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EDITORIAL



Researching global, national and local adult education policies and actors

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Today's global phenomena, such as climate change, health and biodiversity threats, and environmental degradation, intertwine with new and long-standing societal challenges. These include migration movements, conflicts, wars, hate crimes, as well as the deepening of old inequalities (e.g. class, gender, age, ethnic identities, among others) (Benavot et al., 2022), and new social and economic cleavages, such as the digital or energy divide. These trends have deepened the complexity of inequality both within communities and between the Global North and the Global South (Stanistreet et al., 2021).

Moreover, the technologisation of societies through the fast-growing power of artificial intelligence, as well as ill-working labour markets and outdated welfare models exerts additional pressure on policy-makers in democratic contexts. This pressure contributes to shaping policy agendas while providing room for populist and right-wing actors to raise their voices and gain political power, with potential long-lasting effects of social policies, including adult education policies.

In a context of crisis and uncertainty, the dominant narrative around policy can also impose to prioritise certain purposes and goals of adult education over others (see Mikulec in this issue; Guimarães & Barros, 2025) and justify the necessity and urgency of reforms in the field of (adult) education. For instance, the most prescribed solutions in adult education policy seem to come from international organisations, which are identified as 'risk-managing experts' (Mikulec, 2021). The international organisations, including through mutual collaboration, take up this role, set the policy agenda, provide global normative directions for policy to address global/European policy problems and risks, hence creating global/European (adult) education policies (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). For example, in 2021, the Council of the EU adopted a *Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021–2030*.¹ The agenda focuses on skills and calls for a holistic approach and multi-stakeholder and multi-level cooperation, including a stronger emphasis on monitoring, evidence-based policies, new actors and regular funding for adult education. It also calls for adult education that addresses the 'twin transitions' (i.e. digital and green) and promotes inclusive, digital and sustainable societies and learning workplaces. Around half a year later, in June 2022, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) member states adopted the new twelve-year programme *CONFITEA VII Marrakech Framework for Action*.² The Framework advocates for a new 'social contract' that affirms and exercises adult learning and education as a fundamental human right and a key component of lifelong learning,

which is critical to achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to create cohesive, peaceful, inclusive, sustainable, healthy and democratic societies for all. Although ambitious and widely recognised, the impact of these initiatives on national and regional territories is mediated through different national contexts, as much comparative research shows (e.g. Barros and Biasin in this issue; Cavaco et al., 2014; Milana, 2017).

Civil society organisations and/or interest groups with a European or global reach, active in the field of adult education (see Milana, 2024; Milana & Mikulec, 2023), have also recently advocated for promoting adult education that helps address current socio-economic challenges and crises (cf. Heikkinen et al., 2023). For example, in 2019, the European Association for the Education of the Adults adopted the *Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century: The Power and Joy of Learning*,³ which emphasises the transformative power of adult education and calls for greater public investment in adult education. Similarly, the International Council for Adult Education adopted the *ICAE and Global Civil Society Manifesto 2022: Adult Learning and Education – Because the Future Cannot Wait*,⁴ which calls for long-term, sustainable solutions based on the transformative power of adult learning and education.

Given these international and national policy developments, where adult education policies are often seen as an instrument to prepare individuals and societies for contemporary challenges, there is a need for ‘research-based knowledge and critical analyses of the politics and policy of adult learning and education by interrogating, specifically, what policies are put in place (...) how, by whom, to what effects, and for whose benefits’ (Bussi et al., 2024, p. 347).

This call for research also implies exploring and discussing which normative ideas are embedded in adult education policy and how governance levels and actors (Global, European, national, local) interact, namely how adult education policies are negotiated on the ground by local actors. Researching adult education policy also raises question about evaluating their effects and identifying how different actors resist to today’s dominant technocratic-rationalist understanding of adult education policy with the aim of revitalising the historical adult education goals of emancipation, social justice, and democracy.

Against this background and with this research ambition in mind, the purpose of this Special Issue is twofold. On the one hand, it presents studies focused on critical analysis of the beliefs, values and ideas that are spread by global and European policy agendas, and its key policy actors and implementation logics, as one of the ‘neo-empires’ of knowledge in education (Klerides et al., 2014), which has, for example, consolidated adult education as a fully – fledged European Union (EU) policy subsystem (Milana & Klatt, 2020). On the other hand, it offers analyses and critical reflections over the historical connection of adult education with emancipation, social justice, and democracy (Holford et al., 2014) that goes beyond today’s prevailing vocational and instrumental perspective of adult education.

