

## Political globalization and the shift from adult education to lifelong learning

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### Abstract

*This article reflects on the shift in vocabulary from (adult and continuing) education to (lifelong) learning and the ideological and purposive orientations it carries. It does so by critically addressing the changes occurred in policy discourses concerned with the education of adults after WWII at transnational level. The main argument is that the shift in vocabulary has been favoured by an increased voice acquired by transnational and inter-states entities (i.e. OECD, UNESCO, EU) in educational matters, however in combination with a change in political emphasis, at least within the European Union, from creating jobs opportunities towards securing that citizens acquire marketable skills. While both trends seems to point at the demise of the nation state as a guarantor for social justice, more research is needed to deepen our understandings of the interplay between transnational and nation-state levels; thus the article concludes by suggesting a research agenda to move in this direction.*

**Keywords:** lifelong learning; adult education; OECD; UNESCO; EU

In recent decades, transnational and inter-state organizations working in the field of adult education have silently dropped the term ‘adult education’ in favour of the alternative term, ‘lifelong learning’. This shift in vocabulary has attracted the attention of academic scholars interested not only in the causes of this change, but in the values that it carries. In fact, the change in vocabulary limits the set of practices that define the objectives of adult education as a field of policy and practice. It also shows how these objectives can be put under scrutiny, and how adult education policy and practice can be ameliorated as a result.

Taking Biesta’s (2006) interpretation of the shift in vocabulary from education to learning as a point of departure, this article will draw on documents produced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Union

(EU) to reflect on the ideological and purposive orientations embedded in the shift from adult education to lifelong learning that political globalization processes have favoured. The main argument is that while this shift in policy discourse (which has redefined the relation between education, work and socio-economic development) has been promoted by transnational and inter-state entities with their own interest in education, the shift cannot be seen simply as the result of top-down power relations. That states are members of these entities suggests some degree of global-local interconnectedness. In the meantime, with the failure of labour market and employment policies within the European Union since the 1990s, making sure that citizens acquire marketable skills has become a more important political goal than creating and securing job opportunities. While both trends result from political globalization processes, more research is needed to deepen our understandings of the interplay between transnational and nation-state levels; thus in the concluding section I suggest a research agenda to move in this direction.

## 1. Shifting vocabulary

In his attempt to define ‘a way to understand and approach education’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 9) in the new millennium, Biesta engages with this shift in vocabulary from education to learning. He does so with a point of departure in education and learning theories and philosophies as well as in societal changes. He concludes that the shift from education to learning represents the result of diverse and often contradictory developments, rather than the outcome of an explicit agenda based on a critique of prior knowledge and understanding (or similar) of educational matters. He suggests that four interrelated trends have contributed to the move from education to learning.

The first trend is that constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning have focussed attention on activities in which learners interact with multiple actors in particular environments (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). Traditional approaches were challenged as interest moved away from the teacher-learner relationship and/or the knowledge content of such interaction (Biesta, 2006).

The second trend is identified by Biesta (2006) in the impact of postmodernism theories on educational thinking. Education was for a long time considered a viable project of modernity, intimately connected to philosophical humanism and its creed of the rational autonomous being, inherited by the Enlightenment and intertwined with the continental tradition of *Bildung* (a concern for what constitutes an ‘educated’ person and the practice that leads to this pursuit). However, in addressing the failures of the modernism project, postmodernism theories have undermined the idea that education can liberate and emancipate merely by fostering rationality and critical thinking among learners. Consequently, these theories claimed the ‘end of education’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 18).

The third trend is what Field describes as the ‘silent explosion of lifelong learning’ (Field, 2000, p. 4), with special (but not exclusive) reference to the adult population. It is Field’s empirical observation that in contemporary societies more people are spending time and money engaging in diverse learning activities, activities that are often both individualized and individualistic - individualized in form, as the learner may well be on his/her own in front of a book, a DVD player, a computer screen or an iPad; individualistic in content and purpose, as learners are often pursuing their own interests in search of individual satisfaction.

