

## Adult education research between field and rhizome –a bibliometrical analysis of conference programs of ESREA

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### Abstract

*Adult education research is frequently an own subject of research. Such research is often focused on the analysis of journals. This paper will instead analyse triennial research conferences of the European Society for the Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) between 1994 and 2013. The research was carried out mainly via a bibliometrical program analysis of conference papers. Results support previous findings in the analysis of adult education research, but a number of differences or blind spots of ESREA and adult education research in general will become visible.*

**Keywords:** adult education research; longitudinal study; program analysis; bibliometrics; triennial research conferences of ESREA; comparative research

### Theoretical-heuristic approach

#### *Mapping adult education research*

There is already a rich body of literature dealing with the international development of adult education research (e.g. Chang, 2013; Fejes & Nicoll, 2013; Fejes & Nylander, 2013, 2014; Larsson, 2010; Long, 1983; Nicoll et al., 2014; Rubenson, 1982, 2000; Rubenson & Elfert, 2014; St. Clair, 2011). It is important that fields of research define and reflect on their approaches. This is even more valid for a field like adult education research, which is nationally and internationally very heterogeneous in many respects. An analysis of articles published in journals was mostly the preferred approach by the scholars mentioned above. The work of Taylor (2001) stands out because, in his analysis of the respected journal *Adult Education Quarterly*, he examined not only the papers published, but also those refused. His study offers the chance to learn something about selection regimes in adult education research at least for this journal in the period analysed. Each academic field has its open or hidden rules of selection, which are often influenced by core people like journal editors and reviewers. Conference papers or proceedings have been analysed much less often (Long, 1983). This is partly astonishing since such an analysis potentially offers a wider overview, especially when

analysing conferences with rather liberal selection procedures with a low level of refusals. An analysis of peer-reviewed papers has instead to keep in mind the crucial influence of editors and reviewers. Overall, the analysis of journals or conference papers has different advantages and disadvantages. Both approaches can be considered complementary and they make a variety of insights possible.

The status and the goals of adult education as an academic field or discipline are frequently debated (e.g. Hake, 1992; Fejes & Nicoll, 2013). The use of the notion 'field' demonstrates partly the quest (Rubenson, 1982) to give adult education research a foundation. A strong academic field (like law) would be characterised by the power to enforce and to control standards autonomously in order to be as independent as possible from regulating forces from the outside (e.g. policy-makers, interest groups). Some researchers in adult education have focused on the term field as follows:

- 'We use the term 'field' of research in order to identify our object of research. A field is a socio-cultural practice which, through those actors, texts, and other kinds of material, that are part of it, makes up the field. What the field is, is a battle over truth in which we as researchers are all engaged in. Thus, the field should not be seen as fixed in any way, it rather emerges through our descriptions of it.' (Fejes & Nylander, 2013, p. 1)
- 'Bourdieu sees the social universe (the society) as an ensemble of relatively autonomous (power) fields which generate their own values and regulate themselves according to their own principles.' (Wittpoth, 2005, p. 26)<sup>1</sup>

Both quotations refer to power struggles inside and outside the field. It becomes obvious that authors as cartographers are not neutral, objective observers of a field. Instead, actors draw a map as an exercise, which also tells a story about the people active in the field and their own historical, cultural and socio-political position in time (cf. Garfield, 2013). Each scientific discipline has to draw lines in order to define boundaries. Educational research might sometimes be even more occupied with securing and reflecting on its identity because of its still often precarious position. It is a relatively young and volatile discipline that might be still engaged in 'curing the ills of an undisciplined discipline' (Plecas & Sork, 1986) and it has to identify 'centrifugal and centripetal forces' within the field (Gieseke et al., 1989).

The metaphor of 'rhizome' is used in social science as well as in adult education research. It was introduced as a general philosophical concept mainly by Deleuze & Guattari (1980). A number of authors in adult education research have applied the metaphor in different ways. The online journal 'Rizoma Freireano/Rhizome Freirean' states in its 2008 editorial of the first edition<sup>2</sup> the journal:

The aim is to emerge the invalidated academic and official knowledge as legitimate knowledge, based on rules of multiplicity. This will lead into new thoughts, ideas, dreams and texts which allow reflecting about the world in/with people; and about what people are in/with the world.

