

ADULT EDUCATION IN GREAT BRITAIN

REPORT OF THE ASHBY COMMITTEE

THE Committee appointed by the Minister of Education in June 1953, under the chairmanship of Dr. Eric Ashby, to consider the organization and finance of adult education in England and Wales, has now presented a unanimous report* which is of wide interest. It includes a concise, coherent account of previous inquiries into adult education and of the regulations which govern its administration. A summary is provided of the written and oral evidence submitted to the Committee, while there are appended, *inter alia*, copies of the resolution sent by the Trades Union Congress to the Prime Minister and Miss Horsbrugh in February 1953 and Sir Winston's reply, in which he stated his belief that "there is, perhaps, no branch of our vast educational system which should more attract within its particular sphere the aid and encouragement of the State than adult education".

It is clear from the report that the Ashby Committee was not asked to examine an organization which had broken down or lost its purpose. It heard no evidence which suggested that the present administrative arrangements are gravely unsatisfactory; indeed, the whole range of evidence, from Sir Winston's letter just quoted to the testimony of those engaged in teaching adult students, was unanimous in the assumption that liberal adult education is still essential. Such changes as the raising of the school-leaving age, the increased provision for secondary education, university expansion and increased assistance given to university students, the development of the cinema, broadcasting and television in a period of full employment have affected adult education, and its content and pattern must change with changing times. No one engaged in adult education, however, is so perturbed by these developments as to question the desirability of the work in which he is engaged, and at the most modest estimate adult education in its present framework serves a purpose which no other agency or activity fulfils.

There are indeed no signs that adult education as an organized activity has, or will become, either universal or lifelong. Out of 31 million adults in England and Wales, only some 150,000 attend adult education classes; but the Ashby Committee believes it to be broadly true that, in relation to the community at large, adult education students represent a social and intellectual asset the loss of which would be deplorable, and it records the hope that the genuine educational desire of such students will never go unfulfilled through lack of funds. This is not to say that the organization and provision of adult education could not be improved, or that its purposes and methods should not be readjusted to meet the needs of contemporary society. Nevertheless, it found no evidence that overlapping is a serious problem in the present system, which is essentially a partnership between the Ministry, universities, voluntary bodies and the local education authorities, with the drawbacks of administrative complexities as well as the

mutual advantages which such a system involves. These advantages, however—not merely the enriching of adult education by the partnership of the universities, the voluntary bodies, the local education authorities, and the Ministry, but the enriching of the partners, too—are regarded as so important that, in this period of transition in British education, the Committee recommends they should be preserved. Disclaiming at this juncture any intention to set a course for adult education over the rest of this century, the Committee's advice is essentially to leave well alone.

Some changes indeed are suggested, but the arguments on which the Committee's recommendations are based are perhaps of wider interest than the detailed recommendations. The Committee pays tribute to the labours of the Workers' Educational Association and is unanimous that 'voluntary-ism' as exemplified by the Association is essential to the preservation of the spirit of adult education. Nevertheless, it believes that the future of the Workers' Educational Association will not be secure unless it can resolve its internal conflicts as to the direction and scope of its activity, and translate its decisions into executive action appropriate to its districts.

Of the universities and university colleges, on which has fallen the main burden for providing liberal adult education in England and Wales, the Committee remarks that the high regard which the public has for British universities is due partly to the fact that through their extra-mural departments they have kept close to the people of Britain. It is evident that many universities set a high value on extra-mural work for its own sake, both for this reason and as a duty which scholars owe to their fellow-citizens. There was great diversity of opinion in the evidence from extra-mural departments and the governing bodies of universities, but there was no dispute that universities should continue to take a large share in responsibility for liberal adult education and on no account surrender that responsibility to local education authorities; that full-time extra-mural tutors should be 'assimilated' in salary and status with the rest of the academic staffs; and that student fees should be determined locally and (in general) should not be increased.

While appreciating the traditional prestige and the real value of the longer course, and especially of the three-year tutorial class, the Committee thinks it undesirable from every point of view that university participation in adult education should be restricted to the provision of three-year tutorial and sessional classes. It did not, however, accept the argument that all adult teaching which is done by a university teacher is of 'university standard', and it considered that an extra-mural department which contemplates the provision of a particular course should satisfy itself that the course is one which can properly be given as part of the university contribution to adult education. In the current man-power situation, the caution against the regular employment of university teachers in providing elementary routine courses is timely, and it is coupled with an invitation to the extra-mural departments to consider whether their

* Ministry of Education. *The Organisation and Finance of Adult Education in England and Wales. Report of the Committee appointed by the Minister of Education in June 1953.* Pp. iv + 67. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1954.) 2s. 6d. net.

resources would not be most usefully employed if, in certain directions, they imposed something of a self-denying ordinance upon themselves.

