

## Adult and Lifelong Education: The European Union, its member states and the world

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### Lifelong and Adult Learning

For two decades, the European Union has been at the forefront of international policy-making on lifelong learning. From the European Commission's white papers on *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment* (CEC 1994), and *Teaching and Learning: Towards a Learning Society* (CEC 1995), and its adoption of 1996 as the 'European Year of Lifelong Learning', the EU has developed lifelong learning as an important policy tool. When a major world power – albeit not a nation-state as such – espouses adult and lifelong education as a vehicle for its political, economic and social aims, we should expect scholars of adult education, of education more generally, and indeed of social policy in general, to take note. Perhaps (as Holford & Mlezcko 2013 suggest) a little belatedly, they have. A little unevenly too: the development has been noticed more by educational than by social policy researchers.

But although 'lifelong learning' has been more and more present in EU policy language since the mid-1990s, what the term has meant has been far from static. It has also varied both between countries – EU member states and others – and within them, and not always in exactly the same ways. Even within a single state, its policy significance can vary by sector, or between jurisdictions – as it does between, for example, the four countries of the United Kingdom. Across Europe, and more widely, sometimes it has been used more or less interchangeably to refer to all education; sometimes to emphasise informal and non-formal approaches to learning, rather than formal 'education'. Of course – perhaps especially in the EU – imprecision can fertilise policy growth. One of the more fertile confluences of meaning – particularly prevalent in the first decade after the 1995 white paper – was that between lifelong and adult learning. This stemmed in part, no doubt, from the UNESCO's Faure report (Faure et al 1972), whose messages that '[t]he idea of lifelong education is the keystone of the learning society' (p. 181) and that '[t]he normal culmination of the educational process is adult education' (p. 205) had been permeating policy circles for a quarter century, and which also raised the status of informal and non-formal education and learning.

Thus we find, as recently as 2007, the European Commission proposing to monitor 'progress in making lifelong learning a reality' through two 'core indicators': *participation of adults in lifelong learning*, and *adult skills* (CEC 2007a: 3) – a proposal which was duly accepted by the Council of Ministers. Lifelong learning, for this purpose, was *adult* learning. From 2006, however, EU documents had begun to distinguish lifelong from adult learning. 'Adult learning is a vital component of lifelong learning', the Commission announced in its policy paper *Adult learning: It is never too late to learn* (CEC 2006: 2). A year later the *Action Plan on Adult learning: It is always a good time to learn* set a 'general objective of implementing 'five key messages': 'to remove barriers to participation; to

increase the quality and efficiency of the sector; to speed up the process of validation and recognition; to ensure sufficient investment; and to monitor the sector' (CEC 2007b: 3). Since that time, the EU has often distinguished adult learning as a distinct domain (within lifelong learning).

It is with this domain – adult learning – that the contributions to the present volume are principally concerned. They address it in relation to the European Union and its member states. 'Definitions of adult learning vary', as the Commission conceded. The Commission's working definition is, however, a reasonable starting point: 'all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training, however far this process may have gone (e.g., including tertiary education)' (CEC 2006: 2). There are, of course, other ways of describing (or prescribing) this domain, and these can be significant. A particularly salient one is adult education: the contributions arise from the work of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA). Variant descriptions of the domain, however, form only the backdrop to the issues addressed by the authors of the papers collected here.

The papers all arise from the inaugural conference of ESREA's Research Network on Policy Studies in Adult Education. The conference, held at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom in 2012, provided a forum for discussion and debate among nearly eighty scholars committed to inquiry into the nature and significance of policy in adult education. Neither the conference nor the Research Network is concerned with Europe alone. The conference theme, 'Trans-nationalisation of Educational Policy Making: Implications for Adult & Lifelong Learning', had truly global reach. Over fifty papers addressed it. Several have already been published in a special issue of the journal *Globalisation, Societies and Education* (Milana, Holford & Mohorčič Špolar, 2014): those papers explored global national and local perspectives on adult and lifelong education. However, as a network located in Europe, and involving many Europeans, many of the papers did focus on Europe. Nine are included here. Several others – focussing on adult education in post-communist countries – will appear shortly in a special issue of another journal *European Education* (Mohorčič Špolar, Holford & Milana, forthcoming).

### **Europe, its Nations and the World**

It is hard today to discuss issues of policy – especially adult learning or education policy – in Europe without reference to the European Union. The EU is now one of the world's major political and economic actors. According to International Monetary Fund figures, its GDP in 2012 was slightly larger than that of the United States of America, and roughly twice that of the People's Republic of China. It amounted to over 23 per cent of world GDP. *Per capita* GDP in the EU in the same year was around three-fifths of the USA's, but it was 3½ times larger than China's. Continuing this comparison, though it has 800 million fewer citizens than China, it has around 200 million more than the USA. But Europe is not, of course, coterminous with the EU, and although the EU may be a considerable power in shaping policy and practice on the world stage, and particularly across the continent whose name it bears, it does so partly as the agent of its member states, as well as partly through engaging their agency.