Lastly, the fourth trend is what Biesta terms ‘the erosion of the welfare state’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 18) and the rise of the market economy. This is the erosion of the very idea of the state as the guarantor of a redistribution of wealth through public provision (through health, social security and education) in favour of a privatization of the relation between the state and its citizens, and the re-elaboration of such a relationship in economic, rather than political, terms. This logic, with its focus on the user or consumer of an educational provision rather than on citizens’ access to a public good (education), suggests that ‘learning’ is a commodity that gives consumers (learners) ‘value for money’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 19).

Biesta (2006) is correct in addressing a mix of trends that relate to theoretical and conceptual developments within the humanities and social sciences, but also in taking into account the socio-political and economic developments that have occurred in society at large. In current debates, the mantra of lifelong learning has been adopted by politicians, researchers and, to a lesser extent, practitioners in both economically developed and developing worlds. Yet the statement that learning occurs along the entire life span becomes problematic from a public policy perspective. By bringing the agency of the learner to the foreground, public policy speech shades off the agency of the educator engaged in teaching-learning transactions or broader educative relations, while interfering with the politics of everyday life.

Furthermore, the mantra of lifelong learning embeds diverse meanings across different ‘fields’. Consequently it contributes to struggles over the appropriation of capital by agents in a variety of social settings (Bourdieu, 1984). The complexity of the relationship between *adult* education and lifelong learning emerges clearly from the regional synthesis reports prepared for the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) held in 2009 (Ahmed, 2009; Aitchison & Alidou, 2009; Keogh, 2009; Torres, 2009; Yousif, 2009).

A close look at these and other documents produced by (or under the auspices of) transnational and inter-state entities (see the following sections) reveals a shift in the very conception of lifelong learning. Originally intended as a means for personal and social development, the concept today is primarily associated with economic growth and the global competition of nations and geopolitical regions. This in turn has impacted on the opportunity structures for people to engage in ‘worthwhile’ learning throughout life (for a critique see, for instance, Biesta, Field, Hodkinson, Macleod and Goodson, 2011). Accordingly, when we consider the shift in vocabulary from adult education to lifelong learning, one more trend in addition to those identified by Biesta (2006) has to be considered, namely political globalization (Nash, 2000). I will elaborate on this in the following section.

## 2. Political globalization and the changing nature of the state

In order to understand the impact of political globalization on the shift in vocabulary and on public policy, we may take as our point of departure contemporary globalization, understood to mean a set of processes that expand and intensify cross-national interactions. These processes in turn endorse the establishment of transnational arrangements and integration processes across geographical scales (Castells, 1996; Dreher, Gaston & Martens, 2008; Luke & Luke, 2000; Nash, 2000), leading to global imaginaries that are ‘powerfully reflected in the current transformation of political ideologies’ (Steger, 2009, pp. 11-12). In line with this argument, we observe that the power and authority of the ‘modern’ state are reshaped and transformed (Held,

McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton, 1999). Traditionally understood as an organization where political power is organized and exercised through a set of arrangements controlling specific fields of action (Poggi, 1990), the modern state (and its changing nature) is better captured by the ‘bargaining’ or network state approach (Stråth & Torstendhal, 1992). This conceptualization interprets the state as a structure logically distinct from individual action, but brought about by the interactions of individual actions. Accordingly, although contributions by individuals may be inadequate in resource terms to produce discernible changes, a conscious effort by collectivities can influence not only state structures, but also the power they exercise. This occurs with the production of specialized knowledge by groups with their own interest in policy-making: specialized knowledge which in turn is either appropriated or utilized by the state. While in the latter case the state makes use of specialized knowledge but recognizes that it belongs to the holder, in the former case specialized knowledge is treated as belonging to the state. The linkages between knowledge production and knowledge appropriation or use vary depending on the particular network composition of individual states; thus, even when different states share a similar interest, knowledge appropriation or utilization at national level may differ.

Seen in this perspective, transnational and inter-state entities with their own interests in education not only assign to the concept of lifelong learning particular values, meanings and norms about the world that become accepted truths; in doing so, they produce specialized knowledge in a conscious effort to legitimize specific political interests, to set the agenda of what can be discussed, and to influence state policies. Yet state membership in transnational and inter-state entities blurs the boundaries between knowledge production and knowledge appropriation or utilization; and this cautions against ascribing the shift from adult education to lifelong learning policies either to global or to local politics. Rather, it is an argument in favour of global-local interconnectedness. Although the strength of such interconnectedness may vary in different localities – something that is beyond the scope of this paper to assess - acknowledging global-local interconnectedness justifies paying closer attention to the conscious efforts made by transnational and inter-state entities to rethink the relation between education, work and the economy by the production of ‘global imaginaries’ (with, however, nuanced meanings). To these I will now turn.

