

NATIONAL INSIGHTS FROM LITHUANIA, LATVIA AND POLAND FOR EU ADULT EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. *The discovery of the power of adult education in facilitating smart, sustainable and inclusive growth has increased the demand for adult learning. Education in European countries had always been seen as a national affair. The education systems and objectives had been closely related with each country's history, political system and location. However, due to the increasingly global character of the way national and supranational policy is created, education policymaking is increasingly framed by national economic imperatives and driven by the need to be globally competitive. The education of adults is a component of these politics, and has become a powerful lever for shifting the boundaries between education and work, state and market, formal and informal education. The aim of the present article is to highlight the national perspectives of Lithuania and such neighbourhood countries as Latvia, Estonia and Poland. Despite national diversities, a cursory glance at contemporary processes in adult education across European states brings to light many common or similar characteristics in systems and mechanisms. Moreover, comparative perspective of countries' experience and expertise is beneficial for improving of the quality of adult education. The novel contribution of the work is revealed in recommendations on policy for adult learning.*

Keywords: *adult, adult education, education formalization, education institutionalization, policy, quality.*

Introduction

Ageing European population and workforce, the recent economic downturns and the labour market's increased flexibility (Maniscalco, 2013) have widened the search for opportunities to ensure smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010). The joint efforts made by the European Union's countries to offer solutions to such challenges as population ageing, workforce ageing and labour market's increased flexibility have brought the European Union to the discovery of the power of education in general and adult

education in particular (Zaščerinska, Aļeksejeva, Aļeksejeva, Andreeva, Gloņina, & Zaščerinskis, 2015). Since then, the demand for adult learning is permanently increasing.

Education in general and adult education in particular in European countries had always been seen as a national affair. The education systems and objectives had been closely related with each country's history, political system and location. It has been perceived as an instrument for strengthening national identity and culture. The nation state also provided a major framework in the provision of formal education. However, due to the increasingly global character of the way national and supranational policy is created, education policymaking is increasingly framed by national economic imperatives and driven by the need to be globally competitive. The education of adults is a component of these politics, and has become a powerful lever for shifting the boundaries between education and work, state and market, formal and informal education.

More recently, the EU – led by the European Commission – has encouraged state representatives to share and exchange knowledge about their national systems in peer-to-peer activities, working groups and networks (EPALE conference 2018, 2018a). Such cross-national communications and initiatives are also the result of joint political will and agenda-setting at European Council meetings, and find further expression in the work of such shared political institutions as the European Parliament and the Council of the European Communities. All member states, therefore, are now involved in debates – domestic and international – on the status and development of adult education.

The aim of the present article is to highlight the national perspectives of Lithuania and such neighbourhood countries as Latvia, Estonia and Poland. Despite national diversities, a cursory glance at contemporary processes in adult education across European states brings to light many common or similar characteristics in systems and mechanisms. Moreover, comparative perspective of countries' experience and expertise is beneficial for improving of the quality of adult education. The comparison of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland is especially relevant as these countries have similar historical background, transition period and traditions in adult education, and are currently seeking to re-arrange their educational systems (Melnikova, Ahrens, & Zaščerinska, 2017).

The present manuscript is built on use of such research methods as theoretical and empirical methods. The theoretical method implies analysis of scientific literature. The methodology of theoretical analysis proceeds from “research politization” through the definition of such a term as “adult” to “formalization of adult education”. The empirical study is qualitative. The data were collected at EPALE organised a pan-European conference, Budapest, Hungary, October 2018. Semi-structured interviews were carried out for data

gathering. The novel contribution of the paper is revealed in recommendations on policy for adult learning.

Literature review

In the light of ‘politization’ of research (Roger, 2002), analysis of adult education and learning is based on rooted-in-the-policy definitions (Kuļšs, 2014, 141).

Adult is identified as a person who has reached the age of 15 years, “that after a break continues general or professional education (formal, informal)” (Basic Guidelines of Lifelong Learning Policy for 2007–2013, 2007).

Adult learning or, in other words, adult education is understood to cover all formal, non-formal and informal learning undertaken by adults after they have left their initial education and training, whether for professional reasons (such as re-skilling and up-skilling) or for private purposes (e.g. social, cultural, artistic and societal learning) (European Commission, 2011).

