THE UNIVERSITIES AND CONTINUING EDUCATION IN IRELAND: 
AN ASSESSMENT

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Background

Ireland is an island of intrigue. It is a land steeped in history, magic myth and folklore all of which seem inextricably intertwined. The heroic tales and legends with which every Irish child grows up seems to have shaped the country’s character as much as the Act of Union with Great Britain or the disastrous potato famine, which led to the rapid depopulation of the country in the 1840s. Today the population of the island stands at approximately 5.5 million, 4 million in the Republic and 1.5 million in Northern Ireland.

The island has been inhabited since prehistoric times and has seen many invaders - Celts from Central Europe, Vikings from Scandinavia, Normans originally from France and later the arrival of a Dutch King, William III of England leading to the subsequent English and Scottish plantations or settlements. The island was ruled as a dependency of England from the 16th century and united with England, Scotland and Wales in 1801. In 1921, the island was again divided with 26 of its 32 counties forming the Irish Free State later to become the Irish Republic. The remaining six counties formed Northern Ireland, remaining under the jurisdiction of Great Britain.

Early Irish history sometimes refers to Ireland as the land of Saints and Scholars’. Ireland was an island with a distinctive Christian tradition, Catholic and Protestant, with a long tradition in scholarship and learning. The religious manuscript of the Book of Kells from the 7th century now housed in Trinity College Dublin library, testifies to this. Ireland has also renowned literacy tradition and names such as Jonathan Swift, William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and George Bernard Shaw are widely known and whose works are studied by English literature students around the world. Ireland is of course also renowned as a country of mystery and intrigue - its people have penetrated practically every part of the globe and are renowned for their relaxed and easy going outlook. Their ‘cead mile failte’, or hundred thousand welcomes is a slogan proclaimed to the delight of the thousands of foreigners who come to the island each year.

In this paper, I will briefly trace the historical development of University Education and Continuing Education on the island of Ireland - North and South. The paper will highlight some of the key achievements in the development of continuing education, showing how it has contributed to innovation and to encouraging creativity.

The Development of University Education in Ireland
Ireland today has eight universities - 6 in the Republic and 2 in Northern Ireland. With the exception of one university, all of Ireland’s universities were established in the 19th and 20th century. The reasons for this are complex and related to socio-religious and political developments in Ireland.

**The Establishment of University Education in Ireland**

Ireland’s first university, called Trinity College Dublin, was founded in 1591 by Queen Elizabeth I of England and Ireland and endowed by the city of Dublin. When founded, it was intended that Trinity College would be the first of many constituent colleges of the University of Dublin. The full benefits of the university - degrees, fellowships, scholarships and emoluments were limited to members of the Anglican Church for many years and it was not until 1873 that all religious requirements were eliminated.

The university in the early days served the landed and professional class. It resembled the Scottish universities in giving a sound professional training and its strong Anglican character meant that it satisfied neither the Catholic majority of Ireland nor the Scots Presbyterian settlers in the North East of Ireland. The latter, however, unlike the other denominations, was prepared to accept mixed or non denominational colleges, rather than ones controlled by themselves. There also grew up a traditional Ulster or North East Ireland where Protestants looked to Scotland to train its professionals, including doctors and ministers.

**19th Century Expansion of Higher Education in Ireland**

During the 19th century, the British government recognised a need to expand university education outside Dublin and in 1845 three colleges were established in Ireland in Cork, Galway and Belfast. They were soon to be given full university status. The British hoped that these colleges, directed at the middle classes would form an Irish elite rising above party and religion, and loyal to the British connection. The plan, however, failed from the start as it was condemned by the Catholic church, which was hostile to the principle of religiously mixed education and the separation of religious and secular instruction. The logical consequence was the foundation of a Catholic university in Dublin in 1854. Initially the university was not very successful and was later revived in 1883 when taken over by the Jesuits, and became known as University College Dublin (UCD).

Irish higher education in the 19th century suffered from difficulties familiar in England. The underdevelopment of secondary schools, especially for Catholics, and limited demand for anything but vocational education. The British also failed to establish the principle of non-denominationalism in Higher Education in Ireland. The result was that different religious communities had separate systems of higher education expressing
their distinctive values and emphasis is what divided them. Trinity College Dublin remained the stronghold of the Protestant ascendancy, and was the subject of a ban by the Vatican. University College Dublin came to be identified with nationalism and the embodiment of Ireland’s Catholic tradition, and to form a national elite.