### **3. Rethinking the relation between education, work and socio-economic development**

It is particularly through the work by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and – to a limited extent - the European Union (EU) that lifelong learning has acquired substance in diverse global imaginaries. These imaginaries reinterpret the relations between education, work and socio-economic development in these entities in ways that reflect their differing cultural and social settings of member composition, organizational aims, structures and ways of functioning.

Several observers have traced the origins of lifelong learning back to the 1960s to understand its wide appeal in contemporary public policy. Rubenson (2006) highlights how the construct emerged as a response by the OECD and UNESCO to educational and social crises that affected the globe in the 1960s and again in the 1990s. Tuijnman and Boström (2002) complement this analysis by paying special attention to the role of

the UNESCO Institute for Education and its related journal, the *International Review of Education*, in fostering lifelong learning as an organizing principle for educational planning in western as well as in developing countries. Finally, Borg and Mayo (2005) offer a critical perspective on the adoption of lifelong learning at the outset of the twenty-first century as a core principle for promoting educational reforms within the European context. These analyses show how lifelong learning as a political mindset has changed, not only over time and across transnational organizations, but also over time within each organization, leading to the development of fundamentally different ideologies, legitimizing conflicting value-systems. It is worth noting that this was particularly relevant in the case of UNESCO and the OECD, as there is a consensus that the EU uncritically embraced the OECD's interpretation and strongly contributed to its adoption in national political contexts in Europe (Borg & Mayo, 2005; Rubenson, 2006, 2009). As a result, the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning - as originally conceptualized by experts working for the World Bank and UNESCO - became distorted.

In particular, Rubenson (2006, 2009) identifies two generations of political thinking informing the notion of lifelong learning. The first of these, from the 1960s to the 1980s, was strongly bound to the emerging notion of 'lifelong education' as developed by UNESCO, as well as the conception of 'recurrent education' launched by the 1969 Conference of the European Ministers of Education and soon afterwards adopted by the OECD. The concept of 'lifelong education' emerged not only in response to the increasing dissatisfaction with education that ultimately led to the student uprisings of the late 1960s, but also to a concern to identify educational models that would meet not merely societal needs, but the needs created by inequalities between highly economically developed and less economically developed countries. 'Recurrent education' was promoted by the OECD as a political strategy for educational planning in response to two developments in the 1960s: the expansion of education to promote economic prosperity worldwide (in the wake of human capital theory and its claim for a return on investment in education), and the concern to make public spending on education productive (in terms of achieving better economic, social and educational benefits).

The second generation, beginning in the 1990s, according to Rubenson (2006) found its fullest expression in the OECD report *Education and the economy in a changing society* (OECD, 1989), exemplifying societal concern with the challenges and threats posed by contemporary globalization processes, especially in the fields of economy and technological advance. The report led to the forging of closer ties between the economy and education, and saw a reinterpretation of the 'recurrent education' conception, now strongly bound to the distinction between learning occurring in formal, non-formal and informal structures, originally elaborated by Coombs and Ahmed (1974) in a study sponsored by the World Bank (Tuijnman & Boström, 2002). This new OECD position was elaborated further in the report *Lifelong learning for all* (OECD, 1996). Within UNESCO, the second generation of lifelong learning took shape in the work of the International Commission on Education and Learning for the Twenty-First Century, set up in order for the organization to regain international visibility within the educational policy arena (Jones, 2005). The work of the Commission, chaired by the former president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, resulted in the publication of *Learning: The treasure within* (Delors et al., 1996). The report not only reaffirmed the need to position education at the top of the policy agenda, but did so through its adoption of a critical stance towards any vision of economic growth that did not reconcile with equity issues, respect for the human condition and for the natural

environment. Consequently it advanced lifelong learning, rather than lifelong education, as the response to globalization processes at the same time as the OECD was also embracing lifelong learning as a new mindset for its policy.

