

Engaging with Communities: Making Higher Education Accessible to Non-standard Entrants of the Past, Present and Future

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The Review of Post-18 Education and Funding (the Augar Report) states that the purpose of post-18 education is to 'promote citizens' ability to realise their full potential economically and more broadly'. However, the Report identifies that 'the longer-employment outcomes for disadvantaged students remain disappointing and there are regional gaps in access to tertiary education.' In addition, it observes that the 'numbers undertaking adult education and part-time study have fallen at all levels.' Foundation years currently operate to address these issues. They aim to widen access to, and participation in, higher education for mature students and/or those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The agenda for widening participation is not new and has a long history. This article will take a 'long view' of the movement to widen participation by taking account of historical precursors, namely adult education organisations, to foundation years. It will use historical evidence and information on the current state of post-18 education to explain the social, economic and policy backgrounds in which foundation years currently operate. Using the evidence, it will suggest that stronger collaborations between universities and adult education organisations have potential to support the agenda more effectively for widening participation in higher education.

Introduction

Foundation Years support the recommendations of a series of recent reports that investigate the state of post-18 and adult education. The Reports include the *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, also known as the Augar Report (2018), the Centenary Commission on Adult Education Report (2019) and the House of Commons, Education Committee Report (HoCECR), 'A Plan for an Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning Revolution' (2019-21).¹ Each report, with a slightly

¹ The *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, (the Augar Report) (2018) available at:

different emphasis, identifies that different forms of post-18 education have a key role to play in facilitating the transition of modern British society from an analogue to a digital age. All the Reports, irrespective of their specific perspectives, recommend that much greater attention needs to be given to realising the full potential of post-18 education in terms of equipping mature students with the necessary skills to adapt to a modern society and economy where traditional forms of employment, services and communication are becoming automated. The Reports, though impressively researched and evidenced, do not explicitly recognise Foundation Year programmes as integral to this mission. This seems an odd oversight given that Foundation Year programmes were established to provide tailored education in academic skills to enable mature students to successfully undertake degree studies in anticipation of improving their employment and life prospects.

This article will take a historical approach and analyse the social, economic and policy contexts in which foundation years currently operate to widen participation in higher education for mature and other non-traditional learners. It will analyse the historic collaboration between universities and non-university adult education organisations in disseminating higher education to mature students who in the past would otherwise never have acquired any education beyond primary level because of severe economic and social adversity. It will also use evidence from the Reports (named above) to understand why a stronger relationship between modern adult education organisations and higher education institutions would support a civic and democratic society in the twenty first century.

Adult Education: The Historical Context

The Elementary Education Act, 1870, was the first piece of legislation passed in Britain that focused principally on the provision of education. 1870 was thus a seminal moment in the history of education because the State, by passing the legislation, committed itself to establishing a national statutory education system. The drive to legislate for a national education system was underpinned by the industrial revolution whereby Britain required a literate and numerate labour force to compete economically at a global level. William E Forster, the MP who championed the 1870 Education Act and whose name is associated with it, expressed the need for a national system of education when introducing the Act to Parliament:

Upon the speedy provision of elementary education depends [sic] our industrial prosperity ... Uneducated labourers – and many of our labourers are utterly uneducated – are for the most part, unskilled labourers, and if we leave our work-force any longer unskilled... [t]hey will become overmatched in the competition of the world.²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf (Accessed August 2022);

the Centenary Commission on Adult Education Report (2019) available at:

<https://centenarycommission.org/wp-content/uploads/reports/The-Centenary-Commission-on-Adult-Education-Report-HI-RES.pdf> (Accessed August 2022);

the House of Commons, Education Committee Report (HoCECR) 'A Plan for an Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning Revolution', (2019-2021) available at:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmeduc/1310/131002.htm> (Accessed August, 2022).

² J.S., Maclure, (ed), *Educational Documents*, 5th ed (London, 1986), p.104.

