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### **About the author**

~~**Dr Francesco Sofo** is Associate Professor of Human Resource Development at the University of Canberra and Fellow of the Australian Human Resource Institute and the Australian Institute of Management. His research interests include learning across the lifespan and in different contexts, thinking critically and broader issues of leadership, change and people development.~~

### **Contact details**

~~School of Education and Community Studies, Division of Communication and Education, University of Canberra, ACT 2601~~

~~Tel: +61 2 6201 5123      Facsimile: +61 2 6201 2263~~

~~Email: [Francesco.Sofa@canberra.edu.au](mailto:Francesco.Sofa@canberra.edu.au)~~

## **The Workers' Educational Association of Victoria and the University of Melbourne: A clash of purpose?**

Gordon Dadswell

School of Professional Development and Leadership  
University of New England

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*The paper challenges an argument made by Alf Wesson in 1972. His argument was that the failure of the University of Melbourne Extension Board to work effectively with the Worker's Educational Association of Victoria was almost exclusively as a result of the poor management skills and personality of the Director of University Extension, Professor John Gunn. The paper argues that in fact it was the failure by four University of Melbourne inquiries to resolve a difficult situation. The lack of resolution was due to a complete misunderstanding by the University of the role of the Workers' Educational Association.*

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## Introduction

The W.E.A is an organizing body representative of the general public and of the various organisations affiliated with it. The aim of the officers and council of the W.E.A. is to encourage its members to become tutorial class students and thus carry out the principal object of our movement. (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria Council 1927:2)

... the primary responsibility for developing adult education must rest largely on [the Director], and he must leave nothing undone to secure the wholehearted support of both the University and the Workers' Educational Association. (University of Melbourne 1927:3)

In these two quotations lies the key to the relationship between the University of Melbourne and the Workers' Educational Association of Victoria (WEAV) during the period 1924–1939. The relationship could be described as the failure by the University, and in particular the University Extension Board, to understand that the role of the Workers' Educational Association was in the organisation of adult education – that is, the planning of courses, arranging lecturers and venues, purchasing and supplying books, meeting with prospective participants, and paying costs associated with the courses.

This paper challenges the thesis, argued by Wesson, that the inability of the Extension Board to work amicably with the WEAV lay exclusively with the second Director of Tutorial Classes and later Director of University Extension, John Gunn (Wesson 1971: chapter 4). Wesson considered that there may have been some responsibility due from the Extension Board, and the WEAV. In his view, they should have '... realized within a few years ... of Gunn's arrival, that [his] major policies, ... were, in fact, in utter ruin' (Wesson 1971:186–187). The paper argues that the failure was caused by the University not understanding the implications of entering into a relationship with a voluntary adult education organisation, the WEAV, in 1913. The paper also suggests that Gunn did identify

problems and solutions, but due to the failure by the University to understand the role of the WEAV, his opinions were considered to be irrelevant. The problems identified by the University and the WEAV were the subject of four inquiries conducted by the University in the period 1924 to 1938.

The paper forms part of an on-going re-evaluation of the models that were considered by Badger, Bentley, Portus, Wesson and Whitelock to be the dominant adult education paradigms in the 1920s and 1930s. These writers have suggested that the model was dominant across Australia (Badger 1984, Bentley 1970, Portus 1953, Wesson 1971, Whitelock 1974). The model of the Workers' Educational Association organising and promoting tutorial classes, supported by academic staff from a university who delivered the programs and examined the students, with the whole managed by a Joint Committee, has been viewed as, '... the main provider of systematic adult education programmes in Australia' (Bentley 1970:85). This view has been challenged by Boughton, Merlyn and Taksa on the basis that there were other less obvious models, including those established by workers, unions and political organisations (Boughton 1998, Merlyn 2001, Taksa 2003). This paper attempts to continue the challenge by demonstrating that the substantial tensions between the university extension/WEA model resulted in the 'dominant' model failing in Victoria. The paper also suggests that the failure of the dominant model allowed for the idea of the place of the voluntary organisation in government-funded adult education to be taken seriously in Victoria.

