

# The End of Adult Education? The Formalization of Nonformal University Extension and Union Education.†

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the circumstances that precipitated a shift from liberal, social purpose to vocational adult education in the UK. To the voices of those in the UK who warn of the potentially dire social consequences of this shift, the paper adds the voice of a North American adult educator who addressed the serious implications of just such a shift in adult education's focus early in the century: Eduard Lindeman.

**Résumé:** Les circonstances en Grande-Bretagne qui ont précipité le mouvement de l'éducation aux adultes à but social et nonformel vers l'enseignement professionnel formalisé ont été analysées dans ce mémoire. En appui à ceux de la Grande-Bretagne qui prédisent des conséquences sociales désastreuses suite à ce changement, ce mémoire présente les propos d'un éducateur Nord Amérique qui, il y a plus de cinquante ans, abordait les implications sérieuses d'un tel changement. Il s'agit d'Eduard Lindeman.

The much vaunted new technology is developing piece meal...; systems of access to and use of information require to be understood and digested... Familiar political ground is now shifting...; many of the politically aware and committed have joined movements for social reform, disarmament, human rights, conservation, third world development, etc.... All possible resources will be needed to preserve society in the midst of the problems and changes it faces. The "fabric of society" is very much the cultivation of dialogue across boundaries, of exploiting or creating opportunities to the full, of cultivating common ground on which debate (however heated) can take place. A traditional belief in education is in its role as a liberal study, a process of personal development for society's good. It is a necessary role in any democracy.

(Small, 1982, pp. 92-93)

## Introduction

In the 1980s, dramatic reductions to, and a redistribution of, core funding threw UK university adult education (UAE) into a state of financial crisis. An unprecedented scramble for resources ensued, precipitating a dramatic shift in provision as UAE departments jockeyed to replace traditional course offerings with self-financing, vocationally relevant programming. Heralding this new focus on vocational training as an economic panacea, government rhetoric sought to downplay the dramatic shift in educational focus this reorientation entailed. While the state defined vocational as "anything which is broadly relevant to the individual in his development in working life, whether or not it is immediately relevant to his present job" (DES, 1980, p. 1), "this breadth of vision," according to Small (1982, p. 90), "was not matched by funding." Resources were increasingly directed from nonformal to employment oriented certification programs. Although this vocational thrust was somewhat mitigated by the Universities Council of Adult and Continuing Education (UCACE), who continued to argue for some nonformal programming into the early 90s, the fate of nonvocational traditional UAE and community based programming—liberal adult education for personal development and social purpose—became sealed with the credentialization of all UAE courses in 1993. Such "reforms" sounded the death knell for traditional adult education in the UK.

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† The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of several UK adult educators, in particular, those of John McIlroy, Douglas Miller, and Richard Taylor. This research comprises part of a three year comparative study of worker education funded by SSHRC Canada.

UK union adult education, especially programming under the auspices of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), fared little better against the rationalizing impulse of vocationalization. Persuaded by the spectre of diminishing resources to “reconsider” its course offerings, the TUC chose to abandon nonformal courses in favour of vocationally relevant—and eminently fundable—NVQ certified courses. While this shift can be seen as an extension of previous policy, it has, nonetheless, formalized previously nonformal courses, turning social purpose education into professional training.

This paper examines the circumstances that precipitated the rationalization of adult education in the UK, in the hope that such an investigation will alert Canadian educators to the potentially dire social consequences of a similar process of vocationalization occurring in Canada. To the voices of those who lament the imminent demise of the UK adult education movement, this paper adds the voice of Eduard Lindeman, the North American movement’s earliest proponent and most stalwart defender of social purpose education. For Lindeman, “true adult education is social education” (1947, p. 55).

## UK University Extension

The role of UAE in the UK began to take shape early in the century. According to the 1908 Oxford and Working Class Education Report, UAE had a singular objective—to prevent the leaders of the working class from disrupting the existing social order by instilling in them “foresight in political means.” The means to this end was declared to be Oxford style liberal education. By 1919, however, the Ministry of Reconstruction had begun to recognize adult education’s social function and recommended not only that the state finance social purpose education, even when such programming was clearly partisan, but also that UAE departments—departments of extra mural education with an academic head—be established in every university. At this point, the UAE mission became one of reform, of transforming the nation’s elitist, conservative universities into egalitarian, progressive institutions. But while radical solutions to social problems can be addressed within a broadly defined liberal program of study—as advocates of the Worker Education Association (WEA), such as R.H. Tawney, were well aware—Britain’s universities, stalwart defenders of class privilege and the established order, interpreted liberal education much more narrowly: as a way of “seeing the other side of the argument,” as a means of pursuing solutions to political problems *within* the existing socioeconomic order. Despite the fact that by 1939 approximately 15,000 adults were enrolled in over 800 UAE tutorial classes—three year programs of evening study under the direction of a single tutor—such progressive programming proved to have little impact on the conservative agendas of Britain’s mainstream universities.

