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The University of Nottingham and Adult Education

Abstract: This article examines twentieth century British university adult education, using the University of Nottingham as a case study. From around the time of the First World War until the 1990s, universities' 'adult education' or 'extra-mural' departments provided higher education to part-time students in towns and villages throughout the country, often in association with voluntary organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association or with local education authorities. Nottingham was the first to establish such a department (in 1920). The departments focussed on teaching adults in the geographical area for which they were responsible, but several – including Nottingham's – also became centres of research and scholarship on the subject of adult education, with a wider influence across the United Kingdom and internationally. The rich role played by British universities in adult and community education is illustrated through the contributions of the Nottingham department itself, of its staff (including Robert Peers, who held the world's first university chair in adult education) and of its students.

Key words: university adult education, extra-mural education, lifelong education.

Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, universities took a leading role in British adult education. They organised this through departments – often called 'adult education' or 'extra-mural' departments – which provided university-level courses to part-time students in towns and villages throughout the country. Often held in church and village halls and schools many miles, sometimes hundreds of miles, from the university itself, these classes were frequently arranged in association with voluntary organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association, and (after 1945) with local education authorities. The first university to establish such a department – in 1920 – was the University College, Nottingham (after 1948, the University of Nottingham). Most of these university adult education depart-

ments focussed on teaching adults in the area for which they were responsible, but several also became centres of research and scholarship about adult education. This article explores the history of adult education at Nottingham and its contribution to its region and to adult education scholarship. It also shows the influence – within the United Kingdom and internationally – of the department and its staff and alumni.

‘A Radical Sort of Place’

In the mid-1970s, the University of Nottingham’s Department of Adult Education published a landmark collection: *The University in its Region: the Extra-mural Contribution*. In the opening chapter, on the origins of adult education in Nottingham, Alan Thornton described nineteenth-century Nottingham as ‘a radical sort of place’ (1977, p. 3). His claim had much to commend it: E.P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is peppered with exploits of the city’s radicals, from Jacobins to Luddites. In 1832 three men were hanged, and four transported, for their incendiary contribution to riots for electoral reform. In 1847 the city elected Feargus O’Connor – the only Chartist ever returned as a Member of Parliament. As late as 1885, the Riot Act was read – and police charged the crowd – when John Burns of the Social Democratic Federation stood for Parliament in Nottingham West. Beckett’s more recent (2006) account has nuanced this story of radical struggle – but Thornton took it for granted that the history of adult education in a region needed to be grounded in the social movements which democratised society and knowledge.

Who was Alan Thornton? He was an adult educator and an academic. By 1977, he had been a member of Nottingham University’s adult education staff for thirty years, and deputy director of its adult education department for over twenty. He started as ‘Resident Tutor’ in mid-Derbyshire – a role which gives some sense of how adult education staff worked to ensure higher education was embedded in the communities of the region the University served. Through the work of people such as this, the University provided ‘extra-mural studies’ across an area stretching 90 miles from east to west and 45 from north to south, encompassing two large industrial cities (Derby and Nottingham), several large and small towns, and hundreds of villages.

Robert Peers and Adult Education at Nottingham

The department had been formed in 1920 – Nottingham's was the first department formed as a result of the Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee's recommendation that universities should do so (1919). Robert Peers was appointed as Director, and within two years – in 1922, at the age of 34 – he was given the title of professor: the world's first university chair in Adult Education.

The rapid democratization of national life promoted by the [Great] war, the new sense of political power which the franchise act of 1918 gave to the people, the rise to influence of a political party claiming to speak specifically for the workers, the widening consciousness of economic and social issues, and the controversies over them which cut down to the very bedrock of the national traditional organization, all contributed to a demand for information and instruction on which the adult education movement was borne triumphantly forward. (Wood 1953, p. 70)

For three decades, Peers was to be an energetic and successful leader of the department. It grew remarkably: by 1926 Nottingham had the largest extra-mural tutorial class programme in England outside London; by 1936, when the university college had fewer than 600 full-time students, there were not only more than 4,000 extra-mural students spread over the region, but a further 2,000 part-time students in technical evening classes in Shakespeare Street (Wood 1953, p. 71, pp. 113-114). Across England's East Midlands, 'in country villages no less than in the industrial centres, little groups gathered through the winter evenings to study and to read, to listen and to discuss, under the guidance of lecturers of university calibre ...' It was, according to a contemporary history, 'a triumph of constructive effort, achieved by a combination of fine organizing ability and "salesmanship" at the head of the adult education department' (Wood, 1953, p. 114). Peers was, in other words, both a visionary educational organizer and a supreme organizational educator and innovator. Towards the end of his career, as Acting Principal, he pushed through Nottingham's promotion from a University College to a full University.