Prior to the Act, primary education provision in Britain was an ad-hoc affair dominated by voluntary organisations such as the Church of England and philanthropic enterprises. The state provided funds to these organisations to run schools, but the problem was that many communities did not have any access to primary education centres in their areas. As a result, large sections of the population remained illiterate and innumerate. The 1870 Education Act rectified this problem by allowing voluntary schools to continue providing education and establishing ‘a system of “school boards” to build and manage schools in areas where they were needed.’³ The legislation made it possible to fill the geographical gaps in education provision and establish and run schools in areas where previously there were none. The Education Act, 1880, made it compulsory for children to attend school between the ages of five and ten. Primary Education was made free by the 1891 Education Act and subsequent Acts in 1893 and 1899 respectively raised the age of compulsory attendance from eleven to twelve.⁴

The information outlined above shows that education of all types and levels was scarce, especially for those from working class backgrounds who could ill afford either to attend school, and, or pay for education. In an era of *Laissez Faire* politics built on the principles of capitalism and a free market economy, the opportunities for working class people to take advantage of educational opportunities were limited by the economic environment. For example, many working-class families could not afford to forgo the income generated by their children who often worked outside of school hours. It also shows that the process of establishing a comprehensive and national statutory education system began relatively late in the nineteenth century and thereafter took place slowly. The ultimate consequence of the lack of education in this period was that opportunities for many working-class people to access university level higher education were negligible. What did this mean at a broader level for those who desired a post-primary education but whose social and economic circumstances limited their opportunities to access it?

An answer to this question is that the absence of a viable post-primary education system allowed space for a diverse and dynamic voluntary adult education movement to emerge and flourish. Ultimately adult education became the only realistic option for disadvantaged adult students to pursue their interests in post-primary education. The most well-known adult education organisations to emerge in the nineteenth century include the Young Adult Schools, the Mechanics Institutes, the Working Men’s Colleges and Co-operative Education enterprises. Each organisation had its own unique perspective on adult education.⁵ This article will focus on the emergence of the extra-mural tradition, and the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) as part of the adult education movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

³ <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/> (Accessed 03 August 2022).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For general histories of these organisations please see Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education*; J Wilhelm Rowntree and Henry Harry Binns, *A History of the Adult School Movement* (London, 1903); Thomas Pole, *A History of the Origins and Progress of Adult Schools*, 3rd ed. (London, 1968); Mark Freeman, ‘The decline of the adult school movement between the wars’, *History of Education*, 39, 4 (2010), pp. 481-506; Martyn Walker, *The Development of the Mechanics’ Institute Movement in Britain and Beyond* (London, 2017); J.F.C Harrison, *A History of the Working Mens’ College* (London, 1954); Keith Vernon, ‘Co-operative Education and the State, c.1895-1935’, *Forum*, 55, 2 (2013), pp. 293-307; Roger Fieldhouse and Associates, *A History of Modern British Adult Education* (Leicester, 1996).

Origins of the Extra-mural Tradition – University Extension

In 1873 the University Extension Movement, established by James Stuart, an academic at the University of Cambridge, and others, emerged to disseminate extra-mural education.⁶ Stuart and his peers recognised that there was considerable demand for higher education by a population ill-served by the state. He believed that the elite universities of the time, Oxford, and Cambridge, were well placed and obliged from a humanitarian and political perspective to meet this demand. Stuart argued that extension would be ‘a great step towards making the Universities truly national institutions and no less beneficial to them than to the country’.⁷ RD Roberts, another university extensionist also based at the University of Cambridge, argued that education should be a democratic right and that it was vital to establish a national system of higher education.⁸ University extension marked the advent of the British extra-mural tradition of education. It was akin to a peripatetic university whereby university lecturers went beyond the walls of their institutions to the wider community and delivered courses of lectures for a fee. By doing so, universities made themselves much more accessible to a large population of adult students keen to improve themselves and their prospects by acquiring knowledge of the liberal arts and humanities.

If history is seen as a continuum, the development of extra-mural education in the nineteenth century shows that the theme of inclusivity is not new, but rather one that repeats itself over time to reflect the ways in which universities adapt to changing political, cultural, social, and economic contexts. Today, similar debates about how inclusive or not the current higher education system is continue to reflect the needs of a modern society much in the same way as occurred in the nineteenth century.

University extension worked to an extent to deliver higher forms of education to the wider population. The student body who attended university extension lectures and courses comprised of middle-class women and some working-class people. However, the cost of university extension and the elite culture that imbued it, discouraged those adult students from more deprived backgrounds from attending. The question that emerged from this situation was how could the issue of access be ameliorated?