After a further series of commissions and inquiries in 1908, the Colleges of Cork, Galway and Dublin became the National University of Ireland. Although formally secular and supported by the state, in reality it embodied and satisfied Catholic aspirations. Trinity College Dublin remained independent, while in the North of Ireland, Queen’s College became the free-standing Queen’s University of Belfast.

After the division of Ireland in 1921 into two separate states Queen’s University came under the control of the new Northern Ireland government. Although it drew on a school system segregated by religion, it succeeded in attracting Catholic students and acting as a point of union for the contention communities of the North.

Recent expansion of Higher Education in Ireland

The growth in university Education in Ireland in the 1960s led to increasing demands for new provision. To meet this demand a second university was established in Northern Ireland in 1968. The new University of Ulster was sited in Coleraine, despite the hope of many that it would be located in the historic city of Londonderry, (or Derry as it was better known by the majority of its inhabitants). In 1972, Magee College, a small but lively academic institute in Derry which was affiliated to Trinity College Dublin which sent students to Dublin to complete degrees, was formally made part of the New University of Ulster. An Institute for Continuing Education was established, which set about developing a range of social and education programmes linked to local community needs. In a further development in 1984, the University of Ulster was created by the merger of the Coleraine/Derry campuses with the Northern Ireland Polytechnic at Jordanstown and its Art and Design Centre at York Street, Belfast.

In the Republic of Ireland, to facilitate a growth in demand for Higher Education, three universities were created from former colleges. In Maynooth, Co Kildare, a college for the training of Catholic priests was developed into a university and the University of Limerick and Dublin City University were also established from former Higher Education Institutes during the 1980s.

So the landscape of present day universities in Ireland was completed.

The Development of Adult and Continuing Education in the Universities in Ireland
Just as the expansion of Higher Education was influenced by factors unique to Ireland, so the ethos and development of Adult and Continuing Education in the universities in Ireland has also developed in response to local needs and issues.

**Continuing Education in the Republic of Ireland**

The development of Adult and Continuing Education in the South of Ireland has to a large extent been dominated, as elsewhere, by the religious values of the Catholic church in Ireland. Just as ‘Catholic Action’ or ‘social action’ in 19th and 20th century Europe and elsewhere had an impact on the development of Adult Education (eg the worker-priest’ phenomenon in France and the Antigonish movement in Canada) so to this had an impact on developments in Ireland.

In Cork and Galway there has been much pioneering work in the last century involving bringing the local university to the rural people of the South West. The older universities have in this century had a highly visible tradition in the development of liberal adult education programmes. A wide range of personal development programmes in areas such as languages, arts, music, social sciences and recreation have since the 1960s been available at Trinity, Dublin, Cork and Galway universities.

The strong emphasis placed on catholic or social action in achieving change has also led to the development of community action aimed at involving people in their environments. One such example was in Galway, where there has been a sustained attempt to involve people in rural villages. In 1989, this was further developed with the establishment of a Community Education and Development Centre, which also offers training programmes for community development workers. To facilitate discussion among adult educators, a National Association of Adult Education (AONTAS), was established at Maynooth College in 1960, and the first formal professional adult education training programmes began to emerge. In recent years, particularly in Dublin, the development of continuing vocational and professional training and updating courses for adults has undergone rapid development.

Alongside developments in the universities, there has also been considerable expansion of adult education by the Regional Vocational Education Committees in the regional Colleges and Schools, and by the voluntary sector, who contributed substantially to the development of informal and non-formal adult education in Ireland.

**Continuing Education and the Universities in Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland Continuing Education is today a function of both Queen’s University and the University of Ulster and organised at both the 5 main campuses of
the universities and two outreach centres of Armagh (Queen’s University) and Enniskillen (University of Ulster).

Continuing Education at Queen’s University

The Queen’s University of Belfast has a long tradition of involvement in Adult and Continuing Education throughout the North of Ireland. Only two years after the opening of the University in 1845, evening lectures were first offered to working men in a diverse range of subjects including chemistry, anatomy, botany and talks on English and French literature. Soon added to this was a range of summer courses in Irish topography, history and philology. Early pioneering work at the University was entirely reliant on the enthusiasm and commitment of individual staff members. The transition to a more permanent and regularised arrangement for adult evening study was to prove a lengthy process, but by the end of the 19th century, a university extension movement had been firmly established. In the early 20th century the emerging extra mural or liberal adult education tradition developed and expanded, with classes being established in a number of rural locations and drawing in students from a wide cross-section of society. By the 1950s the most requested subjects were in Geography, History, Psychology, Literature and Economics with interest also in Music and Art.