Formalization of adult education and learning (Handler, 2015) has attracted a lot of interest. Formalization is literally understood as a progressive generalization and standardization of the learning process (Zürcher, 2015, 74).

Discussions on the formalization of the learning process bring to the light another issue such as the institutionalized educational process in formal and non-formal adult education (Ahrens & Zašcerinska, 2015a, 44). By formal and non-formal adult education, an organized adult education model (university, institution, college, academy, summer school, etc), systematic, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms is meant (Ahrens & Zašcerinska, 2015a, 44). Thus, the institutionalized educational process is organized, systematized, structured and administered within formal and non-formal adult education according to a given set of laws and norms (Zašcerinska, Aļeksejeva, Aļeksejeva, Andreeva, Gloņina, & Zašcerinskis, 2015).

Hence, adult learning is inter-connected with the process of adult education politization, formalization and institutionalization shaped by the policy of adult education.

Methodology

The guiding question of the empirical study was as follows: What are national perspectives of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland on policy of adult learning?

The purpose of the present empirical study was to analyse the opinion of respondents from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland on the policy of adult learning underpinning the formulation of recommendations on adult learning.

The empirical study was carried out at the EPALE organised a pan-European conference with the slogan “Growing together: fostering an inspiring adult learning community” in Budapest, Hungary, on the 15–16th October 2018. The adult learning event gathered over 230 national government representatives, EPALE members, European stakeholders and representatives from the European Commission. One of the aims of the event was to gather participants’ views on how the European Agenda for Adult Learning and the EU programmes in this field could evolve after 2020. With that aim, National Support Service (NSS) representatives with their selected delegates were expected to work to prepare some thoughts and recommendations on the future of adult learning policy at the European level. That was an opportunity for the national perspective to feed into the conference. The national perspectives were presented in the poster’s format and further on captured in the final conference report (EPALE conference 2018, 2018b). Countries had to prepare recommendations under such three key topics as policy issues, area of focus within adult learning, and lessons learnt within adult learning sector. Consequently, semi-structured interviews were carried. Semi-structured interviews are used when knowledge on the research field is obtained by the researcher (Kroplijs & Raščevka, 2004, 99). A semi-structured interview is open, allowing new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The interviewer in a semi-structured interview generally has a framework of themes to be explored (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The study was based on such a theme framework as policy issues, area of focus within adult learning, and lessons learnt within adult learning sector.

The method of interpretive analysis was applied (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Taylor & Medina, 2013). The researcher is the interpreter (Ahrens, Melnikova, & Zaščerinska, 2018).

The sample was composed of the participants of the EPALE organised a pan-European conference in Budapest, Hungary, on the 15–16th October 2018. The respondents were from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland. The sample was composed on the principles of (Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2015b) sample appropriateness, sufficiency, and confidence. The sample size was shaped by the external and internal factors (Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2014). External factors included (Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2014)

- access to the sample and
- resources such as time, personnel and its competences and experiences, technical support, and measurement procedures.

Internal factors comprised (Ahrens & Zaščerinska, 2014) researcher’s

- aims of research,
- aims of generalisation (Mayring, 2007, 2) such as categorisation,

- research methodology,
- motivation,
- interest,
- skills, and
- experience.

The collected data were processed via summarizing content analysis (Mayring, 2004). Summarizing qualitative content analysis leads to phenomenon's categorization (Mayring, 2000). Categorization implies that ideas and/or objects are grouped into categories, usually for some specific purpose (Rothenberg, 2014).

Research results

1. Recommendations – three key recommendations on policy for adult learning.

One of the major recommendations both from Lithuania and Latvia was to deepen the understanding of the adult education policy on different levels.

In the opinion of Latvian colleagues, adult education policy is very disputed at the international and national level. The implementers of the policy are formally aware of it and do not always see possibilities for influencing the policy and ways to focus on the priorities in their work. Wider and more constructive discussions should be organised to provide for a higher level of understanding among all stakeholders.