## University extension

The aim of university extension was to provide university lectures to an interested public. The lectures were to be delivered by academics who were specialists in the fields of literature, science, history and philosophy. The lectures were delivered either externally or internally within the university.

University extension was established in all Australian universities by 1901, a time that coincided with the mechanics institutes 'approaching their nadir' but with a similar philosophy to that which led to the establishment of the Institutes (Williams 1972:185). This was '... educational evangelism, [with] hopes that education would sweep the adult community (particularly the working classes)' (Williams 1972:200).

Lectures started at the University of Melbourne by 1891 and were enormously successful in terms of attendance. The new movement was seen as a useful way to publicise the work of the University to the Victorian public, but more importantly to the politicians through the provision of lectures to rural Victoria. The development of the extension movement at the University of Melbourne has been well described by Wesson (1971: chapter 2).

Williams has suggested that the peak years for extension in Victoria were between 1892 and 1899. The major reasons for the decline after that period were the lack of permanent staff, an unwillingness to commit financial resources to the program, and the inability of the movement to appeal to a cross-section of the community (Williams 1972:192–193). The Extension Board was concerned enough about the failure of extension to seek a review of future options. This concern was finally made explicit as part of a major report by the University Council into the future of the University where there is a substantial section on extension and its future. The recommendations included the development of tutorial classes with the WEA, and extension services that should include lectures that stimulated interest in longer study, correspondence study, evening classes and a summer school (University of Melbourne Council 1913, University of Melbourne Extension Board 1911).

The extension activities continued at the University of Melbourne during the period covered by this paper. The success of the movement was, however, severely compromised as a result of the

relationship with the Workers' Educational Association of Victoria and amounted to very little in the way of adult education other than that delivered in conjunction with the WEAV.

### **The Workers' Educational Association**

The development of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in England is well known. It was formed by Albert Mansbridge in 1903 when he and his wife initiated the Workers' Educational Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men, which became the Workers' Educational Association in 1905. The founders of the WEA had as their main purpose, '... the provision of a university education for working-class people ...' (Fieldhouse 1996b:166).

In Australia the universities of Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide all became affiliated to the English WEA by 1911. The model developed by Mansbridge was based on using the expertise of university lecturers through the methodology of the tutorial class that was to be organised and promoted by a voluntary organisation, the WEA. This arrangement was to be managed by a Joint Committee consisting of representatives from university extension boards and the WEA. This Committee would control the subjects to be taught in the tutorial classes and the engagement of lecturers. The WEA itself was to be managed by a Central Council consisting of representatives of affiliated groups, particularly the trades unions. The day-to-day operations of the WEA were to be carried out by a General-Secretary.

The main educational instrument of this new development was the tutorial class. This class had the following characteristics: not more than 30 students; the class was to continue for three years; each class must have 24 lessons, each of 2 hours' duration; and 12 fortnightly essays were to be submitted for assessment. Students were expected to pledge to attend and no one under 18 years of age was to be admitted. This model was to be used wherever a WEA class was held (Workers' Educational Association 1913a).

### **The Workers' Educational Association of Victoria, 1913–1923**

In 1912, Mansbridge and his wife were formally invited to visit Australia by James Barrett, an influential member of the Council of the University of Melbourne. As a result of the visit, the first Australian branch of the Workers' Educational Association was established in Melbourne on 19 September 1913, followed by the commencement of classes in Footscray (Leathley 1963:32, Workers Educational Association of Victoria 1913c). From this meeting a sub-committee was formed to develop a constitution that was endorsed on 25 March 1914 at a meeting of the WEAV chaired by Barrett. At this meeting he addressed the attendees on the subject of the relationship between the WEA and the University through the tutorial class process (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria 1914).

William Harrison Moore, founding President of the WEAV and Professor of Law at the University of Melbourne, reinforced the interest of the University in the WEA at the first Annual General Meeting of the WEAV in 1915. He added another dimension: the possibilities for the University; that is, the opportunity for the University of Melbourne to demonstrate to the government that the University was concerned with the broader education of the adult Victorian population (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria 1915).

