

Agenda for a national association ... 50 years on

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I was honoured to be asked by the current Editor to write a response to W.G.K. Duncan's 1961 paper, 'Agenda for a national association', in the first number of the *Australian Journal of Adult Education*, the journal of the newly established Australian Association of Adult Education (AAAE).

The brief has been interpreted in this way. Duncan viewed AAAE as an 'outsider' and proposed challenges for the new association without giving guidance as to how the challenges may have been met. As an 'insider', I propose to review Duncan's challenges, how they were dealt with, or ignored. Then I plan to look at newer challenges that the growing association has had to meet and some current concerns. As with Duncan, the means to achieve the goals will not be proposed in any detail.

Walter George Keith Duncan (1903–1987) is described in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)* as 'an adult educator and political philosopher' (Stretton nd: 1). He was educated at

Sydney University and gained his doctorate at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He returned to Sydney University and was Assistant Director and then Director of Tutorial Classes (or adult education). He edited the famous *Current Affairs Bulletin* from 1942–50 and made a contribution to the development of the Australian Army Education Service (Dymock 1995).

He was seconded in 1944 to investigate adult education in Australia. His subsequent report that detailed a post-war national adult education service was not considered and not published. The problem for the Commonwealth Government was that its implementation would have required the cooperation of all the states, a post-war problem Prime Minister Chifley did not wish to face. In 1951, Duncan moved by invitation to Adelaide University to a Chair in History and Political Science. Ironically, the Department of Adult Education of whose Board he was Chair published his 1944 report in 1973, with commentaries, as *The vision splendid* (Whitelock 1973).

His journal paper then was written 17 years after his report, 12 years before the report was published and 10 years after his arrival in Adelaide. It was also the first year of this new national adult education association and its journal. Politically, Sir Robert Menzies held sway in Canberra.

So the author of the article had been an academic leader in Australia's adult education and written a report designed to set up a post-war national adult education service. He had moved on to a chair in other disciplines in Adelaide but was chairman of that University's Board of Adult Education.

The statements of the previous paragraphs are made because of the ways in which Duncan describes himself in his paper, for example, as a 'fellow traveller'. At the time, the term was used for persons with 'communist' links, though his ADB biographer Stretton (nd: 1) identified him as a 'left-wing liberal, not a communist'. Why then

does Duncan use that term? He also noted that he would only qualify as an 'associate' member and is here perhaps criticising the AAAE membership structure with its preference for professionals over volunteers and amateurs.

In spite of his long experience with, and knowledge of, Australian adult education, Duncan writes his paper on the association from the point of view of an 'outsider'. But he seemed to agree with the definition of adult education at that time, that is, non-credit and non-vocational education.

What Duncan does present to the new organisation and its members are some suggestions. He notes the importance of publications and provides examples to set the tone and level of such publications.

An important part of the paper is that he suggests, from his experience, that there are other similar types of organisations from whom the newly formed AAAE may gain ideas for its development, namely from organisations of librarians, political scientists and university staffs. These are certainly professional and important occupations.

In addition to suggestions, there are challenges offered by Duncan. There is the challenge for the AAAE to become involved in training for adult educators. That was a difficult demand as the offering of named awards in adult (or continuing) education was not seriously promoted, and then not from any AAAE initiative, until the mid-1970s.

Then there was the challenge relating to adult education and television. At the time of the writing of Duncan's Report, there was strong advocacy for exploring the potential of the movie film as a technique in adult education. In 1961, black and white television, from the ABC and commercial channels, was widely available in the capital cities and moving into regional areas. How would the AAAE,

as a national organisation, seek to deal with such an important new media? There was a long-running program in Sydney organised by Sydney University with Channel 7. But the use of the medium in general for adult education was not successfully developed.

Duncan used the metaphor of the missionary to question the degree of commitment and enthusiasm of the adult education professionals in seeking to extend the scope of, and participation rate in, adult education. Was this language likely to be well received by the professionals from an 'outsider'?