In a more recent analysis Rubenson (2009) confirms that the OECD's second-generation thinking about lifelong learning has currently not only reached its fully fledged expression, but has become a common-sense view in public policy, thus foreshadowing possible alternative approaches (see also Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako & Mauch, 2001; Wain, 2001). An understanding of possible alternative approaches, however, requires a step back in order to put under scrutiny how lifelong learning has acquired its current connotations over time within each of the organizations that contributed to its development.

Within UNESCO, the Institute for Education (UIE) was established in 1951 to function as a contact point for educationalists around the world and carry out studies on the principles, aims and most suitable methods for education. In 2006, following the shift in terminology from 'education' to 'lifelong learning', it was renamed the Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). It was through the work supported by the UIE in the late 1960s that a forerunner of lifelong learning, namely 'lifelong education', came to be conceptualized as an organizing principle for educational development worldwide (Tuijnman & Boström, 2002). The concept first came to international attention in the early 1970s, thanks to two publications by UNESCO: *An introduction to continuing education* by Paul Lengrand (1970), and the report of the International Commission on the Development of Education by Edgar Faure et al. (1972), *Learning to be: The word of education today and tomorrow*. Wain (2001, p. 184) called the latter 'the canonical text of the lifelong education movement', with its radical approach to education, eclipsed over time as it lost UNESCO's backing. An analysis of these publications reveals that the notion of lifelong education still made primary reference to the need to create new and diverse education and learning opportunities in order to broaden democratic processes, within a radical project rethinking the very nature of education and culture as processes 'transcending the limits of institutions, programmes and methods imposed on it down the centuries' (Faure et al., 1972, p.145) - a project that embedded strong social-democratic liberal ideas (a belief in individual growth inextricable from social development) and also incorporated radical stands (de-schooling, de-institutionalization) (Moosung & Friedrich, 2011). Coombs and Ahmed's distinction (1974) between three possible modes of education - formal, non-formal and informal - developed the definition of lifelong education further. Here, both formal and non-formal modes aimed to support learning occurring in informal settings by using similar pedagogical approaches and methods, but through differing organizational settings and by reaching out to different target groups. This distinction made it possible to define lifelong education as:

a process of accomplishing personal, social and professional development throughout the life-span of individuals, in order to enhance the quality of life of both individuals and their collectivities. It is a comprehensive and unifying idea which includes formal, non-formal and informal learning for acquiring and enhancing enlightenment so as to attain the fullest possible development in different stages and domains of life. (Dave, 1976, p. 34)

The above definition was accompanied by a set of 'concept characteristics' to support its concrete implementation within a variety of socio-cultural contexts. These included an understanding that education does not necessarily correspond to formal schooling, hence a view of education in its totality as a socio-political and cultural utopia for a

more humane society (Wain, 2001). Accordingly, 'lifelong education' covered formal, non-formal and informal contexts for education, and sought continuity over time (vertical articulation) as well as an integration of diverse dimensions (horizontal integration). Lastly, 'lifelong education' represented not only a universal principle, but a concrete step towards a democratization process in education that should lead to the improvement of the quality of life for all (Dave, 1976).

Subsequent elaborations by a group of experts invited by UNESCO to define a theoretical framework for the implementation of lifelong education led to the publication of *Towards a system of lifelong education* by Arthur Cropley (1980). In the following decade, however, not much can be found as a concrete implementation of this framework, not least because in the 1980s political attention moved towards problems faced by governments in handling slow economic growth and subsequent increased unemployment, larger public deficits, and rapid technological change (cf. Rubenson, 2006; Tuijnman & Boström, 2002).

