Situating SCUTREA

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From local to global, from exclusion to inclusion: a brief history of the conference

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The 40
\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of SCUTREA is actually being celebrated at the 41
\textsuperscript{st} Conference, given that SCUTREA was launched through an inaugural conference at Middleton Hall in Edinburgh, June 1970. There were nine papers given at the inaugural conference. Included in the proceedings were eight of the nine papers, together with brief summaries of discussions for some of the talks. SCUTREA proceedings were the norm from the beginning until 1988 when there was a shift from proceedings to ‘precedings’, which occurred between 1987 and 1988, which is well documented by Miriam Zukas (1996) in her editorial introduction to the conference ‘precedings’ of 1996. Her concerns focused mainly on the balance between being inclusive and assuring quality of the papers included in each conference. The editorial by Zukas was not the first critical examination of SCUTREA. A previous inward look at SCUTREA was written by Teddy Thomas, on completion of his term of office as SCUTREA Chair at the end of the 1984 Conference, held in Hull. Only a brief summary was provided in the proceedings, as the full version was to be published in \textit{Studies in the Education of Adults} (Thomas, 1984). So this critical reflection is timely.

The official ‘first’ annual conference was held in Knuston Hall, Northamptonshire, organised by Roger Fielden of the University of Nottingham’s adult education department. There were just five papers included in the proceedings. The proceedings did, however, include a list of 38 participants from 13 different UK higher education institutions. It is worth noting that only one woman participated in that conference (Judith Calder, Open University). Again, the papers had some reports of the discussions held. The second annual conference, held at Holly Royde in March 1972, organised by the University of Liverpool, had 36 participants, including visitors from the Ontario Institute (Roby Kidd) and from Berlin (Büchner) and Brunel University in the UK (Pask). Nine UK higher education institutions were represented, as well as the National Institute of Adult Education (now NIACE). But again, only one woman was present (Leni Oglesby, then of Leicester, later Sheffield and Teesside Universities). The conference programme was organised through six sessions, each of which had between two and three contributions, except the fourth session which had five groups, based on SCUTREA’s special interest groups at the time, focusing on assessment and evaluation, initial training, post-experience courses, training for management and training for teaching. Each session had a chair and a secretary. In a note on putting together the proceedings, it was reported that ‘the participating institutions were asked to provide the copies of their essays or reports .... The resulting volume displays a variety of typing styles and lay-outs’, adding ‘it would have been difficult for the host institution (Liverpool) to have found the resources to produce alone what is a much longer book’ (110 pages). This was
the standard set for the next six or seven years. A list of participants was not routinely included each year's proceedings. It is fair to say that although still 'roneo' copies, the typeface began to be standardised, and the appearance became more 'professional'. The first 'neat' set of proceedings was in 1975, which had been produced using new technology - an electric typewriter. The font size however is point nine, and would not meet contemporary recommendations under the current disabilities' legislation. In terms of gender, it was still possible to count the number of women participants on one hand; in addition to those already mentioned, by the 1980 conference, Muriel Crane and Marilyn Pedley (both Hull), Sallie Westwood (Leicester), Sylvia Harrop (Liverpool), J. Bell (Sheffield) had all attended at least one SCUTREA.

Participants were typically addressed using their initials, and title. The gender of those participants with a doctorate was not easily identifiable, so counting the number of women participants may not be accurate. This was indicative of the formality of SCUTREA at this time. However, it was clear that prior to the 1980s there was a distinct imbalance, and claims heard at the time that SCUTREA was a 'club for men in grey suits' had more than an element of truth.

This gender imbalance would from the 1980s onwards begin to shift dramatically. And with it there were several other organisational shifts, that reflected the response of the organisation to 'changing times', and one reason why SCUTREA has succeeded in surviving for 40 years or more.