Duncan sought to keep the agenda on a high intellectual plain by asserting that the solution to the problem cited by C.P. Snow of the cleavage between the theoretical and the practical could become a task for which the AAAE could seek to provide an Australian remedy. A noble objective, but surely beyond the scope of this new, small organisation.

Having sought ideas from other groups and suggested that other agencies and additional areas within universities could become promoters and deliverers of adult education, Duncan concluded rather abruptly. He suggested that cooperation between traditional providers and new agencies such as libraries and agriculture departments may be a means of helping adult education, and hopefully the new national adult education body, to progress.

As an admitted outsider, Duncan provided the words but was leaving the translating of the words into action to this new national organisation. His agenda was going to be very difficult for the AAAE to translate in projects and programs.

The AAAE did initiate a journal that has developed into an important international publication. It conducted many significant conferences and gave support to those working in the field, as well as those agencies that provided adult education or developed policy in the

field. But the AAAE does not appear to have taken on the challenges that Duncan posed in his paper.

The current writer has a different perspective from that of Duncan. In the first place, he is and has been a member since 1973. He was on the Executive in the mid-70s to 1983 and was Chairman in 1978–79. He was also Editor of this journal under its older title of *Australian Journal of Adult Education* from 1984–1989.

An additional reason for the writer's ongoing interest in the name changing AAAE/AAACE/ALA has been his 'amateur' rather than professional interest in the history of organisations with which he is associated. He has been involved in the celebration of AAAE's 30 Years (Nelson, Brennan & Berlin 1992), ALA's 40 years (Brennan 2001) and now the 50th Birthday.

The 2001 paper offered five topics for future exploration by the organisation. These topics will be initially used to link Duncan's paper with the ways the organisation has evolved and provide a structure for looking forward. The order the topics are examined varies from that of the 2001 paper. These topics are used because, while Duncan's paper had stimulating content, it had a rather loose structure. The topics are planned to be treated in the following order: international relations, its role, membership, resources, governance and staffing.

Duncan's paper shows an awareness of the national but also the international dimension of adult education. The writers quoted are international, from C.P. Snow to Tawney and Elton Mayo. Reference is made to UNESCO. What ensued was that the AAAE in fact provided significant leadership for adult education internationally and especially in the Asian-Pacific region. The AAAE provided the base for the Asian and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE) which had links to the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) and was recognised by UNESCO. In the 1970s and into the 80s, the headquarters of ASPBAE were in Canberra and in the 90s a

Regional Officer of ASBPAAE was located within the AAACE's offices in Canberra.

The participation in, support of and contribution to ASPBAE have declined. The lowering of the national government's concern for relationships with international adult education agencies, such as the 2009 UNESCO Conference, marked a shift in the scope and value of ALA's international relations. In the recent Annual Report (accessed from the ALA website, <http://www.ala.asn.au>, 10 June, 2010), international relations appear to be focused on bilateral arrangements, for example with New Zealand and South Korea, and depend on personal contacts. Examination of the association's publications to members, for example recent copies of *Quest*, indicates less content on, and attention to, the international dimension of adult education compared with earlier decades.

It seems ironic, then, that in the age, say 1970s and 80s, of the telephone and postal service as the major means of maintaining contact, the AAEE was able to have ongoing and effective communication with adult education in Asia and the Pacific—where technology was not advanced. But in the era of the internet and i-phone, where the global dimension is evident in all that we do, the ALA's international contacts and activities appear to have declined.

The second topic is concerned with the association's role. As Ginger Mick pondered, 'What's in a name?', so may those with an interest in the ALA. Until its most recent name change, the focus was on a special type of educational provision. It was not necessarily a widely recognised or respected field of education, but then the association's role was to raise the level of its acceptance. So that has been its challenge to promote the sector.

In many ways it was successful. The AAEE in the 70s took a lead in promoting women's education. The Executive sponsored a series of special activities organised by Executive Member, Gwen Wesson.

The AAAE Executive made a conscious decision to support women's education and accepted the offer from a collective of women on the North Coast of New South Wales to conduct what was a very successful Annual Conference at Valla Park in 1984. In the report of the Adelaide 1990 AAAE Conference (Nelson, Brennan & Berlin 1992), the speaker on the AAAE in the 80s, Diana Berlin, defined it as a period of women's mature contribution to the organisation.

