

MEMORANDUM ON ADULT EDUCATION

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In this note we first discuss the need for adult education from the point of view of developing the country's human resources (albeit viewed in a wider framework than is usual) and then turn to the relationship that adult education bears to education as a whole and to the general organisation of society.

I. Need for Adult Education: Occupational Re-training and Human Resources Development of

Adult education seeks to provide people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and interests that they either enjoy acquiring, will enjoy following or practicing, or need for some reason such as the pursuit of their careers or improvement of their homes, communities or families. Sometimes the courses now required, although old-established, were, for one reason or another, not available to the individuals concerned in their childhood or adolescence, sometimes people have come to need education which they did not previously require; while in a third group of cases modern developments in educational technology have only recently enabled the courses themselves to be designed.

The need to retrain people pursuing certain occupations, such as agriculture, which require fewer personnel to move into different occupations is frequently discussed. Less frequently discussed however are:

(a) The need to develop self images. What we have in mind here is, for example, the need for people moving

from one occupation to another - such as out of agriculture and into mechanical engineering - to develop appropriate images of themselves prior to taking conventional educational courses; one of the biggest problems for ex agricultural (and other) workers is to develop sufficient self confidence to believe that they, at their time in life, can learn a new trade and can cope with the changes in their social life that will eventually be entailed if they move into a different occupation.

(b) The need to develop social skills and provide community centres. When people change from one career to another they often have to grow new roots in a new community. Sometimes this arises only from moving into a new social circle but in other cases the need arises from geographical migration. In our society rates of geographical mobility tend to be low with the result that people have few opportunities to acquire appropriate social skills by experience, schools provide little training in the necessary social skills, and society provides few social institutions to facilitate the growing of new roots in new communities and places extensive barriers in the way of housing exchange. Adult education courses, for this reason alone, should therefore be concerned with encouraging the development of a wide range of social skills and attitudes. Courses of this sort could, perhaps, best be organised through community centres. These would have the advantage of being able to provide the entertainment and social life which is so much in demand in rural areas, but, properly organised, they could do much more than just provide interests,

entertainment and company. In all areas (whether urban or rural) they could help people to lead more satisfying lives and provide the facilities and intellectual atmosphere in which new social organisations could germinate and grow, thus starting a cycle of still further enrichment of the community and further development of the individuals within it.

(c) Education of Professionals. A third neglected area of adult education ~~derives from~~ the widespread desire of middle aged professionals either to change their field of employment, or their need to take refresher courses or otherwise to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes which are necessary to make further progress in the field of employment in which they are already engaged. Large numbers of people feel stuck in a rut or feel that what they are doing is a waste of time and of no value to the community, but they go on to say that, even so, they are well paid for it, and that to retrain for a new occupation or take a refresher course would be time consuming, potentially mentally disturbing (i.e. they would have to worry about their possible inability to cope with it), and costly, and that their eventual qualifications would, in view of their age and the current attitudes toward employing middle aged personnel in developing fields, be unacceptable to most employers.

(d) Education of Employers. Although the number of management courses has mushroomed over the last decade the amount of time these courses devote to the actual management of people and the utilization of human resources and capacities is small, partly because of the dearth of worthwhile research results

in this field. It is well known that the induction into work and the management of young employees is generally poor and that employers require education in this matter. However, employers are even more in need of education in relation to the employment and utilization of older people. Very few appreciate the contributions that the employment of graduates could make to their firms if they were properly managed - and even fewer know how to handle graduates in order to get the best out of them once they have acquired them. Possibly similar numbers recognise the merits of employing older people but fewer still would know how to set about making the best use of a worker moving from one field to another after a short retraining course at 45-50 years of age.

If employers are resistant to employing graduates and older people they are even more resistant to retraining their own workers. Often they say they would prefer to invest in a younger man - not allowing for the fact that the young man will himself need retraining in middle age, will be more likely to leave the firm, and will be generally less conscientious and reliable than an older person. Furthermore they neglect the fact that the older person would be able to draw on his pool of experience with the firm.

(e) The Changes Required in Society Itself if Education is to be Restructured

If short courses covering the knowledge, attitudes and skills actually required to practice the various trades and professions - and only the knowledge, skills, and attitudes which are actually required - became widely available, widespread revision of the formal entry requirements for most occupations would be entailed.