As a scholar, Peers is now best known for his *Adult Education: A Comparative Study* (1958) – a book he in fact wrote after retirement. But throughout his career, by the standards of the inter-war academia, Peers was a productive scholar. He published regularly on adult education, and if some of his work now seems descriptive and institutional, some unquestionably broke new ground. His pioneering collection *Adult Education in Practice* (Peers, 1934a), for instance,

contained a fascinating chapter on 'The Adult Student'. 'There is no such person as the adult student,' he began. 'Like the average Englishman or the economic man, he exists only as an abstraction' (Peers, 1934b, p. 59). As Parker argues, his view of student learning was 'radical for his time'. He used evidence from psychological studies (such as Thorndike 1928) to argue that 'adults over 25 years of age were still capable of learning', and he set out a model of participative learning that 'resonates closely' with approaches advocated more recently (Parker, 2001, p. 122).

He then proceeded both to empirical analysis of the social and occupational background of adult students in tutorial classes, and to some subtle reflection on the effects of restricted initial educational experience, and on the character of the class which brought together men and women of different backgrounds. He clearly reflected on his own teaching, and gained from collective reflection with his colleagues. 'Perhaps the chief characteristic of working-class students,' he wrote, 'is their diffidence and their consciousness of inadequate knowledge. ... Both diffidence and prejudice are the results of the same set of circumstances' Women students, he found, were 'usually more diffident than men in discussion, more conservative in outlook, and less likely to come with preconceived notions' (pp. 70-71).

Historians of Nottingham University generally point to its origins in the mid-Victorian university extension movement (Beckett, 1928; Wood, 1953; Tolley, 2001). No doubt this played some role in ensuring the centrality of adult education to the inter-war university college. Peers pioneered methods such as resident tutors in the remoter parts of the region, residential summer schools, close links with local education authorities, and the transition of able tutorial class students to internal university studies. Immediately after the Second World War, working with LEAs, he initiated a university adult education centre in Nottingham. Some indication of the scale of this work can be seen in the university staff lists of the mid-1950s: in 1956-57, for instance, adult education was the largest department in the university, with eighteen academic staff (University of Nottingham, 1956) – though many, of course, were seldom present 'intra muros'.

The Contribution of Harold Wiltshire

Possessed of an 'imperious nature and strong personal ambitions', Peers was, apparently, 'not the easiest of men to work with', but by the time he retired, Nottingham's was 'the premier department of its kind in the British university system'. He had 'created a model for other university institutions to follow' (Tolley, 2001,

p. 212). His successor as Director of the Adult Education department, Harold Wiltshire, was a very different character: 'extremely modest' and 'always ready to listen to others' (Tolley, 2001, p. 213). If Peers was a radical organisational innovator, seizing the opportunities presented by the extraordinary movements of his time, Wiltshire was able to take advantage of Nottingham's national pre-eminence. As one of his staff, Alan Rogers, remarked, Wiltshire's approach was 'sowing seeds and encouraging their growth': 'He was always open to new ideas, provoking others to new efforts.' He was 'a listener', 'on the whole tolerant', and '(mostly) democratic' (Rogers, 1976, p. 2). The tribute to his work – published by the department shortly after his retirement – focussed on four areas in which he had – through leadership and scholarship – made a contribution of major value. First was in the development of adult education centres: under his aegis, these were extended beyond Nottingham to Boston, Loughborough, Matlock, Derby, Lincoln, Stamford and Alfreton. A 'good Centre' he maintained, 'can greatly increase the amount and range of our [adult education] work, both in a town of 25,000 and in one of 350,000 people. (These are the extremes of population within which our Centres work in Nottingham.)' (Wiltshire, 1976 [1959], p. 20). Second, there was the media: he argued early that television should be turned into 'educational television': for 'active students, not passive viewers' (Wiltshire, 1976 [1963], p. 48). The third was his advocacy of ever-closer collaboration between the various bodies providing adult education: in particular, between the Workers' Educational Association and other 'voluntary bodies', the local education authorities, and the universities. The 'partnership' with the WEA had of course been central to the early development of university adult education; but – perhaps in contrast to Peers – for Wiltshire the adult education came first. He 'saw adult education as a movement; ... the links with the University were incidental, useful as far as they went but on occasion a snare. "Don't let the name of the University appear", he once said; "it puts them [the students] off".' (Rogers, 1976, p. 2). Fourth, he was energetic in promoting adult education in Africa (particularly Kenya).