As noted by Lithuanian team, adult education policy should not be designed in isolation from other important social, economic, etc. factors. It is important to ensure links with such important areas of society as medicine, economics, law enforcement, etc. These interfaces would stimulate the growth of people's social and economic well-being.

Moreover, adult education policy should respond both to the needs and goals of the entire society as well as of the individual adult. That means that an adult should be able to realize, by means of adult education, his or her individual needs (e. g. employment, career, citizenship, etc.). In this case, adult education becomes effective and creates added value for various social areas: social, economic, etc.

The respondents from Latvia highlighted the shift of learning theory focus from cognitive to holistic approach that requires a development of a new concept within adult learning (Babajeva, 2012, 456). An adult must be seen as a whole who learns by transforming experience into bodily feeling, soul emotions and ideas of mind (Babajeva, 2012, 456). This transformation of common experiences provides a large understanding on how to help an adult to gain new

competences and adjust oneself in this ever changing world (Babajeva, 2012, 456-457). Latvian team has also emphasized that there should be national guarantees for every EU citizen to have access to adult education in both the Labour Law and Law on Education.

Lithuanian team has stressed that adult education is characterized by great diversification. When designing an adult education policy, it is important to foresee strategies for the inclusion of different target groups, especially those difficult to achieve. In addition, it is important to create learning bases that will meet the needs of these target groups. It is necessary to pay more attention to the activation of the Third age persons.

Polish colleagues agreed with this idea and mentioned that employers and society in general need knowledge and skills for diversity (ethnic, race, religious, gender, age etc.) management among staff and within communities. We should cater for each individual person's ability to function in compliance with the basic values of democracy, such as equal rights, social inclusion, national and state identity etc.

Moreover, Lithuanian team pointed that the design of an adult education strategy should be based on coherent co-operation between politicians, theorists, practitioners, learners themselves, employers and other stakeholders. Such cooperation would result in the consistency and quality of this system.

To sum up, adult education, although implemented nationally, can no longer be understood as a policy concern which is delimited by the nation-state. Uncovering the reasons and mechanisms that sustain regional transnationalism in adult education constitutes a pre-requisite to broadening our understanding of what enables European citizens to engage in learning – or precludes them from doing so.

2. Areas of focus—three key areas that policy within adult learning should focus on.

Adult education has been conceptualised at the European level predominantly in terms of vocational training or training for the job. Accordingly, it has received growing attention in those divisions of the European Commission charged with employment and social inclusion.

According to Latvian colleagues, the major focus of the adult education policy should be on the coordination of the information available on the development trends of the labour market and demographic situation. It is very important to take into account the data to forecast the education demand trends and develop the range of education offers as well as to collect feedback on the implemented education programmes, courses, their usefulness and quality. Moreover, it is important to gather data on the performance of the persons who have acquired the qualifications in their respective sector.

Polish colleagues also stress that courses and trainings should reflect the actual needs present on the national and European labour markets. They should be regularly verified to check if the content offered is up to date. This also applies to appropriate, current competences and qualifications of the teaching staff.

Polish team emphasized that currently, too few companies understand their role in the adult education process beyond the employee training programmes. At the same time, there are discrepancies between the competences available on the labour market and the real needs of business companies. Technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) or mixed reality should be deployed. New methods are employed by the business and an atmosphere of elitism is being created, accompanied by entry barriers, despite the fact these are relatively simple to master without the need of considerable budgets.

When designing the reforms in the adult learning education system, a key thing is to invite stakeholders at each step: starting with the consultations concerning the systemic solutions (e.g. the qualification register functionality), up to consultations related to curricula for individual courses, trainings and qualifications.

The positive link between employment and learning is obvious: Learning workers and employees are important for innovation, productivity, competitiveness and entrepreneurship. Workplace learning is one of the key drivers for adults' participation in lifelong learning, and cooperation with all main stakeholders, especially the social partners, is essential.

To the mind of Lithuanian representatives, employers are one of the factors that can stimulate or discourage adult learning. They must realise that adult learning (and not just vocational) helps to promote productivity, competitiveness, creativity and entrepreneurship, which is an important factor in increasing the employability and mobility of workers in the labour market.

