

Where have all the flowers gone?: The wilting of university adult and community education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Brian Findsen

University of Waikato

In the 1996 special issue of ACCESS a number of articles were commissioned to “provide a snapshot of the diverse field of Adult and Community Education (ACE) in this country” (Benseman & Findsen, 1996: i). Within this publication, I wrote a critique of University- based Adult and Continuing Education, emphasising then current trends and issues, based on my work experience at both Auckland and Waikato universities in respective centres for continuing education (Findsen, 1996). Five years later, I constructed a more analytical critique on what had occurred at the University of Auckland’s Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) subsequent to a review. The overall tone for that review was largely pessimistic, based on seemingly continual restructurings of the CCE by senior management, rendering the unit increasingly powerless in a more entrepreneurial and managerial environment (Findsen, 2001).

This paper provides an assessment of events since the 1996 and 2001 articles in which I re-engage with serious issues previously-identified, this time focussing on the University of Waikato. Since these articles were written the field of ACE in Aotearoa New Zealand has changed significantly in response to diverse economic and political forces and my own positionality has altered. Yet throughout my career my focus has remained in this field as a researcher, teacher and manager. After years of management in adult/higher education,¹ my work focus is now more on research/teaching than on management after sometimes painful negotiations to reclaim this territory. The spark to ignite this critique is the New Zealand Government’s 2012 budget decision to eliminate funding to universities for ACE from 2013 and the need to wind up the current Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Waikato by the end of 2012. I argue that the flowers of ACE in universities have wilted because the roots of the plant have been pulled out and there is little political will to replant a new garden.

The broader context for ACE in universities

In recent years universities, along with other publicly-funded educational agencies, have been subject to a cult of efficiency (Bates, 1990) as they face up to economic retrenchment on a major scale. Government’s agenda of “rationalisation” amid the tertiary education system has resulted in a more resource-depleted sector as the nature of work has intensified and competitive forces both external to and internal within the universities have made longer term relationships and developmental projects more difficult to sustain in adult and continuing education.

It is important to acknowledge that the Government’s Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) places high priority on three groups: Youth; Māori and Pasifika peoples. While it is difficult philosophically to argue against these priorities as part of this Government’s bid to upskill the workforce for a competitive economy, these priorities tend to marginalise more the already-marginalised, such as

older adults wanting to return to formal study (Findsen & McCullough, 2008). While the massification of higher education throughout the Western world (Thomas, 2001) did produce a more diversified body of students in universities, historically Māori and Pasifika students have still struggled for respectability in terms of recruitment, retention and educational outcomes (Smith, 2012).

Adult and community education in New Zealand universities has had a proud history. There are now eight universities, but their relative engagement with ACE has varied considerably. The majority, after gaining independence from the original University of New Zealand, developed their continuing education service along one of two lines: either as a modified version of the University Extension, extra-mural model inherited from British colonisation or as a primary administrative model based on the American notion of adult educators as facilitators of learning who connect to the academic resources of the University. In the early period, the University of Auckland adopted the British model (wherein academic staff were employed in specialist areas such as Music, Philosophy or Māori Studies) and later transferred to a centre for continuing education. In comparison, the University of Waikato started from the “educator as programme planner” model in the early 1970s and built up its Centre for Continuing Education by the 1980s as arguably the strongest unit of its kind in Australasia.

Early days at the University of Waikato

Staff were appointed as Continuing Education Officers who were programme developers with responsibility for developing specialist areas (e.g. Humanities; Human Relationships; Science Education) plus regional responsibilities where they operated as generalists, helping to organise programmes in many nooks and crannies of the University’s vast region. During the 1980s and some of the 1990s, the work was limited only by lack of imagination and resources were commensurate with this ambitious outreach programme. Also during this period the Centre for Continuing Education developed vibrant programmes in women’s studies, trade union education and Māori Studies and was also, in collaboration with the then National Council of Adult Education, behind training of trainers workshops at a national level. The certificated programmes in Māori Studies (six papers, three in Māori language, three in cultural aspects) and in Continuing Education attracted a diverse range of people into the University who would have been considered “non-traditional”. Hence, the CCE functioned not only as a provider of adult liberal education but also as a major point of access to mature-aged students. It was an important incubator of new ideas where its relative marginality in the academy worked to its advantage. It could experiment in ways that the mainstream credit programme could not, in structure of courses, in more dialogical teaching-learning methods and in academic processes.

University ACE priorities

The generic priorities of ACE are not the same as for the universities. For general providers, the wider ACE funding criteria are:

1. Targeting learners whose initial learning was not successful
2. Raising foundation skills
3. Strengthening social cohesion.

These are indeed laudable aspirations. Few people would argue against these priorities for the ACE sector. However, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC, 2012), as the current funder of ACE to universities, expects the universities to adhere to five priorities as follows:

- Providing specialised and research informed higher-level learning that contributes directly to the creation of an advanced and rapidly evolving knowledge community.