The debate within UNESCO on lifelong learning revived in the mid-1990s, as already noted, with the publication of *Learning: The treasure within* by Jacque Delors et al. (1996). This report stated the need to reconsider education in order to cope with the disenchantment affecting modern societies, by shifting paradigm from local community to world society, from social cohesion to democratic participation, and from economic growth to human development. Although the report made no direct use of the term 'lifelong learning', it identified four pillars on which pedagogical action was to be based: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. In so doing, it took a stand against the diffusion of human capital theory that had permeated the OECD's policy, while reaffirming the central role of the state in guaranteeing the welfare of those who experienced distorted social structures. In fact the Delors report stressed that 'education system[s] must operate within the context of a social compact... governments have a huge responsibility to act as the brokers of this compact' (Delors et al., 1996, p. 223), at the same time as the OECD was calling on governments to 'promote the development of appropriate "bridges" and "ladders"... in which the various elements of education and training provision can be articulated' (OECD, 1996, p. 184). Nonetheless, a thorough ideological analysis suggests that while the Delors report preserved a social-democratic liberal approach, unlike the Faure report, it was not immune to neoliberal ideas, such as the updating of skills (Moosung & Friedrich, 2011).

It was not until 2001, however, that UNESCO re-entered the debate on lifelong learning with the publication of *Revisiting lifelong learning for the 21st century* by Medel-Añonuevo et al. (2001). This booklet gave a sharp critique of the OECD's vision of lifelong learning, visions which spread to other transnational organizations (such as the EU and the World Bank) as a guiding principle for policy work worldwide. It underlined how contemporary interpretations of lifelong learning had departed from the notion of lifelong education from which the concept derived, as demonstrated by the following passage:

The predominantly economic interpretation of lifelong learning in the last ten years... has become problematic for many educators and practitioners who have come forward with such terms as "Lifelong (L)Earning" and "Learning to Earn" as their succinct criticism of the way the term is being promoted. (Medel-Añonuevo et al., 2001, p. 1)

Thus at the same time UNESCO was introducing the concept of 'lifelong education', the OECD was adopting 'recurrent education', whose relationship to lifelong learning

was first stated in the report *Recurrent education: A strategy for lifelong learning*, published by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation in 1973:

Recurrent education is a comprehensive educational strategy for all post-compulsory or post-basic education, the essential characteristic of which is the distribution of education over the total life-span of the individual in a recurrent way... In this context, the concept of lifelong learning assumes a more precise sense in that it accentuates the need for adaptation through a constant registering and processing of information, formation of concepts, and development of attitudes and skills. (CERI, 1973, pp. 16-17)

Yet critical analysis suggests that ‘recurrent education’ was a pragmatic response by the OECD, aimed at securing a ‘good fit’ between educational profiles and the skills and competencies required on the labour market at a time when the unprecedented expansion of upper and higher education had led to an oversupply of graduates (cf. Rubenson, 2006, 2009). Thus Bengtsson (1985) and Tuijtinman (1990) argue that the adoption of recurrent education was an ‘educational strategy’ for giving new signification to degrees and certificates which, though traditionally considered an end in themselves, were now seen as necessary steps in an educational career that would extend in the course of the lifespan.

Although the OECD endorsed recurrent education as a planning strategy in education to increase economic gain at both individual and societal levels, by encouraging the individual’s search for knowledge and skills that would better match the labour-market demand, its implementation partly failed. As Rubenson (2009, p. 255) notes, ‘the OECD’s agenda setting effort lacked the support of the required national ‘policy window’; further, it was not well anchored in the overall program of the OECD’.

A couple of decades later, however, as already noted, a new report by the OECD brought back the recurrent education conception, now presented under the new guise of lifelong learning, in a report produced for the 1996 meeting of the Council of Ministers. The report, *Lifelong learning for all* (OECD, 1996), embraced the advances made by UNESCO through the recognition of diverse modes of learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. But this conceptual appropriation was filtered through a human capital theory approach, resulting in an emphasis on formal education occurring out of school, as well as on non-formal and informal processes linked to the workplace. This twist created stronger ties between education and work, thus allowing for joint political action between the ministries representing these two strands of public policy.

In OECD (2004, p. 1) words, lifelong learning ‘covers all purposeful learning activity, from the cradle to the grave, that aims to improve knowledge and competencies for all individuals who *wish to participate* in learning activities’ (emphasis in original). With its move from education to learning, the OECD’s definition has been seen as a subtle way to redefine the relation between the state and its citizenry (Griffin, 1999a, 1999b). In fact, by removing government responsibility for educational structure and institutions, lifelong learning makes individuals responsible for their own learning, and thus is ‘well suited to a neoliberal agenda’ (Rubenson, 2009, p. 256). Not surprisingly, this has led to the current situation, where the OECD’s mindset for lifelong learning seems to represent ‘the’ only way to interpreting lifelong learning, a position that is resisted by UNESCO (cf. Medel-Añonuevo et al., 2001) but has been adopted by other international organizations (such as the World Bank and the EU).

