

REFLECTIONS FROM A KEEN SUPPORTER – LITERACY AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

**By H.Fisher, Former member of NIACE Directorate;
former NIACE representative on EBAE Steering
Committee**

So much has changed since 1976 – or has it? Yes, of course it has, but has there been as much dramatic revolution as hoped for by those earnest agents of change so active in the mid-70s; or has there been a more satisfactory, may be a little on the slow side, but steady improvement and development on all fronts since then, as preferred by the more cautious among us?

Certainly, 1976 was a significant year for me and an important one also for the European Bureau of Adult Education, as it was called at that time, with a particular conference in England with the title ‘Forgotten People’. Perhaps that conference can now be seen as the start of a series of conferences putting greater emphasis on aspects of social concern and on new priority groups such as women, unemployed adults, ethnic minorities, all stemming from the increased attention to educational provision for disadvantaged groups.

After several years selling steel products and then computer systems, I had moved to the Business Studies department of a large college in the West Midlands of England. This, eventually led me to the post of Area Organiser in one of the smaller local authorities in the area, where I soon got caught up in what was an enthusiastic but at the time really quite small reading and writing scheme for adults. This was an ‘extra’, over and above the well established general/hobby/leisure/liberal adult education programme long provided by the local authority, mainly in children’s secondary schools in the evenings.

I knew a little of the 1973 survey by BAS/British Association of Settlements which had estimated that if 5% of the adult population in the UK had severe reading and writing difficulties, and were therefore scarcely functionally literate in an advanced western economic society, then that meant in actual fact that no less than two million people were handicapped in this way. It was however quite by chance that at the end of 1974 I found myself being interviewed by the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE) for a London based post to help set up ALRA/Adult Literacy Resource Agency, as a special project within the National Institute. This Agency would disburse a single grant of one million pounds in the financial year starting April 1975 to more than 100 local education authorities in England, Wales and Scotland to create and stimulate provision for ‘illiterate’ adults with particular help from the broadcasters and other parts of the media. The work of ALRA within the National Institute made an immediate and dramatic impact, pushed along with great speed by Bill Devereux who had been released by ILEA/Inner London Education

Authority in his pre-retirement year to head up the Resource Agency.

Word quickly got round to other parts of Europe, especially via European Bureau networks, that the Brits were up to something. How could an adult literacy campaign in such a country attract over 100,000 students in the first twelve months? How could almost 25,000 volunteers come forward without pay to help in schemes across the country, working under the supervision of so few full time professionals? In early 1976, the European Bureau readily accepted an offer from the National Institute to host a September conference in England in which much attention would be given to the Adult Literacy Campaign. Much lobbying from senior adult educators in the campaign had already persuaded the Government to grant support funds for a further two years. Because of my export selling experiences and some facility in French and German, I had been looking forward to getting involved in the international work of NIAE, particularly through the networks of the European Bureau. There might have been a touch of disappointment when it transpired that my first conference on this new international circuit would in fact be in England. I allowed myself a further wry smile when, after the sub-theme ‘Provision for Disadvantaged Groups’ had been chosen, the venue for this particular conference turned out to be a castle in one of the most affluent areas just south of London.

Whatever my anxieties and disappointments, they all disappeared as soon as the conference started. The reception given to me by senior officers in the Bureau could not have been more welcoming and helpful, from Helmuth Dolff, Bureau President, from Germany; Bob Schouten, Bureau Secretary, from the Netherlands; and Edward Hutchinson, former head of the National Institute, and Honorary President of the Bureau, Rapporteur General for the conference. Furthermore, the intensity of the debate was overwhelming, as was the willingness of colleagues to learn from each other. Even if we were suddenly ahead on adult literacy matters, Bureau members from other countries certainly had a great deal of relevant experience in inner city work, work with migrants, provision for unskilled industrial workers, and other important projects.

I don’t think any of us at the time would have guessed that NIAE/National Institute of Adult Education, would in the early 80s change its name to The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education/NIACE; and then in the early 90s retain the increasingly recognisable acronym NIACE and emphasise the explanatory translation as ‘The National Organisation

for Adult Learning', while trying to retain the full version of 'The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, (England and Wales)', for official and legal purposes. During that period of almost twenty years, there seem to have been times when the National Institute might not have been economically capable of surviving, whatever its title.