- Contributing to the knowledge society through the preservation, dissemination and application of university research.
- Promoting the development of critical and reflective thinking, and active and informed citizenship locally, nationally and globally.
- Facilitating pathways into and through university education.
- Building capacity in the wider ACE sector.

All proposals for new courses/seminars require to be assessed against these priorities and at least one of them deemed to be appropriate. As expected in a higher education context, the research component is highly emphasised as this is unapologetically the primary focus of contemporary universities, especially in a Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) environment. A different priority stresses the need for an informed citizenry that engages in critical thinking and reflection. This is crucial in terms of the CCE's educative functions and allows for a broad interpretation of possibilities for continuing education events. In an enrolment economy, the priority of facilitating pathways into the universities allows for Jo(e) Citizen to be attracted to new learning; such programmes function as a bridge between non-credit continuing education and credit bearing programmes. Undoubtedly, bridging and foundation studies still have a place in a university environment and CCEs around the country have tended to subscribe to this stance (Benseman & Sutton, 2008). The last priority, encapsulating the building capacity notion, in earlier times a major function of universities, and has slipped off the radar, reflective to some extent of the malaise nationally of the relative (un)importance of training and professional development, especially at a more advanced level. Universities, more generally, have lost much of their visibility in the wider ACE sector, exemplified by the alienation of a university representative on the Strategic Alliance, a club of main providers in the ACE field who provide advice to the Government.

Discussion of the following issues provides a better basis for judging whether the flowers of university ACE have wilted or whether they are disappearing out of the ACE garden altogether.

Funding

At the University of Waikato the funding for its CCE has been primarily from governmental revenue and a much smaller component from participants' fees. In relation to total budget, the proportion of governmental funding has been getting larger while the money from participants has reduced significantly in tough economic times. Given the pending demise of governmental funding, the financial sustainability of the CCE has become highly questionable. It's no surprise that the University has decided to close the CCE from the end of 2012 subsequent to the government's action. Even if funding had continued, the sustainability of the work has become really marginal. In effect, the NZ Government has thrown the responsibility of ACE to the universities to fund; however, unless a CCE is in a major urban area (Auckland) or aside the seat of NZ Government departments (as in Wellington), the economic future is perilous. In addition, internal competition in continuing education within universities (e.g. continuing education within Management) has tended to erode the prospect of CCE's gaining a surplus in one area to cross-subsidise another. Acquiring external financial assistance from philanthropy or a major business for continuing education is a remote possibility in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Staffing

In 2010 the NZ Government cut ACE funding to universities by 46 per cent, resulting in a major clear-out of long-standing staff in the Waikato CCE. In 2012 the CCE has operated with the following staff: a Programme Leader of 0.3 (my role); two ACE advisors of 1.0 (one of these two also providing programme support for Tauranga city); a full-time administrator whose tasks were formed from an

amalgam of two previous workers; and a specialist administrator for an external partner, funded from participant fees. These staff members have toiled steadfastly under difficult circumstances, including tightening quality assurance mechanisms, and face potential redundancy as a result of the 2012 Government budget decision. The decline in numbers of staff since the “golden days” of the 1980s has been steady and seemingly irrevocable.

Curriculum and provision

The ways in which the ACE priorities are exercised in the university context determines what counts as knowledge (the CCE programme) and affects the potential balance of offerings. In the chapter by Findsen and Harré-Hindmarsh (1996) in *The Fourth Sector*, 16 separate programme areas were identified in operation across university continuing education units in this country. At the University of Waikato, we have managed to retain more areas than most for a unit of small size while recognising that society and universities have changed markedly since 1996. Those programme areas retained include the general liberal adult education offerings (very modest in numbers); enrolment of mature age students in non-credit programmes (e.g. New Start); a community issues forum; a small component of community development; education for older adults; Māori adult education (especially through the Rauawaawa Trust) and a modicum of continuing professional education (mainly for teachers) and a little on-line learning. Not part of this CCE’s offerings are vocational continuing education; academic teaching of and research in adult education (undertaken by me in my other role as a professor of education); summer schools; educational travel; and professional training of adult and community educators.

In effect, the acceptable university face of continuing education has been narrowed and “risky” or significant developmental projects have generally been relegated to the “too difficult” file. With an ambitious EFTS target and a small staffing contingent, the work of the CCE has been increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly because in an economic recession discretionary money is not often spent on liberal adult education, the traditional mainstay of university continuing education. Over the last year, given very constraining external and internal factors, more emphasis has been placed on public education lectures/events to attract larger numbers of participants at a low cost. Historically in universities there has been on-going tension in adult and community education between university priorities and community-based initiatives (Findsen, 2001). The effect in the university of the TEC’s priorities for ACE has been to focus mainly on those continuing education events which have corresponding subjects taught in the university; hence, those programmes which may fulfil community development imperatives have been more at risk, unless confirmed as legitimate by university academics through the approval process.