This anniversary provides an opportunity to reflect on the significance of SCUTREA as an organisation, primarily set up for academics undertaking teaching and research in the education of adults. As it enters its fifth decade, the notion of situating SCUTREA becomes important, not only to locate the organisation in its social, political and economic context, and also in terms of the recognising the response to changing cultures of higher education over this 40-year period. The first explicit focus on 'changing demands on university adult education' was in 1977; in 1980 the conference focused on 'the next ten years', with the theme of the 1992 conference being focused on 'changing cultures', followed two years later, at the 1994 conference in Hull, with an opportunity to reflect on 'changing practices, contexts and identities.' In 1995, SCUTREA participants were celebrating 'vision, invention and futures' in Southampton, 'diversity, development and futures' in Leeds the following year. By 1997, the conference reflected a significant change - its increasing internationalisation, and held its first conference labelled 'international', held at Royal Holloway (though the 1988 TransAtlantic Dialogue in Leeds was also genuinely international). The 1997 conference was organised in collaboration with the two most significant North American adult education research organisations, AERC (Adult Education Research Conference) and CASAE (Canadian Association in the Study of the Education of Adults), and supported by colleagues in Australasia, 'crossing borders' (and 'breaking boundaries'). From here, the conference began 'making connections' in Exeter in 1998. Ominously, in 1999, on the eve of the new millennium, and the previous time the conference was held in Warwick, the participants were discussing 'the final frontier', and having to begin 'exploring new spaces in which to research and teach'. By 2001 – possibly the 'third' international conference (the second was held in 2000, in Vancouver, jointly planned with AERC and CASAE) – there was a vast amount of collective experience to draw on through an extensive range of travellers' tales. Under postmodern conditions, and the first
conference after ‘9/11’, participants were challenged to understand ‘altered states of adult education’ in the context of a different kind of global world (Stirling, 2002).

Awareness was growing that with the diversity and eclecticism, the question that really needed to be addressed was ‘whose story now?’ (Sheffield, 2004). The annual conference recognised that it had ceased to be an exclusive organisation since the beginning of the 1980s, and indeed by 2000 (Nottingham) had been able to celebrate its inclusivity, and recognised its ability to ‘speak in tongues’ (Bangor, 2003). The conference would go on to acknowledge how different and diverse it now was at Sussex, in 2005. But this conference will be most remembered for the fact that it ended abruptly (on the last day) due to news of a series of explosions in London, potentially disrupting journeys home. The effects of globalisation were being felt both politically and personally. In Leeds in 2006, the conference was sharing awareness of a range of inter-cultural perspectives, through what was termed a ‘global dialogue’. However, the conference was aware that many global voices were still absent. There was a need to question inclusivity when non-English speakers were unable to get their papers accepted by SCUTREA (an issue raised by Zukas, 1996), and even had their papers been accepted, there persisted such global inequalities in terms of the distribution of wealth that the authors would not have been able to attend without significant financial support. There was a logical progression the next year, in Belfast, asking participants to re-consider learning communities and partnership in their local as well as their global contexts. In the following conferences, two further questions were to be addressed: whither adult education in the learning paradigm? (Edinburgh, 2007) and the challenges to the significance (or as some would say, impact) of our research – is it ‘really useful’? The 40th anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on the first forty years.

**Changing contexts: mirror or response?**

In order to situate SCUTREA, I am going to take as my starting point the academic year 1969-70. By the end of the 1960s, the UK had witnessed a decade dominated by Labour Party policies on education. In 1969 a collection of university adult educators in the UK would have been discussing the feasibility of setting up this forum which would focus on researching teaching and learning, the notions of compensatory and community education were still strong influences in and on adult education practice. In the UK, as elsewhere in the western world, especially the USA, there was a great belief that education not only should, but did, make a difference. The early sociology of education was characterised by its emphasis on functionalism – schools, colleges and universities were understood as institutions that served to maintain the existing social order; in short, education was seen as an agency of social control. By the end of the 1960s, a new radical perspective on education was developing, that argued that not only was learning about individual change, but for large-scale social change too.