Adult Education in the 20th Century – The Workers’ Educational Association

In 1903, Albert Mansbridge (one of the primary architects of twentieth century voluntary British adult education) and his wife Frances founded the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and directly addressed the issues of access, financial and cultural, that working class students faced in taking advantage of university extension programmes.⁹ Mansbridge excelled in organisation

⁶ For information on the origins of university extension please see Norman Jepson, *The Beginnings of English University Adult Education – Policy and Problems. A Critical Study of the Early Cambridge and Oxford University Extension Lecture Movements Between 1873–1907 with Special reference to Yorkshire* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973).

⁷ James Stuart quoted in Lawrence Goldman, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and working class education since 1850* (Oxford, 1995), p.15.

⁸ R.D. Roberts, *The University Extension Scheme as the Basis of a System of National Higher Education* (Aberystwyth, 1887), p.4.

⁹ For detailed information on Albert Mansbridge and the WEA please see Bernard Jennings, *Albert Mansbridge, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (accessed 17 November 2019); Bernard Jennings, *Albert Mansbridge. The Life and Work of the Founder of the WEA* (Leeds, 2002); Albert Mansbridge, *An Adventure in Working Class Education, Being the Story of the Workers’ Educational Association 1903 – 1915* (London, 1920); Albert Mansbridge, *The Kingdom of the Mind: Essays and Addresses 1903 – 1937* (London, 1944);

and through perseverance, the cultivation of relationships with university extensionists, trade unionists, working-class activists and local government officials succeeded in establishing a mutually beneficial partnership between universities and the WEA to deliver tailor-made education to disadvantaged working-class students nationwide. Key to the success of the collaboration was that the WEA in principle placed students at the centre of its mission to ascertain exactly what students wanted from education providers. How it achieved this was to establish a WEA presence through regional and local organisers in a very wide range of communities (cross-class urban and rural). Through a process of negotiation with the student body the WEA identified what potential students wanted courses in. This meant that the subject of the course was controlled by the students themselves (not by the university or organiser of the course) as was also sometimes the lecturer allocated to a particular class. University extension lecturers delivered the courses to students under the auspices of their universities in collaboration with the WEA.

So, in summary, the WEA controlled the organisation of classes while university extension as set up by different universities provided the knowledge and teaching expertise. Key to the success of the collaboration between the WEA and the universities was the setting up of regional and national Joint Committees. Joint Committees comprised of representatives from the WEA, university extension and working-class bodies. The Joint Committees thus represented the interests of each group and liaised to organise and disseminate education to disadvantaged mature students of the time who were made up mainly of working-class people who would otherwise not have been able to access any form of higher education. WEA courses were also well subsidised by grants from Local Educational Authorities (LEAs), charitable funding, and WEA membership subscription fees. Statistics of student numbers attending WEA classes show evidence of how successful the collaboration between universities and the WEA was in disseminating higher forms of education to students nationwide.

YEAR	1919-20	1935-36	1940-41	1941-42
Total Student Numbers	12,438	67,023	48,835	58,582

Table 1: Snapshot of WEA Student Nos: 1919–1942.¹⁰

The historical account of adult education provided here explains the context of how a national statutory system of education developed in Britain. It also explains the failings of that system and why extra-mural education and the adult education movement emerged to meet the demand from an adult student body for higher forms of education during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The collaboration between the universities and the WEA shows that each organisation shared the same aims and vision for making higher education accessible to a much wider and more diverse population of disadvantaged students than ever previously conceived of. Crucially each organisation recognised the merits of the other in making this vision a reality.

What is most interesting about the merging of these two great traditions of education in Britain – voluntary non-statutory adult education and extra-mural – is that it shows how feasible it was for the different organisations to communicate, and more importantly to act and make post-18 and higher education a diverse and inclusive enterprise. The history of the merging of traditions seems to be something that we have lost sight of in recent times. The history of adult

T. W. Price, *The Story of the WEA from 1903 – 1924* (London, 1924); Mary Stocks, *The Workers' Educational Association: The First Fifty Years* (London, 1953); Stephen K Roberts (ed.) *A Ministry of Enthusiasm. Centenary Essays on the Workers' Educational Association* (London, 2003).

¹⁰ Adapted from *Workers' Education in Great Britain: a record of education service to democracy since 1918* (London, WEA, 1943), p.31.

education from the perspective of inclusivity and accessibility as outlined here supports the idea that universities through Foundation Year programmes could re-enact the successful collaborations of the past by engaging with community partners to reach more diverse non-standard mature student entrants.