Wiltshire was, according to Rogers (1976, p. 2), 'above all a practical man; his interests were not in academe but in the teaching workshop'. Yet – though he wrote no books – he was also a scholar, who made important theoretical contributions to adult education. Perhaps the most notable were his contributions in the mid-1950s on what he called 'The Great Tradition in University Adult Education'. He identified, and defended, a form of adult education committed to a curriculum of 'humane or liberal studies', and within this, to those social studies 'which illuminate man as a social rather than a solitary being; ... its typical student is the reflective citizen'. This tradition demanded 'a particular attitude

– the non-vocational attitude’ to study, ‘and therefore ‘deplored’ ‘examinations and awards’. It combined ‘democratic notions about the equality of educational opportunity with what may seem to us unwarrantably optimistic assumptions about the educability of normal adults’, and therefore rejected student selection. And it adopted ‘the Socratic method’ as its characteristic technique, generally in ‘small groups meeting for guided discussion over a fairly long period’ (Wiltshire, 1976 [1956], pp. 31-32). This was, of course, a strongly normative argument; he saw it as threatened, even in the late 1950s; yet he was convinced that, without it, though adult education might ‘go on in name’ it would ‘be dead in spirit’ (Wiltshire, 1976 [1956], p. 38).

Under Wiltshire’s leadership, Nottingham was innovative in many ways: the development of day-release courses for industrial workers, experiments in teaching with television, community research on urban deprivation conducted by adult class students, training of adult education staff, particularly those working in LEA adult education (Thornton & Stephens, 1976). Wiltshire’s retirement came at a period of rapid intellectual and policy change, in the field and more generally. The Faure Report (UNESCO 1973) placed lifelong education squarely in the international policy agenda. The Russell Report (Department of Education and Science 1973) – to which Wiltshire submitted a ‘quite outstanding’ (Hutchinson 1976) paper (Wiltshire 1976[1970]) – set a new policy environment for adult education. More generally, the British Empire was ending: from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, colonies rushed to independence. The ‘oil crisis’ of 1972 shook Western economic security. The first shoots of what we now know as ‘globalisation’ were appearing. The British economy teetered on the brink of deindustrialisation – before leaping boldly into its 1980s nemesis.

Adult Education in the Age of Lifelong Education

Wiltshire had headed the Adult Education department for 28 years; before him, Peers had led it for 26. In comparison, their successors’ tenure was brief. Peers died in 1973, and in early 1974, the University attached his name to adult education professorship. Michael Stephens’ appointment – at the age of 36 – was therefore to the ‘Robert Peers Chair in Adult Education’. The task he and his two successors faced was to lead adult education through times of growing challenge and crisis. Ironically, of course, this was at just the time when the importance of education throughout the lifespan was growing.

Stephens was an insightful policy thinker, committed to the development of teaching, research and scholarship in the field. Early in his tenure, he recog-

nised the likelihood 'that considerations of the economy ... will continue as paramount in education during the next few years' (Stephens, 1976, p. 187), and he saw a need for strengthening the vocational dimension of universities' education for adults – 'continuing education' – particularly for graduates. He continued to support non-vocational adult education. He played a central role in forming and developing SCUTREA (the 'Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults'), and in the establishment of the International Journal of Lifelong Education. Yet – perforce – much of his tenure involved dealing with the problems of financial stringency, environmental crisis, and policy revolution. From the early 1980s, the real world envisaged by the Russell Report had become a utopian fantasy. For governments, non-vocational education was at a discount – and despite Stephens' encouragement of continuing education, the bulk of the department's work (and the expertise and commitment of many of his staff) was in liberal studies. Day-release courses in industry came to an end as the factories and mines which employed their students closed.