The formation of SCUTREA coincided with publication of Young’s *Knowledge and Control* (1971), subtitled ‘new directions for the sociology of education’. In that collection was a piece by a university adult educator - Nell Keddie - who represented Birkbeck College at SCUTREA in the 1970s through to the 1992 conference at Kent. Adult educators in the early 1970s had the opportunity to read Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), and Illich’s *Deschooling Society* (1971). Whilst there is no evidence that university adult educators in the UK were driving the radicalism of the practice through teaching and research, there is little doubt that by the end of the
1970s some had been influenced by the arguments that education was for change. Jane Thompson’s edited collection, *Adult Education for a Change* (1980) included five contributors who regularly attended SCUTREA. However, the ‘radical change’ agenda had been hi-jacked in the UK by the Conservative Party, led by Margaret Thatcher, whose policies – like those of Reagan in the USA, and Mulroney in Canada, were no longer focused on education as the change agent, but to meet the ‘needs of the economy’. The political agenda had shifted to the point where it was no longer clear who the ‘enemy’ was. Within the adult education world, the existing critique of the so-called ‘liberal tradition’ was based on its conservatism, its resistance to change. Now, a neo-liberal philosophy was driving change in a radical way, but not in the direction of enhancing social equality but through increasing inequality, as a necessity for the ‘new right’ vision of the new economic order. It is tempting to say that they were right, in their critique of the old traditions of adult education, but for the wrong reasons (Armstrong, 1988).

Two parallel forces were operating at this time, and a third - postmodernism - was to follow later in the 1980s. The first was the growing feminisation of SCUTREA, ready to challenge ‘men’s ways of knowing conferences’, and the increasing internationalisation of SCUTREA. A significant opportunity arose in the early 1980s, for a number of ‘young university professors’ in North America to engage in an exchange with a similar number in the UK. This was known as the British and North American Faculty Exchange, funded by the Kellogg Exchange. The UK participants were chosen through the SCUTREA conference. The idea was that each would attend the others’ conferences and also spend a short time with an international colleague and their institution, to increase their understanding of the significance of adult education, and the place of research, in each other’s ‘learning cultures’. I have written more about this elsewhere (Armstrong, 2004).

The success of this Exchange was explicit in terms of personal and professional development, but it also led to some significant structural changes and priorities for SCUTREA. The Exchange, for example, was very influential in making the shift from having proceedings to what were in effect ‘precedings’, which was the approach to publishing papers before the conference used both by AERC and CASAE. The last conference to have proceedings was 1987 in Lancaster. From 1988 (the TransAtlantic Dialogue in Leeds) onwards, papers were not only written in advance to tight specifications, but also were subject to a ‘selection’ process, using a range of criteria to judge their suitability for the conference. Whilst this has been largely considered successful in raising the standards of the papers and the conference, it has also been exclusive (Zukas, 1996).

Up until this point, SCUTREA conferences had been organised primarily by a volunteer host site, typically around a series of plenary papers and interest groups (management and training, history of adult education, the psychology of adult learning, comparative adult education, sociology, women, and the arts). It was the setting up of the women’s group that was significant because it in effect cut across all the other interest groups. The majority of the sociology group, for example, were women, and given that conferences timetabled a single session for interest groups, participants had to decide which group to go to. This came to a head in the 1982 conference in Nottingham when the women’s group moved to hold their own alternative sessions within the conference. This was important not only for consolidating ideological shifts in the organisation but in the ways in which future
conferences might be organised. Rather than having ad hoc parallel sessions, alternative strands might be planned in, focusing on a specific conference theme. This was a significant landmark in bringing more choice, and therefore encouraging more diversity into the conference. Although the conference has never changed its title, the ‘U’ for university is no longer restricted to specific higher education institutions, and papers are judged on their contribution to research, and not their institutional affiliation.

Typically membership of SCUTREA had been institutional, but there has been a growth of individual membership (and at the same time a decrease in institutional membership, as university adult departments have been merged or simply closed down). In addition, there has also been a slight but significant shift towards postgraduate research as well. In the 1970s there was little evidence of student participation in the SCUTREA. The contrast with North America was stark for those visiting the sister organisations’ conferences in the USA and Canada. SCUTREA’s initial response was to offer reduced fees for students, with travel bursaries and a financial prize for the best student paper. Again, this was both exclusive and selective, but necessary if – paradoxically – inclusion as to be enhanced.

It has not been explicitly stated so far, but SCUTREA is a not-for-profit, voluntary organisation. That is not to say that it does not make a profit out of its conferences. But any profit is intended to be used to support inclusion, and initiate and support research in adult education. Most of its income is from conference surpluses. For this reason, most of its conferences have been hosted by universities with departments of adult education that had resources that could support the conference. Since 2000, the contribution of host departments has diminished, and difficult to gain institutional support. Typically the volunteering organisation has to satisfy the SCUTREA Council members of its ability to deliver the conference, and at least break even. In the 1980s, the competition between institutions in the North American conferences appeared quite fierce compared with SCUTREA. When SCUTREA was proposing a joint conference to be held in 1997 with AERC and CASAE, a small delegation had to ‘sell’ the conference to the North Americans at their conferences the year before.

