

## Editorial – UALL Special Edition

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## Introduction

This special UALL issue of the Journal – now in its fifth year – is an important occasion in the calendar of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL). The papers arise from the UALL Annual Conference, which presents a platform for research and practice presentations by the higher education (HE) lifelong learning community. There is a long history of publication in the field of adult learning - an appropriate thought in this centenary year of the ‘1919 Report’: the Government report on the state of adult learning at the end of the Great War. This Report led directly to the national framework for adult education, and thus to the academic community of which we are members. Research and publication followed rapidly from this beginning; the National Institute of Adult Education was founded in 1921, and the *Journal of Adult Education* in 1926. Other journals followed later. Interestingly, in this first issue of the *Journal of Adult Education* is a paper on ‘Educational Theory and Adult Education’.

For many years there was a strong current of publication on the education of adults. Alongside the mainstream journals were many lesser or more local publications. Many university adult education departments published series of research papers, such as the *Vaughan Papers* at Leicester. UALL likewise has a long history of enabling publication in the field, publishing a series of *Occasional Papers* on aspects of theory, policy and practice in adult learning.

Such series were excellent platforms for publication by early-career adult educators – an opportunity now much reduced by the regularising of research publication as a result of the Research Assessment Exercise (1986 *et seq*) and its successors. UALL maintains its commitment to fostering early-career adult educators, and this Special Issue is a most worthy inheritor of the open tradition of scholarly discourse shared by both UALL and the Open University. UALL is most grateful to the Open University for this publication of selected papers from the 2018 Annual Conference.

The 2018 Conference was held in Downing College, Cambridge, over 3 days from 21<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> March.

The central topics of the Conference are policy, practice and research. From a policy perspective it was with excellent timing that the opening keynote speaker was Nicola Dandridge, newly-appointed Chief Executive of the *Office for Students*: the new regulatory body for higher education in England. She spoke on the Conference theme of *Opportunities for Lifelong Learning in a Changing World* and outlined the future role of the new organisation in providing for the non-traditional learner. The ensuing discussion was a valuable opportunity for delegates to contribute to this development and for UALL to engage in ongoing policy discussions.

UALL is predominantly an association of practitioners who are committed to provision and innovation grounded in research. As has become customary, the conference offered a platform for a large number of papers for presentations addressing practice and research from across the UK, and from Europe and North America. The encouraging number of international presentations reflects the increasing engagement of UALL with the global lifelong learning community. The papers this year displayed a remarkable spread of approaches to the Conference theme, some analysing social and economic change and their impact on providers and students, others focusing on citizenship, public engagement and the concept of the ‘learning city’. Presentations on vocational learning addressed the current initiatives in the UK for degree apprenticeships, professional practice in changing economic conditions, business enterprise and the empowerment of employees, and the use of creative fiction in management training.

At the formal Dinner the opportunity was taken to celebrate another significant historical date: the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first university adult education programme in England by James Stuart of Trinity College, Cambridge. Stuart, a far-sighted mathematician, famously began the provision of university lectures from which grew the university extension

movement and eventually the national system of public access to higher education.

One day of the Conference was dedicated to international partners. The keynote speaker was Sten Tiedemann, Rector Folkeuniversitet Aarhus, Herning & Emdrup (Copenhagen), who gave a valuable insight into the state of higher education and lifelong learning in Denmark in the face of changing times and cutbacks. Presentations followed from other international speakers from Ireland, the Turkish Universities Continuing Education Network and the Centre of Women's Studies at Ege University, the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education, and the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education.

The papers in this Special Issue have been selected both for their contribution to the literature of lifelong learning and for their reflection of the Conference's thematic strands. They demonstrate the breadth of interest in the field and the continuing energetic commitment to researching adult learning. The first of these: 'Enhancing mobility? Validation of prior non-formal and informal learning and its impact on individuals' employment biography: Qualitative Insights from Germany and Poland' admirably reflects UALL's increasing international focus. Franziska Laudenbach and Aleksandra Lis address a topic which is central to the European Union vision of labour mobility: the free movement of citizens to work and live within member states, as codified by the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and later by the European parliament. In the current period of intense self-questioning by the UK of its European identity it is instructive to see the results of this comparative project on the role of the validation of prior learning (VPL) in two EU countries within a contextual discussion of policy developments. The authors find that VPL confers both access and certification to participants, who are likely to be at a turning point in their professional or personal lives.