In view of the elaborate mystique which has been carefully built up over the years in relation to trade and professional training this would in turn involve widespread changes in attitudes because the mystique has been created partly in order to restrict entry to these occupations (and thus maintain the status and salary of those already employed in the field), partly in order to punish the young and delay their entry into the labour market, and partly in order to provide a form of initiation ceremony which results in stronger identification with the occupation once it has been entered.

If these widespread changes in society could be brought about there would be no particular difficulty in developing short courses to teach the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes. To a very large extent these could be effectively provided in an educational environment composed almost entirely of teaching machines and objective examinations. In particular it should be noted that there is no particular difficulty in developing systematic teaching programmes to develop necessary attitudes once these have been identified and isolated by means of job analysis.

II. Other Functions of Adult Education

Apart from occupational retraining of employers and employees, and development of the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to cope with, or conducive to, geographical and social mobility, adult education serves other functions. This second area of adult education is concerned with the pursuit of interests, the development of generally useful attitudes and skills (such as willingness to notice the need for

change, willingness to take the initiative in introducing it, critical thinking, self confidence, social skills [for example those required for dealing with committees], and the skills and attitudes required for responsible participation in government) and the pursuit of friendship and community. As Marris has pointed out these have often been half-heartedly incorporated (alongside vocational training) into traditional thinking about university courses. The conflict between these two sets of goals of university education has been responsible for an enormous amount of frustration and dissatisfaction among both students and staff. Yet it cannot be too strongly emphasised that in traditional education the emphasis has been altogether too much on academic abilities. There is very little evidence that academic ability or attainment is at all closely related to a wide variety of criteria of life success such as salary, contributions to science or literature, success in scientific research, business success, leadership, contributions to the development of society, or happiness in family life.

As a lecturer in London University extra mural courses one of the authors devoted some thought to what his students wanted out of his course and what he could give them. What the students actually wanted was vaguely formulated by them. They were interested in, and concerned about, society and social problems and hoped that psychology would have something significant to say. What could psychology offer? It could not provide them with answers to many of the specific questions they raised - such as how to deal with their wives, families, friends, superiors, subordinates or even themselves. It could not tell them

how to deal with politicians, scientists or criminals; nor could it tell them how to run education, the police force or their businesses. What it could do was to develop a critical and scientific attitude of mind and encourage the application of that attitude of mind to thinking about society and social problems. What was taught, then, was not what the students came to the course seeking but it was, we hope, worthwhile. It seems highly likely that this case is not atypical: Students will come to courses with vaguely formulated interests and expectations, particularly with hopes for concrete knowledge, when the most useful thing for them to acquire is not detailed knowledge in the traditional sense (and of which school and university courses are absurdly full) but rather attitudes, habits of mind, stimulation of interests that can be pursued after the course has ended, and knowledge of what knowledge exists.

The range of interests that are likely to be encountered in voluntary adult education in Ireland can be estimated by glancing at the London County Council's publication "Floodlight" or at the London University extra-mural brochure. No doubt an even greater range of courses would be encountered in a similar American brochure. However, although the long term range of demand is extremely wide, the situation in rural Ireland is critical at the present time. The present situation calls for urgent steps to provide interests, entertainments, social skills and development of such things as self confidence, willingness to uproot oneself and take a new job, and willingness to take the initiative in developing ones community. The expressed need is for interests, entertainment, social contacts and socio-economic

development: We have been repeatedly told by people living in rural areas that there is an absence of entertainments, of things to interest one, and of amenities. It seems to us that the development of rural schools as community centres - with a range of interesting courses and social activities (designed however to do much more than merely provide interests and social contacts) and with full provision of transport services - is an urgent priority.

Problems in Extending Adult Education

The importance of using school buildings as community centres for extending adult education raises two other topics: one is the widespread reluctance on the part of Irish adults to have anything to do with schools and the second is the widespread reluctance on the part of adults in western society to be thought to be seeking friendships through formal institutions.

Reluctance of adults to have anything to do with schools (even in order to promote their childrens education) stems partly from their own dislike of school (originating in their experience there) and partly from the feelings of inferiority which arise when talking to more educated people. These two reasons account for the widespread failure of parent-teachers associations. It seems to us that one way of dealing with the difficulties which arise when parents have negative attitudes to school and books and communicate these attitudes to their children is to involve the adults directly in the educational process. Indeed we would go so far as to say that if it is not possible to convince adults that they have something interesting and worthwhile to learn at school then we have no right to compel children to go to school.

