

Editorial - *IJLE* 35(4)

NIACE: *'atque in perpetuum frater ave atque vale'*¹

A year ago, on 4th November 2015, a few dozen British adult educators gathered London. They were there to attend what turned out to be the last annual general meeting of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education: NIACE. Legally speaking, the organisation was merely changing its name, rather than ceasing to exist, but the rebranding was more than trivial. Only two of the words in its name remained ('national' and 'institute'). 'Adult', 'continuing' and 'education' were dropped, replaced by 'learning' and 'work'. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education had become the National Learning and Work Institute – and for 'branding' if not formal purposes, even 'national' has been dropped.

For an avowedly international journal to devote an editorial to the fate of a national institution – indeed, arguably sub-national, since NIACE's full title limited its role to 'England and Wales' – may seem disproportionate. But its history, both recent and more distant, is a worthy one, at the centre of international developments in our field, and some reflection is surely in order. NIACE traced its roots back to the end of the First World War, when 'a group including Albert Mansbridge' set up the World Association of Adult Education (WAAE). The Learning and Work Institute's website now wears post-colonial sackcloth-and-ashes about the 'grand title' ('the WAAE had a largely British membership with its international dimension coming primarily from the Dominions of the former British Empire')², but Mansbridge himself pointed out that '[m]ovements in European countries, as well as in the Dominions, the United States [of America] and other countries affiliated', that the WAAE's president for its first decade was Thomas Masaryk, President of Czechoslovakia, and that over forty countries were officially represented at the World Conference it convened in 1929 (Mansbridge 1940: 97).

Over the years, NIACE and its ancestors (the British Institute of Adult Education and the National Foundation for Adult Education which merged to form the National Institute of Adult Education in 1949) have played a vital part in developing the field. It published a (half-yearly) *Journal of Adult Education* from 1925; this became the quarterly *Adult Education* in 1934, and continued in publication, a vital forum for debate until it was succeeded by the monthly *Adults Learning* in 1989. But that only scratches the surface. From its earliest days, its publications shaped the field: *The Way Out* (Stanley 1923), *Adult Education in the Life of the Nation* (1926), *The Tutor in Adult Education* (Moberly 1928), *The Guildhouse* (1928), *Adult Education after the War* (1945). Along the way, it 'spun off' important developments: it co-sponsored, for instance, a Commission on Education and Cultural Films, whose report (1932) led to the establishment of the British Film Institute. W.E. Williams, the British Institute of Adult Education's Secretary, was the driving force behind Pelican Books (the 'science, astronomy, archaeology, politics, economics' arm of Penguin): launched in 1937 with George Bernard Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism, and Fascism*, within two years it encompassed the work of many leading authors (e.g., Wells 1937, Cole 1937, and Huxley 1937) as well as important contributions from the less prominent (e.g., Spring Rice 1939). The Army Bureau of Current Affairs, which Williams headed during the Second World War,

has been seen as important in the election of a Labour government in 1945, and the formation of a welfare state. (Mackenzie 1992)

There is not the space to rehearse a full record of NIACE's achievements, but few scholars in field today have been untouched by its work – particularly under Alan Tuckett, Director from 1988 to 2011. Under his leadership NIACE's turnover grew from £600,000 to £45m, and its staff from 18 to 300. It initiated and organised annual Adult Learners' Weeks – later adopted by UNESCO, these have spread to 55 countries (Wilby 2014). It conducted research of major importance, sponsored reports (e.g., Schuller & Watson 2009; Sharp 2011) which have deserved an even greater impact than they have had, and worked effectively – mostly with, though sometimes against, government – to improve educational opportunities for adults. It also made its name as a publisher of international significance.

What happened? We leave that to the historians. With 'austerity', money became scarce. Some felt that NIACE had become too close to – and financially dependent on – government during the 'New Labour' years (1997-2010); when a Conservative-dominated Coalition government came to power following the financial crash, the path was bound to be rocky. Other sources of funding, such as local government, were equally stretched. As Paul Stanistreet (2015a), for many years editor of *Adults Learning* wrote, this led to 'a succession of bruising "restructures" and the loss of some large areas of work, including its events and publishing activity and some of its research capacity.' Suffice to say that as times got increasingly tough, the leaders – David Hughes, Alan Tuckett's successor, and the NIACE trustees – came to the conclusion that survival required merging with another organisation. They settled on the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, an organisation committed to promoting 'social inclusion in the labour market' which undoubtedly shared some of NIACE's aims and values. In line with this, the final NIACE AGM voted to change the institute's aims: from 'the promotion, study and general advancement of adult continuing education' to 'the advancement of all forms of adult education, and the relief and prevention of unemployment and poverty'.