Another example of enhancing employment opportunity, this time in the UK, is Paula Nottingham's 'Acknowledging lifelong learning principles within work-based studies: A continuing legacy for the degree apprenticeship.' Degree apprenticeships figure largely in UK lifelong learning policy debates, and this qualitative study of graduates from an integrated Degree Apprenticeship programme, is set within a contextual background of the development of work-based learning from its early 1970s emergence as 'recurrent education' in the UK, European Union and the wider sphere of, for example, OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). Nottingham sees the emergence of degree apprenticeships as

the latest manifestation of the long and complex evolution of employer-centred education, though, as she reminds us: ‘Understanding the evolution of apprenticeships in the UK can be difficult, as their history has been a long one.’ (p6)

Paula Nottingham locates the principles of effective work-based learning firmly within the broad ‘holistic’ concept of lifelong learning: ‘The concepts and principles are broad ones, and ones that go beyond the discipline of education, but it is these broader principles that have shaped the development of work-based studies by aligning learning for life with the ability to undertake continued professional development and learning.’ (p12)

The place of mathematics for the adult learner can be a problematic one. Poor experiences at school may have engendered an aversion to the subject or a belief that it can’t be learned, while on the other hand it is often a requirement for higher education and training. Having to sit a GCSE exam among teenagers can add to the anxieties. In their paper: ‘Stories of mathematical resilience: how some adult learners overcame affective barriers’ Sarah Cousins, Janet Baker, Janine Brindley and Sue Johnston-Wilder explore this common hurdle for students through a study of these barriers experienced by students on a programme of free mathematics education for students in a university lifelong learning centre. They use the engaging idea of ‘mathematical resilience’ to counter the fear of the subject, based on the notion of *perezhivanie* (Russian: ‘lived experience’) to conceptualise the barriers created by past, strong emotional experiences and developing ability to manage the associated feelings of inadequacy and under-confidence. They interviewed a sample of participants in the programme, with some predictable findings such as nervousness exacerbated by unhelpful teachers. These memories were in contrast to their present course, in which the students found supportive tutors and the ability to manage their learning. The authors find reason for ‘an optimistic perspective. People can overcome anxiety about mathematics and succeed...it is possible to transform training adults from ‘can’t do’ mathematical avoidance, or mathematical anxiety, to ‘can do’ mathematical resilience’. (p7)

Mark Richardson et al’s project WARM (Widening Access, Research and Mentoring) is a strikingly original initiative aiming at both widening access and removing stigma for mental health service patients. Readers of this journal will recall his contribution to this special issue in 2018. This paper: ‘Exploring opportunity freedom with mental health service users: Applying a widening participation, capabilities and situationist informed framework for

transformational learning’ extends the argument for both participation and participatory research and postulates a seven-point action plan for practitioners: ‘Co-CREATE’, which is intended to restore an equilibrium between ‘provider’ and ‘recipient’ partly by the stratagem of ‘stealth engagement’ – refusing ‘to introduce outcomes and measures before they are needed.’ (p3) ‘Co-CREATE’ is of course an acronym, explained in the paper, for ‘the action points which have evolved both in practice and understanding’’ (p5). The aim of this paper is to enable mental health service users (patients) to develop their capabilities to convert ‘resources’ (provision) into ‘what they deem are valuable outcomes’. The effect will also be to challenge not only stigma, but assumptions made, perhaps unwittingly, by providers of services. It (memorably in the field of lifelong learning) references the situationing in relation to finding oneself. The paper concludes with the argument that the Co-CREATE approach to capabilities can equally be applicable to everyone seeking meaning and value through learning.