It was not until the 1940s and 50s that the current UAE structure came into being, and while UAE’s national complement of staff tutors swelled to 250 in the early 1950s, developments during the 1960s—postwar prosperity settlements and an emergent welfare state—served to quell worker and WEA concerns and spawn a new clientele: formally educated, middle-class professionals and their spouses, seeking courses in the humanities and professional development. Since such programming proved to be a great source of income, it is hardly surprising that by the time of the 1973 Russell Report, the majority of UAE students were middle-, rather than working-class. While this prompted Russell to chastise UAE departments for abandoning their 1919 commitment to nonvocational social purpose programming, the Report was not sufficiently inspirational to build the momentum or free the resources necessary to undertake such a mission; moreover, the Report, being largely uncritical of UAE’s new focus on humanities at the expense of economics and sociology, was read by many as an endorsement of UAE’s reorientation, since it recommended extending traditional university programming into the broader community. The origins of the crisis that emerged in the 1980s are to be found in this period. UAE’s failure to expand during the 1960s was compounded by university pressure to incorporate UAE, reduce traditional tutorial courses and social purpose education, and explore post experience vocational education (PEVE). Internal staff contracts were not adjusted to include an extra mural commitment and the funding problems associated with a stuttering economy prevented the Russell report from providing the impetus for a reinvigorated UAE movement.

While recurrent and lifelong education remained a focus of discussion for adult educators, such debates inexorably drifted toward the subject of continuing education—post initial education (PIE) for economic purpose. This shifted UAE’s emphasis to PEVE, sanctioning the resource generating strategies a growing number of UAE departments were being compelled to initiate. In the Thatcher era universities began to serve—more directly than ever—the needs of “the economy.” Funding for UAE became based almost entirely on results: the number of effective student hours (ESH) determined how much of a shrinking

national grant each UAE department was allocated. As a consequence UAE was pushed more into PEVE work and “economically viable” course offerings.

### UK University Extension in the 1990s

The shift away from the “Great Tradition”—which emphasized nonvocational liberal studies, particularly social studies, for reflective citizenship with a special focus on working class provision—to self-financed, PEVE enmeshed UAE departments still further in mainstream university politics. Since mainstream university programming has shifted its focus to accommodate the needs of mature students (McIlroy, 1993), UAE departments have been forced to focus on programming that is more accessible and that lends itself to part-time degree work. While it was thought that meeting these concerns may provide an opportunity to salvage a broadly based and reasonably resourced liberal adult education program in the Great Tradition they have in fact swamped the remaining nonformal programs.

From the Fall of 1993 all courses had to carry credentials in order to gain funding support, in short all are to be access courses, UAE provision has been “beaten by the carrot” into the formal adult education system. Tutors and students who do not want to be tied to a stricter syllabus, regular graded assignments and course exams have to establish a totally self-funded course, a practical impossibility. The traditional one-to-three year, tutorial class, in which students and tutor negotiate a syllabus around their common interests is finally dead. The classes which helped frame the writings of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and their cohorts are finished. It is probable that some traditional UAE students with no interest in attaining a credential will sign up for these new credentialized UAE courses but they will have to contend with a course climate directed by other concerns and marching to a different rhythm. Tutors, practiced in a different teaching skill, will have to start recording grades for student’s classroom contributions, judging one student’s work against another, and deciding what it is that constitutes a “pass” or a “distinction”. The fundamental relationships between tutors and students will shift from one of a common interest in learning to that of an examiner and examined. The atmosphere in the classroom could also change from one of cooperative, collective learning with a social purpose to one of competitive, personalized learning with an individual focus.

This is not to argue that some courses will not succeed brilliantly, that adult students will not attempt to turn this new situation to their advantage or even that some more serious scholarship might be undertaken than was previously the case. There will be adult learning, there will be greater access to other postsecondary provision with transferability. This may still be a liberal educational experience, but it will not be liberal *adult* education; that is, nonformal educational provision designed for personal and social development. Lindeman described the distinction as “education for adults” not “adult education.” If we can stretch his description of “true adult education is social education” to include the traditional UAE courses, then the credentializing of UAE courses finally marks the end of “adult education” in UK universities.