In recent years, the work of the Department has expanded to include new opportunities for adults. In 1983 a part-time degree was introduced enabling students with home or employment responsibilities to follow an academic career. The programme currently enrols in excess of 600 part-time students annually throughout Northern Ireland. Students can study Humanities, Social and Educational Studies or Natural Sciences over a period of up to 10 years, and this has led to a greater integration between ‘mainstream’ and ‘continuing’ branches of higher education.

A range of Certificate and Diploma programmes suited to the continuing vocational education needs of adults and covering a wide spectrum ranging from the arts and social policy to business management and administration, computing, community development, and professional studies in education have been set up. Many of these courses have been developed in close cooperation and collaboration with professional associations and voluntary and community organisations and groups.

Another feature of the adult education programme at Queen’s has been the study tours or field visit series. These courses have included cultural and scientific visits to sites of archaeological, historical, geographical and cultural significance, both in Ireland and further afield. A programme of residential courses or study tours outside Ireland have been organised to supplement other liberal studies programmes. The first of these was in 1959 with a spring visit to study the art, architecture and sculpture of Paris and was followed in August by a visit to the music festival at Salzburg. Since then groups of enthusiastic students have travelled to almost every country in Europe and beyond.
Several new initiatives, worthy of note have developed in the 1990s. The first of these has been the establishment of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language Centre (TEFL) which opened in 1992 and trains teachers of English as a Foreign Language, meets the needs of foreign students studying English, and provides a series of intensive summer courses. Indeed language classes have developed to represent a very significant proportion of the work of the Institute of Continuing Education, with everything from intensive learning programmes to short brush-up courses designed for holidaymakers and classes for business people providing an essential service to the wider community at both professional and popular levels. The development of these programmes also reflects the growing ties between this region with other regions of Europe both in terms of holiday and leisure pursuits and in business and trade.

The University has also been actively involved in providing opportunities for non-traditional students to access a university education. In this part it has therefore increased its efforts to encourage access to a university education through a range of special outreach programmes. Since 1989 access programmes have been developed between the university and regional colleges, with staff from both further and higher education working together to facilitate the needs of the mature student. Other outreach programmes have included the establishment of adult guidance and preparation courses for mature students entering Higher Education.

The Institute has also developed a range of accredited and non accredited courses intended to meet the needs of those already involved in community work (paid or voluntary). These programmes have been devised through consultations with representatives of a range of community organisations in Northern Ireland.

A recent innovation is a Certificate for community works funded by the European Union for three years seeking to develop education and training for those in current employment, for volunteers and unemployed people seeking a career in community development work. The programme provides training both in the context of community work and in skills for community development. While considerable attention is paid to mobilising and facilitating community development, the course also recognised that the long term viability of a local community is dependent on economic regeneration. The course therefore seeks to develop skills in community economic development. A unique feature of this course has been the development of an imaginary community (Ballygoforward) serving as a model for community development. In its first year the programme has been highly successful and with six times as many applicants as there are places. It is hoped to expand the programme, with further support from the additional European Social Fund in 1998.

Another recent development of the Institute has been the development of a Master of Science course in 1996 in Science and Communication. This course is the result of a joint venture between Queen’s University of Belfast and Dublin City University. This partnership between institutions in the two states of the island of Ireland is the first joint
UK-Irish qualification at post graduate level and represents an unprecedented collaboration between scientists, communication professionals, historians and philosophers of Science.

The primary aim of the programme is to train graduate students to become science communicators in the news media, in industry, in government and in public affairs generally. As well as learning the basic concept of science and technology, students are taken beyond the confines of particular disciplines to reflect critically on the place of science and technology in society and to develop their ability to communicate the content of science and technology to diverse publics.

The programme, which has approximately 20 students drawn from Ireland, the UK and other European countries, also uses internet and video conferencing links between the two universities to enable students to exchange information and experience with wider networks of scientists and journalists.

In 1995, Queen’s University opened its new outreach campus in Armagh, the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland and a city with a scholarly tradition. The immediate purpose of the centre was to widen academic opportunity for the local community by offering a more flexible form of part time third level education provision on a ‘closer-to-home’ basis. The centre is seeking to provide as wide a possible range of learning opportunities. Those targeted include mature adult learners who wish to move on to degree level, members of the community who wish to improve their employability and marketable skills, people in mid-career who wish to extend their current qualifications and of course those who simply wish to return to learning because of their interest in an academic subject or discipline.

