Creating New Stories: Exploring the Restructuring of University Adult Education in Ireland and Scotland

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to contextualise change in UAE in Ireland and Scotland, highlighting some of the issues facing the field, and drawing out some implications for the future of adult education in the university, particularly in its more radical and progressive forms.

Introduction

This paper examines recent changes in university adult education (UAE) in Ireland and Scotland. Both countries have re-structured their adult education provision within the university sector. The purpose of this paper is to contextualise this change, highlighting some of the issues facing UAE, and drawing out some implications for the future of adult education in the university, particularly in its more radical and progressive forms.

UAE has a long tradition in both countries, and in the twentieth century UAE has had a clear understanding of itself as offering an alternative to ‘provided’ education whether from the perspective of the liberal tradition (education for its own sake) or from the radical tradition (challenging the mainstream, creating radical alternatives). These two important traditions have always been in creative tension. However the recent restructuring of UAE in the 1990s presents both the practice and the philosophy of UAE with a number of challenges. A key feature of these changes (and arguably the principle catalyst) is the accreditation of liberal adult education. In Ireland universities have been mandated to disengage from non-accredited courses, while in Scotland public funding for non-accredited courses was phased out in the mid-1990s, resulting in the overnight accreditation of liberal adult education programmes. This change is part of wider social and policy changes including the move away (in policy and practice) from adult education and towards lifelong learning. Moreover, there is less and less of a distinction between adult education and post-compulsory education and training, and a new focus on accessible and flexible provision, a focus qualitatively different from traditional social justice concerns of adult education. One result of this is a tendency for UAE to be equated – or even replaced – with institutionalised access initiatives and other forms of flexible entry.
Changes to University Continuing Education in Ireland

Alongside these shared developments and concerns in Ireland and Scotland, there are a number of other factors unique to each country in shaping the current context of UAE. University continuing education has existed in Ireland for several decades. The National University of Ireland, Galway (formerly University College Galway) for instance initiated a programme of extra-mural education courses in 1949. University College Dublin has a similar history in that it has been offering courses for adults since 1949 when an Extra-Mural Studies Board was established by the governing body. Statutory recognition, however, has never existed in a suitable form. Prior to the 1970s, there was even some hostility towards university continuing education, particularly evening degree and diploma courses, as they were seen by some sectors (teacher’s unions, Institute of Public Administration) as both second rate and time consuming (Morrissey, 1990). Although this kind of hostility has more or less vanished (evening degree programmes have since been introduced), and some universities have established separate centres for adult and continuing education, UAE, both in its degree awarding and non-degree awarding forms, has not received full recognition either from the particular university involved, or the state. It is an area of activity that tends to overlap with many other services and organisations (for example, other university departments, state organisations, trade unions, community organisations, professional and private organisations), and has traditionally been accorded low status within Irish education.

The 1990s saw partial transformation of this ‘low status’ position within Irish education, a transformation that needs to be placed within broader changes in the structure of Irish higher education. Although Irish HE has experienced massive expansion since the 1960s, the greater part of this expansion has taken place in the extra-university sector (mainly Institutes of Technology), a sector characterised by a “preponderance of sub-degree programmes, heavily concentrated in the areas of business studies, engineering and applied science” (Clancy, 1997, p. 86). This expansion in the extra-university sector has led to a situation today where enrolments in the university and extra-university sectors are more or less equal, compared to 1965/66, when 77 per cent of higher education students attended university (Hyland, 1997, p. 3). This levelling of the differences between the two sectors (at least in enrolments) has led to the present situation in which the extra-university institutions, particularly the Institutes of Technology, are resisting any capping of the range of programmes they provide. The Universities Act of 1997, however, provides a legal guard against any higher education institutions using the word ‘university’ without the consent of the Education Minister.

This form of sectoral competition can be seen to have an effect on the future of university adult education. Universities are the “last and least” to be affected by changes in demographics (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 139), and as a result are under pressure from the social inclusion agenda to widen participation for disadvantaged groups, including adults. University adult education departments and offices are now viewed as playing a significant role in both the social inclusion agenda and lifelong learning. As is the case in many other countries, particularly those of the EU and the OECD, recent Irish government policy on adult education has shifted towards lifelong learning. Although such an approach was emerging in the early 1980s, and was a central theme in the Report of the Commission on Adult Education in 1984 (Kenny, 1984), the timing was evidently not right. Massive expansion in provision for a rapidly increasing youth population, coupled with the financial crises of the mid-1980s, ensured that a lifelong
learning approach to Irish education provision could not be rendered a reality (Department of Education and Science, 2000: 54).

