

# **Putting ‘a foot in the door’ for Continuing Education in the UK: the case for its retention; strategies for its survival**

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## **1. The commercialisation of the British higher education sector**

The British higher education system is today big business. International students and their families brought £26 billion into the UK economy last year. Student fees generated nearly £16 billion for the sector in 2016; and research generated nearly £8 billion, both from government and non-governmental sources. Each year, universities add £21.5 billion directly to the UK’s gross national product. Once knock-on effects are taken into account, Universities contribute £95 billion to the UK economy, and support 940,000 jobs. (Universities UK, 2018)

The ready availability of this financial data itself signals a shift in the way in which the role of universities in British society is valued. Learning today has price tag. Its purpose is now, in large part, that of income generation.

The commercialisation of the British HE sector has changed the game for learning, as we shall see. However, it has not put young people off from applying to and entering full-time study for first time degree courses. Indeed, despite the increases in student fees that have made the HE market so valuable, student numbers have continued to expand. From 2006-7 to 2015-16 the numbers of entrants onto full-time first degree courses has increased by 31.2%; the number for postgraduate taught courses rose by 30.5%; and the numbers for postgraduate research courses by 25.7%. Student numbers reached a record high in 2015-16.

But what about types of learning that cannot generate income at this level? What about types of student who will never be able to afford undergraduate and post-graduate fees at their current levels. The negative impact of the business model of ‘the university’ upon older learners is all-too-clear when we look at the declining figures for mature student enrollment in the UK.

Figures produced in 2018 show that 40,000 part-time places have been lost from the sector since 2012 when tuition fees trebled. Between 2010 and 2015 there has been a 51% decline in part-time student numbers, from 216,000 to 106,000. The Open University that has traditionally and with great success catered for older and working class students - more likely to be having to balance work and family responsibilities with their studies - has experienced a 63% drop in its enrollments over the same period. The largest percentage drop has been amongst those over the age of 35, where numbers fell from 95,000 in 2010 to 39,000 in 2015. (Universities UK, 2018)

These quantitative, market-focused and monetised indicators however, are symptomatic of a more fundamental shift of priorities across the British HE system. Whilst concern is frequently expressed at the drop in the numbers of mature students on undergraduate and postgraduate courses, still institutions of higher education (HEIs) continue to downgrade or remove entirely those parts of their activity that have traditionally catered for older and non-traditional students. The closing down of centres of lifelong learning is one example of this.

Such centres have often included Continuing Education provision offering short term programmes at very low cost to the student. These courses, either non-award bearing or accredited at Level 1, Level 2 or Level 3 of the British National Qualifications Framework (NFQ), and so ‘pre-entry’ with respect to undergraduate study, are neither income generators nor are they academically prestigious in the narrow terms set by institutional competition on the HE market. However, they have been historically important for the purposes of: widening participation in providing crucial stepping stones into undergraduate and postgraduate study for non-traditional students; and representing links with local communities that provide substance to the civic identities of HEIs in their areas and regions.

These changes then, are at one level the result of market shift pushing HEIs down the road of commercialism, instrumental organisational behaviour and ‘the business model’. At another level however, they are connected to changes to the ways in which learning itself is valued and how its purpose is conceptualised. They also signal a re-framing of the very meaning and definition of ‘learning’ itself.

We will briefly consider the historical background to this changing landscape, as well as the challenges faced by those who strive, against the grain, to maintain and even salvage principles of non-marketised, lifelong and community oriented educational values and provision. We will also consider possible strategies for the survival of Continuing Education.

## **2. The place of ‘lifelong learning’**

Considering education in a historical perspective does enable us to understand ‘learning’ in specific contexts and to appreciate its shifting social meanings. Jonathan Rose (2010) in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* charts the ways in which the autodidact of working class communities in the early decades of the Twentieth Century, valued and respected for their reading, knowledge and competence in matters literary, legal and worldly was largely eclipsed by the rise of the provincial university and polytechnic in the 1960s, and with it the privileging of formal education over informal learning; the hegemony of ‘letters after one’s name’ as the mark of ‘real’ scholarship.

In similar fashion, we can note the way in which: the establishment of the Workers Educational Association in 1903 strove to increase the participation of working class people in democratic life; the way in which adult education after the Second World War was seen as crucial for the rebuilding of a nation in ruins; and the way in which the concept of cradle-to-grave lifelong learning arose from the economic and labour market shifts of the 1960s and 1970s, as Britain moved towards an export-led economic model in the post-colonial era. By the 1980s the rise of information and communications technology and later the digitisation of productive and service industries was once more reshaping the way in which post-compulsory education – described variously as ‘adult education’, ‘lifelong learning’, ‘life-wide learning’ *etc.* – was valued, conceptualised, designed and delivered.