To recapitulate, ‘recurrent education’ and ‘lifelong education’ represent the first two political responses to the notion of lifelong learning that was rooted in the French conception of ‘*éducation permanente*’, a conception adopted by the Council of Europe



in the late 1960s (Schwartz, 1968, 1970) and launched internationally within the context of UNESCO's International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEAs). However, these two concepts embedded quite different significations. While recurrent education restricts education to formal activities deliberately undertaken in a distinct, institutional sphere, lifelong education identifies education with life (Wain, 2001). Thus the OECD and UNESCO differed markedly in their appropriation of lifelong learning as a frame of reference for policy purposes; and while the EU has brought no additional value to its conceptualization, it has helped to disseminate the OECD's view within its member states. In this respect, Nordin (2011, p. 17) speaks of 'an adjustment of the "second generation" [of the OECD's lifelong learning discourse, as depicted by Rubenson 2009, AN] that affects the content as well as the structure of the discourse'. In other words, the EU has radicalized the economic perspective introduced by the OECD through the adoption of a set of new implementation strategies that strongly affect all its member states.

At this point it is worth asking whether the incorporation of lifelong learning as a guiding principle within the EU's policy is just an example of what Rubenson (2009) calls the hegemonic position of the OECD's second generation, or whether in fact it represents the emergence of a third generation of lifelong learning. Rather than defining new frameworks for public policy to accommodate observed societal changes, such a third generation would thus be adopting a homogenizing vocabulary - lifelong learning - that assumes a priori agreement, in order to hide the processes of political signification that might occur in its contextual appropriation and usage.

In the following section I focus on adult education as a distinct objective that has attracted political attention beyond the nation state.

#### **4. Adult education: A global polity**

A 'global polity' is defined by Corry (2010) as a polity structure that results from a set of social actors oriented towards the governance of a common object, which is made real, distinct and subject to political action. In this section I argue for the existence of a global polity based on de-territorialized norms to govern adult education, which emerges from UNESCO's International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEAs) and the EU's work in the field of adult education (and learning). However, the values and meanings carried by these norms have changed over time, and are interpreted differently by UNESCO and by the EU.

The first CONFINTEA (at Elsinore, Denmark, in 1949) addressed as its major themes international exchange and understanding as well as dissemination of information across countries - themes that were at the core of UNESCO's foundation. The following decade saw many new developments. Economic and technological advancements led to the expansion of popular media such as film, radio, and television. At the same time, industrialization processes favoured the economic development of rural-based economies; while long-term loans for education (1960) were introduced by the World Bank to support this process and UNESCO established its Institute for Education (1951). The second CONFINTEA (Montreal, 1960) therefore acknowledged these changes by addressing on its agenda rural education, popular culture, and entertainment media.

It was not until the 1970s, however, that adult education became a targeted policy objective beyond the nation state, when UNESCO published the Paul Lengrand report (1970) and launched an experimental World Literacy Program to boost 'functional

literacy'. Hence the third CONFINTEA (Tokyo, 1972) promoted the expansion of adult education, as well as the innovation of its methods in support of democratization processes worldwide. This way of thinking about adult education was reflected in the *Recommendation on the development of adult education*, adopted in 1976 (Nairobi) by the UNESCO General Conference.

During the 1980s, as economic concerns spread around the globe and human capital theory supported neo-liberalist thinking in education, the fourth CONFINTEA (Paris, 1985), not surprisingly, focussed on the relationship between adult education and economic development, and called for stronger international cooperation in the field.

It was only in the 1990s, when industrial expansion and economic development had been followed by a major economic crisis, that the fifth CONFINTEA (Hamburg, 1997) concentrated its attention on sustainable development - a form of development that would be not only ecologically sustainable, but also scientifically and socially sustainable, thus promoting social justice and gender equity. This was reflected in the *Hamburg declaration on adult learning* (UNESCO, 1997), and has found further application, since 2000, in a variety of development goals and initiatives supported by the United Nations.