This situation changed significantly in the following decade, with the publication of both the Green and White Papers on adult education. The papers were given extra impetus by the introduction of the Universities Act of 1997, which stated that the objectives of the university should include the facilitation of “lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education” (Section 12(j)). The Green Paper, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*, outlined a range of activities for universities in order to reach this objective of lifelong learning, which included widening the range of provision, especially through modularisation, workplace delivery, part-time provision, distance education and more open approaches to credit accumulation and transfer, and provision of access courses and tutorial and mentoring systems and off-campus provision. (Department of Education and Science, 1998, p. 80). The publication of the Green Paper was a momentous occasion for Irish adult education, and also one of its most considerable achievements to date. It was a statement of commitment by the Irish Government to invest and take seriously the adult education agenda. This interest from the state has been welcomed in adult education quarters as a partial vindication of decades of education work in state and non-state bodies, in community and out-reach programmes, and in voluntary and literacy programmes all over the country. The Green Paper was viewed at the time as the beginning of a process by which adult education, so long in the policy wilderness, finally comes in from the cold.

The White Paper, *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*, (DES, 2000) has added to this sense of euphoria surrounding the field. It reiterated many of the points made in the Green Paper, in terms of moving towards a lifelong learning agenda and viewing adult education as a key factor in reducing social exclusion. It also makes a strong statement on the role of UAE in professionalising the field of adult education. One of the problems with UAE in Ireland up until now is the confusion that exists around the training of adult educators, as gaining a professional qualification is not mandatory in order to teach adults in a variety of settings. Only one UAE department offers a professional qualification. The Paper states “it is vital that, over time, qualifications for the teaching and practice of adult education be accorded formal recognition (DES, 2000, p. 150), with the government envisaging that the qualification as an adult educator “will be a third-level one.”

So when you explore the situation of UAE in Ireland, there appear to be a number of changes occurring simultaneously. The elevation of adult education in general to the forefront of education policy, its increasing connection in the eyes of policy makers and others to a lifelong learning agenda, particularly when it comes to widening participation and the introduction of flexible forms of delivery, the accreditation of liberal adult education programmes, the increasing professionalisation of the field – all of these are taking place within a system of higher education that is experiencing a state of flux in which old boundaries and distinctions are being regularly challenged. Although the field of adult education has never before received so much attention, it could be argued that its remit has progressively narrowed, due to its appropriation by the state and higher education institutions, and the reduction of space for more radical visions and practices of adult education. This argument is highly debatable, and current changes in adult education can be seen to widen the remit of UAE in certain ways as well as narrowing its definition. Also, the move away from liberal adult education is not necessarily a bad thing, as for many, such provision
was the sole purpose of adult education within the university, leaving any notion of UAE as a ‘hotbed’ of radicalism floundering. UAE now has an opportunity to really pursue such a radical agenda, an agenda that could only come to fruition within the historical changes outlined above.

**Changes to University Adult Education in Scotland**

The flourishing of university adult education in Scotland (and also in England) in the twentieth century had its origins partly in a liberal commitment to the democratisation of a profoundly elitist system of higher education at the end of the nineteenth century. This took the form of the University Extension Movement, which provided lectures outwith the university itself (in this case Oxford and Cambridge). The radical tradition in adult education has been equally important, particularly in Scotland. This was profoundly influenced by the resurgence of the political left in post war twentieth century Britain which has in turn explained and understood itself with reference to the political ferment of the nineteenth century and the informal radical education which grew out of social movements such as Chartism.

In the context of the university, both of these traditions served to strengthen the Extra Mural tradition first established in the University Extension Movement so that most universities in Britain had firmly established Extra-Mural departments in the first half of the twentieth century. In the postwar period, a number of debates emerged such as, a concern that the social purpose of the Extra Mural tradition was being lost as classes were attended principally by middle class students. This was countered by the idea that adult education should provide lifelong education for all as opposed to being focused on the disadvantaged. There was also concern about the rise of professional development courses, certificated courses and ‘technical’ courses, which were seen to move away from the ideals of the liberal tradition. By the end of the 1960s the Labour Government set up committees to review non-vocational adult education that culminated in the Russell Report (1973) (England and Wales) and the Alexander Report (1975) (Scotland). The Alexander report called for greater emphasis on professional development courses, certificated courses and a community development approach in some courses since it noted that the impact of university adult education on large sections of the population had been minimal. Following these reports there was a greater emphasis on vocational courses and thus a decline in the liberal tradition.

At this time departments were funded partly by the Scottish Education Department, student fees and local authority funding which made them distinct from the mainstream university departments. In some ways this gave them greater freedom to pursue their own agendas and they have often been characterised as ‘alternative, radical spaces’ within the university. However all this was to change and in 1989 Adult Education departments became the responsibility of the University Funding Council UFC (which later became the Higher Education Funding Council HEFCE and The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council SHEFC). This brought the departments under the same policy framework and scrutiny as other university departments and can be seen as the beginning of the end for ‘radical alternative spaces’ within the institution. Moreover, the 1990s brought a general restructuring of higher education in Scotland, which was to have a profound impact on university adult education.