To sum up, in moving forward, adult learning and education must be built into a holistic, intersectoral approach. This requires working across sectors, guided by the urgent need for deeper partnerships. We must continue to inform all sectors of the essential importance of education for success across the board.

3. Lessons learnt- three lessons learnt i.e. what has and has not worked within the adult learning sector that should inform future policy.

As Polish colleagues mention, formal education services are already well defined. However, the number of methods and tools supporting informal development is growing. It makes sense to educate the market and recognise informal methods in the policies. Many adult Poles are unaware of the fact that non-formal activities can be included in the qualification frameworks.

Latvian team supports this idea, they stress that greater emphasis should be placed on the popularisation of options for recognising the effects of non-formal

and informal education. Promoting the employers' use of externally certified qualifications, potential benefits, details of learning effects that can be achieved, institutions that offer education, etc.

In the opinion of Lithuanian team, continuous education offer within one professional domain/sector would motivate employees and provide cooperation possibilities for educational institutions (vocational secondary school, college, university).

Moreover, Latvian team emphasized that there is a big demographic group aged 45+ (more than 40% of Latvian employees) who have acquired their higher or vocational education in 1980s-1990s. They have sufficient skills for the work they have been doing for many years with the same employer or in the same industry, however, upon losing that particular position, they are no longer competitive in the labour market due to the lack of the basic skills that correspond to the modern requirements: foreign languages, digital skills, business skills etc.

To sum up, a common challenge for adult education providers across Europe is raising awareness about the value of their field: making policymakers but also citizens more aware of what adult education is and what its benefits are; making the field better known and better supported.

As Latvian team stressed, the latest technology can effectively support adult education. ICT integration ensures the flexibility of adult education and provides more opportunities for learners to manage their learning. In addition, ICT helps significantly reduce the cost of adult education. It is important to design ICT integration strategies that promote the quality and efficiency of adult education.

Estonian partners stress that many governmental services and tools for civic participation are now available online. Digital skills ensure digital inclusion and participation. Additionally, the service industries will also see radical changes, which will also mean a reduction in human contact. The same is true for e-learning, which offers many possibilities but which also reduces the social aspect which is important for many learners.

To sum up, the level of digitalisation in our societies is rapidly increasing. Therefore, there can be no real inclusion without a functional level of digital competence. Learning to use mobile devices and digital tools can also make basic learning processes more flexible, adequate and efficient – provided teachers know how to use them! Adults can actually learn to read and write by using digital tools. Therefore, a focus should be placed on developing methodologies that make allowances for the high dynamics in the area of available technologies, use of mobile applications and social services.

Conclusions

The theoretical analysis of scientific literature allows concluding that adult learning is inter-connected with the process of adult education politization, formalization and institutionalization shaped by the policy of adult education. Adult education, although implemented nationally, can no longer be understood as a policy concern which is delimited by the nation-state. Uncovering the reasons and mechanisms that sustain regional transnationalism in adult education constitutes a pre-requisite to broadening our understanding of what enables European citizens to engage in learning – or precludes them from doing so.

The findings of the empirical study allow drawing such conclusions as

- In moving forward, adult learning and education must be built into a holistic, intersectoral approach. This requires working across sectors, guided by the urgent need for deeper partnerships.
- A common challenge for adult education providers across Europe is raising awareness about the value of their field: making policymakers but also citizens more aware of what adult education is and what its benefits are; making the field better known and better supported.
- The level of digitalisation in our societies is rapidly increasing. Therefore, there can be no real inclusion without a functional level of digital competence. Learning to use mobile devices and digital tools can also make basic learning processes more flexible, adequate and efficient – provided teachers know how to use them! Therefore, a focus should be placed on developing methodologies that make allowances for the high dynamics in the area of available technologies, use of mobile applications and social services.

The present research has limitations. The inter-connections between policy of adult education and adult learning's politization, formalization and institutionalization have been set. Another limitation is the empirical study conducted by involving only the participants of one EPALE conference. Therein, the results of the empirical study cannot be representative for the whole area.

Involvement of respondents from more European countries is proposed. A comparative research of more different European countries on policy of adult education could be of a high value, too. Further research tends to focus on analysis of implementation of inter-sectoral approach in adult education.

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