Post-18 education in the Twenty-first Century

The strong relationship that used to exist between universities and non-statutory adult education organisations has weakened in modern times. There are many good reasons for this to have happened, for example the development of a much more comprehensive and sophisticated national statutory primary and secondary education system that works to ensure that all children up to the age of sixteen receive in principle the same standard of education; the emergence of the internet that again makes education of all sorts easily available to huge numbers of people; progressive legislation to establish many more universities thus increasing the opportunities for more people than ever before in Britain to pursue studies in higher education; a restructuring of the funding system for higher education which again makes it more possible than ever for students from low income backgrounds to attend universities.

Statistical evidence attests to the success of the current higher education system. 2.66 million students were enrolled in UK higher education institutions in 2020-21.¹¹ 750,000 students applied via UCAS to study in universities and 562,000 of those applications were accepted.¹² 111,000 of the home accepted applications were of students who were over twenty-one years old.¹³ In 2019-20 according to data collected by the Department of Education, the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) of students between the age of 17 and 30 reached 53.4%, surpassing the last Labour Government's ambition to achieve a HEIPR of 50%.¹⁴

However, despite these extraordinary developments, hardly imaginable if one were living in the nineteenth century, significant numbers of adults with the potential to benefit from higher education socially, culturally, politically, and economically are being left behind. Evidence of this trend is presented by the House of Commons, Education Committee Report. Despite Britain's well-established national education system, the Report found that 'Nine million working-age adults in England have low literacy or numeracy skills, or both, and six million adults are not qualified to level 2 (equivalent to GCSE level).'¹⁵ The report also stated that

participation in adult education is at its lowest level in 23 years and funding fell by 45% between 2008-9 and 2018-19. 49% of adults from the lowest socioeconomic group have received no training since leaving school.¹⁶

These are worrying statistics, especially considering the prediction that by 2024 Britain will experience a shortage of four million skilled workers.¹⁷ The challenge facing the state and the educational sector is to create a skilled workforce able to take up work in new fields of employment. It resonates with William Forster's call for state intervention to raise literacy and numeracy levels in the nineteenth century. Today, though the emphasis has changed to creating a society with digital knowledge and skills, the premise remains the same. A well-educated

¹¹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf>, p.5.

¹² Ibid. based on UCAS data resources, p.9.

¹³ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf>, p.35.

¹⁴ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf>, p.26.

¹⁵ HoCECR, p.3.

¹⁶ HoCECR, p.3.

¹⁷ HoCECR, p.3.

society is key to economic prosperity and political stability, as well as being fundamental to maintaining a strong democracy based on a collective understanding of citizenship.

Adult Education organisations are well attuned to the social, economic, and cultural problems that their learners face. This is evident in how they report their activities. Here we will consider only the WEA's activities because it is a longstanding adult education organisation that has adapted over time to serve a modern student body, and that in the past as evidenced above had a strong working relationship with the university community. Also, this article does not allow space to investigate the activities of other no less important adult educational organisations. The WEA's Adult Education Impact Report for 2021 gives information about the number and type of students who attended WEA courses. The next section outlines the key information.

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in the Twenty-first Century

In 2021 the total number of students who attended WEA courses was 28,219. 7,914 courses took place.¹⁸ The number of tutors employed by the WEA is 939.¹⁹ The WEA conducted a quantitative on-line survey to assess its impact in the Autumn and Spring Term of 2020-21. The number of student responses upon which the following figures are based is 1,930.²⁰ 39% of WEA students lived in a disadvantaged post code.²¹ 38% of the students were on income-related benefits and 30% of them had no or low qualifications.²² The WEA are active nationwide with 24% of their activities taking place in the North-West region, 13% in the Southern, 12% in Scotland, and 10% in Yorkshire and the Humber.²³ 24% of WEA students reported that they were carers for their ill, disabled, elderly relatives or friends while 34% of students reported that they suffered from a physical health condition or illness. 16% reported that they had a mental health condition. Table 2 shows the percentage breakdown in terms of the ages of all WEA students (28,219).