At the 1916 Annual Meeting, the original constitution was amended. The revised constitution clearly set out the role of the WEAV: the Object of the organisation was: 'To promote the higher education of workers'. This was to be achieved:

- (b) by inquiring into the educational needs of the workers and by representing them to the proper authorities, and
- (c) by providing, in conjunction with the Department of Public Instruction, the university, and other educational institution, or by any other means, facilities for studies of interest to the workers (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria 1916).

### **Meredith Atkinson**

Atkinson was to implement the above objective and methodology when he was appointed by the University of Melbourne Council as Director of Tutorial Classes in 1917 (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria Council 1918a). He was a disciple of Mansbridge, and had moved from the University of Sydney where he had been Director of Tutorial Studies. Atkinson was convinced that the WEA was the most appropriate vehicle for conducting adult education that would not be vocationally focused and that would reach the workers, but not using the model noted earlier (Atkinson 1915a:16). He considered that the role of the WEA was effectively reduced to that of merely supporting the work of the university. He believed that the relationship between the WEA and the universities needed to change: the tutorial class as a methodology, and the Joint Committee as a management model, had to go. His model was to achieve the wholesale shift of responsibility for the provision of adult education from the University to the WEA (Alexander 1955a: 50,51,54–55, Wesson 1971:135).

Following his appointment to Melbourne, he set about establishing the WEAV. His first action was to appoint a General Secretary, Samuel Thompson (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria, Council 1918b). There is very little known about Thompson other than that he was apparently completely absorbed in his work. His actions over the next twenty-one years define him as determined and focussed about what the WEAV should be doing: organising, promoting, and delivering a variety of learning opportunities to all adults as well as working in conjunction with the University Extension Board.

Atkinson then moved to ensure the growth of the WEAV. The University Council agreed to the merging of the Joint Committee and the Extension Board, and ensured that the Director of Tutorial Classes was the Chairman of the revised Extension Board. The Council amended the relevant Statute so that there would be parity

of membership on the Extension Board between the University and the WEAV. The Statute also provided for a Secretary whom it appears had a vote. The Extension Board engaged the General-Secretary of the WEAV, Thompson, as the Secretary of the Extension Board. It is suggested that Atkinson realised that the attendance at Extension Board meetings by the university representatives was at best minimal and frequently non-existent, therefore he had ensured that the WEAV would effectively dominate the Board, and policy and the delivery of government-funded adult education (Atkinson 1919a; University of Melbourne Council 1921).

The final change made by Atkinson occurred in 1920 with two important decisions. First, the tutorial class methodology as established by Mansbridge was abandoned, and second, the WEAV formally noted that, although their aim was still to attract workers, their main responsibility was not to target the delivery of adult education to any specific group. These changes effectively established the Workers' Educational Association of Victoria as a highly significant organisation that not only organised and promoted courses in conjunction with the University but also became a deliverer of teaching for its own courses (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria 1920:6, Workers' Educational Association of Victoria 1921). Atkinson resigned in 1922.

### **John Alexander Gunn, 1923–1938**

When the selection panel met to appoint Atkinson's replacement, there were three final applicants. They were Douglas Copland, Professor of Economics, Dean of the Faculty of Economics, and Director of Tutorial Classes at the University of Tasmania; and Herbert Heaton, Director of Tutorial Studies and Lecturer in History and Economics at the University of Adelaide. The successful candidate was Gunn, Fellow of the University of Liverpool, and Lecturer in Psychology and Economics at the University of Liverpool

Extension Board. He commenced work in 1923, and immediately clashed with Thompson. At the Annual General Meeting of the WEAV in 1924, he asked about the representation of the University on the WEAV Council (Bourke 1983:251, Harper 1993, University of Melbourne 1922a:497, University of Melbourne 1922b). He was advised:

... that the University was not affiliated to the Council of the WEA, and that the University of Melbourne was included in error in the list of affiliated organisations appearing in the 1922 Report. (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria 1924)