The journal intends to create new approaches in the knowledge production about adults' learning. The multilingual approach of the journal (Catalan, English, Portuguese) beyond using solely the lingua franca English is one expression of this. Enoch & Gieseke (2011) were the first to apply the term rhizome in Germany (see also Gieseke, 2010). They see a non-hierarchical, openly developing structure of educational provision, which contains elements of extension, decay and new linkages. A German-

Polish research team has used the term in analysing and comparing the regional provision of cultural education in Germany and Poland (cf. Gieseke 2014). Usher (2010) wants the ‘tree to be replaced by the rhizome, the multiply connected, interpenetrating underground network of growth without any centre. Rhizomes are networks that cut across borders, linking preexisting gaps.’ (Usher, 2010, p. 71). He is focusing on the concept of ‘lines of flight’, which is part of the metaphor of a ‘rhizome’. In his analysis of research on lifelong learning, he comes to the conclusion that there are contradicting developments (‘vectors’) and ‘the research process, contrary to the model of science, can be better understood as rhizomatic rather than arborescent and powered by desire rather than objectivity.’ (Usher, 2010, p. 78) Additionally, St. Clair (2011, pp 37-38) used the term rhizome in analysing the Canadian adult education research association CASAE. He refers to a ‘rhizomatic nature of human knowledge and human action’ (St. Clair, 2011, p. 37). He focuses on differences and bipolarities in Northern America, stressing that ‘a person with a different background may read these rhizomes quite differently.’ (St. Clair, 2011, p. 38)

The usage of the term ‘rhizome’ by these different adult education researchers in different national and international contexts is very interesting. It challenges partly the notion of a field since none of the authors refers to another. Already this discourse is rhizomatic. No arborescent centre or root can be found. It seems to be rather the case that different scholars in very different contexts of adult education research were intrigued by this metaphor. This demonstrates the frequent disconnectedness of the different national fields of adult education research. Parallel to each other, the authors share the desire to look for new structures, to discuss new perspectives and to challenge popular assumptions of arborescent linearity and a canon of knowledge. In contrast, less differentiated historical writings often tend to describe the history of knowledge production as a logical succession of phases with key thinkers, schools and followers. Rhizomatisation is not meant as a process where everything turns into chaos, wilderness and becomes arbitrary. It is rather a heuristic concept for looking for different connected and unconnected traces and their temporary connections. Overall, the term rhizome heightens awareness of heterogeneity more than the term field does. The following discussion centres on the question of which insights in relation to homogeneity and heterogeneity in adult education research can be found when analysing the European Society for the Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) based on its triennial research conferences over time. The aim of the paper is to enhance partly the understanding of European research in adult education and its development in the last two decades, using the internationally rather lessknown method of a ‘program analysis’.

### **The data analysed and the method ‘program analysis’**

#### *The data analysed: papers of ESREA triennial research conferences*

The data for this program analysis are available papers of ESREA triennial research conferences. ESREA is the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults. Nicoll et al. (2014) did provide the first relatively comprehensive overview of the history of this academic society with its many different conferences, networks and other activities. ESREA “promotes and disseminates theoretical and empirical research on the education of adults and adult learning in Europe through research networks, conferences and publications” as stated on its homepage ([www.esrea.org](http://www.esrea.org)). ESREA thus comprises a wide range of activities (e.g. publishing the journal RELA). It organizes several conferences each year through its different networks, and every third year it organizes a large, central conference called triennial research conference. Only the latter

conferences form the basis of the current research. An analysis of all network conferences would be an even more elaborate and challenging approach, because of the high number of network conferences. ESREA triennial research conferences have taken place in different countries every three years:

**Strobl (1995):** ‘Adult learning and social participation’

**Brussels (1998):** ‘Learning to live in the learning society’

**Lisbon (2001):** ‘Wider benefits of learning: understanding and monitoring the consequences of adult learning’

**Wroclaw (2004):** ‘Between “old” and “new” worlds of adult learning’

**Seville (2007):** ‘Adult Learning and the challenges of social and cultural diversity: diverse lives, cultures, learnings and literacies’

