CHAPTER 3

# Changing Conceptions of Social Purpose Higher Education: The Legacy of University Adult Education

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**Abstract:**

Lalage Bown was an inspirational adult educator who worked tirelessly to bring university education to people of all ages and sectors of society. For her, this was not a one-way process of 'knowledge transmission' but rather a partnership to the *mutual* benefit of both higher education and society at large.

In this chapter I illustrate one university's engagement with its wider community though a social-historical account of the emergence of Glasgow University's Department of Adult and Continuing Education – from which Lalage Bown retired as Director in 1992. The chapter then explores different interpretations of 'university adult education' in Britain and the wider European context – both conceptually and in practical terms. Finally, the question is posed as to whether the time may have passed for the values and ideals espoused by this tradition? Or whether, alternatively, they are interpreted anew through, for example, universities' commitments to widening access, social responsibility, the Sustainable Development Goals and other forms of outreach and civic engagement?

**Keywords:** Access; Community Engagement; Extra-mural; Social Purpose; University Adult Education

> I am standing in the drizzle at a bus stop in one of the famous «schemes», and begin talking with a young woman, who tells me how she feels trapped and alienated. In the end, we neither of us get a bus. She invites me in out of the rain, and the outcome is she organises a small class in her tenement flat. They «never knew» that the uni [University of Glasgow] was for them. I take along the Dean of Social Sciences and even he «never knew» how the university would be enriched by their knowledge and insight.
> Lalage Bown (2003, 153)

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## Introduction

The location of the meeting at the bus stop in the above quotation refers to Glasgow municipal housing 'schemes' located in areas of multiple deprivation. The exchange illustrates the values, creativity and rather feisty 'direct action' approach, so typical of the remarkable adult educator, Lalage Bown, as she worked tirelessly to bring university education to the widest possibly community. But more than that, importantly it reflects the fact that she did not regard knowledge 'exchange' as a one-way process. For her, universities also had much to gain from engagement with people of all ages and from all sectors of society.

In this chapter, I am approaching the question of social purpose higher education through the example of the work and legacy of Lalage Bown in the particular case of her time at Glasgow University.

As Director and Professor of Adult and Continuing Education in Glasgow University, Scotland (1982-92), her ideals reflected those of A.D. Lindsay, Professor of Moral Philosophy who, in the 1920s, had campaigned to persuade the University to establish an Extra-Mural Education Committee. Although the University had previously organised *ad hoc* lectures and collaborated with external bodies such as the Mechanics Institutes, this Committee represented a step change in approach as it was called upon to work to open higher education opportunities to the people of the City of Glasgow and its environs in a more structured way than had previously been the case. Commenting in 1923 that a University such as Glasgow, which was, at his time of writing «situated in the centre of a great industrial community» (Lindsay, quoted in Scott 1971, 102), Lindsay argued that it had a responsibility, and an opportunity to make

> humanistic studies the possession of all men and women who are faced with the need of it, if all who want a completer understanding of the ideals and possibilities of our common life, of economic and political relations, of the laws and the working of the political and social institutions they are called upon to handle, can come to the University for help, and look to it for a standard of impartial and scientific study (Lindsay, quoted in Scott 1971, 102).

There is a view that education is particularly valued in Scotland and, while perhaps some of this could arguably be viewed as a 'reinvention of tradition' it is the case that as, as Bob Bell and Malcolm Tight (1993) point out, in the fifteenth century at a time when there were only two universities in England – Oxford and Cambridge – there were three in Scotland: St Andrews (1413), Glasgow (1451) and Aberdeen (1495). As it happens, there is an interesting connecting line through Oxford University between A.D. Lindsay and Lalage Bown: Lindsay became of Master of Balliol College, Oxford and subsequently Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, while Lalage was strongly influenced by her experience while a student of Somerville College, Oxford (as discussed by Robert Hamilton in Chapter 2).