The EU has changed radically since it embraced lifelong learning twenty years ago. Until 1995, it comprised 12 member states and around 350 million people; today over 500 million live in its 28 member states. Rapid growth presents problems for government and coherence in countries and

empires – and the EU has ‘the dimension of “empire”’, as President José-Manuel Barroso famously reflected in 2007 – as in all kinds of organisation. But if the EU of 2014 is a very different creature from the EU of 1994, ‘enlargement’ is not the only cause. Along the way, the EU has been hit by crises of governance and legitimacy, from the financial scandals which led to the resignation of the European Commission under President Jacques Santer to the non-ratification of the Constitutional Treaty by France and The Netherlands in 2005. In 2000 the leaders of the EU and its member states were confident enough to imagine they could become ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ within a decade. At the same time, the new single currency (the Euro) was seen by many as a milestone on the road to a single European identity. It has since been adopted by 18 member states, but the financial crisis which engulfed the world after 2008 – bringing crisis and poverty to European states and citizens, and taking the Euro to the brink of collapse – has left as little room for political as for economic hubris.

Two decades after taking up lifelong learning as an instrument of policy, therefore, the EU is a good deal larger, but little more – perhaps rather less – politically integrated; and while its economy has arguably fared little worse than many others, it is some distance from being the world’s ‘most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy’. Given the complex geo-political and economic conditions of the same period, it makes little sense to ‘read off’ the Union’s failure to achieve its policy aims as some kind of indicator that lifelong (let alone adult) learning has little value as a policy tool. It was, of course, by no means the only weapon in the EU’s policy arsenal. It must, however, serve to dampen the confidence of those – if any such uncritical critics remain – for whom education must always be a panacea.

### **Understanding European Adult Education Policies**

The starting point for the contributions to this volume is that, while education and lifelong learning in the EU are now receiving more attention in the policy literature (cf, e.g., Pépin et al. 2006, Holford et al. 2008, Dale & Robertson 2009, Lawn & Grek 2012, Riddell, Markowitsch & Weedon 2012, Saar, Ure & Holford 2013), adult education has remained something of a ‘poor cousin’ (the metaphor is, of course, from Newman 1979). Adult education is not, of course, an entirely distinct domain: it is also influenced by the debates and themes which feed the academic study of educational and lifelong learning policy generally in Europe. This means the field is affected by issues such as where EU policies originate, what they mean, and how they have changed over time. A particular interest, given the historic commitment of European adult education to themes of democracy, social justice and freedom, has been how genuine the EU’s commitment to ‘social’ goals (such as social inclusion, social cohesion and citizenship) really is. Related to this has been the question of whether there is something distinctive – and perhaps more democratic – about policy-making in a European ‘educational space’. Some earlier contributions (cf Lawn 2001, Lawn 2006, Nóvoa & Lawn 2002) certainly seemed to imply this. Alternatively, and more recently, the fashion has been to suggest that – even if this ‘space’ exists – it has proved little more than another location within which policies work out in broadly the same neoliberal way as they do in other national and international contexts (cf Dale & Robertson 2009).

The articles in this issue may not address these questions head-on. Only one, for instance (Laurence Bonnafous ) relies in any significant theoretical way on the notion of a European educational (or in her case, lifelong learning) space. They nonetheless contribute a great deal of relevant evidence. Evangelia Koutidou, for instance , shows that employability and adaptability have been to the fore in the operationalisation of EU lifelong learning policy in Greece, while social inclusion, personal fulfilment and active citizenship have been at a discount. Marcelo Marques finds a strengthening of the ‘utilitarian and instrumental perspective of adult education’ in Portugal, while Anki Bengtsson finds European policy documents on career education encourage the development of ‘enterprising career education’. Such contributions leave one with the impression that, if some kind of European adult education space does indeed exist, its priorities are some distance from those of what was once called ‘Social Europe’.

Any study of the formulation and operation of policy in the EU raises the question of the relationship between the EU and its member states. How far are adult education practices in EU member states shaped by the EU? How far do member states preserve autonomy in this area of (formal) ‘subsidiarity’? Several of our articles throw light on this issue. Palle Rasmussen compares how lifelong learning policy works out in two of Europe’s smaller nations: Denmark and Portugal. He concludes that ‘historical trajectories’ continue to shape contemporary education and lifelong learning. In particular – welcome news perhaps for adult educators, though perhaps not for Portugal – he believes Denmark’s early development of popular adult education provide a strong foundation for lifelong learning today. Perhaps ironically, however, he suggests that EU policy has had less impact in Denmark, mainly because its adult education provision has been less reliant on EU funding. In their study of the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Portugal and France, in partial contrast, Carmen Cavaco, Pascal Lafont, and Marcel Pariat suggest that while EU policies have influenced the development of devices for recognising adult competences ‘regardless of the social, cultural and economic specificities of each country’, these specificities have influenced the conditions under which such devices and methods emerge. They see ‘antagonistic logics’ as ‘present in the system, causing paradoxes and [further] increasing the complexity’. The broad thrust of these papers suggests, at the same time, the broad thrust of EU policy, and the complexities in how it plays out in specific contexts. The EU may have the ‘dimension of empire’, but – short of the genocidal approaches adopted by Europeans in the Americas – imperial designs must always be prosecuted in some kind of negotiation with (albeit ‘subaltern’) indigenous cultures and histories.

