

United Kingdom: Universities Association for Lifelong Learning

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The Universities Association for Lifelong Learning promotes the lifelong learning interests of the UK higher education sector. It represents the interests of both the UK and of the four nations: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. UALL acts as a forum for the exchange of ideas and good practice, lifelong learning research, and as a UK-wide consultative body for the discussion and formulation of policy.

A history of the network

The Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) has a very long history. Its origins can be traced to the first conference of university extra mural directors in 1923, which became the Universities Extra-Mural Consultative Committee in 1926. In a remarkably early heralding of the importance of both media and globalization the Committee was affiliated to both the Central Council for Broadcast Adult Education and the World Association for Adult Education.

This early organisation was formed as an association of those universities which had in 1924 been appointed by the Government as „Responsible Bodies“ for the provision of education to adults, each with a designated region. In 1947 the organisation was re-established as the Universities Council for Adult Education (UCAE). At the time Council members were directors of extra mural departments in the English and Welsh universities, together with a member from the national university Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP). The expansion of the university sector from the 1960s onwards was reflected in a growing membership of UCAE, and also, in 1977, the Scottish universities established the Universities Council for Adult Education (Scotland), as a national association within the broader UK UCAE.

The growing diversity of University Continuing Education (UCE), especially in the fields of vocational training and professional development, was recognised in the change of name to the Universities Council for

Adult and Continuing Education (UCACE) in 1981. In 1992 the two higher education sectors in the UK – the universities and the polytechnics – were merged into a single university sector; again in response to this fundamental change UCACE changed its name to the Universities Association for Continuing Education (UACE). The much enlarged membership now included over 90 universities and colleges, together with a small but developing number of international associate members. In 2006, to reflect the currency of lifelong learning as the accepted terminology for the now highly complex field of continuing education, UACE once again changed its name to the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL).

Today UALL is an association which promotes the lifelong learning interests of the UK higher education sector, acting both as a forum for members to exchange ideas and to discuss good practice, quality and standards, and also as a national consultative body for the discussion and formulation of policy. UALL has well-established links with Government Departments, funding bodies and national higher education organisations, and represents the sector to policy-making bodies.

The organisational structure of UALL

UALL is a membership, subscription organisation. Membership is both institutional and individual, with the majority being institutional members. The Association is headed by a Chair, who is a university vice chancellor, supported by officers: vice chairs, honorary secretary, treasurer, editor. The Association has a very lightweight organisational structure; it has no permanent offices, and the officers are voluntary (honorary). There is, however, a full-time administrator who manages the day to day business, is the principal organiser of the Annual Conference, maintains the UALL website (www.uall.ac.uk) and produces an extensive e-Bulletin which is highly valued by members. The Association is a registered UK charity, and is governed by a formal constitution, which determines, for example, the terms

of office and processes of election of the UALL officers. Each member institution nominates one or more individuals as members of the Council – the primary voting and decision making body. An Executive Committee assists the Council in preparation and prioritising of agendas, and is supported by sub-committees for Research and Communications. The Council and Executive meet periodically according to a set calendar. For a diagrammatic representation of the UALL organisation, see Figure 1.

The strategic directions of UALL evolve to reflect the issues and priorities of lifelong learning. All staff of institutional members are fully entitled to participate in UALL activities, and in return the Association benefits greatly from this close working relationship with the expertise of practitioners in the field, who are excellently placed to inform the approach to the strategic issues of the day. Current principal strategic areas are:

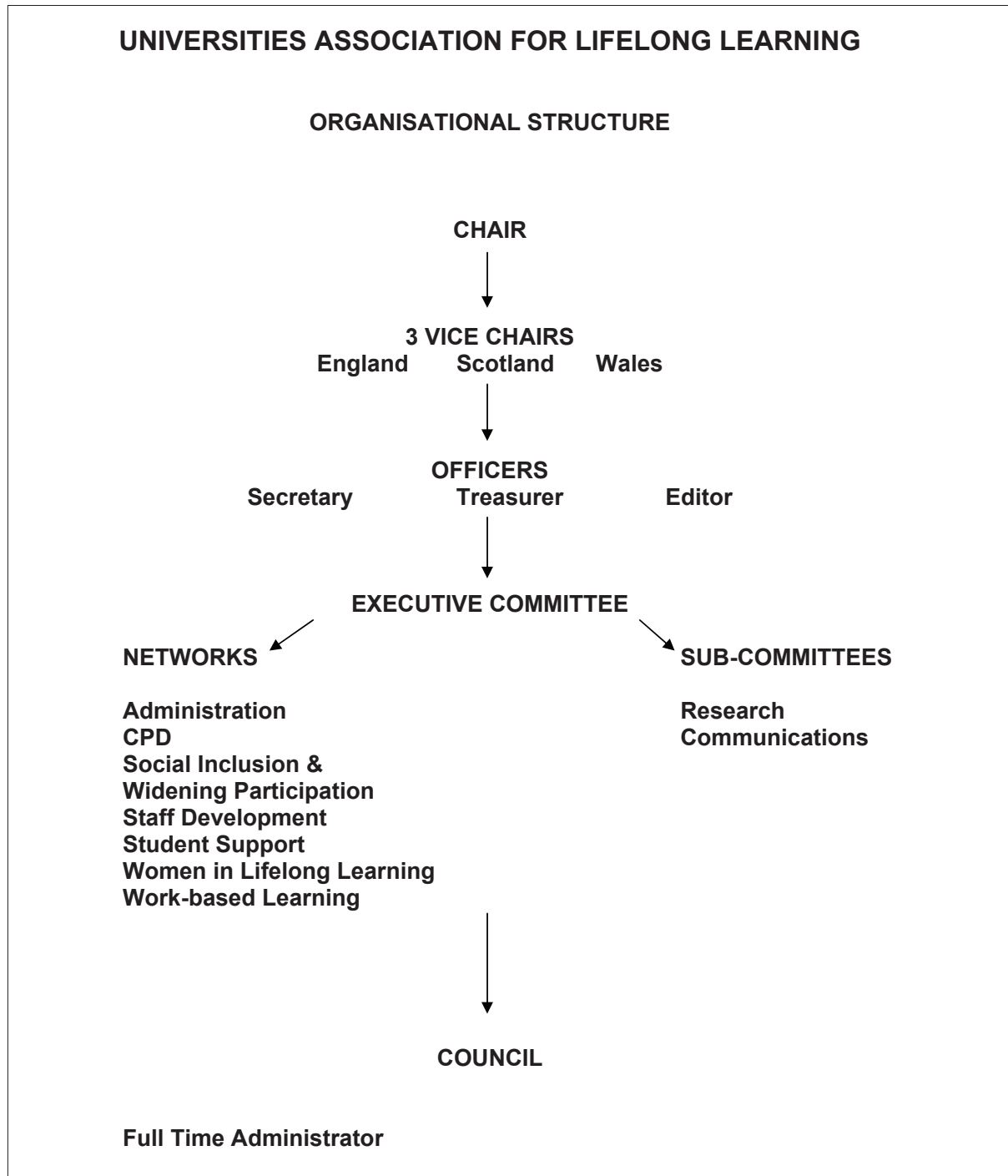


Figure 1

- Administration of University Continuing Education
- Community and civic engagement
- Conferences and seminars
- Continuing professional development
- Disability issues
- Lobbying and networking
- Quality
- Research and publication
- Social inclusion and widening participation
- Staff development
- Pedagogy and student support
- Women in lifelong learning
- Work-based learning

A key strength of the Association is the linking of strategy to practice through an extensive array of organised networks. The networks enable staff of member institutions to engage directly in the Association, and to benefit sharing experience and ideas with fellow practitioners across the UK.

The scope of UALL activity has increased dramatically from the original focus on university adult education departments to the present very broad and inclusive definition of lifelong learning. UALL is a university organisation, but with current government widening participation policy encouraging aspiration for university education from childhood onwards it is clear that higher education takes a whole life view of lifelong learning. On the other hand it is clear that over recent years „lifelong learning“ has often been interpreted in a narrowly vocational sense as training for economic gain, and UALL seeks to keep the broader definition of lifelong learning – as personal and community as well as vocational development – in full view of the policy debate.