The appointment of Lalage Bown in 1982 as Director of what had by then become the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) was significant in many respects. The activities had expanded and changed since those undertaken under the auspices of the Extramural Education Committee, and

there had been an expansion in scale and development of provision in the period after Second World War. However, Lalage's appointment represented a step-change transformation in relation to the philosophy and the profile of the work of the Department: both within the university and externally in the wider community. She was not only Director, but also the Professor of Adult and Continuing Education – at a time when, in Scotland, there was typically only *the* Professor in a department. Her intellect, strong values and personality made her a formidable advocate on behalf adult learners throughout the university and beyond. The tales of her challenging interventions at Senate are legendary – attracting on more than one occasion spontaneous standing applause when she subsequently retired to the campus College Club for a 'wee dram' or in one of the local restaurants where she was an always popular, familiar figure.

When Lalage 'retired' in 1992, I had the privilege of being appointed as her successor. I was both delighted and apprehensive in equal measure. Delighted as DACE had become, under Lalage's leadership, not only one of the largest but also one of the most far-sighted and innovative departments of its kind in the UK. I was of course also rather apprehensive – she had set such a high bar: how might it be possible to follow in her footsteps?

However, I need not have worried: Lalage's contribution was so distinctive that she would have been a hard, if not impossible, act for anyone to follow. From the moment she heard of my appointment, Lalage was unstinting in her support for the new Director of the Department in the University that she loved so much. Once my appointment had been confirmed, she insisted we celebrate together in one of her favourite Glaswegian restaurants.

Given her long-standing commitment to equality for women in all walks of life and in all situations she was particularly delighted that it was one of the first – if not *the* first – occasions in Glasgow University when a female Professor had been succeeded by another woman, but also that my appointment was as a time when it was estimated that only around 6% of the professoriate in the university were women.

Indomitable, intrepid, dedicated, engaging, inclusive, imaginative, radical… these are all terms would come to mind when thinking about Lalage. She dedicated her long life to fighting for social justice: and, in her tireless pursuit of this struggle, adult education – in its various manifestations – formed her 'weapon'.

This chapter makes the case that her ideas and strategies remain, if anything, even more pertinent today than ever. The discussion is divided into three parts.

In the first, drawing largely on three historical accounts (Shearer 1976; Hamilton and Slowey 2005; Slowey 2010) I use Glasgow University as a case study, tracing a brief social history of the background to the university's engagement with its wider community – including the introduction of the first university classes designed for the general public, from which the Department of Adult and Continuing Education emerged.

Secondly, I explore different conceptual and practical interpretations of 'university adult education' in Britain and the wider European context over recent decades.

In the third part I raise the question as to whether the time of the extra-mural, university adult education tradition – to which Lalage devoted most of her working life – may have come to an end? Or, whether alternatively, have the values and ideals she espoused been reinterpreted anew through, for example, universities' commitments to social responsibility, access initiatives and wider forms of civic engagement?

## 1. The Case of Glasgow University: Changing Manifestations of University Adult Education

Universities are social institutions which, inevitably, change over time in response to shifting cultural, social, political and economic conditions. At the core, however, lies a common mission to create and disseminate knowledge through research and teaching. In this way, universities are simultaneously part of society, yet, if they are to fulfil their unique academic mission, they also require the freedom to be independent, holding a critical mirror back to the society of which they are a part.

One significant aspect within this context concerns a commitment to supporting wider society and the 'public good' – the notion of which, of course, varies over time (Marginson and Yang 2020). However, arguably an arena where university values and those of social purpose adult education converge concerns access to education for people of all ages and stages of life – not just school leavers – and particularly those who did not have the chance to engage in higher education at a younger age.

In the case of Glasgow University, approximately 300 years ago, in 1727, the University Commissioners instituted changes in the Constitution of the university whereby the Professor of Natural Philosophy was required to offer two courses: one in physics and one in experimental philosophy. It was further laid down that «any person, not a student as said is, may attend the lessons of Experimental Philosophy without a gown»: in other words that the course on experimental philosophy should be open to the general public (Shearer 1976, 1). In this spirit, from 1729 to 1746, the Professor of Moral Philosophy, Francis Hutcheson, gave his lectures in English to both students and the wider public. Over the eighteenth century the professors of the university connected with clubs such as the Political Economy Club and the Glasgow Literary Society – combining, Shearer suggests «the pleasures of conviviality with the dissemination of knowledge and the promotion of research» (1976, 3). With influential thinkers such as Adam Smith and David Hume the scale of influence was impressive given that in 1800 the university comprised just thirteen professors and a few lecturers.

