

Adult education in a university of the elite

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The Vital Message: continuing education and the University of Cambridge 1945-2010

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The ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge are symbiotically joined ('Oxbridge') in the public consciousness, but among adult educators Oxford's reputation shone brighter through most of the 20th century. Under the influence of a handful of energetic young academics who saw the importance of the rise of labour, and working hand-in-glove with working-class advocates of adult education such as Albert Mansbridge, the conference and report on *Oxford and Working-Class Education* (1908) led to Oxford's development, working with the WEA, of three-year tutorial classes for workers. It was the Oxford graduate, R. H. Tawney, who taught the first of these (in Longton, Stoke-on-Trent, and Rochdale); it was A. L. Smith, master of Oxford's Balliol College, who chaired the Ministry of Reconstruction adult education committee. Tawney's contemporary and friend, William Temple, fellow of the Queen's College, later bishop of Manchester and archbishop of York and Canterbury, was a leading adult education advocate, for 16 years president of the WEA. After the Second World War, it was Oxford's extramural delegacy, led by Thomas Hodgkin, which pioneered British universities' extramural work in Africa – though Oxford was eventually sidelined by colonial administrators who found its tutors too left-wing (several, including Hodgkin, were communists) and over-sympathetic to independence movements. Raymond Williams' great work in cultural studies was done while he was an Oxford resident tutor in the 1950s, teaching adults in Sussex and Kent. And in the 1950s and 1960s, Oxford extramural courses played no small part in the growth of industrial relations as a field of academic inquiry.

By contrast, Cambridge's profile in 20th-century adult education appears more modest. (It also contrasts with Cambridge's innovatory role in the 19th century when, led by James Stuart, its extension lectures spread across the country, spawning several colleges which are now Russell Group universities.) But this lesser prominence makes it, in some ways, more typical. Mark Freeman's new postwar history of Cambridge's 'continuing education' is therefore an important addition to the field:¹ based on extensive research in the university archives, and on interviews with key actors, it combines scholarship with easy reading. It shows how, from the 1940s to the early 1980s,

the university built up adult educational activities in a broadly supportive national environment, and how it weathered the storm and stress that overtook the field from the 1980s.

Cambridge is, of course, one of the best-resourced universities in the country: its Institute of Continuing Education has survived, and prospers today. This contrasts with most British universities, nearly all of which have abandoned adult education. One of the strengths of Freeman's book is the picture he draws of the changes – the compromises, the concessions, the abandoned principles and the new thinking – which even the wealthiest of institutions needed to make to survive in a hostile, neoliberal world.

Freeman's book covers a period of 75 years, and by and large each decade is allocated a chapter. The first covers the later 1940s, when hardship and rationing accompanied the origins of the welfare state, and the 1950s (when Harold Macmillan, in one of his occasional descents into the demotic, declared 'you've never had it so good'). Freeman entitles this chapter 'Expanding frontiers', and the expansion was not only geographical but also in types of activity. The Board of Extra-mural Studies (Cambridge had no truck with 'departments') was then promoting courses across the eastern counties (Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire and Suffolk). By that time, universities had divided the entire country into regional domains – 'extramural empires', one scholar called them.²

The board populated these counties with classes (three-year 'tutorial', one-year 'sessional', one-term 'terminal', and various other events such as day schools) and staff. Academic staff came in three main categories: staff tutors, based in Cambridge; resident tutors, who lived and worked in the areas for which they were responsible; and part-time tutors, many recruited locally, but some from the university academic staff. Class numbers grew and subject areas included – among many others – international relations, local studies, archaeology. Courses were offered with the armed forces (National Service meant these were a far larger and more integral part of day-to-day life than they are today), and an extramural toe was also dipped into the sea of professional and vocational education. The 1950s also saw the beginnings of residential courses at Madingley Hall, a 16th century house set in eight acres of gardens, about three miles west of the city, which is now the institute's home.

For 40 years after the Second World War, Cambridge's work developed along these lines. Conditions naturally changed, as Freeman's second and third chapters, on the 1960s and 1970s, show. The '60s began with the Robbins report on higher education, and by the end of the decade several new universities and polytechnics were in action. More immediately important for adult education was the growth of television and radio, with profound implications for use of leisure time. In comparison with some other universities, such as Nottingham, Cambridge does not seem to have experimented

much with the use of radio and TV in teaching adults, or with distance learning.