The impact of credentialism on targeted community and social purpose university extension is potentially even more devastating. While this work may still be able to attract some funds to aid programs with educationally disadvantaged groups it could lose all core funding unless these “courses” also adopt arbitrary criteria to satisfy the external demands of transferability and comparability. It does not take much imagination to see how provision for, say a tenants’ group, becomes more difficult if not impossible under these conditions. An interesting example of the impact of this formalization process, on what was previously nonformal social purpose education, is provided by examining the education provision of labour unions, particularly that of the TUC.

### Union Education

The drift from a broad workers’ education towards a narrow union training under TUC control has a long history (McIlroy, 1990; Spencer, 1992a). A number of providers of workers’ education established prior to the first world war—the WEA and the avowedly Marxist Labour Colleges—become more intense rivals in the interwar period. In the 1920s the TUC tried to bring the different parties together in a more integrated structure but whilst they were seeking “certain specialized forms of education” they also had “in mind above all an education broad enough to give every worker who desire it a new sense of understanding and therefore power to mould the world in accordance with his human social ideals” (TUC, 1922, p. 227).

In 1925 an agreement was reached on a unified scheme that would give representation to the different educational provisions within a TUC controlled structure. Although the agreement stated that its objectives were not to “abolish the rights of criticism or propoganda of the separate organizations” (point 7 of the TUC scheme), the WEA ran into difficulties with its voluntary members and local and national government

(which provided some funds) and the new scheme was not established. The TUC and individual unions began developing their own programs and although they still worked with the WEA and National Council for Labour Colleges (NCLC), the courses were more suited to the organizational needs of the unions and less concerned with either liberal education or education for social change.

In the postwar period, the syndicalist/workers' control ideas, which had a powerful pull on trade unionists and on workers' education, gave way to the dominant political perspective of unions working within the established framework of industrial and political relations and hoping to influence Labour Government. The movement towards the concerns of the union as an organization and of the education of the representatives for industrial relations purposes, and away from broader adult education/worker education concerns was thus consolidated in this period. There were examples of long, broadly based courses for workers such as miners and steel workers in a number of UAE departments, but much of the education became focussed on the training of local lay union officials as responsible workplace negotiators and reliable union administrators.

In 1964 the TUC agreed a unified scheme which involved winding up the NCLC and the trade union arm of the WEA—WETUC (Workers Education Trade Union Committee). The TUC established a regionally administrated scheme with existing NCLC organizers able to apply for the new TUC Regional Education Officer (REO) posts. The REOs were controlled from the centre with only an advisory body established in each region. Unlike the NCLC, they set out to use the state system to provide courses by the universities and technical colleges as well as the semiautonomous WEA. Although achieving a unified scheme had been a trade union objective for forty years, doubts were expressed by trade unionist about what had been created. These fears were disregarded by George Woodcock, General Secretary of the TUC, who noted that if the TUC were to have a scheme it "must be absolutely in control of it." Interestingly, he also commented that education is not training, it is a very broad activity intended to stimulate the critical faculties. That is better done by an organization dedicated exclusively to the task" (TUC 1964, p 483-4). Yet the TUC was to place its shop steward training courses, particularly after 1974, in educational bodies such as UAE departments, the WEA, and further education colleges.

In pushing for paid release in the 1975 Employment Protection Act, the TUC accepted the distinction between industrial relations training and training for trade union duties, agreeing to forfeit paid release for the latter. In seeking State aid for trade union education from the 1974 Labour Government, the TUC further compromised its independence. However the Act provided a real impetus to union education and TUC ten to twelve day-release provision increased from 643 ten-day courses involving 8, 721 student places in 1973/4 to 2, 849 ten to twelve day courses involving more than 40, 000 students in 1978/9. During this period, individual unions also expanded their programs and several opened new training colleges.

While it would be correct to present the period since 1974 as one in which trade unions asserted their rights, sometimes against the more independent and elitist approach of some professionals and providers of education, it cannot be presented as a straightforward development of independent workers' education channelled towards the diverse needs of workplace representatives. In the post-war period trade union leaders took a greater interest in education as an instrument of internal control and as a way of creating more loyal, efficient (bureaucratized?) activists within their official union organization. Officials also saw education as a way of exercising some control over the way in which negotiations were taking place at work.