While the university had links with working class men through Mechanics Institutes, it was not until the 1860s that the university – not without opposition on the part of some professors – made its major contribution to widening access for women through the Association for Higher Education of Women,

the establishment of Queen Margaret College and its subsequent incorporation into the university.

It was James Stuart – another influential academic who also had spent time at Glasgow University – who is credited with articulating the idea of university extramural (beyond the walls) provision in Cambridge University (Fieldhouse 1996). In 1873, the University of Cambridge agreed to organize, formally, programs and lectures in various centers, and Oxford also undertook to provide a number of programs through extension centers. Shortly afterwards, the University of London established the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching.

In Glasgow an 'Extension Board' was established in 1888, however, it some decades later, largely through the energy and commitment of A.D. Lindsay, Professor of Moral Philosophy, who had been strongly influenced by his experiences in Oxford University, that more formal connections were developed between the university and the WEA (Workers Education Association).

Ultimately this led in 1924 to the establishment of the Glasgow University Extra-Mural Education Committee. The work undertaken under the auspices of this committee was firmly in the liberal tradition of university adult education, placing an emphasis on personal growth and development of the individual, through educational experience, including both the acquisition of knowledge and analytical skills and enhancement of self-confidence and breadth of social awareness. In this regard, informed, independent, self-motivated, free individuals are held to be the cornerstone of the 'good society'. And to this objective of individual development, liberal education should be characterised by critical thinking: all questions are open questions, subject to rigorous, sceptical and wide-ranging criticism and discussion.

This then is the tradition of university adult education into which Lalage Bown fitted so well when she was appointed as Professor and Director in 1981 – shortly after her return from an influential period of working in many countries in Africa: as described in detail in other chapters in this book.

This was also the background which Lalage Bown drew on in a joint lecture which I had the pleasure of presenting with her in 1998 as a contribution to a seminar series in honour of Glasgow University's 11th Jubilee (Bown and Slowey 1998). In our lecture, Lalage emphasised the historically important role played by university adult education in supporting what she termed «a huge surge towards democracy», and the major concerns she had for a narrowing of focus due to increasing domination by economic imperatives.

In the next part, I elaborate on the economic and other imperatives which have shaped university adult education in recent decades – particularly in Britain, but also with reference to the wider European context.

## 2. University Adult Education: Interpretations in Britain and the Wider European Context

The days when a university might comprise just thirteen professors and a tiny proportion of the male population are long gone. In the global north higher

education has expanded greatly to a scale where many, if not most, young people progress from school to some form of higher education (UNESCO 2022).

Three factors however have to be taken into consideration when looking at these raw statistics. First, the age participation rate (APR) simply measures the proportion of the population of the typical school-leaving age which progress to higher education – that is young people. Secondly, much of the expansion in higher education over the last two decades took place in institutions of higher education other than universities – such as polytechnics, community colleges, further education colleges, and the like. Thirdly, international statistics usually refer to full-time undergraduate entrants, whereas adult learners are more likely to be found on part-time, distance, post-experience, and non-credit programs.

An examination of adult participation in higher education in selected OECD countries (Schuetze and Slowey 2012) identified five different approaches to the categorization of engagement by adult students in higher education.

- The age of the learner on entry to higher education – defined in many countries as those aged somewhere between 21 and 25.
- The mode of study – predominantly part-time, blended, distance or on-line.
- The type of programme undertaken – for example, professional updating or retraining and non-credit or community courses, as opposed to undergraduate degree qualifications.
- The life course stage, or predominant motivation of the learner – for example, 'second chance' or postexperience.
- The mode of organization of higher education provision for adult learners – for example, whether it is through specialist institutions (such as open universities) or centers with a dedicated mission to meet the needs of adults (of which the extramural tradition, considered above and below, is the classic example) as opposed to widening access for adults to 'mainstream' higher education provision.

While arguably most university systems in Europe display some elements of the above features, in order to understand more specific patterns of university adult education, it is necessary to have a broad appreciation of the historical traditions from which they emerge.

In this regard three major traditions can be identified.