From the mid 1980s there was a massive expansion of participation in higher education so that the number of participants in higher education in the UK doubled between 1981 and 1995. While this expansion has in fact been led by social classes I and II, arguably this transformed the
system from an elite to a mass system of higher education (Scott, 1995) placing a renewed emphasis on the social purpose of democratisation of higher education (at least with respect to participation in provided education) but one which came from the policy mainstream as opposed to the ‘marginal spaces’ of adult education. Adult educators could be forgiven for thinking that their time had come. This expansion in participation was given further impetus by the extension of the title of University to 5 higher education institutions in Scotland (formerly known as Central Institutions) almost doubling the university sector in Scotland. At the same time Further Education Colleges which previously offered mainly vocational and sub degree provision began to expand their higher national provision (equivalent to years one and two of degree level study). This meant that higher education was increasingly delivered in diverse contexts and the policy and practice of the former Central Institutions was given a higher profile than formerly. This included a much more explicit commitment to flexibility of provision (including part time study, modularised curricula and credit transfer arrangements) than the old universities (Schuller et al, 1998). This created the opportunity for reformist pressure to be brought to bear on the old universities as they participated in the same policy fora and became subject to the same funding arrangements. However, the oldest universities have remained largely unresponsive to these pressures (Morgan-Klein & Murphy, 2001) These system changes finally brought a wholesale re-organisation of adult education within the universities.

In short, the funding for the non-accredited liberal adult education courses was ended and departments were invited to accredit their provision and bid for mainstream funding from the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. About two thirds of the money previously earmarked for non-accredited provision was then allocated to the newly accredited courses, while the remainder was allocated to short term projects designed to widen access to university study. This last activity has since been greatly expanded. These changes have been nothing short of traumatic for adult education. Key concerns have included, the way in which education has become increasingly marketised, the concern that the liberal ideal of ‘learning for its own sake’ would be lost and the worry that the mainstreaming of adult education would mean more conformist provision and the loss of the ‘oppositional’ character of adult education. The debate that ensued was both made more difficult and invigorated by the predominance of a powerful economistic discourse of lifelong learning in Scotland and in Europe as a whole which emerged out of an explosion of British and European education and social policy which had emphasised education for employability in the globalised knowledge economy. These policy documents and the legislation that followed both emphasised the importance of vocational relevance and the need for individuals (as opposed to the state) to take responsibility for individuals’ lifelong learning. The predominance of this discourse and the structural changes in university adult education have all but destroyed its presence in England, but Scotland is different.

In May 1999, the Scottish electorate voted in elections to elect its first Scottish Parliament for almost 300 years. While the responsibility for many matters including education have always been devolved, the establishment of the Parliament has profoundly revitalised the Scottish polity and civil society. While some Adult Education Departments have closed or been restructured, there has also been a flourishing of activity including publication and inter-institutional co-operation within the adult education community in Scotland (Crowther et al, 1999). This community is influenced by both the radical tradition and a reformist or Fabian tradition and as
such has strong links with both social movements and with Scottish government, the latter of which has placed greater emphasis on social justice in education leading to a divergence in Scottish and English education policy. This has led to a sense that that the adult education community in Scotland can reclaim its social purpose tradition despite the difficult structural changes of the past 5 years and the rise of an economistic discourse of lifelong learning.

The profound changes in British university adult education and higher education are still being debated. They have been represented as the democratisation of higher education. However, quite apart from the fact that simply widening participation does nothing to democratise the content of what is provided, little actual widening of participation has in fact taken place (Murphy et al, 2001). Initially many adult educators welcomed the renewed emphasis on adult education in discourses of lifelong learning but the individualistic and economistic emphasis in lifelong learning policy and discourse have undermined this initial optimism. There is no doubt that the closure and restructuring of departments, particularly in England, has destroyed much, yet it is possible to discern the green shoots of recovery particularly in Scotland where a reformist and radical adult education community is beginning to reclaim its social purpose tradition.

Discussion and Conclusion

What do these changes mean for the future of UAE, in particular its more progressive format? In response to changes in the UK, Peter Scott argued for the potential of UAE to radicalise the mainstream. He suggested that these changes could end the marginal status of adult education and allow a student and equity-centred practice to transform the university. These changes also have the potential to reshape the nature of the client groups availing of UAE, one of which has traditionally been the leisured middle class, who could afford the time and money to take extra mural courses for their own enjoyment and personal development. Scott’s ‘adult education is dead, long live adult education’ mantra, is useful in the present context. It could be that, however risible on the surface, efforts to reconstitute the field may provide the catalyst for a new positioning, not only of adult education within the university, but also between the university and the rest of society. UAE in the past has allowed the university to extend its remit as an institution dedicated to public service, and the provision of community outreach and extension programmes, access initiatives and extra-mural courses can arguably be construed as forms of public service. However, if Scott’s radicalising of the mainstream approach is to be taken seriously, then the debate needs to move away from the confines of the institution and instead consider the potential of adult education in linking the university to the wider concerns of civil society. In this way, university adult education takes on a more radical agenda, situating the university at the forefront of strengthening democracy and defending learning potential from further colonisation by the state and the market.

1 A Green paper is a discussion document commissioned by the government. It is usually followed by a White Paper, a public discussion of the proposals in the Green Paper. The discussion and consultation process is formally completed by a government Bill, and then an Act.

2 This view was exemplified in the headline of the Irish Times education supplement on the Green Paper (Irish Times, January 26, 1999) “Cinderella is getting her wish” adult education being perceived as the poor cousin of Irish education.