AGE (years)	19-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
% of all students (28,219)	15%	20%	18%	15%	32%

Table 2: Percentage of WEA students by age.²⁴

A further analysis of these statistics gives information about BAMER²⁵ students attending WEA classes. 18% of BAMER students were aged 19-29, 35% aged 30-39, 28% aged 40-49, 12% aged 50-59 and 7% aged 60+ years. White British students made up between 12% and 15% respectively of the cohorts aged 19-59 with 49% of white British students aged 60+ years.²⁶

What these general statistics indicate is that the WEA as a modern non-university adult education organisation is reaching a significant number of disadvantaged mature students. As

¹⁸ The WEA Adult Education Impact Report (2021) p.4. Available at: <https://www.wea.org.uk/about-us/impact> (Accessed 22 August 2022). [Note that since this article was first written, the report at this site has been updated to the 2022 report. The 2021 report is available by email from marketing@wea.ac.uk. It appears not to be available online at this time. Editor.]

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. p.32.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. p.6

²³ Ibid. p.4.

²⁴ Ibid. p.4.

²⁵ Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee.

²⁶ Ibid. p.4.

the report states the WEA 'are different from further education colleges because we reach and connect with those who need education most and who are often farthest from study.'²⁷ The WEA achieve their agenda for inclusivity through working partnerships with '102 community-based venues and local networks.'²⁸ According to the online survey results conducted by the WEA, 21% of unemployed students found work, 67% of unemployed students improved their skills and knowledge for work while 41% 'gained a better understanding of job opportunities suited to them.'²⁹ 37% of students in employment became more confident about progressing at work.³⁰ The Report goes on to outline how the WEA works very closely with local employers and communities to support students with gaining skills for employment, especially in technical skills.

The information outlined shows how the WEA as a non-university adult education organisation succeeds in reaching disadvantaged students who would perhaps be deterred by their socio-economic backgrounds from applying to universities. These are the very students that the HoCECR identify as needing support to improve their social and economic prospects when it states that 'Adult community learning fills a vital role in targeting the hardest to reach adults, including learners in deprived communities, and those furthest from the job market.'³¹

The HoCECR acknowledges the work of its predecessors, namely the authors of the 1919 Report on Reconstruction that identified that adult education is 'a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship ... both universal and lifelong.'³² In the spirit of the 1919 Report, the 2021 HoCECR makes a series of highly important recommendations to improve access to different forms of education via the adult education community based on an impressive array of evidence.³³ 81 pieces of written published evidence from a range of different organisations involved in adult education were received and studied by the Committee. The HoCECR is also based on the statements of key witnesses representing the adult education community as well as a series of reports generated by the Committee itself during its 2019-21 session.³⁴ In summary the Report identifies four key pillars to support a national strategy for Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning (ASALL) in anticipation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The pillars are:

- 1) To ensure that there is a community learning centre in every town to provide a space for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to begin their journey in education.
- 2) To introduce individual learning accounts so that all adults may exercise agency over their learning.
- 3) To re-establish part-time higher education by providing fee grants to part-time students from disadvantaged backgrounds 'who study courses that meet the skills needs of the nation, and extend maintenance support to disadvantaged learners.'³⁵
- 4) To support employer-led training through a system of skills tax credit for employers who give financial support to employees for training.³⁶

²⁷ Ibid. p.6.

²⁸ Ibid. p.6.

²⁹ Ibid. p.9.

³⁰ Ibid. p.9.

³¹ HoCECR, p.24.

³² Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee. [Final Report](#). (1919).

³³ HoCECR, p.47-53.

³⁴ Ibid. p.55-61.

³⁵ Ibid. p.11.

³⁶ Ibid. p.11.

The above evidence shows that adult education remains a relevant, viable, and realistic option for many disadvantaged students who, because of their social and economic circumstances, are unable on a practical level to contemplate attending university.

Issues of access – funding post-18 education

The Augar Report, the HoCECR, and, over a century ago, the 1919 Report, all highlight that the current system of funding and organisation of university higher education makes it near impossible for the most disadvantaged students to attend. One significant aspect of the problem is the profound lack of options available to mature students to take up state-funded part-time study. The Augar Report observes that though the proportion of English young people attending university is increasing, the numbers of mature and part-time students enrolled in some form of higher education has decreased. The evidence for this trend is based on HESA statistics.