First, the model of bringing university education 'outside the walls' to the wider community. As discussed in the example of Glasgow University, the origins of this model can be formally traced back at least to the 1870s in the British universities. It led in many of the older universities to the establishment of specialist adult education (extra-mural) departments, with, at some stages dedicated and separate funding lines. These departments were unusual in being multidisciplinary and devoted to the delivery of university level courses specifically tailored to meet the needs of adult students. This extramural approach provided a con-

ceptual model which, as demonstrated by Lalage Bown, had also a widespread international influence, in particular in Commonwealth countries as discussed in other chapters in this book.

Second, some higher education systems have traditions of university adult education which are connected to the ideal of 'service' by the university to local and regional social and economic communities. A significant example of this tradition are the land-grant universities in the USA, which had a particular mission to support community and rural development.

Third, there are traditions where educational provision to adults, as a distinctive group, tended not to be seen as a significant function for universities, but was rather associated with institutions such as folk high schools and similar. This is particularly evident where the university traditions emphasized research, professional development of adult educators, where direct delivery to local communities was largely undertaken by other agencies and specialist institutions, such as open universities or vocational organizations (for example in the Humboldtian higher education system of Germany).

The complexity and variability of patterns was well demonstrated in the findings of a comparative study of continuing education in universities across thirty countries which showed that

> activity with ostensibly different purposes, including continuing professional development, second chance education, education for leisure and social development, U3A and technology transfer, are all within the remit of continuing education. Increasingly, continuing education within universities has become blurred with other aspects of flexibility including part-time education, summer universities, open and distance education, accreditation of prior learning and work-based learning (Osborne and Thomas 2003, 20).

Allowing for the expansion and development of on-line learning opportunities and the – as yet unknown – impact of artificial intelligence, there is little reason to think that this 'blurring' has declined in recent decades: or, seems likely to do so in the future.

To what extent do such organisational changes matter in the efforts to widen access to higher education for adult learners, and the social justice mission of universities? This is a question which is explored in the next part.

## 3. Reinventing the Social Justice Mission of Higher Education

The case of the extramural tradition considered above illustrates common challenges faced. These in part concern the relative advantage of seeking to incorporate adult learners into 'mainstream' university activities versus the benefits of dedicated provision which reaches out in proactive ways to the wider community, with curricula, modes of teaching and assessment (where relevant) tailored to the interests, needs and life experiences of adults – as distinct to the traditional cohort of school leavers.

Additionally, there are wider structural dynamics operating at the level of both higher education systems and individual institutions which influence how this balance tilts one way or the other, including: financing; research priorities; and institutional missions. In the case of the British model of extramural education, the interaction of these three factors over recent decades has led to a situation where effectively many such departments – leaving aside Oxford and Cambridge – have ceased to exist in the forms most had since after Second World War.

These are briefly considered below.

*Finance*: many such departments had been the recipients of two important streams of funding. One of these operated at a national level through specific earmarked allocations from the relevant higher education funding agency – the names and structures of which changed over time. A second stream of funding, which was particularly important for the Scottish universities, came through close collaboration with regional public authorities. By the year 2000 these two streams of funding had either come to an end, or been significantly reduced. In their place, while some targeted funding became available on a bidding basis, this not secure enough to maintain the previous scale of activity.

*Research*: the second important development with a significant impact on adult education departments was associated with an increasing focus on research assessment. The traditional adult education/extramural departments were, by definition, multi-disciplinary. In some respects their nearest equivalent were Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, with a mix of experts from a variety of different disciplines who took responsibility for developing programmes and oversight of the quality of provision in their areas of expertise. Such academics were expected to be active scholars in their relevant areas. This provided a fruitful environment for the growth of new interdisciplinary areas of knowledge, many of which subsequently became incorporated into the 'mainstream' departments (Steele 1997; Taylor et al. 2002). Thus, for example, the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at Glasgow University in the 1990s comprised academic colleagues with backgrounds in archaeology, art history, biology, geology, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, physics, sociology, as well as researchers in adult and community education.