As a result the curriculum on shop steward education courses could be seen as shifting in the direction of workplace problem solving and away from a broader educational thrust aimed at creating a greater understanding of the economic and political context of trade unionism. This shift was to be further entrenched by the TUC Education Department from 1979. The curriculum was perhaps more practical—it was safer from the TUC's point of view and more limiting in educational terms. This new direction concentrated on the workers' needs—on the problems as the workers themselves identified them—and yet, it was argued, allowed other issues to emerge. So the new course structure was presented rather simplistically as not only focusing on workplace problem-solving, but as a way of directly meeting the immediate democratize needs of workers' representatives and their members (Spencer, 1992b).

### **Union education in the 1990s**

The understandable desires of the TUC to maintain its state grant led it to proceed cautiously in relation to the curriculum in the 1980s, but in spite of this the grant was ended in 1990. With it went the "threat" that some in the TUC had used as an excuse for its limited programming.

The number of TUC courses had fallen during the recession but it was still using local colleges for day-release provision. Colleges could only continue to work with the TUC at reasonable rates if the courses were to be part of the NVQ initiative and thus receive core funding. The “stick” of the government grant was therefore replaced by the “carrot” of NVQ. This was first applied to full time officer training, which received European funding (and thus kept open the TUC training centre), and has now been extended to workplace representative training.

The NVQ process means that the key competencies a union official requires have to be identified and taught—just like any other competency based education (CBE) program. Credits earned will be transferred to other skills based training; a trained voluntary union official will be equivalent to a trained company supervisor. The officials task will be further professionalized, the elements of union training which can easily be identified and taught (preparing grievances, writing reports, handling meetings) shall displace those which emphasize union consciousness. Although courses had been locked into workplace problem solving, they had allowed students some choices and had not been tied to students “mastering” particular competencies. Students had not been examined and certified. The courses could have accurately been described as non-formal social purpose education, a limited example maybe, but “adult education,” rather than education/training for adults.

It would be a mistake to present all trends in union education as negative. For some time individual colleges and universities have been developing part-time certificate programs in labour studies targeted at union activists (Spencer 1992b). These are one-to-three year courses and involve students in formal educational activity such as essay writing, projects and exams. In some cases they are developed for individual unions and include a distance learning component. The courses have provided activists with more serious sustained study and a sympathetic route into degree work. Previously the TUC scorned such developments but have recently be scrambling to gain representation on the boards of studies of these programs, in an attempt to demonstrate its support for certification in general. Many of these courses encourage students to undertake projects which will enhance unionization or community activity and, therefore, they try to retain not only a liberal education but also a social purpose. Such provision may seem inconsistent with the analysis being offered, but in practice these programs allowed labour educators to extend the constricting parameters of mainstream TUC courses.

## Implications

While the shift to access and training in both university and union adult education described above can be envisaged as a continuation of previous developments, it is significant because it represents a decisive move toward credentialism. Although the general social welfare derived from accessible social purpose adult education cannot easily be measured, if adult education is totally commodified and the movement becomes fully oriented toward providing narrowly focussed vocational and leisure programming, on a strict cost recovery basis, any social benefits will be undoubtedly be serendipitous and any social good fortuitous. The implications of just such a reorientation were plain to Eduard Lindeman over fifty years ago.

Early in the century, Lindeman warned of the fate that awaits those who submit to modernity’s systematizing impulses.<sup>†</sup> Increasingly suspicious of a capitalist system that preached the ideals of freedom and equality yet failed to put them into practice, Lindeman (1944b) exhorted that

a serious danger lies hidden in every human situation for which intellectuals have evolved elaborate rationalizations and ideas which they do not translate into experimentation. An ideal which is not practiced is... worse than absence of ideals. It is worse because it leads inevitably to hypocrisy, and once a human situation has become enshrouded in falsehood and misrepresentation all resolutions are postponed with the result that the situation itself becomes worse rather than better. (Lindeman, 1944b, pp. 93–94)

Fully cognizant of the modern age’s impersonal, inherently oppressive forces, Lindeman (1949) warned his contemporaries that

democracy is no longer to be taken for granted. The new age, dominated by science, technology and industry, calls for a re-interpretation and a reaffirmation of our democratic way of life. We have not yet adapted ourselves to an industrial civilization. Our lives are factionalized. Our responsibilities are varied and more easily evaded. The older patterns of society from which democratic leadership emerged automatically

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<sup>†</sup> An extended discussion of Lindeman’s position on the relation of adult education to democracy appears in Briton (1993).

no longer exist. Our human relations are strained; communication between professionals and laymen becomes a more hazardous undertaking. We may continue to repeat the old Eighteenth Century ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity but the world expects us to define democracy in more realistic terms. We need not forsake the old ideals but we should now undertake the task of defining democracy in the language of practice. (1949, p. 179)