### **The Schutt Inquiry**

Gunn was left in no doubt about the strength of the WEAV and the weakness of the University. In 1924, in an attempt to clarify the relationship, the University established what was to be the first of four inquiries. The chairman, Mr Justice Schutt, was asked to investigate claims made by Gunn. The claims were first, that the fusion of the Extension Board and the Joint Committee was not working, second that Thompson was administratively inefficient, and third that Thompson's attitude towards the University was 'one of declared hostility', and that therefore he should be removed. After making these claims directly to the University Council rather than through the Extension Board, he suggested three possible options to overcome the impasse.

- Dispense with the WEA altogether on the ground that it is not doing classes for working men and has no standards and is merely battenning on the province of extension classes and lectures.
- Remove the WEA and its secretary right out of extension and give the authority to the present director to direct free from the WEA. Have a new Extension Lectures Committee for Town and Country consisting of university men and other qualified educational persons, without the WEA.



- Appoint an organising secretary who should be secretary to the Board (University of Melbourne Extension Board 1924).

Gunn's position about the role of the WEAV is quite clear. The Workers' Educational Association of Victoria was there to support the university in delivering education to a particular group and implicitly using an explicit methodology: the tutorial class, with the whole process managed by a Joint Committee. It was also obvious that Gunn realised that the structure of the Extension Board had effectively given control to the WEAV and not to university people. That is, the WEAV was effectively organising and not just promoting activities that were, or should have been, the prerogative of the Extension Board. He had accurately recognised the crux of the relationship: a dominant voluntary body managing a University Board.

The Committee did not agree with him and in their recommendations indicated that there should be 'more frequent consultation and fuller co-operation between the Director and the WEA and its officials' (University of Melbourne 1924: Recommendation 1). Gunn was also explicitly directed to ensure reports about the work of the Board and its officials should go through the usual channels, that is, to the Extension Board first, rather than direct to the University Council. There was no attempt to recognise that the University had misunderstood the basis for the relationship with the WEAV. The WEAV was now organising, promoting and delivering learning to all adults, and the University only wanted an organisation to promote university level courses to workers. The University upheld the role of the WEAV as being the dominant partner in the relationship (University of Melbourne 1924). Instead of making recommendations that reflected the need to resolve the situation, the committee concentrated on issues of protocol and communication. They had lost an opportunity.

### **The MacFarland Inquiry**

Having failed to contain the WEAV, yet another enquiry ensued, this time in 1926. The Extension Board asked the University Council to consider the abolition of the position of Assistant Director of Tutorial Classes that had been established and filled at the request of Atkinson in 1921. The University Council did not automatically accept the recommendation and established an inquiry into the recommendation as well as the constitution of the Board (Atkinson 1921, University of Melbourne 1927).

The report of the Inquiry suggested that the most important activity for the WEAV was the organisation of the tutorial classes. The committee also indicated that as far as the University was concerned the only role for the WEAV was the promotion of such classes. The report clearly articulated that the WEAV should not have any active role in organising or conducting tutorials, correspondence, University extension, or vacation classes. The report correctly noted that the existing constitution of the Extension Board and the WEAV meant that the latter organisation was effectively able to decide what educational activities were carried out (University of Melbourne 1927:3).

It is considered that the recommendations were founded on confusion. What the report of this Inquiry demonstrated was a considerable misunderstanding again by a Committee about the relationship between the WEAV and the University. By 1925 tutorial class enrolments represented only 22% of the total activity of the WEAV. The most significant activity arranged and conducted by the WEAV were public lectures that used speakers from the University. The Committee failed to understand that the role of the WEAV had always been one of organisation as well as promotion (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria 1925, Workers' Educational Association of Victoria Council 1927).

The Committee concluded that, first, the University should take back financial control of all monies applicable to adult education; second, that the Secretary of the WEAV should cease to be the Secretary of the Extension Board; third, that all Association positions paid for by the university be approved by the University Council; and fourth, that the WEAV be encouraged to develop high quality materials for participants in tutorial classes, and secure the co-operation of organised Labour. The report also defined precisely the role of the Director and adult education.

