

Adult education

New Zealand, to 2012

adult education, lifelong learning, lifelong education

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This entry posted 7 November 2013

In its broadest sense, *adult education* refers to the education of anyone beyond school-age. Historically, the sector has constantly evolved as elements of its provision have matured into autonomous sectors in their own right, leaving adult education to constantly re-invent itself on the boundaries of the educational mainstream in its mission of meeting adult learner needs.

Maori education

Pre-European education for Maori (irrespective of age) was based on kinship-based structures of *whanau* (family), *hapu* (sub-tribe) and *iwi* (tribe). While these structures maintained the informal oral transmission of traditional knowledge and skills, specialist learning institutions (*whare wananga*) were central to life in these communities as they ensured that *ariki* (chiefs), *tohunga* (priests) and recognised experts passed on specialist knowledge to chosen *akonga* (students). Specialist wananga included astronomy, carving, agriculture, weaving, folklore, myth and ritual.

Colonial adult education

With the arrival of Europeans in the 1700s and subsequent pioneering challenges, there was little initially in the way of formalised education for adults, but with burgeoning numbers of migrants (from 90,000 in 1860 to half a million in the 1880s) and increasingly stable patterns of settlement and cultural life, the first organised forms of educational provision emerged for adult settlers. Consistent with a predominance of English migrants and the subsequent modelling of social institutions from the 'old country', the first programmes to emerge in the early 1800s were the Mechanics' Institutes or Athenaeums providing technical education and libraries (later to be taken over by local government) and religious groups such as the Christian and temperance organisations, the Young Men's Christian Association and its female equivalent, the YWCA.

With the gradual decline of these institutes' classes from about 1860, the second half of the nineteenth century was a period of sundry inventions, each with its own character matching the rapidly changing social structure of the new colony. Informal initiatives saw more than 100 local institutes established across the country, with the main centres and some towns like Nelson being better served than most, although even a few small gold-mining towns could boast of such a centre. Typically these centres included a building that provided a room for meetings, a library and a reading room. The locally-organised institute would often be responsible for the library as well as offering a public programme of lectures and classes on a range of topics. Most were autonomous and not linked to any larger organisations or part of any national plan of provision.

Churches (especially the Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian and Baptist denominations) were also major educational players in these early days through organisations such as the Temperance movement and Mutual Improvement Societies. The latter organised informal gatherings of young men to meet and debate current social issues, but these activities soon waned with the advent of more secular provision and the arrival of alternative attractions such as cinema and radio.

Workers' Educational Association (WEA)

The turn of the new century ushered in a new era in the education of adults with the development of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). Its English founder, Albert Mansbridge briefly visited Auckland and in the following years branches sprang up in all the main centres and some smaller ones. The fledgling organisation appealed to a broad church of university academics, religious leaders, political activists and a small number of trade unionists. Despite its sources of support and name, the WEA was liberal in its intent, but still steadfastly non-sectarian and non-party-political. Its key mission was to provide educational opportunities for workers who stood no chance of accessing the minimal number of places in academically and socially elite universities.

The WEA were determined not only to provide educational opportunities for those who had experienced minimal schooling, but also to provide education that was qualitatively different from traditional schools: participatory District Council structures involved students in running the organisation, courses on topical subjects and new perspectives (such as the newly emerging panacea of the times, psychology, sociology and especially economics) and a distinctive two-hour 'tutorial class' format of an hour's lecture by a recognised expert followed by an hour's free discussion of the topic.



Figure 1: WEA Summer School in Canterbury, 1915. Source: <http://www.cwea.org.nz/History.php>.

After World War I

By the end of the First World War, the WEA had established itself as the main provider of adult education throughout the country including outreach programmes into the rural hinterlands. Some financial support was provided by government and dispensed via universities. The relationship between the WEA and their university counterparts was uneasy at best and fraught at worst, but persisted until the WEA was finally funded directly from government in the 1970s. The WEA had become the premier education provider for adults outside the university sector, but its prime aim of recruiting workers was only moderately successful in its early years and even less so in later years as it became increasingly captured by the increasing numbers of middle class adults.



Figure 2: Participants in a WEA Canterbury Summer School between 1920 and 1935. James Shelly is in the centre of seated row with hat on knee. PAColl 4919-1-04, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ.

Early analyses of students' backgrounds for example show good representation of manual workers (including skilled artisans) and women from domestic duties backgrounds, but later, more rigorous studies in the 1970s showed WEA classes (and its night school and university counterparts) to be dominated by what one writer called a 'crème de la crème' clientele. Working people were few and far between in these classes and the organisation's name became an increasing anomaly.

