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“An inseparable aspect of citizenship”: marking a centenary in “universal and lifelong” adult education

“We need to think out educational methods and possibilities from the new point of view, that of the adult learning to be a citizen. All this can only be effected by giving him a share of responsibility for his own education”¹

This year we mark a major adult education centenary: the publication, in November 1919, of the *Final Report* of the British Ministry of Reconstruction’s Adult Education Committee. This was a landmark in our field – probably the first major official report on adult education in any country to be based on serious empirical research. More important, perhaps, it set out a strong political case for a broad – lifelong and lifewide – adult education curriculum as essential for democratic citizenship.

Though well-written, the *Final Report* – over 400 tightly-packed pages, around a quarter of a million words – was not a quick read, and the Committee’s chairman, A.L. Smith, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, wrote what was in effect an eight-page summary introduction – though he cast it in the form of a letter to the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. The “*necessary conclusion*” to be drawn from the Committee’s work, Smith wrote, “*is that adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong*”, adding that “*the opportunity for adult education should be spread uniformly and systematically over the whole community*”. (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, p. 5)²

The *International Journal of Lifelong Education* tries to live up to its name: though founded and based in Great Britain, we have always tried to be *international*. At first sight, therefore, it may appear odd for an editorial to stress the importance of a British report. It is hardly necessary to mention that other important things were happening across the world in 1919. The Great War had only recently ended; much of Europe was in turmoil; Europe’s global empires, reaching their zenith, were also beginning to fray. (1919 saw widespread unrest in India, for instance, most notoriously the Amritsar massacre; the Irish war of independence was getting under way.) Nor was it only in Britain that important things were happening in adult education: German adult educators are rightly celebrating the centenary of a landmark year for the *Volkshochschule* movement.

Yet there is good reason to argue that the Ministry of Reconstruction Report’s influence was indeed international. Of course, it was directed at a British audience, and concerned itself with policy and practice in Great Britain.³ But partly because Britain was then the centre of a global Empire – one on which the sun only set fifty years later – the opinions of a British committee had wider impact. Trivially, perhaps, we find the Report discussed at some length just a few weeks after publication in the *Japan Advertiser* (1920, p. 6). More substantially, as its ideas bore fruit in British practice – and that was a process that developed over two or three decades – they wormed their way into the thinking of adult educators not only in the British colonies, but in the independent countries (“dominions”, particularly Australia and New Zealand) then regarded as integral to the British Empire. Arguably, they played a part also in shaping the thinking of UNESCO (Holford, 2016).

What distinguished the Committee’s thinking and recommendations was a deep commitment to adult education as democratic practice, and to its role in strengthening civil society. As Harold

Wiltshire explained, in his masterly introduction to the 1980 reprint of the Adult Education Commission's reports, its remit was in principle restricted: "To consider the provision for, and possibilities of, Adult Education (other than technical or vocational) in Great Britain, and to make recommendations." (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, p. 1) Nevertheless, its first report (it produced three interim reports in addition to the *Final Report*) was on *Industrial and Social Conditions in Relation to Adult Education* (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1918), and it was on the educational needs of the mass of the population that it focussed. The Committee had been "forced" to recognise that "education is hampered in many directions by economic obstacles, that industrial and social reform are indispensable, if the just claims of education are to be met, and that the full results of these reforms will be reaped only as education becomes more widespread." (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1918, p. 5) But in doing so, it emphasised the importance of providing structures and systems by which "the men and women of to-day will increasingly utilize the enlarged opportunities for equipping themselves by education for the development of life and the duties of citizenship". This was a duty to those who were sacrificing their lives in war: "The nation ardently desires to order its life in accordance with those principles of freedom and justice, which, led so many of its best sons to the field of battle." (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1918, p. 28)

Adults, the Committee argued, had more than one motive for learning. In particular, they had strong motives for learning what was not for the purposes of their work. It mentioned two. First, there was personal fulfilment:

The motive which impels men and women to seek education is partly the wish for fuller personal development. It arises from the desire for knowledge, for self-expression, for the satisfaction of intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual needs, and for a fuller life. It is based upon a claim for the recognition of human personality. This desire is not confined to any class of society, but is to be found amongst people of every social grade. (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1918, p. 5)

Second, however:

The motive is also partly social. Indeed, so far as the workers are concerned, it is, we think, this social purpose which principally inspires the desire for education. They demand opportunities for education in the hope that the power which it brings will enable them to understand and help in the solution of the common problems of human society. In many cases, therefore, their efforts to obtain education are specifically directed towards rendering themselves better fitted for the responsibilities of membership in political, social and industrial organisations. (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1918, p. 5)

British society in 1919 was, even in quantitative terms, far from democratic. It was only the previous year that the franchise had been extended to all adult men, and (for the first time) to some women – most women continued to be excluded by a property qualification for a further decade. The extension of the franchise was in part a response to the sacrifice of war; but probably more an important factor was pressure from two social movements. On the one hand, labour – organised around voluntary organisations such as trade unions, co-operatives, and the political parties – had shown its industrial strength in the decade before war broke out, and was securing remarkable political advances locally and nationally. On the other – now celebrated, then widely reviled – was the women's suffrage movement. The Adult Education Committee saw itself as speaking to a society in flux, political elites which felt their power under challenge, and rising movements of the dispossessed thirsty for the knowledge.

In this light, the Committee argued that the voluntary organisation that marked such social movements was not a passing phenomenon, to be replaced in due course by solid institutions. On the contrary, it was essential to democracy:

In a modern community voluntary organisation must always occupy a prominent place. The free association of individuals is a normal process in civilised society, and one which arises from the inevitable inadequacy of State and municipal organisation. It is not primarily a result of defective public organisation; it grows out of the existence of human needs which the State and municipality cannot satisfy. (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, pp. 113-114)

For this reason, an system of adult education suitable for the citizens of a democratic society must embrace voluntary organisations: giving them support and finance. The Committee recognised that all kinds of informal and non-formal adult learning takes place in such movements. For instance:

Study circles, discussion classes, conferences, courses of lectures, and activities of a less systematic character are in varying degrees and in different ways valuable means of education. They may be carried on in adult schools, working men's clubs, or trade union branches; they are, in fact, facilities taken to the students in places where they are accustomed to assemble. (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, p. 115)

A system of adult education needed to avoid "rigid uniformity" which "inevitably devitalises education of every kind" – and adult non-vocational education especially – and would cause it "either to perish or to seek new channels outside the influence of the uniform system":

In the sphere of adult education, where so much yet remains to be discovered, and where, owing to the age and experience of the students, direction from above plays a smaller and initiative from below a much greater part than is the case in other forms of education, voluntary association and effort are essential. The voluntary organisation stands as a link between those whose duty it is to provide education and those who desire education. (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, p. 116)

While embracing voluntary organisation, and being prepared to fund their educational work, the 1919 Report was strong in asserting that there should be safeguards. The state should exercise only a very loose control over what went on in adult education, and this control should be over quality, not content. "The State should not, in our opinion, refuse financial support to institutions, colleges and classes, merely on the ground that they have a particular 'atmosphere' or appeal specially to students of this type or that. All that it ought to ask is that they be concerned with serious study." It vigorously opposed the view "that the adult educational work of sectarian bodies ought not to be subsidised out of public funds. We do not agree; in our judgment, whether the State ought to help such education depends upon the quality of the work and not upon the institution which conducts it."