With each historical iteration we have seen alterations in the conceptualisation of ‘learning’, its meaning pulled between competing priorities of skills for the labour market and learning for personal development and community participation. But from the 1970s onwards, ‘lifelong education’ as it had been coined in the 1972 UNESCO report *Learning to Be*, was seen increasingly as an adaptive tool, enabling the individual to be flexible on the ever-shifting sands of a modern competitive and constantly changing industrial landscape; ‘learning’ now harnessed to a rising skills agenda. As the organising discourse of the ‘knowledge economy’ became dominant new agencies and institutions came into existence,

giving this new agenda its material manifestations: the Manpower Service Commission with a remit of modernising the labour force; the Open University established in 1969 to provide a 'second-chance' to adult learners and expanding rapidly using innovations in curriculum delivery with the use of television, radio, video- and audio-tapes and summer schools; and the creation of new provincial universities.

Complementing these developments, and crucial to our central theme, was the proliferation of extra-mural studies programmes within an expanding university system, each interacting with a wider family of learning organisations, both formal and informal - adult education institutes; non-vocational education programmes; Access courses in colleges of further education; and so on – providing a variety of opportunities for learning as well as routes into higher education for those who aspired to go further.

It is that world of learning opportunity – either informal, non-accredited, or undertaken through non-instrumental motivations of personal growth and development - that we see becoming eroded and dismantled at an astonishing rate in the brave new world of higher education as big business. Continuing Education programmes for students on benefits, pensions or low incomes, courses that will never be income-generators and learning services that cater for the elderly or the long-term unemployed perish in this harsh environment.

Yet, this process is harmful, not only to the potential learners who are losing the opportunities to learn that these services have been providing since the 1970s, but also in fact for the very skills-based agendas that are driving it. Whilst the tension within post-compulsory education between skills for the labour market and learning for personal growth, democratic life *etc.* has always been present, a definite shift towards the former occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s. In his seminal 1996 publication for UNESCO, *Learning: the Treasure Within*, Jaques Delors (ex-President of the EU) had proposed four pillars to lifelong learning (or what he called life-wide learning). These were:

- learning to know (knowledge and understanding);
  - learning to do (skills and capabilities);
  - learning to live together (social cohesion);
  - learning to be (self-realisation and fulfilment).
- (Delors 1996)

However, by the time of the 'EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning' presented at the European Council of Ministers in Lisbon in 2000, this notion of lifelong learning had been replaced by one far more concerned with economic development. Within the UK, alarms were being raised at the very low levels of basic skills within the British workforce compared with other OECD countries. The Leitch report (*Skills in the UK*) in 2005 highlighted that Britain was languishing at the bottom of the rankings for skills and work-based training.

Government policy conceptualisations of learning now swung sharply towards those rooted in an employment market, work-skills oriented agenda. 'Train to Gain', launched in 2006 enabled employers to access government funding for training. At the same time, agencies that had for many years been supporting adult education were having state funding withdrawn and run down or wound up entirely. The Lifelong Learning Sector Skills Council was closed in 2011. The collapse in the participation of adults in higher learning that was described earlier begins in this period.

The reasons are not hard to fathom. Reduced budgets for adult education, the transfer of costs from the state to the individual learner, the constriction of the very meaning of ‘learning’ to the development of skills for the job market, and ‘employability’ becoming a near-exclusive measure of the value of learning have all conspired to raise up the draw-bridges between universities and their local communities with respect to opportunities for lifelong learning.

### **3. The value of Continuing Education for current learning agendas**

We can look at this issue in some more detail before making the case for a new appreciation of the value of lifelong learning, and the pressing need for its retention in the form of Continuing Education provision. Three ways in which ‘skills’ can be helpfully conceptualised for this purpose have been employed previously (Bynner 2016; Smethurst 1995). They are:

1. skills of direct relevance to job market entry;
2. ‘merit skills’ that are of more generic workplace relevance;
3. personal skills that are of benefit or enjoyment for the individual only.

From the vantage point of the state, in a period in which considerations of life-long learning have given way to those of economic growth and employability, there is a clear hierarchy of how these definitions are valued. The more removed from the job-market the definition is of course, the less valued it becomes by the quantifiable, monetised measures of public funding.