Membership

Membership is open to all providers of higher education in the field of adult and continuing education. In practice this means that most UK universities and higher education colleges are members, together with relevant national organisations such as Universities UK (the re-named CVCP, see above), GuildHE (the association of higher education colleges), Foundation Degree Forward (a Government organisation for vocational HE), and others. The interests of members varies very widely from non-vocational liberal adult educa-

tion to professional development and training, giving UALL a synoptic perspective on the whole field of UCE. Membership is open to international as well as UK institutions, and to individual members. UALL has a federal structure reflecting the different nations of the United Kingdom: Scotland (SUALL: Scottish Universities Association for Lifelong Learning), Wales (UALL Cymru), Northern Ireland and England. Each has its own committee structure and networks, and engages at policy level with the various national governments and assemblies. The Association is affiliated to two international organisations.

Activities and aims

Activities of UALL include a major annual conference which attracts a wide constituency including delegates from overseas. European colleagues are warmly welcomed to the Conference, which includes a European strand in the programme.

The Conference addresses concepts, research, policy and practice in university lifelong learning through keynote addresses, seminars and workshops. The Conference typically includes addresses from ministers and government officers. Each Conference addresses a broad strategic area – for the 2009 Conference this is Success through Partnership: lifelong learning in higher education.

Other seminars and lectures are arranged throughout the year, with the practitioner networks organising their own seminar programme. These seminars can enable a wide range of other national networks and organisations to come together to address an issue of the day – a good example being a one-day conference on the implementation of new legislation for disability and discrimination. Currently UALL is hosting a series of major lectures by the main UK political parties on the issues and concepts informing their policymaking. UALL publishes an Annual Report and Yearbook, and other small-scale publications such as Occasional Papers.

The Association is extremely active in the current climate of rapid change in the political landscape of lifelong learning. Responses are made to Government consultations on forthcoming policy initiatives, and all opportunities are taken to inform policy from the point of view of higher education providers and students. The principal goal of UALL is therefore to

be both responsive to changing circumstances and to exercise influence on policymakers; policy formulated for other areas of higher education can have many unintended consequences for lifelong learning. A current example is the recent announcement by Government of the withdrawal of funding from students who already have an „equivalent or lower qualification“ (ELQ). This policy has potentially very damaging consequences for adults wishing to re-train in mid career to cope with changing economic and employment circumstances.

UALL has, throughout its long history, adapted and evolved to meet the challenges of a changing and expanding higher education. The rise of the lifelong learning culture has brought continuing education into the educational mainstream to the extent that its distinctive nature is in some danger of becoming hard to identify. This pace of change has accelerated in recent years, and there is every expectation that it will continue. UALL's long term aim will be, as it is currently, on the one hand to adapt flexibly to reflect new developments such as increased globalization and electronic learning, and on the other to be pro-active and influential as the representative body for higher education lifelong learning. As part of these aims UALL aims to increase its international membership base, and to form affiliations with other national networks, as well as enhance its participation in European collaboration.

UALL as a federal United Kingdom Association

Within UALL there have been strong associations representing Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In 2005/06, as well as changing its name to „UALL“, the Association formally adopted a federal structure to reflect the „four nations“ of the UK. Northern Ireland does not have a separate organisation within UALL, owing to the very small number of universities and the relative similarities with England; nevertheless, UALL Northern Ireland makes reports to the Executive and Council, and periodically hosts the Annual Conference.

Universities Association for Lifelong Learning Wales (UALL Cymru)

UALL Cymru is the national organisation in Wales representing Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education within Welsh Higher Education institutions: all of those elements of Higher Education provision that offer learning opportunities in a broad adult and continuing education context. Community based learning, „return to learn“ access provision, including non-accredited first steps as well as accredited provision, continuing professional development and programmes of adult education for all citizens are encompassed by the organisation's constituencies and through its aims and objectives. As part of UALL UK, UALL Cymru seek to ensure that the provision of lifelong learning through higher education is understood, well researched and highly regarded in the development of education policy and practice in the 21st century.

As the professional association for the lifelong learning community within higher education in Wales it promotes the interchange of ideas and good practice, quality and standards' and acts as a forum for the discussion and formulation of policy. It is linked to the „Wales Widening Participation Project Directory“ at the University of Wales – Newport which provides details of projects and research relating to widening participation activities in Wales.

The Scottish Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (SUALL)

SUALL provides a forum for the development and dissemination of good practice and excellence in continuing education, lifelong learning, training and CPD within Scotland's universities; represents continuing education within higher education and to funding authorities; responds to government papers and other public documents; facilitates communication, liaison and collaboration with other bodies and organisations in the field; conducts and disseminates research into education throughout life. Active membership of SUALL currently includes 16 universities and two colleges.