To this end we favour complete integration of adult and child education. Classes of mixed age composition would have two advantages. One would be that the presence of adults in the classes would give the children a clear indication that what they were learning was going to be of use to them in adult life. This should facilitate learning and help to reduce discipline problems. The other advantage would be that teachers themselves would have to conduct their classes in a more mature fashion and would have to ensure that what they taught really was going to be of value to their students (otherwise the adults, too, would rebel!) The current popularity of technical colleges among 16 year old pupils pursuing traditional academic sixth form courses in Britain stems largely from the more mature, down to earth, and less petty climate which an infusion of adults brings into the educational world.

Community Centres

The development of adequate community centres dedicated to the development of better human relationships within the community and to development of people as individuals who are more self confident and both willing and able to set up organisations to fulfill their own un-met (and, as yet, often unverbilized) needs requires extensive experimentation and careful monitoring of the results of the experiments. So far as we know the only major experiment that has been undertaken in this area was the Peckham experiment conducted in the 1930's. However, the widespread half hearted attempt to set up community centres for old people provides an additional field for research into

the factors which make one centre thrive while another dies. One variable which seems to be important is the provision of a continuing excuse to attend. The central core around which the Peckham experiment was organised was participation in a longitudinal medical study which required frequent visits to the centre. The most successful community centres for old people also seem to have a central and continuing core over and above the seeking of social contacts - such as pursuit of hobbies or the availability of free meals. For the general population the central core (or excuse to attend) might well be provided by formal education while the real benefits the centres provide might appear as fringe benefits. In saying this we are assuming that Ireland will follow the trend, well established elsewhere, for demand for education to grow as a society becomes more affluent, and, in particular, for there to be a growing demand for Culture and for information about society itself.

Adult Education and Economic Growth

Although we predict an increasing demand for adult education particularly of the non-entertainment, non-fiction, type we should at this point perhaps emphasise that we do not share the belief that traditional forms of education markedly affect the rate of economic growth. This is not to say that we do not believe that adult education could not do so if it were pursued in an appropriate fashion. And, as we have made quite clear, we also believe that adult education could lead to a great advance in social development.

To be maximally effective the change to a form of education of the sort we have envisaged (a form that would lead to increased social and economic development) would have to be accompanied by basic changes in the attitudes of all members of society and the creation of new social institutions. Obviously some sort of cyclical process would need to occur to reach our goal. How do we get ourselves on to some sort of ascending spiral which will in the end lead to a radically different situation?

Steps to the Goal

It seems to us that among the first priorities are:

(a) The development of schools as attractive community centres open during the evenings to both present pupils and adults from the surrounding community. To begin with the value and interest of the courses run in these centres would have to be extensively advertised, the differences from the schooling of ones youth emphasised, and a subsidised transport service provided: In other words a heavy marketing campaign would have to be undertaken. In a sense demand would have to be created - but only in a sense that demand for central heating has to be created in among people who suffer from the cold most of the year but whose standard of living did not hitherto permit them to envisage warmth the year round. If it is argued that major expenses would be required to make present school buildings sufficiently attractive to adults this only serves to confirm our argument because it raises the question of why parents - and pupils - do not protest about the conditions under which pupils have to

study at present.

(b) The running in these schools of educational programmes of the sort discussed in the enclosed Institute memorandum "Social and Economic Development". These programmes should result in the development of individuals able and willing to notice defects in society that they would like to see remedied, and able and willing to do something about them - for example by creating the necessary social organisations.

(c) Reform of current university courses in order to resolve some of the sources of conflict noted above and enable them more explicitly and effectively to develop a much wider range of skills than those denoted by the term "academic". We would like to see them do much more to provide opportunities for people to follow interests wherever these may lead them and to develop attitudes and skills that enabled the individuals concerned to function more adequately to secure the happiness of themselves and others.

Long Term Developments

Although not a top priority it also seems to us that it would in the long run be very beneficial for the Irish economy if we could develop a programme of research and development into adult education of the form envisaged in this note and then run seminars and courses (both at home and abroad) and publish text books to utilize and publicise the results. The "knowledge" industry now accounts for one third of American GNP. For the reasons given above we foresee an expansion in this area in Europe. It would be highly profitable to Ireland to be in the

forefront of this development. Like Britain and the Netherlands the Irish economy, with its lack of natural resources, can prosper only by export of the early application of intellectual activity. This appears to be one challenging opportunity: it demands a heavy investment of capital and commitment to continuous development.