The campus is seeking to widen access to third level education and many of its early programmes are seeking to address this issue. A range of short credit and non-credit courses, and postgraduate programmes have been established and teaching using video conferencing links between Belfast and Armagh have been piloted. Support from the European Union's Regional Development fund has enabled the centre to develop a wide range of learning opportunities targeted at the needs of adults on both sides of the border in Ireland.

This ambitious project is providing new opportunities to many adults who for geographical and other reasons have previously been unable to benefit from Higher Education. There are also plans to establish a multi-media and archival research centre, an international centre for multi-cultural, ecumenical and religious studies and a residential centre for adult learners. Together these opportunities will make a substantial contribution to the future educational and community development needs of the area.
Adult and Continuing Education and the University of Ulster

Northern Ireland is one of the poorest regions of the European Union. As well as being a marginalised area, it has high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. Since 1968, it has gone through a troubled and violent period in its history. While many of you will be aware of the depressing news emulating from Northern Ireland over the past quarter century, there have also been considerable collective efforts by many to find solutions to the common social, economic, cultural and moral issues and problems faced by both communities.

The University of Ulster, through its four campuses at Magee (Derry), Coleraine, Jordanstown and Belfast and its recently established outreach centre at Enniskillen, has been at the forefront of developments in adult and continuing education to meet the needs of disadvantaged and excluded groups.

During the 1970s the university established the first professional training programme for adult educators in Northern Ireland and a range of additional programmes linked to personal and social development at Magee College.

One of the earliest programmes to be established in 1973 was a Certificate in Foundation Studies for mature students. This course serves as a gateway for mature students to enter undergraduate and other similar courses. The course, which is still running, serves to allow adults to deepen their education and to achieve a greater degree of personal development and to enable students to progress on to undergraduate programmes or other further education programmes, or to move into work. The course is designed for mature adult students of varying age and educational background who would not normally have acquired the qualifications expected from young people seeking entry to higher education. The academic programme is broadly based and includes studies in English, Maths, Computing, Contemporary and Regional Studies and a range of other optional subjects which are often chosen according to the intended area of future study of the student. Students in the past have progressed on to taking higher qualifications in a range of subjects including Humanities, Social, Health and Environmental Sciences, Business Studies, Accountancy, Informatics, Law, Theology and Education.

So successful was this course that in the 1980s it served as a model for the development of similar courses throughout the UK, and in other parts of Northern Ireland. In 1986, the University of Ulster expanded the programme to its Jordanstown campus, and to Further Education Colleges throughout Northern Ireland from 1989. Approximately 1,000 students now enter the programme annually across Northern Ireland.

A range of liberal and continuing vocational education programmes have also been developed by the University of Ulster. A particular focus of credit courses has been the emphasis on the development of understanding in areas of social and community
concern. Such programmes have included programmes in Community and Cultural
Studies, Community Development, Ecumenics, Peace and Reconciliation Studies and
Addiction Studies.

The University has also piloted a number of other special development projects in adult
and continuing education targeted at the needs of special groups. In the field of
Women’s education a number of special projects aimed at getting women back into
education and work were developed in the 1980s and some of these courses which are
largely funded by the European Union are still ongoing. Programmes such as ‘Time For
Me’ and the ‘Women and Information Technology’ project have provided foundation
training in assertiveness and communication and personal development, information
technology, management and enterprise skills, self employment and in the social and
economic issues affecting women’s role in society and in work.

Perhaps one of the most notable achievements of the University of Ulster, has been its
contribution towards research and development in the field of community development
in Northern Ireland.

Almost since its inception, the university has been actively involved in research in the
field of Adult and Continuing Education at both staff and student level. Many of the
issues examined have had a direct relevance to ongoing social and educational problems
affecting adults in Northern Ireland. Participation rates in adult education, rural and
urban regeneration, peace studies, women’s educational development are some of the
many issues which have been and are currently being explored. The establishment of a
Community Development and research centre at the University with a focus on adult
and community education has in this respect been an important development in
developing an interdisciplinary approach to analysis issues and problems related to
Adult and Community Education.

Adult and Community education has a vital role to play in supporting and strengthening
the community developments process and historically adult education and community
development have been closely linked. The latter is recognised by many adult
community educators as essentially a learning process, a situation where people can
learn through involvement in tackling real problems. Community development is, in
fact part of the learning iceberg. It is that part of the learning process, social education,
which is hidden from view because it does not take place in traditional, institutional,
education settings.