Of course, the relief and prevention of unemployment and poverty are very laudable aims; we warmly endorse them. But if there is gain – and in the circumstances, many will think organisational survival no small gain – there is also loss; and there are grounds for concern. Some of the losses will already be apparent to our international and scholarly readers: the closure of the publications division, and of *Adults Learning*. The NIACE imprint is no more. (Strictly speaking this is a separate decision from the merger and rebranding; but the developments are clearly of a piece.) It can only have a damaging effect. NIACE authors came from many countries, and their books addressed international, as well as British, readerships. NIACE encouraged authors and their writing ideas; as a publisher it was a creative agent in the field.

Publications were of course an aspect – and an important one – of NIACE's role as a 'voice' for adult education. The voice will, in that respect anyway, in future be more muted. We hope that in other ways it will be able to speak – even shout – for our field. While broadly welcoming the development ('the clear focus on equity and inclusion that both organisations already share'), our colleague John Field (2015) expressed some of our concerns: that 'the need to adapt and change will damage core values', that the new Learning and Work Institute will 'find itself drawn to focus on young adults, to the cost of learners aged 25 and over – let alone those in the third and fourth age', and that it will 'be pushed into becoming a partner of government rather than a critical friend'.

In this respect, some of David Hughes' comments at and around the AGM give some cause for concern. The 'whole agenda for the country from George Osborne [down],' he said at the meeting, was 'how to support people to get on in life and work'. In advance, he said:

The skills and employment agendas are critical for us as a nation: we have an ageing population, immense technological change, too many people without the skills to participate fully in life and a tough labour market for young people and older adults. As Government, LEPs and Combined Authorities focus more on employment support and employer engagement in skills, we will be able to provide solutions to the current challenges of low pay, low productivity, the need for higher labour market participation and skills shortages at all levels, from basic to specialised. (Hughes 2015)

This seems to us a rather narrower view of adult education than NIACE has espoused for the past century. In the opening essay of *The Way Out*, Haldane (1923) argued that members of the British Institute of Adult Education 'should have in their minds a definite impression of the ideals the accomplishment of which they are trying to realize' (p. 7). The 'impression', the 'ideals', he and his colleagues developed in the remainder of that volume was rather broader than the 'upskilling' agenda currently favoured by the British (along with most other) governments.

We mention this not because we think the educational policy agendas of 1923 could or should be applied today. What has been truly impressive, however, is how NIACE kept alive visions – and realistic ones – for forms of adult education that were both socially inclusive and broad in their definition of what adult learning should encompass. NIACE thinking, for example, lay at the heart of the work of the National Advisory Group on Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning in the late 1990s, with its call for 'creating learning cultures'; over the last fifteen years or so, it has promoted a 'citizen's curriculum'. In the climate of neoliberalism, even such qualified successes deserve applause.

David Hughes said at the final NIACE AGM, the organisation must 'press the buttons that politicians recognise'. This perhaps goes to the heart of the issue. For a representative organisation like NIACE, or the new Learning and Work Institute, the tensions are always present. They apply in any country. How close should you get to government? If you 'speak truth to power', will you still be listened to? How much will the field lose if you are no longer thought 'realistic' or 'on message'? On the other hand, what is the cost – now and for future generations – of only saying what is currently 'sayable'? Or of only pushing the buttons today's politicians recognise? As George Orwell (1944) remarked, 'Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip, but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip.'

The new organisation, Hughes says, 'won't lose touch with the historic work of Niace in supporting adult education for everybody throughout their lives and for campaigning for the wider benefits of learning' (quoted in Offord 2015). Let us hope not – and equally that broader visions of adult education are not consigned to a folder labelled 'historic work'. The final NIACE Annual General Meeting was held, we hope not ironically, at London's City Lit. The City Literary Institute was formed in 1919 after a report to the London County Council recommended better provision 'for the needs of a large number of students who seek education other than vocational', with 'a coherent programme of studies related to leisure, and an adult setting' (quoted City Lit 2016). NIACE spoke to, and for,

that constituency, *as well as* younger, and vocational, learners; we hope the Learning and Work Institute will continue to do so.

Perhaps we should add that it will not be David Hughes who develops the new Institute's vision: what he has done is done; he has moved on. The mantle of Bill Williams, Edward Hutchinson, Arthur Stock and Alan Tuckett now descends onto the shoulders of Stephen Evans. We wish him well.

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¹ The quotation is from the Roman poet Catullus, mourning for the loss of his brother: it translates into English as 'and forever, brother, hail and farewell'.

² Learning and Work Institute, 'Our History', <http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/our-history> (retrieved 2 August 2016); NIACE, in its final months at any rate, carried the same account ('Our History': <http://www.niace.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/our-history>, retrieved 2 January 2016). Mansbridge was, of course, a serial founder of educational organisations: apart from the WAAE, and the BIAE, he played signal roles in establishing the Workers' Educational Association, the Seafarers' Educational Service, the National Central Library, and the Church Tutorial Classes Association (see Mansbridge 1940: 92-103).