Yet, even for the economic model of learning that these tendencies have privileged, the outcomes are irrational and counter-productive (Palmer, 2017). Not only have they eroded the civic roles of universities in their city and town regions, they have also transferred significant new costs for learning from the state to the individual learner, and sacrificed important public benefits that lifelong learning previously offered. Such public benefits, arising from non-vocational, non-accredited and lifelong learning types of adult education, now jeopardised by the economic model of higher education, include:

- health and well-being benefits;
- ‘embedded vocationalism’ that ensures local, cultural and effective workplace integration for skills-oriented programmes;
- and social inclusion (covering the integration of newly settled migrant communities, citizenship agendas, digital literacy, sustainable development, community relations *etc.*).

In each case in this short list, there are economic benefits and efficiencies that tend to be overlooked by governments in an era of restricted public spending (Coleman, 2017). Health and well-being benefits for individuals mean reductions in the pressures on health services, and reduced time away from work *etc.* (Laal and Peyman, 2012). Enhancing the local and cultural relevance of skills-related programmes improves student motivation, completion rates and overall attainment; moreover, functional and work-related skills acquisition is often dependent upon the acquisition of more generic or ‘soft’ skills and psychological dispositions towards learning, that lifelong learning programmes can offer. Learning for social inclusion reduces the pressures on policing and the need for other types of social intervention.

Putting all of these aspects of non-accredited, Continuing Education delivered from within institutions of higher education, in a larger frame, we can appreciate the consequences of allowing them to become eroded or lost altogether. These wider benefits of life-long learning

and Continuing Education programmes have been historically important in the UK for improving health outcomes, social outcomes and economic outcomes for disadvantaged sections of the population, and in reducing health and wealth gaps across society. Indeed, in the national case of Singapore, these types of benefits of lifelong learning are now formally recognised in the form of the SkillsFuture government initiative that commenced in 2015, and that draws upon the principle of ‘deep learning’ in its pedagogical conceptualisations (Sung, J. and Freebody, S. 2017: 615-628). As a counter-point to this exceptional example, now in the UK the loss of provision for these types of educational opportunity from many universities that profess values of civic identity and a commitment to local communities is playing its part in the return of what has been called the ‘trajectory of disadvantage’. (Byner 2016: 86)

#### **4. Continuing Education strategies for survival**

The case for the retention of lifelong learning as something that is of value to both graduate-level study and employment market-related skills acquisition should be clear to a considered view. However, types of lifelong learning found in Continuing Education services still need to maintain their position within the professional and academic cultures of the modern, business-oriented university. These cultures are unfriendly to any aspect of the civic university that does not pay its way either in direct monetary terms, or at least in the added value such services bring to ‘the university’s’ other agendas. Despite the difficulties however, survival strategies are indeed open to the leaders and professional staff of Continuing Education services. We will consider some of them here.

##### *Research impact*

‘Impact’ for research has risen within the UK research quality assessment agenda, with greater weighting being given to it for the 2021 Research Excellence Framework exercise compared to that in 2014. Continuing Education programmes can provide vehicles for the public dissemination of research findings, the creation of community networks and the brokering of stakeholder collaborations for research. All of these are valuable for the construction of impact case studies, that can be difficult to achieve for academic teams that would not otherwise have a public-facing aspect to their work.

##### *Commercial value*

Continuing Education courses and programmes are not well positioned to achieve high commercial value for their institutions. Their students are often retired, on low incomes or are undergraduate and postgraduate students who are already paying significant fees for their substantive places of study. More to the point, the logic of commercialism is inimical to their very *raison d'être*. Nonetheless, there are types of course that are of greater market value than others. A case-in-point is modern languages for which many learners – especially university students who are not from low income backgrounds – are able to afford market rates. Here there are two challenges: how to differentiate courses from those offered by external providers or even faculty-based modern languages departments; and how to maintain equity and fair access for low-income students. In the UK context more generally, with respect to external learning markets, careful mapping of the profile of other providers such as colleges of further education, local authority adult education provision, the Workers’ Educational Association, the University of the Third Age (‘U3A’), *etc.* is required to avoid loss of market identity for Continuing Education courses.

### *Partnerships*

HEIs are of great economic importance to their cities and regions. They are often major employers and are also income generators; considering their research investments, educational provision and local student economies they create. To function adequately, HEIs and the academic research and student recruitment programmes within them must develop and sustain relevant collaborations and partnerships with local authorities, government offices, health agencies, educational services, community organisations and a wide range of public stakeholders. Types of Continuing Education activity such as community-based courses, one-off engagement events, continuing professional development (CPD) courses with visiting tutors and speakers *etc.* can be crucial to the nurturing of cross-institutional relationships for these purposes.