By compiling a variety of educational research in different contemporary contexts, the Special Issue illustrates how global and European trends unfold at the national, regional and local levels of adult education policy and practice. It brings together six contributions presenting four European countries and the USA that were first presented at the V conference of the Research Network on Policy Studies in Adult Education (active within the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults, ESREA)⁵:

Problematising the Futures of Adult Education: Between Global, National, Regional and Local Policies and Actors, held in Madeira, Portugal, from 29 February to 2 March 2024.

Thematic papers were written by scholars located at university departments, research centres or professional associations, thus representing independent, and critical policy research equivalent to ‘research of policy’ (Desjardin & Rubenson, 2009) that problematises both the construction of policy problems and solutions in education policy research. However, there are different ways of understanding what critical research means in the field of (adult) education (Savage et al., 2021). For example, it might be related with: (a) normative and emancipatory aims that seek to formulate visions of a better future (that include critique of oppressive social and educational practices and also strategies for progressive change that might challenge oppressive structures and practices – in tradition of Frankfurt school or radical adult education); (b) unmasking power relations and/or critique of policy problem/solution construction, but without giving visions of desired future or solutions – in post-structural tradition; (c) critique of elite (global) actors, networks and power, and their impact on shaping educational ideas within and across nations – in tradition of critical policy sociology or critical education policy. We argue that the contributions to this Special Issue adopt all three approaches: the first is evident in *Vanderavero et al.*, the second in *Joahnnna Mufic* as well as *Elizabeth Roumell*, and *Omniya Mohamed*, while the third is represented by *Borut Mikulec*.

The first contribution takes global and European adult education policies as its starting point and discusses the normative ideas underlying these policies, which seek to formulate visions of a better future. In his paper, ‘Global and European adult education policies in times of crisis: between shifts in normativity and epistemological continuity’ *Borut Mikulec* examines possible shifts in epistemic and normative ideas between the 2011 European Agenda for Adult Learning of the EU and the 2009 Belém Framework for Action of the UNESCO, adopted in the period marked by the global financial crisis, and the 2021 European Agenda for Adult Learning of the EU and the 2022 Marrakech Framework for Action of UNESCO, adopted in the period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Based on the epistemological framework developed by Bagnall and Hodge (2018, 2022) and document analysis, his findings indicate shifts in the desirable ends in society attributed to adult education, as well as unchanged epistemologies over the decade. Indeed, in European policies, the ‘design or instrumental’ epistemology remains dominant, whereas in global policy, the ‘design or instrumental’ epistemology, as well as the ‘developmental’ and ‘emancipatory’ epistemologies, still coexist and compete. The author concludes by pointing out the relevance of the epistemological framework developed by Bagnall and Hodge for adult education policy scholars.

The second contribution by *Chiara Biasin* and *Rosanna Barros* titled ‘Youth and adult learning for the green transition in Italy and Portugal: policy and perspectives of key-actors from multilevel governance’ also discusses the EU policies. Yet it focuses on the processes of Europeanisation and multilevel governance that enable Member States to align their national policies (horizontal level) with EU priority agendas (vertical level) by adopting and adapting measures and guidelines. In their analysis, the authors compare aspects of youth and adult learning (YAL) policies in Italy and Portugal related to the implementation of green and sustainable agendas. They do this by analysing the perceptions that key multilevel policy actors have about the efficiency of soft law policy tools, thereby allowing Europeanisation to deepen over time, and the challenges this implies for

national YAL policy agendas. The authors identified signs of multilevel negotiation of policy priorities and features of policy transfer that prove capable of shaping national policies, mainly through the persuasive power embedded in current policy networking mechanisms. Therefore, their results show the central role of networks of best practice underpinning European initiatives, revealing underlying processes of policy learning.

The third contribution, ‘Policy vs. practice. An analysis of the course provision of Finnish study centres between 2016 and 2021’, authored by *Jyri Manninen* and *Kukka-Maaria Vuorikoski*, is timely insofar as it deals with institutions of adult liberal education, like folk high schools and study associations, which have been historically a central part of ‘modern adult learning systems’, but are nowadays diminished in size and importance in most European countries (see Kalenda & Desjardin, 2025, pp. 393–394). In Finland, study centres are still the second largest liberal adult education organisation, registering 500,000 participants. In this original study, the authors analysed whether and how study centres’ course provision matches the policy objectives (i.e. lifelong learning, well-being, active citizenship, democracy, and civil society) defined in the Finnish law on liberal adult education. Providing the first-ever detailed description of course provision at Finnish study centres, this paper is based on programme analysis of course provision ($n = 77,655$ courses) between 2016 and 2021. The authors identified 43 course types and six course categories and found that most of the courses fulfilled the policy objectives set for study centres. The largest single course category was Personal Growth (39.6%), which comprised liberal arts courses that promoted lifelong learning and well-being. Active citizenship, democracy, and civil society were supported by two course categories: Citizenship & Associations (29.9%) and Social & Community Support (11.1%), which accounted for 41.0% of the provided courses. The study’s results highlighted the central role of study centres as the primary organisers of citizenship and community education in Finland, and as pursuers of the historical and original objective of civic and community education.

