

From the President



People unfamiliar with the Workers' Educational Association are sometimes confused as to the meaning of its name. Who are the Workers? What kind of Education is it? What is it an Association of?

The name of the WEA derives from its origins in the British Victorian-era Labour Movement, and its mission is to make available to working adults the enjoyment and benefit of liberal education. Such education – as distinct from the technical or professional education that enables workers to do their work – we believe to be of value in itself, and additionally that knowledge so obtained contributes to informed and intelligent debate among citizens, and it therefore contributes a benefit to the democratic process.

The fundamental ideology on which the WEA is based is that education is not the exclusive privilege of any particular class of society, whether that is the gentry, academics, or even the young.

From the earliest days – and the WEA Sydney is nearly a hundred years old – there has been discussion about just who the WEA provides education for. The consensus is that the institution's invitation is inclusive rather than exclusive – everyone (at least after school age) is welcome to participate. "Workers" justifies its retention in our title to indicate that the original (and abiding) aim is to provide liberal educational services for (but not only for) those who may have missed out in the formal tertiary education system.

The word "Association" indicates that it is a co-operative endeavour of its members – primarily its students – rather than the prescription of an academic authority. While the WEA's tutors are all skilled teachers, expert in their subjects, and mostly qualified to higher degree level from a university, at the WEA they are teaching in the pure philosophical tradition of love of knowledge.

As the Director's Report notes, 2009 has seen some ups and some downs for the WEA. While the NSW Government grant was again reduced, we are much elevated to have received an infrastructure enhancement grant from the Federal Government. This grant – as well as those received by many Community Colleges – is a welcome acknowledgement from the Federal Government of the value of Adult Education.

Enrolment numbers have risen slightly from the previous year, although measured in student-hours, participation is at a ten year low. When analysed, certain sectors are seen to be in greater decline (notably computer training), while others (foreign languages) are in the ascendant. Michael notes with satisfaction that enrolment in those courses representing our central mission remain strong.

The challenges that face us are from a number of directions. Insecurity about obtaining ongoing government financial support has been a feature of the institution throughout its history. At present, the State government support is directed exclusively at the accredited vocational offerings of the WEA, leaving its Humanities and Arts activities to be self-supporting.

The general economic climate is something that we are unable to control; at best, we can trim our sails accordingly, as we have done over the last year.

Social change, however, is a thing with which the WEA can more actively engage, as it is a social institution. The much increased cultural and linguistic diversity of Sydney provides opportunities for us to increase our pool of participants. Our venture into AMES teaching in recent years is a move in this direction, and the flourishing of our languages program is an indication of our capabilities. *We should make an explicit effort to promote our ideals and offerings to multicultural Sydney.*

Over the years, the WEA's geographical reach has contracted somewhat, and community colleges now provide many educational services to suburban Sydney. An important area, however, where the WEA differs from most community colleges is the provision of more rigorously scholarly courses. We have been providing this to both the suburbs and to the Bush with our Discussion Group program. This program – which is arguably the purest embodiment of the original WEA philosophy – is continuing successfully, although student numbers continue to decline.

This decline is largely caused by that most irresistible challenge of all, the Ever-flowing Stream, the Passage of Time. The WEA student body (both discussion group participants and class-room students) is large and loyal, but we are all getting on...

Another explicit effort is therefore needed to make our services attractive to younger students. Although the WEA is an adult education provider, and has not extended its offerings to school-aged students, I personally believe that this policy may have been too rigorously adhered to. I therefore welcome courses such as STAT and HSC preparation that have recently been offered. Certainly, the WEA must remain true to its original aims, and not become a swot college, or a real high school (like certain other related institutions) but these initiatives which introduce our Association to a younger generation should be welcomed – and increased – in the pragmatic recognition that young people are the old people of the future.

As the WEA is approaches its centenary, we can look proudly on its past, with satisfaction on its present success, and be realistically optimistic about its adaptation and continuation into the decades ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adam Marchant', written in a cursive style.

Adam Marchant
President