Depression and World War II

Over the next few decades, provision for adults firstly faltered somewhat and during the 1930s Depression and it was only money from the Carnegie Corporation and volunteer tutors that helped sustain providers such as the WEA. Provision then gradually expanded subsequently under more sympathetic political patronage with the first Labour government that counted WEA graduates such as Prime Ministers Savage and Fraser among its key ministers. The Second World War understandably also arrested development, but saw the temporary emergence of the Army Education and Welfare (AEWS), which provided an extensive vocational and hobby programme (including publications) for all of the armed forces, especially in rehabilitation work. Although AEWS was seen by some as a possible blueprint for post-war development,



Figure 3: WEA Summer School at Geraldine, Canterbury in 1924.

Source: University of Canterbury

this idea came to nothing, but it did leave a legacy of education in the armed forces. This period also saw the innovative 'box scheme' developed by the WEA's James Shelley that provided lecture notes, text books, prints and gramophone records for groups of adults around the country to study various liberal arts topics. The scheme was the forerunner for the National Library (under Geoff Alley), book discussion groups and the Trade Union Postal Educational Services in later years.

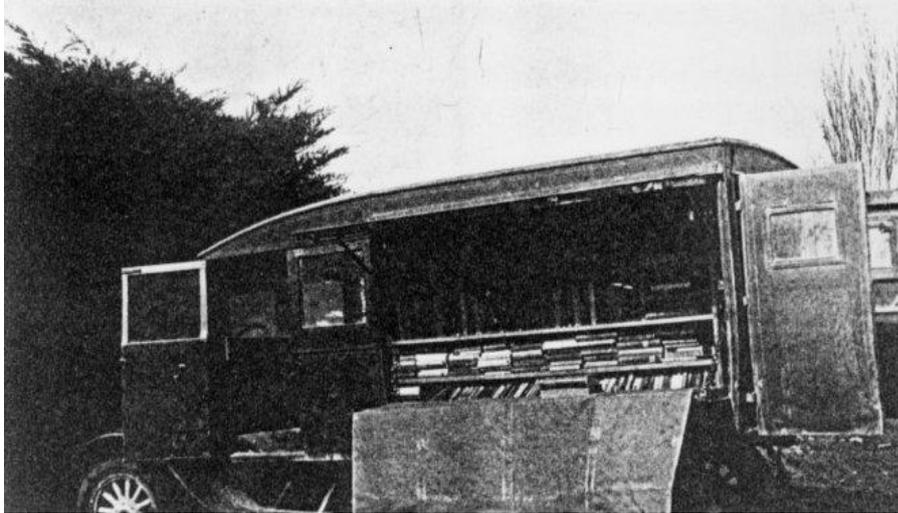


Figure 4: Van fitted as a travelling library in rural Canterbury under the Carnegie Adult Rural Scheme, early 1930s. PACColl-4919-1-06. Permission of Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ.

Council of Adult Education

A national Council of Adult Education and regional councils were launched in 1938 as part of the Education Amendment Bill to provide an overview of the emerging provision, as well as advise government on future directions. These organisations represented the first official recognition of the adult education sector and later, the Adult Education Act in 1947 saw the formation of the National Council of Adult Education (NCAE), with the first National Secretary of Adult Education, Bob Martin appointed. These bodies were dominated by the university sector, often ensuring that the greatest part of the funding available would be allocated to support their own programmes. Steadily increasing funding saw a significant expansion in staffing; by 1951 there were four directors and 50 tutors working in regional centres and travelling rural backblocks by car. In addition, three Maori tutors were appointed to support Maori language and culture.

Including new populations in adult education

Maori

Up to this point, adult education had offered little to Maori who had largely operated outside the activities of the array of adult education agencies and maintained their own educational traditions independent of any state involvement. A national report on Maori adult education in 1972 highlighted a range of educational needs, especially with the rising numbers of Maori migrating from their traditional areas to rapidly growing urban areas. Activist educators like Matt te Hau, Ranginui Walker and Ngoingoi Pewhairangi ensured that Maori perspectives were included in policy debates while also pioneering distinctive programmes geared to Maori contexts.