**Link ping (2010):** ‘Adult learning in Europe – understanding diverse meanings and contexts’

**Berlin (2013):** ‘Changing configurations of adult education in transitional times’.

As much as possible papers of these conferences will be analysed. One advantage of this is that ESREA conferences traditionally have a low rejection rate (Antunes, 2003). Thus, the analysis gives a broader insight into adult education research and goes beyond analysing solely conference titles, call for papers and keynotes (Nicoll et al., 2014, pp 34-41), which gives rather insights in the intentions of conference organizers. Journals refuse many submitted papers; editors and reviewers are important gatekeepers. (Taylor, 2001) The collection of the papers constituted a major challenge, since ESREA itself does not keep an archive of conference papers. The papers could only be collected with the help of the conference hosts and other people<sup>3</sup>. The papers of ESREA1995 were edited in a book (Bisovsky et al. 1998) or even a series of books. This also applies to ESREA2001 and ESREA2004 (ESREA, 2001; Bron et al. 2004). The papers of ESREA2004, ESREA2007, ESREA2010 and ESREA2013 were acquired as electronic data directly from the conference hosts. Unfortunately, data for ESREA1998 in Brussels could not be found despite extended efforts. The resulting sample consists of 364 papers from six conferences:

*Table 1: ESREA conferences (year, location and number of papers)*

	ESREA1995 in Strobl (Austria)	ESREA2001 in Lisbon (Portugal)	ESREA2004 in Wroclaw (Poland)	ESREA2007 in Seville (Spain)	ESREA2010 in Link�ping (Sweden)	ESREA2013 in Berlin (Germany)
Number of available papers	<b>25</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>126</b>

Source: Own analysis

All data was saved or converted into Excel, Word and SPSS files for the respective analysis. Limitations of the data refer especially to the first two ESREA conferences, where papers were only available via the publication. It is likely that these and other conferences assembled more papers than are currently available. Overall, participant numbers at ESREA triennial conferences have increased significantly over time, which is a first expression of the liveliness of this field of research.

*The method applied: program analysis*

The data were analysed using the method of quantitative program analysis. The coding process resembles characteristics of the qualitative interpretation of documents. The method ‘program analysis’ refers partly to the content analysis of social sciences. It is often used in Germany in order to analyse the course offers of providers (see Gieseke, 2014; Schrader, 2014). Elaborate methodological discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of this method are available (e.g. Gieseke, 2000; K pplinger, 2008). The method was applied here to the analysis of conference papers of ESREA triennials. A similar approach was applied by Long (1983) for the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) in Northern America in using content analysis. A program analysis is a non-reactive method, which means that the material is analysed by a coding scientist or a coding team of scientists. Each paper was coded by a team of five people at Humboldt University<sup>4</sup> based on a code plan which was deductively and inductively developed. The coding was discussed by the team of coders, which helped to achieve so-called intercoder-reliability. The code plan consisted of these variables:

- **NAME:** Names of the authors. Papers with multiple authorships were multi-coded per each name.
- **COUNTRY:** The code was assigned according authors’ workplace (institutional affiliation) and not according the country of birth.
- **TITLE:** Full title of paper.
- **METHOD:** Coded according a revised coding plan developed and used by Long (1983)
- **RESEARCH\_FIELD:** Coded according to a plan originally developed by Arnold et al. (2000) and revised by Ludwig & Baldauf-Bergmann (2010)
- **NUMBER\_CITATIONS:** Quantitative amount of citations in the reference lists.
- **GENDER\_AUTHOR:** Gender of the authors.

The different variables chosen give information about a variety of important dimensions of adult education research. For example, it is important to know with which methods adult education research is carried out and which subfields of research dominate over time. Similar variables were chosen by the authors already cited who analysed journals. Other variables could of course be chosen as well. More details on exactly how the coding was undertaken/carried out will be given in the following chapters.

## Results of the analysis

*The role of conference sites*

Triennials have taken place at seven locations so far: Strobl (Austria), Brussels (Belgium), Lisbon (Portugal), Wroclaw (Poland), Seville (Spain), Link ping (Sweden), and Berlin (Germany). Which effects are connected to these sites and to what extent are they visible? Firstly, contributions from the host country clearly flourished at the ‘own’ conference, being well above the average participation rate:

*Table 2: ESREA conferences and the shares of authors from host countries*

	1995 Strobl	2001 Lisbon	2004 Wroclaw	2007 Seville	2010 Linköping	2013 Berlin
Share of authors from the host country in relation to all authors in the conference	12%	15%	23%	14%	19%	30%
Average share of authors from the host country in all six conferences	2%	10%	6%	4%	12%	10%

