

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RFS - 2 AN ADULT AND EDUCATION

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Mr. Richard Nolte
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

In my first newsletter I promised to tell you more about Birkbeck College in London, my course there, and my ideas about adult education in general.

Birkbeck College was founded in the 1820's by Dr. Thomas Birkbeck, a fellow traveler with Jeremy Bentham and the radical utilitarians, as a mechanics institute, i.e., a college for working people. It still remains an institution devoted to educating adults who missed their opportunity to attend university at 18, although a good percentage of them are no longer working class. In order to attend Birkbeck as an undergraduate, one must be over 21 and employed full time (unless one is a married woman with at least one child). The course for the B.A. or B.Sc. is normally four years. A maximum of one year of full time study is allowed; the rest of the course must be attended on a part time basis. A substantial percentage of Birkbeck students are state school teachers who need a degree for further career advancement.

Birkbeck is now becoming more of a postgraduate rather than an undergraduate college. This change in emphasis is due to the expansion of opportunity for traditional undergraduate education in Britain. Many of the students Birkbeck would have attracted twenty or thirty years ago are now able to go to university full time at eighteen.

Both full and part time students are accepted for postgraduate courses. Lectures are held in the evening for the convenience of the part time students.

For the M.Sc. in Computer Science, the degree which I read for, the course for full time students was a complete calendar year; for part time students, two calendar years. The full time students had to complete the equivalent of the first year of the part time course (basic computer science topics) in the first four months of study. Lectures were given during the morning and afternoon in these basic

topics. In the evening, full time students attended the elective second year courses. This scheduling of courses for full time students made the first four months of the course more of an endurance test than a learning exercise. So much time was spent in the lecture room that little time was left for individual study. The remaining eight months of the course consisted of attending the elective lectures, and studying for exams and doing research for a project.

Professor Peter King, who holds the chair in computer science at Birkbeck, believes that part time students, in general, perform much better than full time students. He attributes the success of part time students to their increased motivation and intellectual maturity. Most part time students work in the field of computer science during the day and are therefore already familiar with various aspects of the course. Full time students are usually recent graduates and therefore less mature and less experienced than the part-timers.

In our group of thirteen full time students, seven were recent graduates; of the six "mature" students, two were women; all but one had experience with computers. The performance of the group as a whole was very mixed. Two dropped the course, but one of these became a part time student. Four students completed all work on time; of these one obtained a distinction and one narrowly missed getting one (I, but I got a distinction on my project). One student failed and the other six eventually finished the work and obtained the degree. The student who failed was a recent graduate.

Most of the recent graduates in our group came on the course because jobs in their fields (biology, math, etc.) were not easy to obtain. All of them were recipients of Science Research Council grants. These grants are given for only one calendar year of study in a postgraduate course approved by the SRC. For some of them computer science merely represented a means of getting grant money for a year. (The length of the full time course was twelve months in order to comply with the SRC regulation.) The more mature students attended the course mainly to obtain a more detailed and academic (or theoretical) knowledge of certain aspects of computer science, e.g., linear programming or compiler (the language translator of the computer) writing.

One of our group was a thirty-five year old electrical engineer, who worked for the Central Electricity Generating Board. He came on the course because he thought that computer simulation would become more important in the future of the Generating Board. This engineer had effectively given up two years of his career to pursue the course, since the decision to attend it was made a year before

he started and affected his promotion prospects during that year. He therefore gambled that the M.Sc. in computer science and the skills and knowledge obtained from it would justify this sacrifice. I think this man represents an important constituent for adult professional education and his needs are suggestive of the role adult education can play -- partial or complete retraining of people necessitated by the dynamic nature of most careers. And this retraining should be in an integrated atmosphere -- integrated in terms of diverse student age and background. I do not believe that professional retraining should take place in an atmosphere where mature students are isolated. I think the electrical engineer and myself benefited from the diversity of student background and age in our group. We all had varying interests, abilities, and experience. This diversity helped to create an atmosphere of comradeship. Each student tended to compete with himself rather than with the others; our differences kept us from feeling that we should compete with each other.

My experience at Birkbeck has made me a firm believer in adult education; and not just as a "second chance" institution. As an undergraduate I was forced to work for my education: that is I had to earn money. Therefore I had to budget my time carefully for paid employment and studying. But at 17-21 I lacked the maturity to benefit fully from the educational opportunity I was receiving. Professor King believes, and I partially agree, that late adolescence is the wrong time for formal institutional education. Young people are undergoing too many psychological changes to be in a position to take advantage of the opportunities which higher education provides. It would be much better to have a break of a couple of years between high school and college in order to give young people time to adjust to becoming young adults. It has become trendy in the States for students to drop out of college and/or society in general in a search for "relevance". I would maintain that at least partially they are dropping out to discover the maturity and self-awareness needed to determine what they want to do as adults. If they later decide to go to or continue at university, then they will do so with a determination that is usually lacking in American university students.

University education requires self-discipline. An adult who has worked for several years will, of necessity, have acquired at least a moderate degree of it. Most bosses will not give people "extensions" to complete their work unless there are some very good reasons for the delay. Self-indulgence is not often tolerated in a work environment, as it is in most universities. It is therefore very understandable that some university lecturers are

becoming very interested in extending adult education programs. They find it stimulating to teach students who bring determination and dedication to their studies.

So from my work at Birkbeck I have gained not only new knowledge about computer science but also some insight into the reality and the possibility of continuing education in a rapidly changing environment.

Sincerely,

Bobbi Spitzberg

Robert F. A. Spitzberg

Received in New York on April 24, 1973