The AAAE was also successful in promoting the need for attention to adult literacy. That resulted in the establishment of the Australian Council on Adult Literacy and a new subset of adult education was recognised. The AAAE supported other specialised areas of adult education, for example in prisons and a special number of this journal was devoted to this theme (29(2), July 1989).

But as Foley pointed out (2004: vii), the general field of adult education has been replaced by specialist fields—vocational education, HRD, community-based education, workplace education, recreational (outdoors) education, education for seniors and prisons and adult literacy from the previous paragraph—and these specialist fields have established their own organisations to represent them. For example, there is the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) (<http://www.avetra.org.au>) for the teachers and researchers of vocational education. So the shift in the organisation's name from 'adult education' to 'adult learners' was an adjustment to a change that had already happened.

However, to make a claim that the ALA has the role of representing adult learners is, as I suggested in 2001, both 'presumptuous and pretentious' (Brennan 2001: 378). The great irony of much of the work of the ALA, and the AAACE before it, was that good research and programs were developed on behalf of adult learners in the study circle movement that AAACE promoted, in adult literacy groups or in conservation-type programs for indigenous and non-indigenous

adults in remote areas, but these activities did not produce members for the association from these groups.

This important point is made because it is central to the next issue, that of members.

In the new AAAE in the 1960s, the situation was clear there were professionals and amateurs and the organisation was most interested in professionals. The professionals were in three groups: administrators (the directors), the programmers and the tutors. The amateurs were a diffuse group, and many were students. In the 70s and 80s the membership broadened with people in the 'new' areas of adult education provision. Also, many of these new members had different roles, being involved with media or in the writing of materials or in counselling/advising of their adult students.

There was also the important category of membership for 'organisations'. However, the parent organisation never seemed to be able to harness the energies of these member organisations. The situation was rather one of the parasitic use of the resources of these organisational members by the Executive in the 70s and 80s, for example the departments at ANU, Sydney and New England, the CAE in Victoria and the Sydney WEA and the NSW Board of Adult Education, for the actual running of the association.

Then of course there was the constitutional problem. The AAAE was supposedly a national organisation but adult education, despite Duncan's Report, did not have until the 1970s any sort of adult education presence nationally until the advent of TAFE and an AE in FE (Further Education). Adult education remained as a state focus and the different ways in which it was organised in each state was a problem nationally. The AAAE went federal, and state branches were set up, but their effectiveness varied from state to state and year to year.

So there is a declining membership of individuals identifying as 'adult educators' and a mix of organisational members. But the ALA as a 'professional' organisation provides limited services for its members: a magazine, a journal, an annual conference, email information, an occasional professional development activity and a website. Is that competitive for a professional organisation in the Australia of 2010, not 1960?

What then is the point of proceeding to discuss resources, governance and staffing, the last three topics of the 2001 agenda? The larger issue of the role and goals of the association needs to be clearly scrutinised. What worked quite well in previous decades and allowed the AAAE/AAACE/ALA to coast along is no longer relevant, operationally. But one value of being 50 years old is that the organisation can review its past and see if there are features in its history that can be dug up, revised and re-activated. That is what is being suggested in the following.

What is proposed is a return to AAAE's 'roots'. Specifically, the suggestion is for ALA to seek to become a peak level national/international organisation with a focus on adult learning. But the new concern is not **all** adult learning and **all** adult learners. The new target proposed is particularly and specifically learning of a non-vocational, non-credit style. That was how adult education was defined in the 1960s.

That changed focus would mean a shift away from VET, from the concentration on jobs and preparing for them and the gaining of awards, certificates and diplomas, to indicate the achievement of identified work skills. The ALA would seek to gain the support of those organisations involved in recreational, health, sporting, religious and other similar types of adult learning. The emphasis would also be on the less formal delivery of education and emphasising these other forms of learning, in contrast to

the vocational. The traditions of individual and organisational membership could be maintained but guided by the new emphases.