Source: Own program analysis

Hosting a triennial is a chance for the national research community to present its own work to an international conference. Pragmatically, it is also an opportunity to publish internationally without substantial travelling costs. But how does the national participation develop before and after a triennial conference? It might be reasonable to assume that participating in a conference also raises participation rates afterwards. However, this assumption/this hypothesis is not generally reflected in/supported by the quantitative data:

*Table 3: ESREA conferences and the share of papers from host countries before, during and after hosting a triennial*

	Before hosting a Triennial	While hosting a Triennial	After hosting a Triennial
Share of <b>Austrian</b> papers in Triennials	No data, because Strobl was the first Triennial	12%	1%
Share of <b>Portuguese</b> papers in Triennials	6%	15%	10%
Share of <b>Polish</b> papers in Triennials	3%	23%	2%
Share of <b>Spanish</b> papers in Triennials	2%	14%	2%
Share of <b>Swedish</b> papers in Triennials	11%	19%	7%
Share of <b>German</b> papers in Triennials	6%	30%	No data, because Berlin was the last Triennial

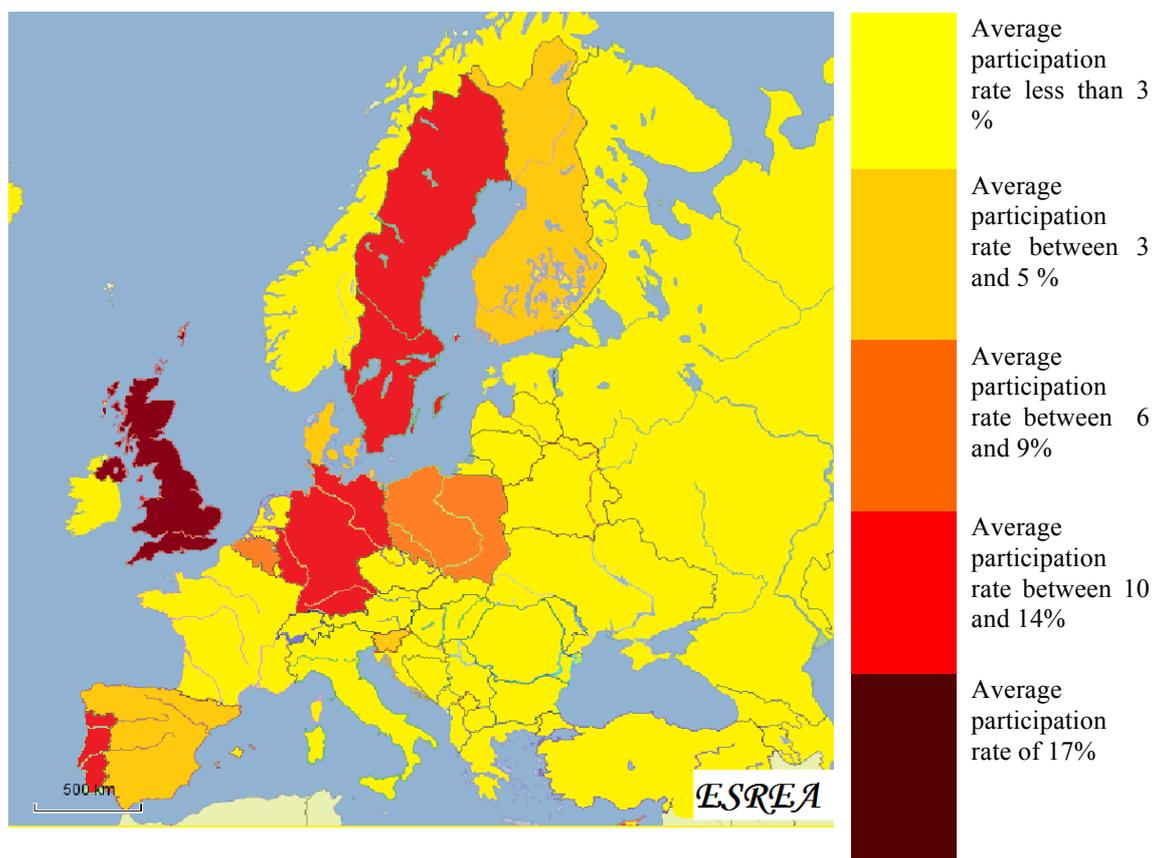
Source: Own program analysis

With the exception of Portuguese contributions, no pattern exists to suggest that national participation was higher after hosting a Triennial. Rather the opposite is the case. The chance to stimulate a sustaining high participation in ESREA just by hosting a conference is rather limited. Nonetheless, it is interesting that the location of a conference mobilises some neighbouring scholars. Regional patterns of increased participation can be observed in each conference. Such patterns were observed for Austria (Slovenian scholars were attracted to a high degree), Portugal (Spanish, partly French), Poland (Czech), Spain (Portuguese, partly French), Sweden (Danish, partly Norwegian). Thus, the location of a conference makes some parts of the rhizome of adult education research briefly visible.