- a. The organization and conduct of tutorial classes
- b. The organization and conduct of correspondence tuition
- c. The organization and conduct of University Extension lectures
- d. The organization of Vacation Schools
- e. The broadcasting of lectures on approved subjects by persons possessing special qualifications for this work.

It should be recognized that provision for other forms of educational activity may be required from time to time as social conditions alter (University of Melbourne 1927:3).

The Committee also recommended that a special sub-committee of the Extension Board be established with equal membership between the University of Melbourne and the WEAV. This was in effect the re-establishment of the Joint Committee that had been abolished in 1921 (University of Melbourne 1927:3). The apparent reason for this change was to ensure that the WEAV should only be involved with the University in the context of promoting tutorial classes. The identification of the role of the Director and the form adult education was to take, was strongly opposed by the WEAV on the basis that their Objective and Methodology also required the same role (Worker's Educational Association of Victoria 1927:9).

The tension between the organising of courses, selection of tutors and the promotion of programs was still unresolved. Indeed, the Committee concluded that:

The Workers' Educational Association should furthermore be requested to keep continually in mind:

- (a) The desirability of setting before intending members of tutorial classes a high standard of performance, and of endeavouring by this and other means to improve the quality of the material upon which the Director and tutors have to work.
- (b) The necessity of making a concerted effort to secure the co-operation of the leaders of organized Labour (University of Melbourne 1927:4).

Recommendation (a) is completely at odds with the requirements the Committee had established for the Director of Extension. Recommendation (b) also completely ignored the reality of the work being done by the WEAV. Confusion was paramount and the University really had no idea what to do with an organisation on which they had come to depend. Once again the University failed to resolve the situation.

The recommendations were implemented, but in 1931 Gunn went overseas on sabbatical leave. Thompson was appointed to carry out the routine work associated with the provision of adult education in Victoria through the Extension Board. Once again the WEAV was in a position to maintain its dominance of government-funded adult education delivery in Victoria as well as continuing to influence the Extension Board (Workers' Educational Association of Victoria 1931:12).

### **Inquiry, 1933**

In 1933 Gunn's contract was up for renewal and, at a meeting to discuss the options available to the University, the WEAV this time expressed concern about the work of the Extension Department. The President of the WEAV, Tucker, made the following comment about Gunn: '... the Director had shown no disposition to make a very definite contribution to the educational activities of the country' (Tucker 1933:3). The University chose to ignore this and agreed to extend his contract until December 1934, ostensibly because of the parlous financial position in which the Extension Board found itself (University of Melbourne Council 1933). The University response was understandable; it was not about to dismiss its Director of University Extension on the basis of a complaint by the President of a voluntary body, not even one on which they had come to depend.

### **The Priestley Inquiry**

In December 1935, the University Council instituted another enquiry into the work of the Extension Board, intrinsically to look at the work of the Extension Board in rural areas. The terms of reference were expanded to include: first, the allocation of resources between extension lectures and tutorial classes; second, the objectives of extension lectures; and third, whether; '... Mr. Thompson's organising work is apt to give a somewhat wrong orientation to the work of the Board' (Bainbridge 1936a, University of Melbourne 1936d).

The Committee questioned Gunn and he made it clear that the Extension Board had lost power in rural areas due to the work of Thompson. He also reiterated the points he had made in 1924. He was also concerned about the financial relationship between the University and the WEAV (University of Melbourne 1936c). Tucker was also interviewed and reiterated what he had said to the 1926 Enquiry: that the work of the Director needed to be controlled and that the Extension Board was failing in this regard. Thompson

followed and indicated that the problem was not with the Director, indeed there was no mention of Gunn at all, but rather a lack of funds (University of Melbourne 1936c:3).

