

WORTHY INVISIBLE EDUCATION

Katherine Peet

(NZ Education Review 19 June 1996)

Adult and community education has fallen off the government's agenda in recent years. DONALD MATHESON looks at the woes of one of the larger community education groups, the Federation of Workers Educational Associations (WEA), and asks if it is now redundant.

The WEA doesn't award qualifications and its courses are not designed to lead to any jobs. It doesn't set course outcomes to fit within the qualifications framework. It doesn't even have a set number of students whom you can count for funding purposes.

In short, it fits none of the tertiary education pigeon-holes that have been created in the last seven years of education reform.

WEA President Katherine Peet says her federation has become invisible to government, although it is the size of a small polytechnic.

In all, the country's 11 WEAs teach the equivalent of 185 full-time students a year, or 123,000 student hours. The federation also coordinates 350 book discussion groups around the country, with about 3000 members.

The WEA lost its government funding in the 1991 budget. The qualifications authority does not recognise its courses, while the Lottery Grants Board and the Community Funding Agency have both declined applications from the federation on the grounds that it should be funded from education.

Peet says the federation is stuck between a rock and a hard place, and it survives through adult and community education funding from secondary schools, and through project grants from charitable trusts, Lottery, licensing trusts and city councils.

It has shrunk by about 40 percent since the 1980s. It now employs almost no permanent staff and relies on volunteers to keep the association alive. Peet says many of them, can't afford to keep going.

Independent contractor and community education expert Jenny Derby says community education has been left to one side as the government pursued its vocational education goals.

The WEA, like a number of voluntary agencies, has fallen down a gap in the new education world.

"They haven't convinced government that they're worthy of being funded in terms of its goals. What they're doing is really good work, but the government believes they should be funded by the community".

Not only does the WEA not fit well within the current system, but it could be argued that with a qualifications framework devoted to seamless education, access for all and courses fitting around students rather than the other way round, it's now redundant.

Education ministry acting tertiary charters and funding manager Harry Doig says simply: "The current policy is that they're not to be funded".

Although government funds some groups outside the system, such as the Foundation for the Blind, the Adult Reading and Learning Assistance Federation and the Auckland Multicultural Educational Resource Centre, it has chosen not to fund a general education group like the WEA.

Education Minister Wyatt Creech says he has asked Associate Minister Roger McLay to review the funding of adult and community education for future years. "The decisions on funding allocations have been made in the meantime but we don't focus on qualifications - people are terrified sometimes that they might be judged. The question now is to work out how we deal with community education in future."

Peet says the WEA is a vital stepping stone for adults to rejoin the education system.

"So many adults believe they can't begin learning again because they didn't have a successful time at school. Our encouragement and support means they can begin learning again."

Doig says WEA could consider attaching itself to a polytechnic or becoming a private training establishment. Peet says the association has considered those options, but her opposition goes deeper.

She says the qualifications frame-work, with its focus on qualifications and outcomes, has a place, but limiting further education to that environment will freeze some people out.

"We're not into cost recovery, we're into low cost. We don't focus on qualifications - people are terrified sometimes that they might be judged. They need low cost, cooperative learning opportunities."

Derby agrees. "I suspect WEA type education is about to become more relevant. Five years ago, before polytechnics and schools became strongly focused on unit standards for the qualifications framework. I wouldn't have said that.

"I think a lot of people in the community are looking for things outside the purely vocational and others are saying

that getting purely vocational qualifications isn't going to get you anywhere, anyway.

"More and more employers want to know what you're doing outside of your job, because they get too many job applications to decide on academic qualifications."

Peet tells the story of a middle-aged man who walked into the WEA in Christchurch.

"He'd been made redundant and hadn't had the courage to tell his wife. He'd gone out to 'work' for a fortnight before coming to terms with it. He hadn't registered as unemployed and so still had a fortnight's stand-down to go through.

"He came into the WEA to work out how to tell his family. He knew that he didn't want to become dependent on the benefit. He wanted to take control but didn't have the skills.

"We're informal and flexible and immediate. It's not a criticism of institution-based programmes. But our role is different."

Peet says a recent community survey in Christchurch by the WEA found that over half the respondents saw deepening their understanding as a major educational goal.

"The very interesting outcome is that only 22 people out of 362 could find the opportunity to do so, including using libraries and self-directed learning. They couldn't find it for themselves.

"That showed to me the very real need to continue to provide these kinds of learning opportunities.

"The courses depend on the community," she says. "One WEA is in a very low socioeconomic area and will be primarily involved in basic adult education."

Others offer courses on children and grief, learning the road code, tutorial groups that complement formal English as a second language courses and discussions on foreign control in New Zealand.

Peet says part of the WEA's philosophy has been to provide whatever people have asked for. Women's studies was first taught at the WEA and groups such as parent centres have sprung up around its courses.

Tutors plan each session, but Peet says the group adapts the material in its discussion. WEA courses cannot, she says, be fitted into "little boxes on the framework."

The association has never had a stable history. Originally funded 75 years ago through the universities, it gradually slipped under the government umbrella. In the Muldoon era it lost its funding, only to regain a third under the fourth Labour government and lose it again in 1991.

Last month the WEA set up a development fund to keep itself afloat.

But nevertheless it is set on getting state recognition and resourcing. For the past four years the association has been writing to government asking for funding. If it were to be funded as a polytechnic, Peet has calculated that on students numbers it would receive \$890,000 a year.

The education ministry told it in 1991 that a review of adult and community education was under way and some education groups outside the state system could be funded as special cases. By September 1993 government was still writing to the WEA saying its concerns would be taken into account in the review.

In 1992 the qualifications authority suggested it become a private training establishment and in 1994 the education ministry recommended it align itself with a polytechnic to provide community education courses.

Then in June 1994, the education minister told WEA that it was not included in the review of community and adult education. In the 1995 budget adult and community education received \$3 million, but none of that went to WEAs.

"It appears that education policy is reduced to funding considerations." Peet wrote to the association's annual report, "Further, activities that cannot be predetermined as individual learning units in the NZ qualifications framework and reduced to fit a 'seamless' system will be made invisible."