*The role of countries and supranational/international organisations*

The following map provides information about the average participation in Triennials according to country. It is measured by the average participation rate of authors from different countries in relation to the numbers of all authors contributing.

*Figure 1: ESREA conferences and national participation rates*



Source: Own program analysis

It becomes clear that ESREA is quantitatively influenced by the engagement of authors from a rather limited number of countries. ESREA is not as internationally diverse as one might expect. The size of the population of a country matters, of course, but it is not a determining factor. For example, France has a large population but a rather low engagement within ESREA so far. Russia is also a blank spot. In sharp contrast, authors from the UK are overall the most active. This is certainly partly due to the lingua franca English within ESREA. But the relative importance of the UK has significantly decreased over time, which might be explainable by the vanishing importance of adult education as an academic discipline even in the UK (Jones, 2014, pp 148-152). While authors from the UK once had an impressive share of 30% (1995) or 37% (2001) in relation to all contributions in an ESREA triennial conference, the last three conferences saw a British participation rate of only 6 to 9%. A similar observation of a decreasing engagement over time can be made for Belgian or Slovenian authors. Contrarily, shares of Portuguese and Swedish authors have increased over time. Polish and Spanish authors have been very engaged in their own national Triennial, which mainly led to their visual representation in the map. This is also partly valid for Germany, where engagement has increased quantitatively since 2010. It is likely that other countries will switch from yellow to another colour, if the next ESREA triennial is held in Estonia,

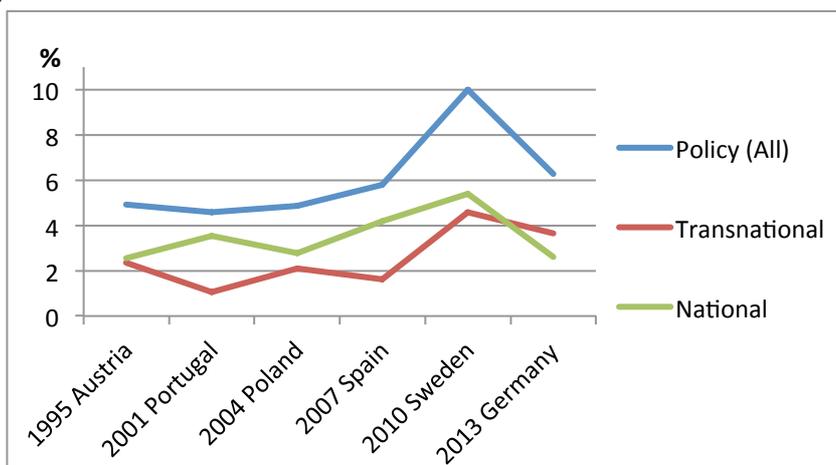
France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland or Italy, for instance. Other countries' representation on the map might diminish if the impact of being a host becomes less influential over time.

Finnish and Danish authors have also been visible at the Triennials, while many other countries have had quantitatively rather marginal roles or a limited visibility. The many underrepresented or even blank spots in Central and Eastern Europe are challenging. Adult education research in Europe is far from being established in each country, although in academia science is in general often unevenly regionally distributed. The relatively active role of Slovenia or the Czech Republic in the past and nowadays Poland (partly also Estonia, Greece or Hungary, although they are by a slim margin not visible on the map) might be an impulse to learn perhaps from these countries or some individually active scholars, how a higher engagement in Central and Eastern Europe could be supported. The European map of research in adult education has a North-South and a West-East bias, although this bias is shifting because of a higher engagement especially in Poland, Portugal, Spain or rather recently in Italy. (cf. Nicoll et al., 2014, p. 71)

More than 40 papers have been co-authored by at least one researcher from outside Europe. This equals 11% of all papers and can be interpreted as an 'internationalization' of ESREA even beyond Europe. Canada (18 papers), Australia (9) and the USA (7) are well ahead of all other non-European countries. 'Internationalization' is not as plural as one might assume. It is often highly interrelated with the English-speaking countries (cf. Fejes & Nylander, 2014).