Who are the ‘actors’ in shaping adult education in Europe? To the extent that adult education is determined by ‘policy processes’, what is the relative role of the various policy actors? Once adult educators – Dewey, Freire, Lovett – would have pointed to the vital importance of participants (students, today commonly termed ‘learners’) in shaping curricula, through processes of negotiation and co-creation of knowledge. If our contributors are a good guide to Europe today, learners are more the objects than the subjects in adult educational processes. Where they do achieve some kind of ‘agentic’ role, it is generally within delimited boundaries. They are consumers. Ingela Bergmo-Prvulovic’s and Anki Bengtsson’s accounts of careers education are very different, but together they suggest careers education increasingly encourages active ‘self-management’ of careers ‘for the market’. Education, of adults no less than children, operates through qualifications frameworks. One aim of these frameworks is to increase ‘transparency’, and by and large the world of qualification is less Byzantine today than it was a few decades ago. But this is the market transparency of the

informed consumer, not the open communication of a Habermasian public sphere. Most of our authors contribute to understanding the dynamics of power in European policy-making processes: little they say suggests democratic governance is in the ascendant.

One of the key mechanisms through which EU policy has been formulated and carried through in education and lifelong learning, especially since the inception of the Lisbon Process in 2000, has been the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC). How does this function, and in particular, what is the role of 'soft law' and the apparatus of indicators, benchmarks, and the like, by which the EU seeks to shape policy within member states? Interestingly, although the papers gathered in this collection have much to say about the mechanisms thorough which EU policy is implemented, they say relatively little about how it is made, and make little explicit reference to the OMC. Certainly the early optimism of Hingel's celebrated paper on 'Education Policies and European Governance' (2001) – with its implication that the OMC could open the gates to a new and more inclusive education space – is lacking. So while several of the contributions gathered here explain the intellectual and political formation of policy, they say little about the concrete mechanisms and forums through which it is developed. In this respect, they reflect a common limitation of policy research on EU education and lifelong learning, as Holford & Milana (2014) point out.

We do, however, include one paper with significant implications for the OMC and its role in adult education. The OMC is grounded in the assumption that (largely quantitative) measurements of educational activity enable policy to be 'evidence-based'. As we have seen, one of the two 'core indicators' of lifelong learning is 'participation of adults in lifelong learning'. This is measured through the Labour Force Survey, co-ordinated by Eurostat. The questions it asks about participation in learning are, as Ellen Boeren points out in her contribution below, rather limited: Eurostat's Adult Education Survey was established to provide deepen knowledge. Boeren places a methodological lens over the 'usability' of the Adult Education Survey as 'a tool for evidence based policy making': she concludes that although it provides important data on the social composition of the adult learning population in Europe, even the AES cannot explain 'what "causes" participation'.

An unusual feature of this issue – and a welcome one – is that none of our contributors is natively 'Anglophone'. All but one are Europeans, from those parts of the European continent the British have regarded – in a popular saying – as liable to be cut off by fog. The solitary non-European (the Brazilian Mário Azevedo), addresses a question raised by the work of Dale and Robertson (2009) – though they address it in relation to education generally, and higher education in particular. In what ways does lifelong learning policy form part of a greater 'European project'? Is it in fact a servant of a larger 'hegemonic' European project, and what might this imply? Dale (2009: 25) has argued that the EU 'is involved in the construction of globalisation *and* that globalisation frames economic, political, cultural (etc.) possibilities for Europe'; Robertson sees the European Higher Education Area and related projects are 'ambitious global strategies' (Robertson 2009: 77) which aim to transform higher education across the world in the European image and the European interest in what is, in effect, 'modern-day colonialism and imperialism' (Robertson 2009: 78).

Although Azevedo's contribution is about how European policies are influencing higher education in Mercosur (the Southern Common Market of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela), it

has strong implications for adult education. He argues, for instance, that current reforms of higher education in Brazil are, in effect, a 're-Europeanisation' of the country's higher education based on the Bologna Process, and define earlier models of the university – teaching, researching and disseminating knowledge to society through various modes of extension – as 'outdated'. He explores the role of EU-supported programmes such as 'Tuning América Latina' in a thought-provoking and persuasive contribution: parallels with the Bologna process's focus on young adults may not be fanciful (cf Holford 2014).

### **Adult Education and its Economic Context**

Underlying all our contributions, and ever-present in EU and European national policy-making today, is the ongoing economic and financial crisis. One of the ironies of policy in Europe, no less than elsewhere in the West, is that the response to a crisis created by neo-liberal economic policies – the sweeping away of democratic controls, especially in markets – has by and large been a neo-liberal one. Though our contributions do not seek to explain why this should be, they certainly illustrate – and illuminate – how neo-liberal approaches and structures are shaping adult education today. Until quite recently, adult education was almost synonymous with the democratic empowerment of people and communities. Today adult education policy seems too often concerned to empower people only as consumers, entrepreneurs of their own selves conceived as mini-businesses. The learning it values is principally vocational; innovation – measured by its profitability in the market – rather than knowledge or understanding is the watchword.

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