

The Ministry of Reconstruction's 1919 Report on Adult Education

The Commission on Adult Education

November 2019 will mark the centenary of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Final Report on Adult Education. The report set the groundwork for a liberal approach to adult education for the rest of the 20th century. Its centenary is, we believe, a vital opportunity to reflect on the needs and possibilities for adult education today and into the century ahead. Britain in 1919 faced immense economic, political and social challenges. Today's challenges, though different, are no less profound.

A programme of activities will mark the centenary. As part of this, and to stimulate a wide-ranging debate and open up new avenues for the development of adult education for the century ahead, we are setting up The Commission on Adult Education.

The Commission will be made up of leading public figures and adult educators. It will include young, emerging as well as established figures. Its remit will be similar to its 1919 predecessor's: "To consider the provision for, and possibilities of, Adult Education in Great Britain, and to make recommendations." It will explore the relevance, for the 21st century, not only of liberal education for adults, but of the many other forms it takes across today.

The Ministry of Reconstruction, set up under Lloyd George's wartime coalition government in 1917, was to oversee rebuilding "the national life on a better and more durable foundation". Its adult education committee, chaired by A.L. Smith, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, was asked: "To consider the provision for, and possibilities of, Adult Education (other than technical or vocational) in Great Britain, and to make recommendations." The committee's nineteen members included leading public figures, such as R.H. Tawney, Albert Mansbridge, founder of the WEA, and Ernest Bevin.

The 1919 Report provided a template under which adult education, oriented towards building a democratic, tolerant and liberal civil society flourished through most of the 20th century. Adult education – committed to enriching the communities where men and women live and work – played a vital, if often unacknowledged, part in the social fabric. The 1919 Report's ringing assertions of principle laid the foundations:

- ▶ "Adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong"; it "should be spread uniformly and systematically over the whole community".
- ▶ "We need to think out educational methods and possibilities from the new point of view ... of the adult learning to be a citizen".
- ▶ The state "should not ... refuse financial support to institutions, colleges and classes, merely on the ground that they have a particular 'atmosphere' or appeal to students of this type or that. All that it ought to ask is that they be concerned with serious study."

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Over the last three decades many of the opportunities for, and institutions of, adult education have been swept away. Much of what remains focuses largely on training younger adults in workplace skills. Training for employment matters. But adult education must be rebalanced, so that democratic, inclusive values, and social justice – enhancing people’s lives as a whole – are at the heart of provision.

Britain faces major social and economic challenges. The Commission on Adult Education will address the need for, and role of, adult education in relation to such factors as:

- ▶ **Globalisation and the future of work.**
For millennia, work has been a vital part of the human condition. Today, “precarity” has become a permanent feature of working life for many – while, as Sir Alan Tuckett wrote recently in *The Guardian*, “robotics and artificial intelligence promise to do for white collar jobs, as globalisation did for their blue collar counterparts”. Some suggest that a “universal basic income” can replace employment – but few have found welfare payments sufficient to fulfil their intellectual or emotional needs. Others imagine work in new ways. What role will adult education have in a world of non-work?
- ▶ **Civic engagement and democracy.**
Our democracy is increasingly strident and polarised, prey to populism and demagoguery. New forms of connection provided by social media often privilege ill-considered and ill-tempered substitutes for reflection and debate. An educated democracy has long been a key aim of adult education: how can it strengthen a considerate civic culture in the digital age? What forms should political education for adults take?
- ▶ **Education as a human right.**
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) established education, “directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”, and to “promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups”, as a human right. Adult education has a central role to play in strengthening these values.
- ▶ **Inequality and social mobility.**
Recent debate about educational opportunity has focussed on social mobility. But enabling a few exceptionally talented individuals to climb the social ladder, to escape from deprived communities, does nothing for those who remain. None should be “left behind”. Many “second chance” learners have become activists in their own communities. Adult education’s mission is to enable all – even the most deprived – to lead fulfilling lives.
- ▶ **Communities, migration and identities.**
Our society comprises many communities. Based on residence, occupation, religion, interest, and much else besides, they are associated with identities. Some are formed by migration; others feel threatened by it. What part should adult education play in supporting and valuing diverse communities, and in developing mutual understanding between them?

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- ▶ **New social movements.**
Adult education emerged from social movements, and is vital to connecting educational institutions with contemporary concerns. It has supported them in challenging social injustice and raising political consciousness. Social movements today – many reconfigured around new identities – generate and require new forms of knowledge and learning. How should adult education adapt to them?
- ▶ **Values, religion and spirituality.**
Adult educators like Tawney and Mansbridge combined deep shared values with a secular spirituality. Today, religious identities are increasingly diverse, while the state requires “British values” to be taught in schools. Has adult education a continuing role in the promotion of some forms of spirituality, of common values?
- ▶ **Demography and ageing.**
The population grows older. We know that people stay healthier, and make a bigger contribution to society and civic debate, when they are active and engaged learners. How should adult education support older women and men – and also ensure their wisdom becomes an asset to communities of all kinds?
- ▶ **International educational policy.**
Across the world, the educational policies of governments and institutions is now driven by a plethora of official and unofficial metrics. Too often these fail to encapsulate the full richness education should offer – the focus on skills and employability in lifelong learning is an example. Can global metrics and policies embrace the breadth and democratic nature of adult education?
- ▶ **Structures and institutions.**
Colleges, institutes, universities, local education authorities, and voluntary organisations providing adult education have been radically “disrupted” in recent decades. Some have not survived; others no longer see adult education as their remit. The Open University, a pearl of British adult education, faces major financial challenges. How might new institutions and structures based on need and aspirations be supported and encouraged? What structures and institutions are needed to enable adult education to grow for the common good?