Women

Women too had largely been marginal to adult education endeavours historically. Despite the efforts of pioneers like Gwen Somerset, home science programmes through university extension

departments and the work of the Women's Institute and the Women's Division of Federated Farmers, women had been peripheral to most adult education and where they were included, the courses were "almost wholly of a practical nature, chiefly designed for housewives" such as dress finishing, millinery, floral judging, canework, making of lampshades, corn dolls, macramé and sweet making. Such provision invariably became the popular public perception of adult education in later years, which has proved difficult to shake off to its detriment in public debate about the sector's value. It was not until the resurgence of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s that adult education moved to include women's perspectives, traditions and knowledge through the emergence of women's studies.

From the mid-twentieth century

The 1950s and 1960s saw fewer innovations, although provision did expand modestly through university extension programmes, local community centres and the after-hours use of schools as educational providers for adults for the first time, spawning the term 'night' or 'hobby' classes in common parlance with its low-status connotations outlined above. Community centres in Dargaville, Buller, Mt Eden, Te Puke Otara (both Auckland), Newtown (Wellington), Risingholme (Christchurch) and Westport were all modelled on the successful centre in Feilding piloted by the principal of Feilding Agricultural High School L. J. Wild and run by Gwen and Crawford Somerset, both of whom went on to make notable contributions in other education sectors. Inspired by Henry Morris' Cambridgeshire Village Colleges, the Somersets aimed to make the centre "a drop-in place for young and old, the curious and enthusiastic, and an irresistible temptation (in the end) for the wary. It meant a focal point in the town where people might communicate with each other through 'great talk about small things' and through other forms of shared activity". The Feilding centre attracted the attention of the Director of Education Clarence Beeby, but like the AWES before it, the hopes for widespread adoption of the concept were dashed competing against the ever-increasing demand for expanding schooling and formal tertiary sectors.

With the passing of the Apprentices Act of 1948, the first technical institutes were founded. Coupled with establishment of the Vocational Training Council (VTC) in 1968, vocational education came of age as an educational sector in its own right totally independent of its adult education origins.

Meanwhile NCAE had shed its involvement in travelling arts programmes to the new Advisory Arts Council in 1961, succeeded two years later by the QE II Arts Council and the universities became more removed through their own independent extension departments. Their programmes became more oriented towards university audiences, although almost all universities have since shed this function in successive waves of budget rationalisations. These changes left NCAE overseeing a diminishing range of provision, although its challenge of ensuring New Zealand adults had access remained as strong as ever. With these changes in the educational landscape, the new NCAE director Arnold Hely set about identifying appropriate gaps for the sector to cover. Hely's attempts to forge a new direction were thwarted by his untimely death in 1967, although the challenge was then taken up by his deputy, David James.

Reorganisation from the 1970s

Out of this period of defections and attempting to find new directions however, New Zealand adult education entered an era of recognition and expansion in the 1970s. Buoyed by international trade prosperity, the government funded the National Commission for UNESCO to undertake an

examination of the concept of *lifelong education* that was being promoted internationally through UNESCO and its near-cousin, *education permanente*, by the OECD. A wide-ranging public consultation process was undertaken through an Educational Development Conference and many of its recommendations were implemented by a newly-elected Labour government that was supportive of its aims.

A senior officer for Continuing Education (the preferred term of the time) in the Ministry gave the sector new political recognition and a range of educational innovations grew in a supportive policy environment along with increased levels of funding: more flexible, community-oriented programmes were piloted in four Auckland schools, adults were entitled to attend classes in secondary schools (usually to pass exams not available elsewhere), a new form of provision was started with Rural Education Activities (REAPs) in a dozen rural areas, a Continuing Education Unit was established within the national broadcasting organisation (NZBC), a national organisation Te Ataarangi formed to promote Maori language and culture, recognition of adult literacy needs led to the establishment of the Adult Reading and Literacy Assistance (ARLA) nationally and in many towns, informal learning exchanges operated out of libraries largely on voluntary input, and a new model of technical institute, community colleges, were charged with broadening their appeal beyond vocational education to local communities. NCAE field officers were often central to developing these innovations, working with communities and organisations to make the best of funding sources available. These were heady times for the sector as it looked to move from the educational periphery to centre-stage. As a sector, this period also saw the beginnings of adult education as an academic area of study within universities, some modest research beginnings about the field, a home-grown academic journal *Continuing Education in New Zealand* and a practitioner publication, *Paragraphs About Continuing Education* (PACE).