Johanna Mufic authored ‘What is represented as the “problem” in principals’ accounts of flexible and individualised education?’. The contribution focuses on a critique of policy problem/solution construction from the view of municipal adult education schools’ principals. National policy in Sweden is increasingly emphasising the principal’s responsibility for the quality and development of Municipal Adult Education (MAE) in terms of higher demands on flexibility and individualisation. The study applies Bacchi’s (2009) post-structural critical approach known as ‘What’s the “problem” represented to be?’ to investigate the problematisation of flexible and individualised adult education. She grasps how the problematisation is developed during principals’ interviews with school inspectors as part of a school inspection audit. Based on the several observations of principals’ interactions with the Swedish School Inspectorate, the study highlights how policy demands play out in practice and the anticipated, and sometimes unexpected, effects they have on principals, students, and staff.

The last two papers critically address a rather invisible subject in adult education policy research, i.e. adult learners (Bussi et al., 2024).

The contribution titled ‘Tracing the conception of adult learners in second chance education. An analysis of an adult education system in French-speaking Belgium’ authored by *Pauline Vanderavero*, *Margherita Bussi* and *Vincent Dupriez* traces the conception of the adult learner in a sub-national form of adult education in French-

speaking Belgium (*Enseignement de promotion sociale*, EPS). More specifically, the analysis aimed to identify to what extent the conception of the adult learner embodies the tension between creating employable workers or promoting emancipated individuals. The texts of draft, proposed, and enacted decrees regulating EPS were analysed based on the capability approach anthropological conception recently applied to social policy by Bonvin and Laruffa (2018). This conception considers individuals as receivers (i.e. vulnerable beings), doers (i.e. beings capable of contributing to society), and judges (i.e. beings capable of making decisions and expressing their needs). The findings of the study show that the legislative documents encourage the creation of an opportunity structure enabling adult learners to primarily develop their employability, yet without neglecting their emancipation. In this sense, adult learners are seen mainly as active receivers, that is, beneficiaries of support and resources who have the aim of becoming individuals who can act and exert agency over their own lives.

Finally, the paper from *Elizabeth Roumell* and *Omniya Mohamed* entitled 'Adult and workforce education policy in the United States: individualization and social risk' critically investigates policies and programmes that push adult working learners to invest their own resources into programmes that are marked with social stigma and do not result in actual improved social mobility. In the USA, adult and workforce education (AWE) policy was created to support improved economic integration and social mobility for vulnerable populations. Its primary framing has been articulated in terms of helping individuals become more financially self-sustaining through the selection of various educational and career pathways. Against this background, the paper explores the political framing and rationale for policy through the theoretical lens of individualisation, using Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how national-level policy unfolds for vulnerable adult learners. Individualisation, as a theoretical concept, refers to structural changes in the relations between individuals and society where the notion of 'the individual' takes precedence over society and the greater public good. Opportunities, dangers, and life's uncertainties must now be negotiated by individuals, rather than by traditional social institutions. Four examples illustrate how the theoretical concept of 'individualisation' is embedded in AWE policy. The authors argue that the individualisation of public programmes may become a form of reverse accountability, shifting social risks away from the state and employers by offloading the burdens onto individuals who have the fewest resources to 'choose' and manage the risks.

To conclude, the six research articles of this Special Issue collectively contribute to the current literature on adult education policies in several ways. Their diverse critical theoretical approaches show the wide variety of questioning policy ideas, policy learning, problematisation, and implementation. The diverse empirical fields confirm the necessity of going beyond political statements to understand the degree and type of change through time and the actors' perceptions on the ground. While we believe that this Special Issue provides some policy research responses to the relevant theme of the PSAE Madeira Conference, we call for an ambitious policy research agenda that would focus more attention on the policy effects, perceptions, and lived experiences of adult learners. Political sociology, political science, as well as education policy research more broadly, could represent fertile (disciplinary) grounds where to make the interdisciplinary nature of adult education policy

study flourish. Their attention to policy targets and policy beneficiaries could shed further light on the democratic consequences of the current political and policy turn.

Notes

1. See: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14485-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.
2. See: <https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/marrakech-framework-action>.
3. See: <https://eaea.org/our-work/influencing-policy/manifesto-for-adult-learning-in-the-21st-century/>.
4. See: https://icae.global/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Updated-ICAE-Manifesto_English_14-June-2022.pdf
5. See <https://esrea.org/networks/policy-studies-in-adult-education/>

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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