Much of the planning for conference is agreed at its thrice-yearly council, but the nominated conference organiser always has a good deal of autonomy in the planning and running of the conference. Typically, they work with a small team of colleagues in the host institution, but they are also able to call on the officers (who are themselves unpaid volunteers) and membership for support. The constitution of this voluntary organisation has to satisfy the Charity Commission that it meets its stated purpose and objectives. The officers play a crucial role in the maintenance of SCUTREA. The three original posts are the honorary chair, honorary secretary and honorary treasurer. More recently, the need for a membership secretary was recognised, as well as most recently, a communications officer for disseminating information about SCUTREA and its sister organisations. The job descriptions have to be formally agreed and included in the constitution. Whilst dealing with constitutional matters can be tiresome, its existence is vital to ensuring the ongoing life of the conference.

**The significance of SCUTREA**

Coinciding with the 40th anniversary, a survey has been undertaken with those who
have participated in at least one recent SCUTREA conference. The survey was distributed through SCUTREA’s email list which has in excess of 300 names. The response to the survey was 17% (n=47). A fuller report of the survey will be made available, but some key points to emerge from the survey will be reported here, to lead to some concluding comments about the significance of SCUTREA. Of those completing the survey, 34% (n=16) had attended one conference. Nearly half of those attended last year’s conference for the first time. Expense of the conference, travel and lack of financial support were the three most cited reasons as to why they have not, or may not attend SCUTREA again. Two respondents indicated that the timing of the conference was inconvenient, being on holiday or too busy. Three agreed that SCUTREA ‘felt like a club to which they did not belong’, although one of those added that they hope to continue to attend so they ‘will begin to feel part of that club.’ And one thought that the conference was ‘too anglocentric’. Reasons for attending their first conference were the recommendation of colleagues, being attracted by the relevance of the conference theme, having funding available, and having their paper accepted. A few saw it as an opportunity to visit the UK.

In terms of the 58% who persist in attending (nearly one-third responding had attended more than five conferences), the ‘supportive and welcoming atmosphere’ or ambience comes through as strongly important, along with an opportunity to ‘network’, meeting up with those already known to them, as well as the opportunities to discuss their research with a wider audience. The friendliness of the conference comes through quite strongly, as well as the professionalism of their planning and organisation. Importantly, there was strong support for the quality of the papers in the proceedings as well as the presentations and subsequent discussions. One or two discussed their experience of SCUTREA not so much as a ‘club’, but more as a ‘family.’ The friendliness and support is set against a backdrop of the ‘increasingly hostile’ environment of higher education workplaces.

What do participants get out of attending? The contacts are important, as well as the opportunities for wider dissemination for their research, and a number of postgraduate students refer to support and confidence. The strength of the theorisation in many of the papers, with critical discussions around research methodologies would also appear to be especially valued. For some, SCUTREA simply ‘makes me think’, and provides new ideas, test out ideas. The notion of a ‘community of practice’ comes through many of the responses focus on identity issues and a sense of belonging. For example:

It has been fundamental to the development of my identity as an adult education .... Not only has this network sustained me on a professional and sometimes personal level, and enabled me to experiment and develop my own ideas, but it has been a really important part of the externalisation of my identity.

Others find it more difficult to pinpoint the significance of SCUTREA. It is known that papers are not fully refereed and therefore the papers in themselves are not valued: ‘It has made no difference to my career’.

Whilst a range of suggestions are made in terms of the practical aspects of participating in SCUTREA conferences, there are some more fundamental concerns expressed about the future and where SCUTREA can go given ‘the changing
institutional bases of adult education and the lack of a coherent research agenda’. As one respondent eruditely summarises:

I think the organisation need to keep hold of its commitments to research and to creative experimentation with the conference as a collective learning experience. It has been a really significant part of my career and I hope it is able to support other scholars in the same way to develop in a safe environment. But we need to make sure it retains a clear purpose as well as culture. The problem comes in how we define the education of adults – and that has, and is, changing.

References


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