With an increasing worldwide emphasis on 'league tables' research assessment and research excellence it became important for all such members of staff to be assessed within their relevant disciplines. This was not only in order that individuals might receive appropriate personal recognition, but also because, in effect 'successful' assessment was associated with some additional funding to the relevant department. In the case of Glasgow University, we were pleased that the research on adult and continuing education received increasingly higher grades over the years in British national research assessment systems. However, as the numbers engaging in such research were relatively small, the funding associated with this line of activity did not reflect the time and effort dedicated to it.

*Institutional mission*: the third matter which arguably shaped the demise of extramural and adult education departments in their previous manifestations was

associated with changing institutional missions and strategies. This was partly associated with the major growth of new types of universities in a unitary system, with the consequent demise of dedicated funding lines. But possibly even more importantly, wider financial pressures led institutions to focus attention on income generation through, for example: recruitment of fee-paying international students; technology transfer and start up enterprises; income generated through student residences, alumni and the like. In such an environment there was, unfortunately, rarely a willingness to subsidise wider adult education programmes for the community, leading to them being seen as marginal to core university 'business'.

In investigating what they termed 'academic capitalism', Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) showed the many ways in which the boundaries between public concerns and private gains became increasingly blurred, as universities sought income from increasingly diverse sources. Consequently, continuing professional education provision, which is usually self-funding – or even 'profit' making – tended to expand: the arena of lifelong learning being one which is particularly subject to the growth of the private sector and both profit and non-profit higher education providers (Peters 2001; Marginson 2011).

Writing in 2009, Peter Jarvis, in considering the wider landscape of adult education beyond universities, posed a question as to whether the adult education 'movement' led, or followed? Towards the latter part of the twentieth century, with the rise of the knowledge economy, and the need for a more educated workforce, he makes the point that suddenly lifelong learning became important «but it was not the adult educators who forced open the door, because in many ways they have been left behind with the rapidity of the transition» (Jarvis 2009, 16).

In a similar vein, Chris Duke – a long-standing colleague of Lalage's at Warwick University where she was a Visiting Professor – reflecting on changes taking place in higher education, remarked that these were «little informed by the commendable and abiding purposes for which extra-mural liberal adult education was founded»

> As universities come to deepen their interest in engagement, and often their commitment to regional partnerships and development, this occurs without benefit of the socially informed liberal perspectives of and the facilitation skills honed in EMDs [Extra-Mural Departments]. University engagement in regional development has been more unbalanced towards the (neo-) liberal economic and the technical/skills agenda. Universities as well as regions are the poorer as a result. As the world experiences new forms and intensities of economic, environmental, geopolitical and cultural crisis, rebalancing in favour of a wider civic mission becomes the more urgent (Duke 2008, 214).

So, if the classic model of the adult education/extra mural department has all but disappeared, where might we see evidence of this 'engagement' on the part of higher education? Given that Lalage Bown dedicated her long and inspirational professional life to supporting the development of dedicated university

centres, departments, or institutes of adult education what does the demise of many such mean for her legacy? Might it mean that, leaving aside her incalculable personal influence, her institutional legacy has somehow been 'lost'? I believe not, as I explain in my concluding reflections.

## Concluding Reflections

In reviewing current developments in higher education in Britain and Europe more widely, I prefer to draw not only Lalage's values, but also the positive energy and associated strategies which she, as a principled pragmatist, epitomised. I see these as a combination of: regrouping in the face of adversity; and vigilance in identifying, and then seizing, every opportunity in whatever institutional 'spaces' she could find, to reinvent new approaches for universities engage with their wider communities, extending access to university knowledge to all.

Where might we identify evidence of such 'spaces' in contemporary universities? The Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland, Peter Scott, points to some as he makes the case that there is a need to replace what he calls a 'pseudo-populist narrative' that focuses on fear, by one based on hope. In this context, policy makers, and universities «need to recalibrate our language, away from world-class universities and beggar-your-neighbour league tables, and back to social purpose, social responsibility and – of course – more open (and fairer) access» (Scott 2017, 4).

Individual academics have always engaged with, and made major contributions to, wider society with a view to supporting 'the public good'. The question is what is happening at the institutional level? Can we find any grounds for optimism as – some – universities seek to reinvigorate this social purpose mission?