In 1976 – two years before he retired – Alan Thornton was promoted to a personal chair. He became the fourth professor of Adult Education to be appointed at Nottingham. Subsequently, three others have held the Robert Peers Chair: seven professors of adult education in all. Nottingham's influence has been national and international: those who have worked or studied in Nottingham's adult education department include both major adult education scholars and leaders such as Stephen Brookfield, Paul Fordham, Ken Lawson, and Alan Rogers. It can lay claim not only to having nurtured leading scholars in other fields (archaeology, social history, industrial relations, environmental studies), but to having played an important part in developing some of these disciplines: altogether, a not insignificant contribution to humanity and learning. At the heart of this contribution lay the belief – shared by most if not all its staff – that education of adults was not just a matter of individual self-improvement, and still less about the quest for higher and more marketable qualifications, but inseparable from the education of citizens and education for democracy. That lay behind Thornton's allusions to 'radical Nottingham', with which we began: adult education at Nottingham University was inseparable from progress, democracy, political emancipation and social justice.

Conclusion

Though this article has been about the University of Nottingham's contribution to adult education – and has been told through the contributions and lives of

individuals – broadly similar stories could be written of several other universities – particularly the ‘civic’ universities established in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, such as Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, and Sheffield. Older universities – Oxford, Cambridge and London, for example – also provided extra-mural courses on a large scale, but by and large they did not generate scholarship or research about the education of adults as such. The distinctive feature – what Wiltshire called the ‘Great Tradition’ – was a theme in all their work, and had a strong – though arguably not a long-lasting – influence internationally. After the Second World War, extra-mural departments were established at many universities in the British Empire, especially in Africa and South East Asia: some survive and prosper (see, e.g., Chiu & Cunich, 2008). In Britain itself, however, the liberal and democratic orientation of university extra-mural education proved unpalatable to the neo-liberal thinking which dominated educational policy from the 1980s (Jones, Thomas & Moseley, 2010). Few university extra-mural departments survive in any form: those that do have a largely vocational emphasis. In the 1950s, Wiltshire feared just this: it would mean, he wrote, that ‘adult education will go on in name but be dead in spirit’ (1976, p. 38). He was wrong in one, unimportant, respect: those British universities which do still offer education to adults generally call it ‘lifelong learning’.

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Univerzitet u Notingemu i obrazovanje odraslih

Apstrakt: Ovaj članak razmatra obrazovanje odraslih na univerzitetima u Britaniji tokom dvadesetog veka, koristeći Notingemski univerzitet kao studiju slučaja. Još otprilike od vremena Drugog svetskog rata pa do devedesetih godina, odeljenja za obrazovanje odraslih ili za vannastavne aktivnosti obezbeđivala su viši stepen obrazovanja za *part-time* studente iz gradova i sela širom zemlje, često u saradnji sa volonterskim organizacijama kao što je Udruženje za obrazovanje radnika (Workers' Education Association) ili sa lokalnim organima za obrazovanje. U Notingemu je prvo takvo odeljenje osnovano 1920. Odeljenja su bila usmerena na podučavanje odraslih na geografskom području koje su pokrivali, ali nekoliko njih, uključujući i Notingem, postali su i istraživački i akademski centri za područje obrazovanja odraslih, sa širim uticajem na celo Ujedinjeno Kraljevstvo i na međunarodnom nivou. Bogata uloga britanskih univerziteta u obrazovanju odraslih i društva u celini prikazana je kroz doprinose samog notingemskog odeljenja, njegovog osoblja (uključujući Roberta Pirsu, koji je prvi na svetu imao zvanje profesora za obrazovanje odraslih) i njegovih studenata.

Ključne reči: univerzitetsko obrazovanje odraslih, prošireni univerzitet, celoživotno obrazovanje.