Similarly, no one could have predicted that ALRA/Adult Literacy Resource Agency would keep on going from strength to strength, succeeding in every new initiative, being granted ten times more money than its parent body. It became ALU/Adult Literacy Unit for the two years 1978-80, then ALBSU/Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit in 1980, eventually becoming autonomous and independent from the National Institute, although still a unit directly funded by government from 1991 onwards. Even the Bureau, as we all know, has become the European Association for the Education of Adults. Who could have predicted that it would have such important offices in Spain, Belgium and Finland, not just in the Netherlands; and that it would be able to take into membership so many organisations from central and eastern Europe?

As I hinted earlier, with the benefit of hindsight, some of us might have predicted that the 1976 conference was the start of an even greater social awareness within the ranks of Bureau members. In the UK, Sir Lionel Russell's 1973 report and plans for proposed developments in adult education, with an emphasis on greater provision for disadvantaged groups, had attracted much debate among adult educators and encouraged several new initiatives, even though the relevant government department in effect "shelved" the report. But it was the success of the Literacy Campaign and the work of ALRA which made the impact from which so much was to grow. A steady stream of observers came to watch the campaign in action, as the programme grew from literacy to numeracy to other coping skills. The Out of School Division of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg organised a study tour to see literacy activities in England.

This and attention from many other interested parties acted as a spur to the ongoing activities, all of which were well documented and reported in National Institute and ALRA/ALU publications throughout the rest of the '70s. In the second half of 1981, the International Council for Adult Education persuaded the National Institute and ALBSU to organise another international seminar in England on 'Adult Literacy in Industrialised Countries'. There was impressive transatlantic participation. European Bureau Network members were again impressed. They had already

given the National Institute a previous challenge in 1980 by asking NIACE to host a what was to all intents and purposes the Bureau's first 'all women's' conference, at a short term residential college in Essex on the theme 'Women in Adult Education; Learning new roles for a changing world'. From this conference grew the movement which eventually created a women's sub-committee within the National Institute and also a similar working party within the Bureau; the latter being given a major boost in its creation by the Bureau's conference on Adult Basic Education at St Andrews University in Scotland in 1983, which was attended by more women than men, a clear indication of the majority employed in this particular area of work. This successful Scottish conference also illustrated the broadening of the concept of ABE, not just the adult literacy emphasis, but the extension to numeracy and the importance of associated coping skills (sadly, SIACE/Scottish Institute for Adult and Continuing Education, host on that occasion, is no longer in existence).

Throughout the rest of the 80s, social concerns continued to play a major role in Bureau activities, although there was still the more usual type of conference, such as the 'The Place of General and Liberal Education' as hosted by the National Institute at Maryland College for Adults, near Woburn in Bedfordshire in 1988. In 1990, most members of the Bureau played active roles in the various celebrations for International Literacy Year. Campaign posters from the UK caught the eye of colleagues throughout the world, some of whom had been less than pleased to see the UK tamely throw itself out of UNESCO, (these are the emotively expressed personal views of the writer and not the official view of the National Institute) sheepishly following the petulant lead of the United States, that great country, of which I am proud to be high school graduate. In the mid 80s, ALBSU had, before that regrettable incident, received a special citation in the UNESCO International Literacy Day Awards. Similar honorable mentions have been received in later years by Literacy Projects in Germany and the Netherlands, where Bureau members were again closely involved with the work given such international recognition.

As the Bureau has developed into the European Association in the 90s, the importance of social concerns still shows through in the overall activity and the primary objectives of many of the networks being more formally set up. NIACE, with its Equal Opportunities groups on Racial Equality, Women's Education, and (Special Needs)/Learning Difficulties and Disabilities, is glad to be associated in so many ways with all this wide ranging and essential work.

Everything is a priority to someone. Every real concern will probably be given priority status at some time or other. European Year of Older People created a focus in 1993 and was prominent in the work of many member organizations within the Association although older adults are not always given this degree of attention in our work. In 1994*, as the United Nations promotes the International Year of the Family, many of us move towards giving this type of work extra priority. At the NIACE annual conference at the University College of North Wales in April in 1994, an ALBSU colleague will be running a session on 'Family Literacy'.

And so the work goes on and we try to be more imaginative as we get further into a demanding decade, leading up to the end of the century no less. The European Bureau/Association is now celebrating its 40th Anniversary. In 1996 NIACE celebrates its 75th birthday, having been founded in 1921 as the British Institute for Adult Education. Rumour has it that in 1997 UNESCO will be holding its next world conference on Adult Education, after a long gap from the Paris event in '84. Let's hope some of us get the chance to meet there as well, and that we are still doing work which we and others find worthwhile.