The 1970s began with the opening of the Open University, which enrolled 24,000 students in 1971, but most of the decade was blighted by economic recession and financial stringency following the 1973 oil crisis. As luck would have it, the Russell committee, appointed under Labour in 1969, reported in 1973. Russell found that adult education was 'by any standards a mass activity', and had proved its 'responsiveness to local demands'; he recommended that 'government should show its concern for one of the truly popular educational movements of our time' by allocating 'the modest resources we claim for it' (quoted p 99). Margaret Thatcher, then Ted Heath's secretary of state for education, was not convinced. Harold Wilson's Labour government squeezed into office early in 1974, but was unable to escape the financial rigours of recession. And in these years the neoliberals began to flex their muscles: Milton Friedman moved into the economic mainstream, and the economics of education came to be dominated by notions of 'human capital'. James Callaghan, Wilson's successor as Labour prime minister, showed how these were taking hold in policy circles in his 1976 Ruskin College speech.³

The balance of Cambridge's extramural studies provision ebbed and flowed. In the 1960s and 1970s, around 30 tutorial and 70 sessional courses were offered annually. The tutorial class was the 'gold standard': as two staff tutors wrote in 1980, this 'unique creation represents a close partnership between the voluntary student movement following its own educational path and the university striving to make learning of the highest quality an active ferment in the community' (Jack Herbert & Lionel Munby, quoted p111). In tutorial classes in particular, students undertook extended and in-depth study, often at a level which would now be regarded as 'research'. One result of this – an area replicated in many extramural departments, but where Munby and Cambridge were surely leaders – was local history. As Munby wrote, local history 'developed as an academic discipline partly through its teaching in adult classes' (quoted p45).

In his fifth chapter, Freeman suggests that the growth of new 'plate-glass' universities, polytechnics and the Open University raised the public demand for courses leading to credit. It had been a matter of principle in university and WEA provision that courses should *not* lead to qualifications. Harold Wiltshire, professor and director of adult education at Nottingham University, famously identified this as one of five central characteristics of what he called the 'great tradition' in adult education (the others were openness to all regardless of prior education, being non-vocational, an emphasis on the humanities, particularly social sciences, and the use of discussion as a pedagogy).⁴ Several of these characteristics were buttressed until the late 1980s in legislation: funding was *only* available for adult education courses that were non-vocational and led to no formal qualification. In any case, the growth of demand for credit, and then through the late 1980s and 1990s a new requirement from

government that courses *must* lead to qualifications, was a source of increasing stress for university adult education toward the end of the century. So was the increasing official preference for vocational relevance.

Cambridge was by the 1980s well-engaged with what the Russell report had called 'role education': educating people with an emphasis on their occupational role or focus of activity, whether as volunteers or professionals. It was, for instance, educating lay magistrates and (working with the TUC) trade union representatives, and managers (it had a particularly well-developed and long-lasting programme with IBM). Residential courses had grown too: the 'Cambridge' cachet meant it could market these nationally and internationally, and some were, remarkably, profitable financially.

As Freeman notes, the 1990s brought 'fundamental changes in the culture of British universities': polytechnics became universities, there were new and highly bureaucratic 'quality assurance' systems applied to research and teaching, massive increases in student numbers and intensified staff workloads. The proportion of the school-leaving age cohort entering full-time higher education trebled. Importantly, government no longer saw university adult education as having a distinct purpose and mission: funding was 'mainstreamed' – no longer 'ring-fenced', university managers found ways of diverting it to uses more in line with their institutions' 'core business'. And as these managers saw their 'core business' as teaching young people fresh from school, who were in residence as full-time students, funds devoted to part-time adults (who required specialised and sometimes arcane administrative systems), seemed ill-spent.

For adult educators, this was to mean a hectic series of exercises in introducing credits and qualifications, modularisation and outcomes-based learning: applying to the teaching of part-time adult students the same models applied to full-time school-leavers. This snuffed out fundamental elements of the great tradition (such as the tutorial class). Successive research assessment exercises, which had begun in the late 1980s, also meant pressure to build up strong research profiles, based on academic publications in 'leading journals'. Extramural departments, typically made up of academics in a range of different disciplines, found they lacked the 'critical mass' required to compete with the productivity norms established by 'internal' departments.

The Board of Continuing Education's response to these was in many ways typical of other universities' departments. Assessment of students became a requirement; increasing numbers of courses led to certificates and diplomas; credit accumulation and transfer schemes were all the rage. New areas of work, more 'relevant' to industry, emerged, and some prospered: a leading example was the Cambridge Programme for Industry. Other areas declined: in particular, the courses offered to the general public across the region. This was partly an accident of history: the (newish) universities of East Anglia and Essex took over course provision in Norfolk, Essex and much of Suffolk in the early 1990s. But it also spoke to a diminishing sense of local connection. Links

with the WEA, once the lynchpin of regional provision, petered out (the WEA was facing its own neoliberal turmoil). Local teaching centres – there were still 70-odd in the mid-1990s: there are none today – and their identification with the university declined. Tutors were no longer resident in localities for which they were responsible; indeed, the number of full-time academic staff – even those based in Cambridge – fell away.

