

## **National and international associations... 50 years on**

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Looking back fifty years is a salutary experience. There is a sense that everything changes, and everything stays the same. Whilst we now have a global non-government organisation to support national bodies in the field of adult learning, most of the national members have a fragile financial base, and the International Council for Adult Education struggles to find secure funders for its global advocacy work. If the profession of adult education has grown dramatically since the 1960s, it feels in too many countries as though it is now well past its zenith, with the optimism of mass literacy campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s giving way to the narrow focus of the Millennium Development Goals—where you look in vain for the explicit recognition of the role of adult education.

Still, we are here, and carry on working together. The development of the internet has made possible global networks of a more intimate

kind. The Bretton Woods architecture may have privileged the interests of affluent countries and of capital but the explosion of creativity that characterises the World Social Forum surely shows that 'another world is possible'.

Back in 1961, in its first year the *Australian Journal of Adult Education* published a paper by my predecessor bar one, Edward Hutchinson, who was then Secretary of the National Institute of Adult Education (the nomenclature has changed) on 'The International Importance of a National Association'. He was writing to celebrate the creation of an Australian Association, and offered modest, practical advice on how to deal with the international dimensions of the work. There was then, little global advice to draw on. There were international federations of Workers' Educational Associations and of country women's bodies. There were hints that university adult educators and residential folk high schools might get together, but there had been nothing like the World Council of Adult Education since its demise in 1947.

Hutchinson noted, a little grudgingly, that in the same year, 1947, 'the microcosm of an international agency has again existed in the Adult Education section of the Education Department of UNESCO, but the comparative indifference of governments has meant that the section has had a low esteem as judged by budgetary appropriations and consequently by its *staffing* and range of action'. Yet he was writing just a year after the second in the sequence of global conferences that UNESCO has mounted every dozen years or so since the late 1940s, just as this piece is written a year after the latest, CONFINTEA 6, took place in Belem at the mouth of the Amazon in Brazil. There has been, in my view, no initiative of greater importance in securing a recognition of the importance of lifelong learning than the global UNESCO conferences—most memorably perhaps the 1997 event at Hamburg, where under Paul Belanger's guidance, UNESCO recognised not only the value of adult education as a thing to be

celebrated and defended for itself, but also its powerful role as a catalyst in the achievement of other social policy goals.

There seemed little likelihood at the beginning of the sixties that the global movement could sustain an international organisation. Hutchinson reported the barriers to the creation of a world association, discussed by participants at the Montreal UNESCO conference. 'It is the typical hen and egg situation—without large funds pre-committed, no justifying activity is possible; without previous evidence of usefulness, no one is in fact likely to commit funds at all, and certainly not on the scale required to make formal organization viable'. From the vantage point of 2010 the analysis is familiar. Despite the successes of the International Council for Adult Education since its formation in 1972 (after yet another UNESCO conference), it continues to sweat to put together a patchwork of funding to secure reasonable participation by educators from the global South for many of its activities. And the pressure Hutchinson recognised is familiar to many national associations, too, as the last decade of the history of Adult Learning Australia illustrates.

The 1960s were, though, a less accountable age, at least in England. Hutchinson argues that one merit of international dialogue is its role in helping us understand ourselves better: 'However little we in the UK may feel the need to rationalize our experience for our own sakes, we are compelled in some measure to do it for other people'. This was an age before cost-benefit analysis. Now much of my working life is spent arguing to government, funding bodies and to the wider policy community that not only is adult learning of value in itself, but that it has measurable economic benefits in the achievement of other social policy goals. The case has been helped by the findings of the Wider Benefits of Learning research centre at the Institute of Education in the University of London, which shows the measurable benefits to health (with attendant reductions in medical bills) arising from participation in any kind of learning. In the same way, studies

on the value of investment in adult education from the States or from Sweden are used by national associations in making the case for funding for the field.

One distinctive gain derives from the way new technologies have made possible collaborative and convivial work by committed practitioners across national boundaries. The sequence of international UN conferences of the 1990s—ranging from the population conference in Cairo, the sustainable development event in Rio and the women's conference in Beijing—each generated a series of promises by governments. So did CONFINTEA in Hamburg. Adult educators across the world, working with the International Council for Adult Education, established a global watch to identify how far governments went to act on the international agreements to which they had signed up. The findings of that work strengthen the advocacy case of national bodies.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the analysis of the work of national associations then and now lies in the importance now attached to advocacy—to making the case for adult learning. National associations continue to be sites of solidarity and mutual support, places to explore the best of good practice. But above and beyond that, the role of national bodies has become in many countries the focus for securing informed debate on the role of adult learning in national life. It involves what Harbans Bhola once memorably described as 'beating drums for attention'; that part of adult educators' work aligned to theatre; the creation of public manifestations, parties, celebrations. That surely was the genesis of Adult Learners' Weeks, which now take place in more than fifty countries worldwide. They take a myriad of forms, but share in common the celebration of existing learners in all their diversity as a stimulus to other adults to take up learning, and as a reminder to politicians and other policy-makers that adult learning transforms lives.

Further evidence of the importance of advocacy can be seen in the success of the sequence of training and development events mounted by ICAE for emerging leaders in adult education. The ICAE Academy for Lifelong Learning Advocacy has been running now for six years, creating a cohort of educators able to work together trans-nationally to better make the case for adult learning. They worked together to great effect in Belem, and must offer optimism for the future.

The aspiration to understand each others' experience and to assert the common humanity we share across boundaries fired my own early engagement with international work, through the International League for Social Commitment in Adult Education—a wonderfully utopian initiative that had no money but still managed a dozen international conferences that forged lifelong solidarities, and incidentally was the trigger for my first chance to visit and learn from Australian educators. Alas, ILSCAE lives on only in our memories now—but was no less important for that. Edward Hutchinson was surely right to emphasise the fragility of the links we manage to sustain with each other. The international movement would be weakened dramatically were the German government to withdraw the funding for national bodies DVV International provides. But if finances are tight, that should be no inhibition to dream, talk together, share ideas, research, and imagine better futures. And fifty years on, what the WEA used to call 'this great movement of ours' continues to make itself anew, as it will I am sure for the next fifty years.