Adult education has received increasing attention by national, international or transnational stakeholders. The slogan of lifelong learning is applied by policy-makers, which many scholars have commented on critically since the interest is often predominantly economically driven (e.g. Martin, 2000; Gieseke, 1999; Popovic, 2013; Olesen, 2014). Which effects can be observed when studying ESREA's Triennials? Figure 2 shows an increased representation of policy documents in the authors' citations<sup>5</sup> over time:

Figure 2: ESREA conferences and the citation rates of different policy documents over time

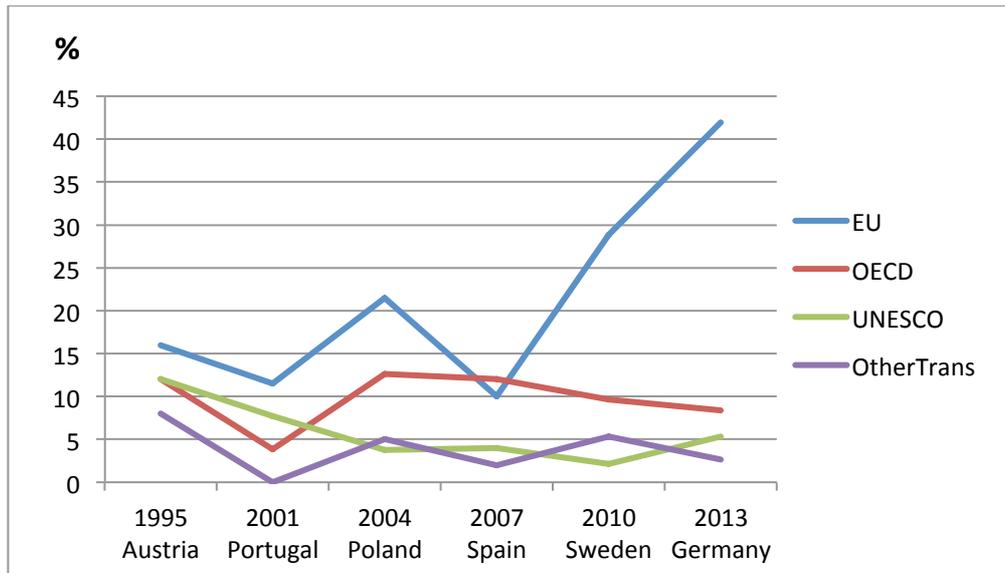


Source: Own program analysis

The share of policy-related documents rose slowly from 4.9% in 1995 to 5.8% in 2007. The climax was reached in ESREA 2010 in Sweden with 10.0%, but even 2013 saw a further rise of 6.3%. It is also interesting that transnational documents from agencies

like the EU, the OECD or the UNESCO have altogether almost doubled their relevance between 1995 and 2013. 2013 was the first year where transnational policy documents were cited more often than national documents. Adult education research refers increasingly to international or transnational developments. This development strengthens the relevance of a society like ESREA. When looking at the international and transnational actors or agencies more closely, the following developments become visible:

Figure 3: ESREA conferences and the citation rates of different policy documents over time



Source: Own program analysis

The EU has clearly gained ground since 2007. The role of the OECD is stagnating somehow, which is rather surprising considering OECD's high engagement in (vocational) education nowadays. This could be (partly) due to the fact that PIAAC results were not published until after the last ESREA conference in October 2013. The role of the UNESCO has clearly decreased. Nowadays, UNESCO seems to play a rather marginal role for most European adult education researchers - at least in quantitative terms and in relation to ESREA. It is also important to bear in mind that ESREA authors often cite policy documents critically. Thus, the sheer increase in citations should not be equated with an affirmative reception. It remains a task of in-depth and qualitative research in order to know better how policy documents are used in adult education research. Different lines of flight are observable. These can reach from rhetorical and rather affirmative reference to policy documents in externally funded projects, to very critical approaches in publications targeted solely at fellow scholars. Some scholars might even adapt their writings to each context like a chameleon. Nonetheless, European adult education research refers increasingly to policy documents. High shares of 59.4% in ESREA2010 and 50.0% of all papers in ESREA2013 had at least one policy related citation, while this respective share was between 22.2% and 35.4% in the other three ESREA conferences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This result might be influenced mainly/predominantly by the conference sites Sweden and Germany, since policy-oriented research is rather strong in both research communities. The share of policy related citations was, for example, 14.7% for Swedish authors in 2010. But this is not much above the overall average of 10% for the whole conference and thus can only

partly explain the climax in 2010. Developments in the policy-orientation of adult education research should be observed in future.