### *Widening participation*

Since 2012, with the increase in UK home student tuition fees for undergraduate courses from £3,225 to £9,000 per annum, universities charging the full rate have been required to use a portion of their fee income to support the entry of students who suffer various types of educational disadvantage. Universities today are required to submit an Access and Participation Plan to the regulating Office for Students. Widening participation then is a compliance issue in the UK HE system. Despite predictions that students from low-income families would be put off taking up university places, the gap between the numbers from disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students entering higher education has narrowed slightly. With respect to mature students however, the picture is very different, with numbers dropping precipitously, as we have seen. Although it cannot provide a solution to the financial causes of this decline, Continuing Education can potentially provide pathways into learning *via* accredited NFQ Level 2 and Level 3 courses that are subject to curriculum quality assurance through faculty boards, and that link to undergraduate programmes. This potential use of Continuing Education should at least be explored by institutions concerned with tackling the sharp decline in mature student access into HEIs.

### *Self-sustaining status*

Pressures upon Continuing Education departments to become ‘self-sustaining’ raises two related issues. Firstly, as we have seen they cannot become significant sources of income for their universities. Financial self-sustaining status can be achieved at course-level by setting recruitment viability thresholds for student numbers which must be met for a course to run. This familiar model does at least ensure that the costs of tutors’ time allocations, accommodation and materials *etc.* are met before a course commences. However, where there are full-time staff responsible for the management, administration and marketing of the service, it is unlikely that these salary costs will be covered by student fees, without raising them to the level which undermines the very purpose of the service. Secondly, there is the issue of how ‘self-sustaining’ status is defined. Frequently the *de facto* definition is one of ‘full economic costs’. This purely financial notion and the metrics that accompany it, eclipse other measures by which Continuing Education services can justify their existence within their institutions. By careful ‘strategic alignment’ with key institutional priorities a strong case can be made for not only maintaining such services but embedding them within and across ‘the university’. In the UK, heritage, health, wealth, social justice and ‘teaching-and-learning’ quality agendas all provide examples of areas that could benefit from close engagement with Continuing Education. There are also subject-related aspects to this, with respect to showcasing discipline strengths and supporting research impact goals. Metrics and

key performance indicators (KPIs) by which the value of Continuing Education is measured should incorporate these aspects of its broader contribution, so moving to a 'demand-led' model of provision driven by institutional needs.

### *Student engagement*

Undergraduate and post-graduate students do take up the learning opportunities that Continuing Education services provide. However, these programmes also provide opportunities for teaching experience for postgraduate students, and potentially in areas that complement their doctoral research. There is also potential for Continuing Education courses to provide platforms for undergraduate project work. In this way such courses are complementing the efforts of academic departments to provide high quality and discipline relevant co-curricular engagement opportunities to students; something that is of major importance to the creation of a 'sense-of-belonging' for students and their relationship to the 'life' of their chosen academic subject.

## **5. Conclusion:**

The fortunes of 'lifelong learning' in the industrialised countries, and its manifestation as 'Continuing Education', have waxed and waned over the last 60 years and its meaning has varied across regional areas (Green, 2002). Ebbs and flows of government commitment have been accompanied by changing ways in which 'learning' has been conceptualised – oscillating between definitions influenced by employability and skills-related agendas, and those framed in terms of personal growth and democratic culture – and valued by society.

We have traced the decline of mature student recruitment into HE in the UK, and noted the particular demise of Continuing Education and also the challenges involved in defending its importance to HEIs and their surrounding regions. In the world of HEIs framed principally as businesses, and in many cases very lucrative ones, such services have struggled to maintain their position within their institutions; indeed, most have been unsuccessful in so doing.

This essay has also argued however, that Continuing Education is of great value to the public profiles of HEIs that have been historically considered to be civic institutions, concerned not only with the 'bottom-line' but equally with benefiting society. It has considered its value for 'learning' seen holistically as something that brings societal benefits for health, social inclusion, citizenship and so on. It has also joined with other voices who argue that it is important for the very market-related and instrumental definitions of learning that presently undermine its status and claim to public support and state funding.

Finally, we have outlined approaches that can be taken for those seeking to defend Continuing Education in the few HEIs that have retained it in the UK. These strategies for survival require strategic alignment with major sector and HEI institutional priorities, the widening of performance metrics to incorporate the contributions it can make to these priorities and the adaptation of provision to areas of local learning markets in which it might indeed have some commercial potential.

Putting survival-oriented pragmatism aside however, fundamentally Continuing Education should be appreciated and supported for its real value; as something that is enabling for social and economic human action and ennobling of human life. It is first and foremost - and *intrinsically* - a public good.

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