In Scotland as elsewhere in the UK University departments and centres of lifelong learning and continuing education are frequently the higher education institutional experts on flexible provision, including:

- All year round flexible, distance-based, blended, mixed-mode and part-time learning
- credit-bearing, certificated, diploma and degree level study through the medium of lifelong learning as well as non-assessed learning for personal fulfilment
- learning appropriate for adults, including high numbers of adult female returners, single parents, learners who have not experienced success in the secondary school environment and those whose disability requires part-time routes
- access courses for young people and adults with no family tradition of higher education.

At any given time, around 60.000 Scottish students will be registered on a part-time continuing education course. They will be intent on acquiring new skills, finding a more fulfilling role in life, pursuing personal interests, changing career, or retrieving missed opportunities; they are aged from 17 to 90+, and may be living in urban centres or remote highland and island communities. They may be second or third generation immigrants, young parents, ex-offenders, mid-career or retired professionals, of any social background. Almost every academic subject is offered, with many students learning European and world languages, contributing to Scotland's global outlook. Lecture-based evening or day time classes are supplemented by alternative methodologies and projects focused on delivering institutional or national priorities.

SUALL activities reflect the wide range of its members' work which embraces:

- university-level access courses for young people and mature learners
- work based learning and CPD
- learning and support for refugees and migrants
- engagement with the voluntary sector
- credit and non credit-bearing courses and part-time degrees
- flexible delivery through summer schools, short courses, weekend and evening provision
- intergenerational learning from young people to Third Age.

Through regular meetings, networking sub-groups, participation at conferences, organisation of seminars and professional engagement with colleagues throughout the UK and in Europe, SUALL:

- identifies and shares good practice in adult teaching and learning, showcasing innovation
- widens participation by creating increased access to undergraduate study
- contributes to the skills agenda by offering a wide range of CPD programmes
- improves linkages and facilitates articulation between the FE and HE sector
- provides research and consultancy services and informed comment on Government Papers
- ensures Scotland has UK and Europe wide dialogue through UALL and EUCEN.

To provide focus within SUALL, active practitioners contribute to Network Groups focusing on:

- Knowledge, Information, Learning, Training and Skills
- Widening Participation
- Research
- Management and administration.

The work of SUALL's members ensures that Universities remain key providers of lifelong learning, continuing education and training. The experience and expertise of SUALL has helped to ensure lifelong learning remains a vibrant and dynamic part of the HE sector's programmes and courses.

International co-operation and projects

Engagement in the international lifelong learning agenda is another increasing strategic area for UALL. For many years UALL has had both international members and a long-standing affiliation with the USA sister body, the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA), a feature of which is reciprocal attendance at the respective conferences. The Annual Conference has an international strand, with seminars and keynote addresses by international members and visitors, and featuring an address by the President of UCEA on the current issues for University lifelong learning in the

United States. Attendance by UALL members at the UCEA Annual Conference provides a valuable experience of approaches to UCE by the very large number of universities in UCEA membership.

UALL is developing its European relationships, especially with the European Continuing Education Network (EUCEN) – in 2008 the UALL Annual General Meeting was held in Barcelona as part of a joint UALL/EUCEN seminar. UALL members are engaged in a range of European collaborative projects, for example BEFLEX Plus, a pan-European initiative to measure the flexibility offered by the Bologna reforms in the development of University lifelong learning across the EU, following the first BEFLEX project on models of collaborations in regional learning partnerships. Another example is TULIP, a Leonardo Trade Unions/Universities Lifelong Learning project co-ordinated by the University of Liverpool Centre for Lifelong Learning.

In Scotland, SUALL research projects with European partners have looked at Third Age Guidance, Refugee Guidance, and Basic Skills for Work. Leading work has also been undertaken both regionally and internationally to explore the contribution of universities to the development of the „learning city/region“. In the wider international context projects have involved African partners and working with communities and agencies in Nepal.

In conclusion UALL is a thriving and extensive network for the UK higher education lifelong learning community. The Association is very keen to develop its European relationships and activities, and we would be pleased to hear from European colleagues and networks. More information is available on the UALL website www.uall.ac.uk or for SUALL see www.suall.org.uk. The UALL Honorary Secretary is Jackie Dunne (jd67@le.ac.uk). The UALL Administrator is Lucy Bate admin@uall.ac.uk, or +44 116 285 9702.

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