A Council of Europe project on adult education and community development in the
1980s which examined a variety of initiatives in fourteen European countries,
concerned with tackling social and economic disadvantage and exclusion, concluded
that community development and community education provide working answers to a
decaying social fabric and an uncertain future.” (Council of Europe 1985).
The University of Ulster, through its work with disadvantaged adults in urban and rural contexts has over the past 25 years made an enormous contribution to achieving these goals through its support in setting up development projects both within and outside the University. Two such projects worthy of note are the Community Development Studies project at Magee College, Derry and the Ulster People’s College in Belfast.

The Community Development Studies unit was established in 1979 to meet the training needs of voluntary and community activist who were involved in development work in their own neighbourhoods and organisations. Participants were drawn from women’s groups, co-operative groups, state agencies, community associations, community resource centres, family resource centres, and the trade union movement. Participants on the programme were provided with a course of study and skills training within a university-based adult education context designed to increase their personal confidence and to provide them with knowledge, skills and resources for use in their voluntary and community work. The programme included taught courses workshops and placement experience in a range of subjects related to community development ie philosophy of community development, social and community economic action and skills for community development (eg computing and desktop publishing, management skills, communication and presentation skills etc). When the programme terminated in 1995, approximately over two hundred local activists had benefited from the programme.

The Ulster People's College was set up in 1982 under a partnership arrangement between the university and others with an interest in community development. The founders believed that it was necessary to combine the best in local community action to work towards a vision of a new society based on a radical analysis of existing structures and the lessons and aspirations of the men and women attempting to create new structures at local level. The college took as its model and inspiration the Highlander Centre in Tennessee USA, whose aim was ‘Learn from the people and start education where they are.’ The Ulster People’s College is issue and problem orientated. It is openly committed to radical social change and the concept of individual and collective growth and development. As well as providing space for workshops and conferences on various social, economic and political issues as they arise, the college is developing an alternative curriculum based on the issues and problems facing men, women and youth in working class communities throughout Northern Ireland.

Its founders also saw as one of its control functions the task of addressing the causes and effects of political division in the North of Ireland and a cultural exploration of the roots of the conflict. A number of accredited courses in Community and Cultural Studies, Community conflict resolution and community relations have been developed in conjunction with the University of Ulster. Many of the courses success have emerged from the opportunity they provide to discuss contentious issues frankly and openly and to avoid approaches which assume a sole definition and solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland.
Higher Education in West Belfast

A recent initiative proposed by the University of Ulster has been the establishment of a new campus in West Belfast, the epicentre of decades of conflict and economic deprivation. In 1993, the University approached the government with a proposal to develop an inner-city campus of the University in the Springvale area of the city. As a large and successful institution with widespread community links, the university believed that it could significantly enhance educational opportunities in the area, and also develop recreational and other social facilities in partnership with local groups. In addition, through its research expertise, it was felt that the university could increase the quality of life in the area, through stimulating inward investment both industrial and commercial.

A number of studies have been carried out surrounding the feasibility of this project. What is clear however, is the need for expansion of Further and Higher Education in this multiple deprived area. The implications for the development of Adult and Continuing Education are enormous and the proposal has the potential to be the most significant single vehicle for bringing the two communities together following the cessation of violence. As a force in the social and economic regeneration of the region, the campus would have a unique role in consolidating peace in North and West Belfast.

Conclusion

In this paper I have endeavoured to give a snapshot picture of the development of continuing education in Ireland. The paper has shown how Continuing Education in Ireland is tackling social exclusion and structural discrimination, by responding to the needs of specific groups. Adult education for personal and social development has been very much to the fore and more recently there is evidence of a shift and emphasis toward developing a highly skilled workforce in the context of dynamic change and the impact of the new technologies. A more recent challenge has been fostering active, participatory citizenship in a democratic Europe partly through its involvement in European programmes.

The creation of wealth and access to knowledge in the next century will depend on the capacity to exploit the potential of the new learning technologies. The challenges for continuing education in Ireland, (and in Europe) will depend on our ability to help individuals to use the new learning in ways appropriate to their circumstances, culture and social needs. Social and technological developments suggest that freedoms for adults to learn what they want to learn will multiply.

The development of open and distance learning using the new technologies, will increase opportunities for learning, provided that they are appropriately supported. At
the same time, we must continue to provide supportive measures to secure access by those excluded socially, culturally and economically.

Continuing education in Ireland in its best sense recognises that lifelong learning is essential to the quality of the life and should be enjoyed by all men and women whatever their condition. The learning society expressed in these terms my be nearer than we think.
References