Participation in ACE

Findsen and Harré-Hindmarsh in 1996 asked, “Who participates in university ACE programmes?” The answer was complex but generally affirmed the proposition that white, middle-class women have dominated adult liberal education at most university sites (unless a major, usually vocational, programme attracts men). Māori and Pasifika have tended to miss out in relation to mainstream provision (Scott, 2010); however, there has been a strong partnership operating between the Rauawaawa Kaumatua Charitable Trust (a capacity-building programme for kaumatua taught by kaumatua) in Hamilton and the CCE at the University of Waikato. Its history, programming and benefits have been recorded elsewhere (see Findsen, 2012) but attest to the benefits of a respectful, mutually-beneficial arrangement.

Aside from the struggling general continuing education programme, the CCE has co-operated with the Hamilton 60 + continuing education group which attracts around 150-200 older adults each Tuesday morning to public lectures. A local committee of seniors constructs the programme

in conjunction with an ACE advisor. Similarly, the CCE offers support to nine regional towns where kindred programmes are conducted by a largely autonomous 60+ group. Hence, overall, the CCE has helped senior adult education to prosper as an outreach project for many years. Again, the composition of these groups tends to mirror those of the independent University of the Third Age (U3A), dominated by those who have already prospered from sustained educational advantage (Swindell, 1999). Now that the CCE is in the throes of winding down, the question is whether these regional groups can continue without explicit support from the University. In most instances, I suspect that their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1974) is sufficiently strong to survive.

University-Community relationships

Over the years the CCE has successfully engaged with numerous external local and national bodies in its vibrant history. In more recent times, some relationships have been formalised with memoranda of agreement to provide much-needed financial support to community groups. These memoranda include relationships with the Rauawaawa Kaumatua Trust, the Waikato Institute for Leisure and Sports Studies (WILSS)—with whom a number of community development initiatives have been possible for more marginalised learners—the Rotary Youth Leadership Programme and the Hamilton Community Centre for Music (HCCM). This last agreement has allowed both children and adults to learn side by side in a variety of instruments and been part of the music education scene in the Greater Waikato. Given the demise of funding, some of these agreements are likely to be foregone; others will survive under different conditions within or outside the University.

In terms of pride of place in partnerships, the arrangement with the Rauawaawa Kaumatua Trust stands very tall. The remit of the Trust is to strengthen cultural identity through activities with elders and the provision of services in the Waikato region. Its primary *kaupapa* (purpose) has been to focus on the well-being of older Māori rather than the more prevalent concentration on *rangatahi* (youth). The curriculum was co-constructed by Māori academics from the University and local people from the appropriate *iwi* (tribe). Since 1994 this Trust has carried out educational programmes in facilities in a Hamilton industrial suburb in a full range of life skills.² The CCE has valued its partnership with this Trust for just over a decade.

Aside from the more formalised arrangements, the CCE has connected with a vast array of agencies and publics through its programming. Recent collaborations include those with the Hamilton City Council, the Waikato Society of Arts, the Waikato District Health Board, the Tauranga Environment Centre, the Forest and Bird Society, Creative Tauranga ... The list goes on. The range of publics is more diverse including older adults in the Waikato, language communities, historical societies, Māori participants, arts groups, mature age students, science-oriented people, women's groups, those with political interests, information technologists, music communities, and animal owners. Some of these contacts will now be under threat of disappearance.

Concluding remarks

The CCE at the University of Waikato, highly dependent on governmental financial support, has experienced a proud history of provision of continuing education from its inception in the mid 1970s. I was a member of staff as a (senior) continuing education officer during the 1980s when the CCE was in its most expansive and creative mode. At that time its operation was highly functional in meeting people's adult learning needs/ interests in the University's region when the economic recession was still a considerable distance away. Since my return to this University in 2008 in a harsh neoliberal environment, I have had responsibility for leadership and oversight of a continuing education unit in its decline. Successive Government cuts to university continuing education in 2010 and 2012 have rendered the CCE inoperative. A small, but dedicated staff has battled valiantly to

sustain a programme against the odds. The garden flowered for many years with radiance; now it is wilting awaiting a miracle gardener.

Notes

1. My positions have been at AUT University from 2000 to 2003 as Associate Head of the School of Education; the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Glasgow, 2004-2008, two years as Head of Department; back at the University of Waikato from 2008 to 2012, initially as director of the Waikato Pathways College and more latterly as a professor of education (0.7) and programme leader for ACE (0.3).
2. The programme includes *te reo* (Māori language), *He oranga kai* (healthy eating), *waiata/whaikorero* (songs and speech-making), *korowai* (cloak-making) and other activities.

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