

When Manchester University closed its Courses for the Public division last summer, it looked like bad news for the city's life-long learners. Having tried to make the unit self-funding the university faced heavy losses, and described its decision as "an inevitable consequence of the decline in demand for places on the courses and the progressive withdrawal over recent years in government funding".

For Radcliffe student Cynthia Greenwood, the loss was particularly acute. An adult education student since leaving college in the seventies she had racked up over 30 years worth of courses in art, literature and history, and had looked forward to expanding her participation once semi-retired.

"I'd been involved in continuing education since my twenties, and the experience had been universally wonderful," she says. "Studying just for the joy of it is so good for mental stimulation, which can be lacking in many people's everyday routines."

Luckily for Greenwood and other literature enthusiasts, salvation came in the form of English and American studies lecturer Dr Jerome de Groot. With responsibility for recreational learning now devolved to the university's academic departments, he quickly started talking to Manchester Central Library.

"I knew the Cultural Services team ran successful reading groups, so I approached them about applying university-level reading and instruction to the format," he says. "I wanted it to be like a little degree, with a comparable range of material and lecturers, but for people interested in talking about books rather than 'target-led' education."

With the library contributing premises and marketing, and his academic colleagues each delivering one lecture, Reading Literature and Understanding Culture was born. These free, monthly workshops explore work by the likes of Woolf, Conrad, Heaney and Shakespeare, in informal 90-minute discussions.

"The class was immediately fully subscribed, with about 90 people on the waiting list," de Groot says. "Because of the library's community work we're attracting very diverse people; the fact that it's free is also important."

Greenwood was one of the first to sign up and says she's been thrilled to take part in discussions led by such specialists. The library's Libby Tempest attributes the scheme's overwhelming success to its fulfilment of this gap in the market, where university-level expertise meets public accessibility.

And the library course hasn't been the only response to this demand, with a group of tutors forming their own network since Courses for the Public's closure. Manchester Continuing Education Network (MANCENT) aims to match interested students with self-employed lecturers via its brochure, website and e-bulletins, with each tutor organising and charging for his own courses.

Seasoned tutor Alan Sennett admits he's been caught off guard by this model's effectiveness in attracting new students. Spending half his time teaching history and social sciences at the Open University, his multiple adult education commitments now leave him with just Sunday mornings off each week.

One of his outlets is History Inc, set up five years ago by a team of four historians. The group runs courses and day schools for very low subscription fees, charging just £40 for an eight-week course, in a

For adults only

Adult education is about much more than flower arranging. Many courses are university level, taught by committed academics. But what's the future for adult learning in austerity Britain, asks **Jo Nightingale**

bid to reach as wide an audience as possible.

As a result, around 25 students are treated to university-quality teaching in a south Manchester rectory each Wednesday. "We decided straight away not to compromise the level from what we teach at university, and often go beyond that," Sennett says.

The groups he's involved with have no problems recruiting each term but students are largely drawn from existing contact bases and are often ladies of a certain age. "Not everyone can come during the day, or pay £75 for some of the courses," says Sennett.

"I used to teach evening classes and got a very different group, including younger people. It's something we need to work on."

One of his biggest commitments is to Wilmslow Guild, a self-governing adult college founded in the 1920s. Drawing around 3,000 students from as far as Rochdale, Buxton and North Wales, the Guild offers recreational classes including arts and crafts, fitness, bridge and singing, and lecture courses on more academic subjects.

For retired primary school teacher Veronica Kaiserman, joining the Guild offered the perfect introduction to retirement and life in Wilmslow when she moved there five years ago.

"I've always taken part in adult courses but having such a range available on my doorstep is wonderful," she says. "I've studied everything from Renaissance painting to local history, with high-calibre tutors, and made a number of new friends. For a former teacher like me, it's lovely to be on this side of the desk."

The Guild has been run by principal John Spawton for over 25 years, and he is its only full-time staff member. Supported by just three part-time colleagues and a host of volunteers, he's proud to be able to offer a range of subjects not normally covered by colleges.