The sector not only found a new direction in these educational provision innovations, but also re-kindled its long-standing mission to reach out to those not served by the schooling system, who could not access formal tertiary programmes, who wanted to pursue new directions in their lives or who simply wanted to pursue learning interests for their own satisfaction. Despite the expansion and diversification of the more formal parts of the tertiary education system, many adults still could not access education that suited their learning needs, living situations or personal aspirations. Its overall success in achieving the involvement of these non-traditional learners is still largely unknown. While there are any number of anecdotal accounts of recruiting learners from under-represented groups, the research data to back up these accounts is largely lacking, which makes it difficult for the sector's advocates to make its case to politicians and policy-makers, many of whom deride it as 'those Appalachian clog-dancing classes and underwater macramé classes for ladies who lunch'.

Challenges of neoliberal policy and Global Financial Crisis

These days of expansion and refinement were not to last however, thwarted by the cold winds of economic neoliberalism under successive Labour and National governments in the 1980s and 1990s. With a 'user pays' mantra rampant, funding was severely cut, the sector largely disappeared off the policy landscape and innovation dwindled over the final decade of the 20th century.

With the new century however came another wave of optimism for adult education in the latest policy iteration, *lifelong learning*, as integral to becoming a knowledge society—again driven to a large extent by the international pressures of the OECD and parallel developments in kindred countries. Lifelong learning ideals and tenets spread into broader debates about the national

education system and many of adult education's long-term concerns were picked up in mainstream policy documents and reforms. A new government agency, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), was established in 2003 with a responsibility for all post-school education. Its mission was based on a series of reports that included the role of non-formal learning, lifelong equitable access, portability of qualifications and promoting democracy and citizenship. These lofty ideals were then operationalised in a series of Tertiary Education Strategies, some of which have since become funding priorities for adult education:

- targeting learners whose initial learning was not successful
- raising foundation skills
- strengthening communities by meeting identified community learning needs
- encouraging lifelong learning
- strengthening social cohesion.

Again, mainstream tertiary provision picked up concerns that had their genes in adult education. A prime example was not only expanding existing adult literacy and numeracy provision, but also making it 'core business' for mainstream, low-level tertiary programmes. Its inclusion as an integral part of tertiary teachers' concerns was developed using an extensive professional development strategy, a new assessment tool, on-line resources and tuition, all underpinned by an unprecedented research programme.

As part of these reforms, a review of the adult education sector was also commissioned. The report sought some administrative coherence for the field, consistency of funding and accountability structures, priorities for funding, identified incentives to involve non-traditional learners and to encourage the field to engage more actively in community issues and debates in their programmes it offers. It also pushed for increased credibility and recognition for the field through increased research, better data collection and utilisation, greater professional development for practitioners, and on-going policy recognition.

Again, the impact of these reforms has been mixed. The advent of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) has again showed that the sector was probably destined to be a 'fair weather option', waxing in times of economic prosperity and waning when the coffers dwindle. Programme funding for school-based provision has been severely cut, research and development work has all but disappeared, funded positions drastically reduced and sector morale diminished. Conversely, lifelong learning is de rigueur all education sectors, adults' literacy skills are now debated by politicians and government officials, equity issues are highlighted (but not resolved) and increasing proportions of New Zealand adults are participating in a broad spectrum of educational opportunities that were denied their forbears.

Significance of adult education in New Zealand

Reviewing the sector's history highlights its role as the educational innovator, taking up issues and involving groups outside the mainstream, which are now part of that mainstream: prison education, women's studies, adult literacy and numeracy, book discussion groups, distance education, rural travelling libraries, correspondence courses, summer schools, educational broadcasting, learning exchanges, bridging programmes and trade union education all had their origins in adult education. The sector also helped germinate notable educationists (Norman Richmond, Arnold Hely, Thomas Hunter, Ranginui Walker, Maharaia Winiata and James Shelley) as well as in other spheres of life (John Condliffe, Earnest Belshaw, John Beaglehole and Geoff Alley).

Like most countries, the New Zealand adult education sector has traversed a range of educational paths in its historical journey. Predominantly on the educational periphery, it has had brief periods of policy attention, but ultimately remains a low-status extra, particularly when funding is hotly contested. Despite its precarious position, the sector has made significant contributions by pioneering innovations and championing non-traditional learners, which in many cases have since become accepted parts of mainstream provision.

Glossary

Whare wananga, house of learning (Maori)

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Citation of this entry

John Benseman, John, "Adult education", *Dictionary of Educational History in Australia and New Zealand (DEHANZ)*, 7 November, 2013. From <http://www.dehanz.net.au>