The most recent CONFINTEA (Bélém, Brazil, 2009) has been primarily concerned with the backdrop of economic expansion and subsequent world financial crisis, but also with the limited achievements reported regionally in reducing the adult literacy gap, increasing social integration, and securing the social benefits of education for vast portions of the adult population. As a consequence, the *Bélém Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 2009) calls for new emphasis on international benchmarking in the field.

Since 1996, proclaimed the European Year of Lifelong Learning, the EU has increasingly deliberated adult education matters. In 2000 the EU issued a *Memorandum on lifelong learning*, in which lifelong learning entered the European discourse: both non-formal and informal learning were for the first time incorporated as a new object of communitarian education policy. In the Memorandum, formal adult and/or continuing education is assigned the task of securing that 'every individual acquires, updates and sustains an agreed skills threshold' (EC, 2000, p. 11), and investment in human resources is seen as a means of 'enabling people to manage their own "time-life portfolios" and making a wider range of learning outcomes more visible for all concerned' (EC, 2000, p. 12).

While the Memorandum initiated a European-wide consultation, the EU also established the Grundtvig programme (2000), providing economic support for the realization of learning activities aimed at adult citizens. It is only in recent years, however, that adult education policy has found its full expression within the Union, starting with a *Communication on adult learning: It is never too late to learn* (EC, 2006) and a complementary *Action plan on adult learning: It is always a good time to learn* (EC, 2007) by the European Commission. While adult 'education' is never mentioned in the Communication, adult 'learning', including 'all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training', is addressed as 'a vital component of lifelong learning' (EC, 2006, p. 1). Accordingly, the *Action plan on adult learning* not only affirms that 'the need for a high quality and accessible adult learning system is no longer a point of discussion' (EC, 2007, p. 3) but assigns to adult learning the main tasks of reducing labour shortages.

The above documents paved the way for a *Resolution on adult learning* by the European Parliament (EP, 2008). Recognizing that 'adult learning is becoming a political priority' (EP, 2008, para. A), the Resolution urges member states 'to establish a lifelong learning culture, primarily focussing on education and training for adults' (EP,

2008, para. 3). In doing so, the Resolution also stresses the need for reliable data for policy-making purposes. Although personal development is mentioned as one of the goals of lifelong learning, primary attention is paid throughout the Resolution to workers' employability, adaptability, and geographical and vocational mobility 'which is important for the functioning of the internal market' (EP, 2008, pp. 2-3). A few months later, the Council of the European Union (CEU) published its *Conclusions on adult learning* (CEU, 2008), in which it recognized:

the key role which adult learning can play in meeting the goals of the Lisbon Strategy by fostering social cohesion, providing citizens with the skills required to find new jobs and helping Europe to better respond to the challenges of globalization. (CEU, 2008, p. C140/11)

In its *Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning* (CEU, 2011), the Council of the European Union spells out that 'in order to face both the short and long-term consequences of the economic crisis, there is a need for adults regularly to enhance their personal and professional skills and competences' (CEU, 2011, p. C 372/2), thus setting the priority areas in which member states should direct their attention for 2012-2014, with a focus on increasing and widening adult participation in lifelong learning, building a strong adult-learning sector, promoting social cohesion, and enhancing citizens' creativity and innovative capacity.

A thorough examination of UNESCO and EU policies on adult education (and learning) brings to light differing institutional justifications for a global polity in this field. UNESCO calls for 'alliances' within and outside territorial borders to fulfil the human right of disadvantaged groups to access adult education; the EU calls for a variety of social actors to use the available resources more effectively to promote regional economic growth. On one aspect, however, there is silence, namely, the failure of labour market and employment policies. I will elaborate on this in the next section.

## 5. The failure of labour market and employment policies

When we look at the European Union as a pool of states that is representative - both in complexity and, until the recent economic recession, in economic success - of the economically developed North, it is of interest to observe that, although economic means to support training activities among adults have been available within the Union since 1951 through the European Social Fund, adult learning became an explicit object of inter-state policy only in the mid-1990s, and found fully fledged expression only recently (see section four). In fact, even though the 'old Europe' (the EU 15) had a long adult education tradition, only a few states have had, and still have, adult education policies. Among these are the Scandinavian countries, for instance, in sharp contrast to their Mediterranean counterparts.