The last time I saw Lalage was when she came to speak at a seminar, I was hosting in Dublin City University – to which I had moved when I left Glasgow – on 4th February 2020. Despite being in her early 90s, she had taken the train by herself from Shrewsbury to Holyhead port, where I met her. As it happened, there was a new ferry travelling between Holyhead and Dublin that day and, in inevitable Lalage style, we were upgraded to seats to right at the bow of the ship – where she charmed all the crew settling into the comfort, commenting the experience was less like a ferry crossing more like being on a cruise! She also was the highlight of the seminar the next day at the launch of a report addressing issues dear to her heart *Living Longer - Working Longer? Ageing Population and New Workforce Dynamics in Ireland* (Slowey and Zubrzycki 2020).

So, in looking for some signs of optimism below I highlight just a few initiatives with which Irish, British and many other European universities are involved, reflecting attempts to put social justice principles into practice.

Widening access: many European countries have set national targets for universities to achieve. For example, in the case of Ireland the objective is «to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing

higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population» ("Higher Education Authority" 2023).

Universities of Sanctuary (2023): building on the City of Sanctuary movement, this initiative promotes good practice by universities in welcoming sanctuary seekers (students and staff) into their communities seeking to foster a culture of welcome and inclusion for all.

Age Friendly University ("Global Alliance of Age Friendly Universities" 2023): a network of c100 universities with the aim of making higher education more accessible and responsive to the needs of older learners.

Scholars at Risk (2023): An international network dedicated to protecting academics and «the freedom to think, question, and share ideas».

Development of new international 'ranking' systems focusing on universities impact, for example in working to help achieve the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals ("THE Impact Rankings" 2023).

The above such initiatives have, of course, strengths and weaknesses, and some may prove little more than 'flavour of the moment'. However, as chapters by Alan Tuckett and others in this book describe, this is where there are clear lessons to be learnt from Lalage's approach: strong advocacy; research to produce the evidence; recount adult students' (compelling) personal stories; networking; developing partnerships and alliances; and, ultimately, 'speaking truth to power'. Whether that representative of 'power' be the Dean of the Faculty (as in the quotation at the head of this chapter), the Principal of the University, representatives of international, national or regional Governments, civic society agencies, business, commercial bodies or whoever.

At the heart of the endeavour, lies the key question: what can we do in universities to engage, share and generate knowledge with the widest possible public? In this respect, as Evans and colleagues put it in a recent Handbook on Lifelong Learning, reimagining «lifelong learning is a creative and productive process in which we all share responsibility in contributing to the iterative and recursive development of ideas, plans, programs, and practices» (Evans et al. 2022). Aways committed to fighting inequality wherever she saw it, in contemporary terms Lalage's approach might be termed 'intersectional': she did not look at key structural factors of gender, race, and social class in isolation, but rather as the ways in which they combine to shape people's opportunities for education and associated lifechances (Slowey 2022).

So, Lalage's vision, as I see it, directly follows those of the founders of the adult/extra-mural tradition in Glasgow and similar universities described briefly in this chapter – combining a passion to widen opportunities for individuals to learn and develop over their entire lifespan, with an Enlightenment conception of the value of liberal democracy. In this respect, the academy rather than

being part of the problem, through exclusion and intellectual isolation, might become part of the solution by, as Jean Barr says in her discussion of the idea of an educated public «actively supporting the growth of new associations, rooted in projects, to which committed intellectuals and academics from different disciplines might contribute» (Barr 2008, 23).

In the Albert Mansbridge Lecture in 1995, Lalage laid out, perhaps most explicitly, her arguments supporting democracy and democratic principles. In doing so, she also stressed that it is crucial

> to draw on our inheritance, on the understanding of our predecessors that democracy's 'magic promises' will always fail without opportunities for the general public to learn about the issues of our time and to judge them on the basis of logic and articulated principles, rather than prejudice (Bown 1995, 7).

> [...] those who use the rhetoric of 'active citizenship' need to have their bluff called: reflective citizenship comes before active citizenship. Political education makes the reflection possible (Bown 1995, 18).

With widespread contemporary challenges to the pursuit of 'truth' and the rise of populism and neo-nationalism across many parts of the world, if Lalage's warning is perhaps more apposite than ever, so also is her vision.

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