The basis of discrimination between, education and propaganda is not the particular opinions held by the teacher or the students, but the intellectual competence and quality of the former and the seriousness and continuity of study of the latter. Any other standard puts the State in a position of censorship which it ought not to be expected to take. It would inevitably give rise to a differentiation between the knowledge which in the opinion of the State it is desirable to disseminate and knowledge the diffusion of which should not be

encouraged. The State could, indeed, hardly avoid the charge of “manufacturing public opinion.” (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, p. 118)

Awareness of the significance of voluntary organisation to a vibrant civil society, and of the latter to an effective democracy, is of course now widely recognised. (Kohler-Koch, 2009). There is, of course, some irony that while many in the West were pointing in the 1990s to the absence of civil society as a central feature of the collapse of “actually existing socialism” in Eastern Europe, Western policy shifted decisively away from seeing democracy and civil society as significant elements of adult education (what was then being labelled “lifelong learning”).

In 2019 Britain, a Centenary Commission on Adult Education has been launched: partly to mark the importance of the 1919 report, partly to set an agenda for the 21st century which stands the test of time as well as the 1919 report does.⁴ It is, perhaps, significant that this is an initiative from civil society: for most governments today – and British governments are no exception – adult education serves the economy, with broader purposes a matter for independent action. This will, inevitably, have an effect. In developing its reports a century ago,

The full Committee has held fifteen meetings. Most of the meetings have ... extended over at least two consecutive days. In this way we have been able to give continuous attention to our work during four or five sessions at each meeting In addition to meetings of the full Committee there have been numerous meetings of Sub-Committees” (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, p. 8)

Reliant largely on voluntary effort, the 2019 Commission cannot do as much research as its predecessor, nor can it meet as often. It can, of course, draw on a much richer body of research-based knowledge – much of it published in this and similar journals. Its success will be measured not by the immediate response of government or others. No debate in parliament followed the publication of the 1919 report, and most of its concrete recommendations were swept aside in the economic crisis and cuts in government spending that followed the Great War. But to imagine it has no impact is to misread history. As Wiltshire pointed out, the 1919 Report’s importance

lies not in specific recommendations or reforms but in its general and pervading influence. It ... created ‘adult education’ in the sense that it established it in our consciousness as a distinctive domain of education, elucidated its ethos and purposes, made us aware of its problems and its possibilities, and described in some detail its characteristic modes of teaching and organisation. All of these ... will be interpreted afresh and discussed and argued over by each succeeding generation. But it is surprising how often we find that the agenda for our discussions has been written by the *1919 Report*, and that its uses are still by no means exhausted. (Wiltshire, 1980, p. 23)

We should be willing, as Wiltshire was, to be surprised. This journal has long advocated lifelong and lifewide adult education, seeing it as key to civil society and democracy. Recent years have not been the best that such rich adult education has experienced. But, as the 1919 Report observed, “All voluntary movements ... are subject to periods of inflation and contraction. Adult education is no exception; its general level must not be estimated by the height which in periods of unusual intellectual activity or in specially favourable circumstances it has succeeded in reaching” (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, p. 36).

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¹ The quotation is taken from Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee (1919, p. 4). All the Reports were reprinted by the University of Nottingham's Department of Adult Education in 1980: Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee (1980).

² The emphasis was even stronger in the original: the words italicised here were printed in CAPITAL LETTERS.

³ The restriction to Great Britain (rather than the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland") seems to have been a direct reaction to the Irish independence movement. The establishment of the Adult Education Committee resulted from a recommendation of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Education Panel. "The original intention of the Education Panel was that the adult education inquiry should cover the whole of the British Isles. Their speedily drawn up list of Committee members therefore included Irish members. However the reverberating events of Easter 1916 in Dublin obliged the Panel to drop the Irish part of the inquiry and consequently the proposed Irish members were not invited. The Panel nevertheless did recommend that a separate committee should be set up to report on adult education in Ireland as soon as the political conditions allowed. Neither the Ministry of Reconstruction nor the continued British presence in Ireland lasted long enough for that recommendation to be implemented." (Taylor, 1976, p. 139) In the event, of course, Northern Ireland remained within the United Kingdom, but the resolution of Irish independence came after the Adult Education Committee had completed its work.

⁴ Like its predecessor, the Centenary Commission on Adult Education is chaired by the current Master of Balliol: Dame Helen Ghosh.