Yet even in those states with a tradition of policy and practice in adult education, there has been a constant redirection of public financial resources from popular/liberal towards vocationally oriented provisions (Milana & Larson, 2011). This reflects a general trend observed in Europe, whereby adult education is reduced to vocational and work-related education, thus creating the conditions for the private sector, rather than the state, to become its main provider (Keogh, 2009).

Trying to understand the rationale beyond this trend, it becomes apparent that in Europe, as in other Western countries, increased political attention has been paid since the early 1980s to competence development, sustained by a convergent view of learning

processes as a central asset - regardless of whether the context is formal, non-formal or informal. The implementation of so-called 'lifelong learning systems', not least through educational reform at state level, is considered a precondition for the goal to be achieved. This has led to the blooming of a multiplicity of competence-development agenda settings in a variety of policy arenas.

In a critical examination of the EU agenda setting for competence development Milana (2009) has brought to light the 'regulatory ideal' that directs current educational reforms in European member states, thus sustaining the above-mentioned trend reducing adult education to vocational and work-related education. This 'regulatory ideal' is based on a simplified account of the social problem it aims to address, i.e. a lack of productivity within the Union, which is grounded on a few assumptions. First, there exists a bottleneck in the single market due to a lack of skills availability among the population. Second, education and training provision represent the only means by which to break this bottleneck. Third, it is possible to reach a perfect equilibrium between the quantity and quality of skills workers have and jobs require. Lastly, the skills workers acquire via education and training correspond to the jobs they can obtain.

This has important consequences for the way adult education (and learning) policy and practice are reframed by individual states, as it assumes that nation states are no longer the guarantors for social justice in taking responsibility for a fair redistribution of resources, by, for instance, paying attention to job creation or the protection of basic worker rights to avoid exploitation, unfair salary distribution, etc. In the meantime, the above assumptions also underestimate the diverse institutional settings of the European labour markets, the under-utilization of available skills, the shortage of adequate paid work, the quality of employment and the unequal distribution of work (De Grip & Wolbers, 2006; Gangl, 2003).

In short, the increased political focus on vocational and work-related education (and adult 'learning'), at least in Western societies, may be also explained by the diminished role of the state in securing job creation and citizens' protection in relation to that of the market.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The shift of vocabulary from (adult and continuing) education to (lifelong) learning can be partly explained by at least three factors: theoretical and conceptual advancements in the humanities and social sciences; the empirical observation that people are spending more time and money on learning activities; and the rise of the market economy, together with the demise of the welfare state (Biesta, 2006). In interaction with the above processes, however, I argue that an additional trend can be identified in political globalization and the subsequent changing nature of the modern state and its authority, which after the Second World War contributed to a shift in mindsets on the relation between education, work and the socio-economic development of nations. This led to the emergence of lifelong learning as a global imaginary, which in its most popular interpretation favours an economic view on education. Yet state membership in transnational and inter-state entities cautions against interpreting this simply as the result of top-down power relations. In the meantime, increased political attention to competence development, sustained by a convergent view of learning processes as a central asset for economic growth, has kept silence on the failure of labour market and employment policies by moving policy attention away from securing job creation and citizen protection, towards securing that citizens acquire marketable skills. Although

these trends seem to point to the demise of the nation state as a guarantor of social justice, more research is needed to deepen our understanding of the interplay between transnational and nation-state levels. Thus as scholars we are called upon to establish new research agendas that will investigate the relations between transnational policy-making and state models for adult education.

I would like to suggest here three points to be at the core of such an agenda. First, the relationship between transnational and inter-state organizations and single states: much research on adult education either ignores or under-values the conditioning effects that result from increased political globalization. Second, the relationship between adult education as a global polity and as localized practice: available research cautions against interpreting adult education as either a global concern or a national affair, while recognizing global-local interconnectedness. Lastly, the tensions between the needs of the knowledge economy, innovation and social cohesion: differing political and ideological logics seem to be influencing the position of adult education within a broader agenda of national and regional growth.

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