Importantly the concept of the amateur/volunteer member—a distinction from the 60s—could be revived to include all the volunteers who are associated with adult learning in historical societies or museums, art galleries, men's sheds, U3As, Landcare, organic farming or playgroups. The list is very long. Then there are all the groups that are concerned with crafts, from pottery to painting and sporting and recreational clubs that have as part of their agenda the teaching of their sport or craft. Then there are the many organisations concerned with health and welfare, most of which have as a central part of their agenda, encouraging their members and the public to learn. These important areas of adult learning have been sidelined and overlooked, as the central issue of how much ACE contributes to VET has been examined and re-examined.

When he was Commonwealth Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson instituted an enquiry into adult learning. The writer gained some advance notice of the enquiry and of the 'hearings' that were to be conducted and that a hearing was to be held in the writer's home town—Tamworth, New South Wales. There was limited promotion of the hearings, so the writer undertook to visit and phone those who 'provided' adult learning opportunities. Contact was made with government agencies, state and commonwealth, with the traditional providers, for example the community college, but also representatives from the types of groups noted in the previous paragraph. Also, commercial agencies delivering services in hardware and DIY and home furnishing and organisations focused on the aged or adults with physical or intellectual problems. There were some general responses. Most groups had not heard of the Minister's enquiry but were interested to be informed that the Minister was interested. They responded that in terms of 'learning', they had little or no contact with other groups but indicated that they could

be positive towards some organisation that provided information and the sharing of ideas and programs. My contact was the first many had received about their role in adult learning/education. At the Tamworth 'hearing', these groups were not represented, nor were they represented at the meeting sponsored by the Minister in Canberra. My contact with over 25 organisations which were involved and indicated a potential interest in further meetings contrasted with the four groups represented at the actual hearing: TAFE, Community College, Education Department and the Smith Family.

The type of initiative proposed for the ALA in changing its direction could take the form of a follow up to the foray at the national level in 2009 into the area of informal learning. A major reasons for noting this particular option is because, in those groups noted above with their non-vocational goals, the less formal aspects of learning are evident (along with the more formal).

Trying to continue as the national group representing the highly diversified areas of adult education/learning in a period when the focus is on the vocational aspects of adult learning and the gaining of awards and credentials will result in a gradual and further decline in role and membership, as has been evident in the past decade. There are more important long-term issues for the adult world than being restricted to the degree to which traditional adult education contributes to vocational education.

Claiming to represent adult learners and all adult education is beyond the association's resources, as has been demonstrated over the past decade. In addition, the association has lost its standing as a credible advisory body. With the high degree of specialisation within adult education, particularly in the VET area, ALA cannot achieve a role as the 'professional association' for adult education professionals. It could provide some CPE/CPD, but not a complete program. It does not have the capacity to provide other services comparable with other professional associations. ALA also has very little to offer the

many private organisations now involved in adult training. Besides, they have other bodies, such as the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) with its 1200 members (<http://www.acpet.edu.au>).

So the proposal is that ALA seeks to become the major focus at the national level (and potentially the international/global level) for the non-credit, non-vocational areas of adult learning. It would seek to ally with peak national bodies in sport and recreation, services for the elderly, craft organisations, those within health and welfare and so on, that had, among their objectives, adult learning for their members and/or the public. U3A would be a good example. There is **no** agency that has such a brief. The fact that the educational and social welfare bureaucracies seem to have difficulties dealing with informal learning/education within their fields is evidence of the need for a peak group to focus on the issue and act as a clearinghouse and provide a leadership role. An organisation that has survived for 50 years in the tough area of adult education could fulfil that role.

As with Duncan's agenda, the details of proceeding in the new proposed direction are not provided. These need to be worked out in a consultative way with those who are involved in adult learning in these areas and who have at the moment no clearly identified support group.

There is also a sense of valuing its origins and history if the ALA were to return to supporting and fostering the type of adult education that was its central brief back in the 1960s. It is a very different world today from the conditions of the 60s, but the need has arisen when the non-credit/non-vocational functions of adult education and learning require a national focus.

I wonder whether Duncan would approve of the suggestion?

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