For Lindeman, the only feasible and realistic way of "defining democracy in the language of practice" was through adult education. According to Lindeman (1932), "adult education represents a groping of the people toward recognition" (p. 70). It is an "educational movement" born of "discontent and unadjustment," and being "a movement is social; it starts from somewhere and moves in permeating fashion through the social mass; it originates in some form of dissatisfaction and grows as consciousness of dissatisfaction become general" (1929, p. 29). It is to be distinguished, Lindeman contends, from what often passes for adult education. His point being that "there is adult education and there is education for adults. The latter," however, which "may include everything from continuation classes in grammar, education for illiteracy, or plain vocational training to woman's club lectures and the reading of books" (1929, pp. 31–32), "is not genuine adult education. True adult education is social education" (1947, p. 55). There is no doubt in Lindeman's mind that "every social-action group should at the same time be an adult-education group, and... that all successful adult-education groups sooner or later become social-action groups" (1945a, p. 119).

Lindeman (1935b) is convinced that adult education is "a social process...., not... a simple device whereby knowledge is transferred from one mind to another" (p. 45). Its "primary goal is not vocational. Its aim is not to teach people how to make a living but rather how to live. It offers no ulterior reward.... Life is its fundamental subject matter" (1929, p. 37). Adult education, he argues, is "social education for purposes of social change...., an instrument designed to shorten the 'cultural lag'... in a democratic society" (1945a, pp. 116–117), "a mode of social adaption....; the answer to blind prejudice and demagoguery" (1944c, p. 102). It is "not merely... a means for increasing the efficiency or the smartness of a few selected individuals," but rather "an instrument for social change" (1938b, p. 51), "a cultural adventure aiming at freedom through intelligence" (1949, p. 179), an endeavour that "begins where vocational education leaves off. Its purpose is to put meaning into the whole of life" (1961, p. 5). Against those who promote it as simply "a matter of adapting individuals to existing cultural norms," Lindeman argues that adult education, "on the contrary,... is definitely futuristic, in movement towards coming adjustments" (1944b, p. 94). It is an indispensable way "of shortening our cultural lag," of bridging "the distance between our technological advances and our cultural values" (1944c, p. 111), of ensuring the continuation of freedom and democracy in our modern age.

Against those who argue that "in an age of increasing tensions... the function of education is to ease and relieve those tensions," Lindeman (1944c, pp. 105–106) contends that "it is the function of education to understand the ideas and the needs which have precipitated the tensions," that "each tension is,... an educational opportunity," and that "to evade social tensions is to invite trouble." Conceptions of adult education that fail to recognize its irremediably social nature, Lindeman (1944c, p. 101) argues, are intrinsically flawed, convinced that "the purpose of adult education is to prevent intellectual statics; the arrested development of individuals who have been partially educated cannot be prevented otherwise." Proponents of vocational adult education, of educational practices that encourage individuals to act "on behalf of goals and purposes with which they have had nothing to do," Lindeman (1938a, p. 147) warns, are courting disaster. Adult education, like democracy, Lindeman (1938a, p. 151) maintains, "is neither a goal nor a mechanical device for attaining a preconceived goal. It is at bottom a mode of life founded upon the assumption that goals and methods, means and ends, must be compatible and complementary." To separate means from ends, facts from values, Lindeman (1944a, p. 160) warns, is to forget that "the ends... 'pre-exist in the means'," that "we become what we do, not what we wish." To "violate this principle," to succumb to "the doctrine that the end justifies the means," is to abandon our "democratic faith" and be left standing "on dubious moral ground."

Lindeman proposed resisting the ideas of "progress" that prevailed early in the century by engaging adults in social forms that would spawn new visions of progress, visions that given the opportunity could emerge to replace those of the system. Those of a postmodern persuasion might well argue that, today, an even deeper respect of difference and an even greater commitment to democracy than a modern liberal democrat such as Lindeman could ever have envisaged is needed if the commodifying impulses of the market are to be resisted. But this may well prove to be a moot point if adult education in the UK and North America continue to be displaced by vocational training and professional development. Given that, increasingly, adult education is becoming defined in terms of vocational training, structured according to the

principles of CBE, and driven by the market's desire for credentials and transferability, the possibility of coordinating any kind of resistance to the economic sphere's penetration of the lifeworld seems to be evaporating. The question that adult educators must ask themselves, then, is whether the disappearance of social purpose education, as Lindeman and the liberal democratic tradition imagine it, does not, in fact, signal the end of the adult education movement.

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