In 2009/10, there were 594,550 full-time entrants to English universities and 385,965 part-time entrants in universities in England. By 2017/18, there were 654,235 full-time entrants but only 180,675 part-time entrants.³⁷

In percentage form this represents a reduction in part-time entrants of 53%.³⁸ The reason why the number of part-time students has decreased so significantly is attributed to the 2012 tuition fee reforms which abolished maintenance grants, introduced substantial fee increases and raised interest rates on student loans. In addition, the reforms

abolished the means-tested part-time fee grant that had previously exempted part-time students on a low income from paying any tuition fees at all. Previously, around 57,000 part-time students received this per year, with an average grant value of £700.³⁹

Lord Willetts, who oversaw the reforms as Minister of Universities, described the fall in part-time student numbers as one of his 'biggest regrets'. He also acknowledged that

The evidence is that the loans for part-time students have not worked. There has been low take up and people have been put off. We need new mechanisms for helping adults to study part-time, and I accept that the loan model has not delivered for them.⁴⁰

Another reason why the numbers of part-time mature students have decreased is the disestablishment of extra-mural departments and their association with diverse communities of learning since 1992 following the expansion of the university sector.

Statistics such as the HEIPR of 53.4%, referred to earlier, indicate that higher education is more accessible than it has ever been. But, ironically, the statistics above also indicate that the post-18 higher educational environment has become hostile to potential mature students from poor socio-economic backgrounds. For many, participating in higher education today is almost as unaffordable and risky as it was to take up in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century. The consequences of the reforms outlined above have created an odd but significant gap in access to and provision of post-18 education to the wider population. Non-university adult edu-

³⁷ The Augar Report, p.20.

³⁸ The Augar Report, p.20.

³⁹ HoCECR, p.37.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

cation, as disseminated by organisations such as the WEA, plugs the gap that has been created by the abolition of state funding for students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, and the removal of opportunities to take up extra-mural studies. Part of the great relevance and attraction of non-university modern adult education organisations is that they can reach these students and offer them affordable part-time education to support them in gaining and/or improving their employment and life opportunities.

So, how can non-university adult education organisations such as the WEA and the universities work towards further supporting students who have been identified as most in need of post-18 education to enhance their ability to participate as citizens and workers in the fourth industrial Revolution?

A way forward?

The answer I propose here is to look to foundation year programmes offered by many universities as a bridge between adult education and higher education. Foundation years, specifically integrated foundation years, are designed to prepare students for their degree studies. In many ways foundation years share the same aims as those held by non-university adult education organisations. The Policy Perspectives Network identifies that 'Foundation years provide an important platform for reaching disadvantaged students, building skills and confidence, and responding to local skills shortages.'⁴¹ Foundation years also provide 'a **route to success** [sic] for students who would otherwise not access opportunities'. In addition, foundation years 'disproportionately meet[s] the needs of students from more **disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds** [sic]'.⁴² These aims fit well with those of non-university adult education organisations such as the WEA to engage on a meaningful level with students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

The Reports referred to in this article make highly important recommendations to improve access to post-18 education on all levels. This article argues, based on the recommendations and evidence presented, for a move towards a more joined-up model of provision of post-18 education that involves building stronger working relationships between university providers of foundation years and adult education organisations who are very well placed to identify and support the students in their communities who would most benefit from all that the post-18 education system as it exists can offer them. These relationships would not be difficult to forge. One way of doing this would be for individual institutions – university and adult education – to explore the possibility of setting up joint committees much as the WEA did in the early twentieth century. Such committees consisting of university and adult education personnel would be able to work together more effectively to support the agenda for widening participation in higher education as set out by current policy. The above is but a suggestion based on the evidence of the historical success of the adult education movement in Britain.

It is not within the scope of this article to detail how these relationships would or should work. This will depend very much on the unique regional and local circumstances of every organisation involved. However, based on the historical evidence that attests to the success of the merging of the two great traditions of extra-mural and the adult education movement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is ample potential for such a dynamic and fruitful engagement to take place in the current evolving digital age to the benefit of all.

⁴¹ Policy Perspectives Network, 'A perspective on Foundation Years', Policy Note No.1, April 2021, p.1 Available at <https://t.co/a6ZxkVqOjx?amp=1> (Accessed 02 June 2023).

⁴² Ibid.

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I am a lecturer in Foundation Year Studies at Newman University, Birmingham. I was awarded my PhD in Modern British History by the University of Leeds in 2018. The title of my PhD is 'Working Class Adult Education in Yorkshire 1918-1939'. I have published articles about adult education and the labour movement in *Socialist History* (2021), *Urban History* (2020), the *History of Education Journal* (2020), and the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* (2016).

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