In 1937, the Draft Report of the Committee was referred to Gunn for his comments. His response was a mixture of considerable hurt and reiteration of points made in 1924, 1926 and 1932. The most telling comment was:

I came to Australia in 1923 on the definite understanding that I would have control of University Extension, but found in fact an unworkable Extension Board because of the overwhelming W.E.A. representation. (Gunn 1937a:1)

The report of the Committee reflected the frustration felt by the University and was critical of the work of Gunn and also of the role of the WEAV. In particular, they commented:

While recognising the value of the organising work done by the President and Secretary of the W.E.A., ... the Committee feels that a system under which the Secretary of the W.E.A. in effect represents the University in its contact with country districts is not satisfactory. The work or organisation should be done by a man who is a graduate of the University. (University of Melbourne Council 1937:5)

and

The Secretary of the W.E.A. could then ... devote his whole time to work which is essentially and distinctively that of the W.E.A. As already stated, the scope of the W.E.A. work, as indicated by the occupation of the persons whom it reaches, is by no means satisfactory. (University of Melbourne Council 1937:6)

The University wanted it both ways. The WEAV was being criticised for having represented the University inappropriately and also for not promoting extension lectures appropriately to the 'right' people.



The Council adopted the report in June 1938. The attitude of the University to the WEAV had also taken on a less positive note possibly because they were attempting to prevent certain information from moving outside the walls of the academy. The WEAV would have been most interested in a statement that clearly acknowledged that the work being carried out was exclusively that organised by them, a point made by Gunn in 1924! (University of Melbourne Council 1937)

### Conclusion

The above inquiries demonstrate that the WEAV/Extension Board relationship was untenable. The actual provision of adult education in Victoria through the joint arrangement was not meeting the main goals of either organisation. The University wanted to increase its public and political acceptance; the WEAV to deliver adult education to all adults. This was not what was supposed to happen – the WEAV was meant to support the University.

Gunn, a philosopher and economist, came to the University from Liverpool. He had an understanding of university extension and the role of the WEA that was historically accurate but that was considerably outdated in the Victorian context. He appeared not to have understood the rationale behind the establishment of the WEAV in Victoria. It was hoped he could rejuvenate the static, almost moribund, extension program of the university. This was not to be. Gunn never really understood the adult education environment into which he had walked. He had wrongly assumed it would be as it was in England. When he made his initial claims to the University Council, he accurately summed up the situation: the Atkinson model was not that which was considered to be the norm in England. He was unable to make the University understand that there should be a separation of responsibilities. He was left in a position where he never understood why the University held the views it did about his role. Wesson's argument that it was the Director's fault cannot

be sustained. Gunn had made it abundantly clear in 1926 what the situation was, and how it could have been resolved. The University failed to act: it needed the Workers' Educational Association of Victoria too much.

The role of the WEAV was never in doubt. Its understanding of adult education remained clear from 1920 to 1938 and was quoted at the beginning of this paper. It saw its role as organising, managing and when necessary delivering adult education using the services of University staff. They refused to acknowledge the straight-jacket of promotion imposed by the University of Melbourne. At the end of 1938, the WEAV was looking towards the replacement of Gunn as Director and the arrival of a new Director of Tutorial Classes. However, they had made a bad enemy in the University. The result of this animosity has been discussed elsewhere (Dadswell 2004).

The 'dominant' model expounded by some historians of adult education in Australia can now be seen as not valid in Victoria. The evidence allows for consideration of a different model for government-funded adult education, one that acknowledges the role of voluntary organisations as opposed to formal, professional bodies. This model would be placed under stress in the 1940s, but would re-appear albeit briefly in the 1970s.

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### About the author

**Gordon Dadswell** has worked in adult learning environments – formal, non-formal and informal – since 1968. His original studies were in adult education and libraries and now he is an MEd (Hons) student. Research interests include: adult learning in non-formal and informal learning environments, particularly from 1900 to 1950, and in particular the Workers' Educational Association of Victoria.

### Contact details

P.O. Box 277, Warragul Vic 3820

Tel: 03 56 222 683

Mobile: 0413 944 297

Email: [gdadswell@dcsl.net.au](mailto:gdadswell@dcsl.net.au)