The early days of access courses more or less confined their objectives to enabling non-traditional students to enter higher education. Experience soon showed that entry to HE was one stage on a journey which, if successful, would continue as a lifelong process, from preparation for access to graduation and beyond. The ‘student life-cycle’ model is now widely accepted, but as Karen MacFarlane, in her paper ‘Widening participation to higher education through the learner life cycle’, argues: ‘Despite this, the area remains under-researched and evidence of impact of widening participation activities is scant’ (p1). She presents a review of the literature of student transitions, and shows, through ‘exemplar case studies of good practice, that widening participation and the student experience are positively impacted when a life-cycle approach to managing transitions is employed’ (p2). Her work is based on practice in Scotland but has equal resonance for all engaged in widening participation and student diversity. The case is made, and supported by case studies, for early interventions to raise aspiration, for institutional ‘demystifying’ of the academic culture, strong support for students once admitted, and development of social, community and employment capabilities as preparation for graduate life and progress.

Geoffrey Elliott examines an often-overlooked area of widening participation: the disadvantaged communities in rural and coastal areas. In ‘Widening participation, student identity and agentic capital in coastal, rural and isolated communities in South-West England’ he addresses this important area of disadvantage in the context of the larger debate on the public responsibilities of universities, on increasing the proportion of students from

non-traditional backgrounds, yet within a climate of hard-pressed university resources. Elliott argues for college-based higher education in rural areas: 'such partnerships are a highly significant feature of the current English higher education landscape.' (p3). In particular he draws on the experience of Foundation Degree students. The students reveal a range of barriers and hurdles they have to overcome, including the relative absence of higher education institutions in rural area, and the very damaging effects of the severe reduction in part-time study. Elliot offers a theoretical background spanning a century (Karl Marx to Pierre Bourdieu), but warns against a 'deficit model of human capital' (p7) which simply gauges upward mobility, as opposed to 'a finely balanced mosaic of challenge, labour, expectation and achievement.' (p7) These qualities are nicely demonstrated by the voices of the students themselves: 'They truly demonstrated that they viewed higher education both as a passage to increased social mobility, for themselves and their children, and as personally meaningful and fulfilling'(p16).

In his discussion paper: 'Co-operative higher education is the answer: How to save adult education for the last time' Malcolm Noble claims that the university as a public good is critically undermined by 'neoliberal quasi-market-style reforms' which only provide 'career and economic returns' (p1). 'Reform of the HE sector', he asserts, 'is thus driven by the pursuit of profits, and the creation of securitizable debt, as students are treated as customers, in increasingly transactional relationships'. Against this threat can be proposed a radical alternative: the 'co-operative university'. Supported by case studies and extensive literature, the co-operative university offers 'democracy, deliberation and discourse' (p2) and is well-suited to reclaiming education as a public good. The specific case for this paper is the relentless demolition of lifelong learning departments in UK universities, despite many years of policy from the European Union and successive UK governments which have at least on paper championed lifelong learning and social inclusion. The time is right, Noble argues, for the co-operative model of higher education to claim its place. He recognises that setting up such co-operatives will not be easy, but 'co-operatives offer a way to solve the problems, institutional and pedagogic, currently faced by HE.'(p3)

This special issue is completed by a review of Samantha Broadhead and Maggie Gregson's book: *Practical Wisdom and Democratic Education: Phronesis, Art and Non-traditional Students*, (Palgrave Macmillan). The authors appropriate the Aristotelean concept of *phronesis* - for which there is no real modern equivalent - for the knowledge and experience non-traditional students bring to their studies. In the field of art and design the 'standard'

pedagogic practices are, they argue, inimical to students unfamiliar with their 'hidden codes'. The larger argument is a challenging one – although policy has succeeded in greatly increasing access, with increasing marketising and of damaging funding structures, should we encourage students into a world where they might not achieve their goals?

This book fittingly draws together many of the topics discussed in this Special Issue. The papers here reflect the creativity and quality of the presentations to the 2018 UALL Annual Conference, and the breadth of engagement with widening participation and lifelong learning in policy, practice and research.

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