On all grounds, and in agreement with the great majority of universities, the Committee thinks it would be undesirable for the Ministry to withdraw its direct grants to the universities for adult education, and for the whole financial responsibility to lie with the universities. It sees danger in maintaining extra-mural work indefinitely as a 'protected' activity in universities: adult education, it is observed, will never become an accepted part of university work in the sense that dentistry or psychology is accepted, unless it establishes its right to a share of the university's finances, but it does not consider that this is the occasion to precipitate the fight for recognition. The suggestion of the Association of Education Committees that the University Grants Committee should make itself responsible for financing all extra-mural work done by universities and that local education authorities should be responsible for financing the provision of all the rest is rejected, because of the weakening effect the proposal might have on voluntary effort and the risk of uneven interpretation. The Committee recommends that the Ministry should not only continue to give direct grants to the bodies responsible for adult education but also should be prepared to exercise on occasion a more active and flexible control of expenditure.

The Committee stresses the importance of this flexibility, which it would not merely preserve but even increase. The present diversity of pattern in the provision of adult education is regarded as an advantage: there is no evidence that it causes appreciable overlapping or extravagance in expenditure; and a uniform pattern, though it might appear efficient on paper, would suffer from all the inefficiencies of a system which takes no account of local differences. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that the present method of fixing grant ceilings on the basis of grant carried in the year when expansion was checked should be discarded. In its place a system should be adopted under which allocations representing the maximum amount of grant available to each responsible body for the coming year should be made after consideration of the quality and standards of work being done by that body, as well as its proposed programme, the needs of the region in which it operates, and the activities of other interested bodies in the region. The limits on the salaries of full-time tutors recognized for grant should be removed, although responsible bodies should still be required to obtain the Ministry's approval for new full-time appointments on which grant would be sought. It would also raise the level up to which fees of part-time tutors are recognized for grant, and in the calculation of grant the conception of sessional rates of payment for part-time tutors of tutorial classes should be replaced by rates of payment by the hour or by the meeting.

The Committee also recommends the amendment of Further Education Grant Regulations so as to give less prominence to the length of course as compared with other criteria. Classes for special groups of students should be acceptable for grant provided the enrolment of other students is not unreasonably prohibited and the Committee would not exclude courses of high quality from grant on the grounds of vocational interest. It recommends that responsible bodies should be given some assurance that the total

allocation of grant for adult education should not be reduced at short notice. It would widen the interpretation of teaching costs to include, besides the primary responsibility of teaching costs, such work as responsibility for a library service or giving guidance to junior colleagues. Local conditions should be the primary consideration in fixing student fees. Such fees should be kept under review and raised if local conditions justified and necessitated this action; and both the Minister and local education authorities in determining their grants should take into account the total financial contribution being made by the students.

As regards the content of courses, the Ashby Committee thinks that money is well spent in satisfying a genuine demand from students who are prepared to throw themselves whole-heartedly into the work of the class; but that public money should not be spent on titillating the interest of students who are not prepared to make some sacrifice of their own time and effort to work at the subject of the class. As regards the content of the subject taught, the Committee would be sorry to see a list of approved subjects drawn up, because it would soon become obsolete and its very existence would discourage fresh ideas. This is a main reason for the suggestion that the Minister should establish a small committee to advise from time to time on the subjects and types of adult education courses which should receive priority in qualifying for grant.

The Ashby Committee's report, for all the merit of the minor improvements it recommends, is probably of most value as a stimulus to the constructive thinking which not only such a Committee but also the responsible bodies, local authorities and others should be giving to the scope, the functions and content of adult education in our changing social pattern.

THE PHYSICS OF THE IONOSPHERE

THE Physical Society held a Conference at the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge, during September 6-9, on "The Physics of the Ionosphere". It was attended by about 150 delegates, many of them from overseas. The subjects discussed were: the lowest ionosphere; irregularities and horizontal movements in the ionosphere; the F_2 -layer; the mathematics of wave-propagation through the ionosphere. Under each of these headings a paper was read which summarized the existing background of knowledge against which the discussion could take place. In the discussion itself short prepared contributions, which had previously been circulated in print, were first presented, and were followed by a general discussion on special problems. Most of the contributions to the prepared discussion will be published as full-length papers in a report on the Conference (available from the Secretary-Editor, Physical Society, 1 Lowther Gardens, Prince Consort Road, London, S.W.7). Some of the more interesting points emerging from the Conference are mentioned below.

D. F. Martyn presented the latest stage of his work on movements in the F -layer. He first pointed out that, when Hall effects are taken into account, in a modification of Schuster's theory of the atmospheric dynamo, the electrostatic polarization in the