

From Edinburgh to Brighton; Britain's free, alternative higher education network offers life-long learning without life-long debt.

By Alex Dunedin, Gary Saunders and Ali Ghanimi

In response to the introduction of increased tuition fees and the withdrawal of direct funding to the arts, humanities and social sciences in universities; a new generation of cooperative and non-fee-charging organisations, which offer free higher education, has emerged across Britain. Rising up out of the ruins of what the 'idea of the University' has become, they are part of a growing global movement against the commodification of knowledge and hope to create a space for people to think about and experiment with alternative models of higher education. Whilst, initially fragmented throughout Britain, there is an increasing sense of connectivity between these organisation, which has been facilitated by events like the Free University Conference in held in Oxford in 2012, collaborative writing (like this article) and the creation of a counter-cartography which maps the provision of alternative, free higher education around the world (<http://goo.gl/maps/V7yrC>).

Although these organisations are organic and diverse by nature, responding to local needs and interests, those involved in the provision of free higher education share a desire to rethink education and make it accessible to everyone, regardless of their financial means. As well as being free in terms of monetary cost (or at least providing debt-free higher education) these organisations attempt to create an environment that is supportive, democratic, critical and political in the hope of creating a space for communities to better understand the problems they face in their everyday lives and help re-imagine the world around them. Emerging out of the current global economic crisis, which has seemingly introduced the concept of 'austerity forever' as a way of overcoming barriers to capital accumulation as well as escalating pressure being placed on the natural environment, significantly increasing the risk of an ecological catastrophe; never has there been a greater need to critically evaluate the way we live and re-imagine alternatives. Given the popularity of the Occupy Movement, there is clearly a desire to engage in this process. Yet this task is not being taken up by politicians, mainstream educational institutions or the media, who appear to reinforce the rhetoric that there is no alternative.

Whilst there is certainly a political edge to the free higher education movement; much of it is about getting people who love what they do to share their knowledge and experience in social spaces. Take the Ragged University in Edinburgh, for example, inspired by the Ragged Schools movement which provided free education in the Victorian era. Utilising the Madras peer led teaching method of Dr Andrew Bell, Ragged works with various academics and self learners to update the ideas that helped create the social infrastructure of the country. Running for nearly four years, and delivering hundreds of enjoyable learning events, Ragged highlights people's work and promotes free knowledge resources on the website (www.ragged-online.com).

Heading south you'll find the Social Science Centre, Lincoln (SSC), which organises free higher education in the City. Constituted as a co-operative in May 2011 it is run by its members. It has no formal connection with any higher education institution, but works closely with a number of local voluntary organisations including the Nomad Trust, Acts Trust and the Volunteering Centre.

The SSC attempts to challenge the traditional, if somewhat simplistic, perception of higher education as being elitist and removed from the local community and instead understands the nature of higher education as being about the creation of new knowledge, new ways of thinking and the creation of new networks and relationships within the City. In terms of teaching and learning, the SSC attempts to challenge the traditional distinction between teacher and student and, instead, starts from the premise that both have a lot to learn from each other and that both are engaged in the pursuit of scholarship. Consequently, there are no teachers or students at the SSC, instead, both are called scholars.

The SSC offers a number of different opportunities for people to access free higher education in Lincoln, ranging from a free monthly public seminar series (<http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/blog/2013/08/05/upcoming-course-and-public-seminars/>) to a photography project called 'Our Place, Our Priorities'. The project is a collaboration between the SSC and residents of The Pathways Centre, a local charity that tackles homelessness. The project aims to promote active citizenship by simultaneously celebrating the city and identifying priorities for change within it.

The SSC also runs a Social Science Imagination (SSI) course, which is an introduction to the social sciences. The course is based on a close reading of C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination*. The book provides a framework for thinking about our life experiences and understanding the world around us in a way that gives us confidence rather than feelings of frustration, fear, anxiety and indifference. For Mills, it was important to understand how our personal lives are affected by power in the wider society and how, by making this connection, we can start to overcome the difficulties we face individually and collectively. During the SSI course, we explore various ways of doing this by examining our questions through many different lenses, including feminist, liberal, Marxism, postmodern, post-structuralist, postcolonial and cultural perspectives

A couple of hundred miles down the road is the 'alternative' city of Brighton. Surprising then, perhaps, that a free university was only established more recently. Less than a year old, Free University Brighton or FUB, which carries the tagline 'education for love not money', is a community-led initiative that organises and promotes free education - both academic and practical. FUB invites people to ask for things they want to learn through a 'wish list' on the website (www.freeuniversitybrighton.org). A diverse array of subjects are listed from philosophy to how to write a rom-com novel and from astronomy to setting up a website. Those that can help others to develop knowledge and skills in these subjects are encouraged to come forward.

FUB organiser, Ali Ghanimi wasn't aware of the free university movement until FUB started to attract publicity. But, like many others, she had watched with anger as the Coalition government tripled university tuition fees and simultaneously slashed funding for adult education and wanted to provide a practical response.

As well as making education more accessible, free universities can be an antidote to the Government's socially toxic austerity programme. Says Ghanimi, "At a time when people are being turned against each other, forced to compete for scarce jobs and resources, this creates a culture of giving. Getting to know your neighbours, sharing interests, learning together, that builds stronger communities."

FUB's website carries a quote from French philosopher Jaques Ranciere which sums up the free university movement perfectly.

"The government does not owe the people education for the simple reason that one does not owe the people what it can take for itself. And education is like liberty: it is not given, it is taken."