‘Move fast and break things’, once the motto of Facebook, is a not a bad description of neoliberal strategies as a whole.⁵ The longer-established an institution is, the more it ‘must’ conceal inefficiencies: ‘free-riding’, ‘social loafing’, what over a century ago Taylor called ‘systematic soldiering’.⁶ The ‘solution’: never allow a practice to bed in; in adult education, never allow professionals or students to take control over how their learning takes place. (If they do, they will only find ways of bending it to their own views of what it is for.) Hence a never-ending litany of new rules and funding schemes, new targets and measures. It is revealing that Freeman’s statistical tables covering the 1940s to the 1970s can list numbers of courses and students under the same categories. From the 1980s, turmoil was the rule; no typology of courses applied for more than a very brief period, and the tables give no numerical sense of the trends occurring.

Freeman’s final chapters, therefore, outline measure after measure adopted to meet ever-changing policies and funding arrangements. While some of the policy shifts were minor, too many were radical. The first decade of the present century ended, he writes, with the ‘sudden ... demise of the public programme in the Cambridge extramural region’ (p 223). The immediate cause was the introduction of the ‘ELQ’ rule: students could not be funded if working to qualifications ‘equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification’ they had already achieved. This meant, for instance, that no one who held a first degree in physics or engineering could be subsidised to study for a course leading to first-degree-level credits in history or English. (So much for lifelong learning!) Many of Cambridge’s regional students were graduates; those who were not discovered that the courses, no longer financially viable, were no longer on offer.

Against this background, the balance of the institute’s curriculum shifted to certificated professional programmes: tax law, dispute resolution, property investment, in-service courses for school teachers, and many others. Some, such as a certificate in grief and bereavement studies, reflected a ‘social purpose’ orientation – long fundamental to the extramural tradition. Others with similar roots, such as a certificate in working with voluntary organisations were short-lived.

Freeman quotes Dick Taylor, the institute’s director from 2004: if university adult education does not have a ‘social purpose – and by implication, politically radical – dimension at its heart, then it is pretty worthless in my view’ (p 213). It is hard to disagree; but these are the views of a man formed in 20th century adult education. Like many of his contemporaries, and many of his colleagues, he had devoted much of his life to defending social purpose adult education from the onslaughts of

successive governments and university leaders who knew little, and cared less, about how it enriched society. Leading continuing education enthusiastically into the sunlit uplands of neoliberal imagination – and in the process, jettisoning most of what had made adult education of social value – called for more ‘modern’ mindsets, for people who would ‘embrace change’ regardless. (Freeman is diplomatic: if he shares my view, it is not explicit.)

The demand to change, which took hold under the Thatcher governments of the 1980s, might be taken to imply that university adult education was in some way failing. If we judge it by the standards and principles evolved over the previous 80 years, it most certainly was not. We have seen what the Russell report concluded in the early 1970s. A similar view was taken by the Advisory Committee on Adult and Continuing Education, appointed by Shirley Williams and chaired by Richard Hoggart, a decade later.⁷ In 1982-83, 272,795 students enrolled in university adult education courses; by 1989-90 the figure was 597,136 (p127). Statistics do not tell the whole of any story, but this does not look like a failing system.

There is much more of value in Freeman’s rich study. Reviewers may look for lacunae. To my mind, too little attention is given to the relationship with the WEA, which for much of the period was a driving force in university adult education; Cambridge was also home to the WEA’s Eastern district and to Frank Jacques, its district secretary for half a century from 1936. He was a power in adult education regionally and nationally, yet receives but five mentions. Most of all, however, although the changing policy frameworks are clearly spelt out, I missed a strong sense of the political. Adult education did not cleave to ‘social purpose’ by accident. More important, the assault on adult education was politically driven. It may have been low on most political agendas, but those in the Department of Education and Science (and its oft-rebranded successors) who were handed the baton generally used their time at the helm to reduce the breadth of citizenship and of individual and community culture; at best they prioritised the economic over the civic.

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Notes

1. Perhaps more than any other area of university activity, adult education has been subject to ‘nominative fashion’: departmental names – university extension, extramural studies, adult education, continuing education, lifelong learning – have come and gone. While adopting the current version in its title, Freeman’s text tries to reflect the changing usage.
2. S. Marriott, *Extramural Empires: service and self-interest in English university adult education, 1873-1983*, Nottingham, University of Nottingham Department of Adult Education, 1983.
3. The text of this speech, in which Callaghan challenged all educators to give more attention to preparing pupils and students for productive work (e.g., ‘There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills’), can be found at: <https://www.education-uk.org/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html>.
4. H. Wiltshire, ‘The great tradition in university adult education’, *Adult Education*, 29, 1956, pp88-97; reprinted in A. Rogers (ed.), *The Spirit and the Form: essays in adult education by and in honour of Professor Harold Wiltshire*, Nottingham, University of Nottingham Department of Adult Education, 1976, pp31-38.
5. Cf. J. Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things: how Facebook, Google, and Amazon cornered culture and undermined democracy*, New York, Little, Brown, and Company, 2017.
6. F. W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1911.
7. *Continuing Education: From Policies to Practice. A report on the future development of continuing education for adults in England and Wales*, Leicester, Advisory Council on Adult and Continuing Education, 1982.