"Students say: 'Isn't it great that Wilmslow's got its own university!'" he laughs.

The college has recently expanded into four neighbouring areas to cope with demand, despite losing funding from (the then) Cheshire local education authority, leaving it reliant on student fees, donations and fund-raising.

"I feel local authorities are lacking in their duty to provide high quality adult education," Spawton says. "There's nothing like it for stimulating the brain, combating loneliness – how can you measure that?"

"Adult education should be promoted, everywhere, at a reasonable fee. Our courses currently cost £53 for a ten-week term, and the model we operate could be repeated up and down the country."

One alternative model, which is found country

Reading list

Manchester libraries:
www.manchester.gov.uk/libraries

MANCENT:
www.mancent.org.uk

Wilmslow Guild:
<http://wilmslowguild.wikidot.com>

Burton Manor:
www.burtonmanor.com

University of Liverpool:
www.liv.ac.uk/conted

Union Chapel:
www.unionchapelmanchester.co.uk

WEA:
www.wea.org.uk

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education:
www.niace.org.uk

Online guide to course provision by area:
<http://liverpool.floodlight.co.uk>
<http://manchester.floodlight.co.uk>
<http://leeds.floodlight.co.uk>
<http://sheffield.floodlight.co.uk>
<http://york.floodlight.co.uk>

"I feel local authorities are lacking in their duty to provide high quality adult education."



de, is the short-term residential college. Burton Manor in Neston is owned by Liverpool City Council, and offers short courses, day schools and evening courses to 3,000 students from all over the UK. "We don't receive a block grant or qualify for funding, so the courses we offer are based on ability to pay," says principal Keith Chandler. "But we also seek community grants to offer other activities which are free. We're keen to remove the barriers for people who've had less positive experiences of education. I'd also love to welcome a broader age perspective, as adult education has a real marketing issue in convincing young people this is for them." The emphasis at Burton Manor is on recreational, accredited learning, with students paying £180 for a full-board weekend. As one of just two academic centres, Chandler taps into a national network of over 100 freelance tutors eager to work on these courses. "In such an intensive environment tutors quickly get a kind of affirmation back from students," he says. "The smile on a learner's face is a great motivator." Liverpool City Council does not directly fund Burton Manor but allows it to operate at a small deficit if necessary. The city's university is also one of the few in the region still offering continuing education, with lectures available as one-offs or as part of credit-bearing series that allow it to claim Higher Education Funding Council support for the student. Demand for recreational learning is clearly there. Should local or national government be offering greater support in austerity Britain? According to Chandler: "Ten times as many people could be experiencing it, but the notion of evening

Adult education allows people to study just for the joy of it

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classes for 50p a week has passed. Learning now takes place in a variety of formats that are not funded. "Unfortunately in this country people think that if you want something you have to pay for it, whereas in Scandinavia and Holland this kind of work is seen as valuable and given government support." Sennett agrees. "I do think local authorities need to think again about adult education, and why people might want to participate. Anecdotally, there are clear benefits for physical and mental agility, as well as socially for those who might otherwise feel isolated." Her experience of life-long learning encouraged Greenwood to pursue an MA in creative writing, and she has met countless others with similar stories. "Each session at Central Library opens up a new area of interest and a desire to learn more", says fellow student Helen, a policy manager for an environmental charity. "I'll have to abandon work to fit it all in!" The last government claimed to recognise "the profound importance of informal adult learning to people's lives and our nation's well-being," yet it re-prioritised its funding towards vocational, accredited courses and reduced funding for short courses. The coalition government has yet to make its position on adult education clear but further cuts seem likely as it increases its emphasis on funding apprenticeships. In a review for the government, former Learning and Skills chairman Chris Banks recommends that adult learners make a greater financial contribution themselves. With so many groups dependent on benevolent staff, volunteers and venue owners, and their students' ability to pay, the fairness and sustainability of the DIY approach is open to question. ■