*The most visible scholars*

Academic societies are influenced by key persons whom are cited frequently. The following so-called tag clouds<sup>6</sup> serve to demonstrate the most frequent citations per conference:

Figure 4: ESREA conferences and the most cited authors



Source: Own program analysis

The tag clouds visualise and support a result of the last section. National policy documents were very frequently cited at every conference. EU policy documents have gained ground in recent years and are now as important as national documents. The OECD is also prominent, while the UNESCO is almost invisible.

When focusing on the ‘big’ (i.e. most cited) writers, it becomes evident that key persons such as PhD tutors or chairs, convenors or secretaries of ESREA are also very likely to be cited most often. Key scholars of ESREA like Alheit, Bron, Fejes, Hake, Larsson,

Olesen or West are just a few to mention and are quite visible within these tag clouds. North-Western and male authors dominate citations and the tag clouds. Only a few women like Bron, Merrill or Formenti are visually represented. Conversely, when looking not at the citations, but at the authors presenting at ESREA conferences, the opposite picture emerges: a female majority amongst presenters. While in 1995 female presenters in ESREA had a share of only 38%, women had shares of 62% both in Linköping (2010) and in Berlin (2013).

A dominance of English native speakers was a feature in 1995 (the often cited Taylor was Richard Taylor from the UK) and partly also in 2001. These conferences had the biggest attendance from the UK. Non-native English authors are relatively prominent and their role has been increased over the years. National patterns of the host country become clear especially in 2007, where three Spanish authors belonged to the most cited ones. A similar degree of an increased representation of national authors did not occur in other Triennials.

It is somehow surprising that authors specialised in adult education research have a relatively strong position within ESREA. They dominate many tag clouds. One might have expected that authors like Argyris, Beck, Giddens, Habermas, Lave & Wenger or Vygotsky of related scientific disciplines would have more prominence since they deliver general foundations. Somehow contradicting this—but only at first glance—might be the fact that French thinkers like Foucault and Bourdieu dominate so much despite the relative absence of French scholars as researchers within ESREA. English is the working language in ESREA, but it obviously does not lead to an unbalanced dominance of English native speakers as academic reference points. But authors have to publish extensively and prominently in English like Bourdieu and Foucault in order to be cited frequently. While in 2004 and 2013 Bourdieu was cited more often, Foucault was dominant in 2007 and 2013. Giddens achieved a brief peak in 2004.

Influences from non-European authors like Freire, Mezirow or E. Taylor are partly also visible. Other world regions in Africa, Asia or South America are quantitatively ‘terra incognitas’ in the adult education research map of ESREA. Such results might encourage ESREA to reflect on its participation policy, particularly since other associations like ECER offer participants from low GDP countries reduced participation fees.

#### *The methods and the fields of research*

Which methods and fields of research are frequently used by adult education researchers? Based on the revised and updated typology of Long (1983)<sup>7</sup> the following was identified:

*Table 4: ESREA conferences and the methods applied in papers.*

	1995	2001	2004	2007	2010	2013
<b>Theoretical-philosophical</b>	40%	30%	23%	2%	3%	12%
<b>Literature Review</b>	16%	22%	10%	8%	5%	17%
<b>Historical</b>	0%	0%	1%	10%	6%	3%
<b>Methodological</b>	8%	0%	4%	8%	5%	2%
<b>Technique or Practice</b>	0%	4%	10%	21%	8%	6%
<b>Qualitative-empirical</b>	12%	26%	36%	29%	39%	31%
<b>Quantitative-empirical</b>	20%	7%	10%	13%	16%	16%
<b>Triangulative</b>	0%	4%	7%	8%	17%	12%
<b>Experimental and quasi-experimental</b>	4%	0%	0%	0%	2%	1%
<b>Others</b>	0%	7%	0%	0%	0%	2%

Source: Own program analysis

The methods and approaches used have changed considerably over time. At early ESREA conferences, it was very popular to present mainly theoretical-philosophical papers. They made up 40% in relation to all papers in 1995. In contrast, empirical papers are much more popular nowadays. They are mainly focused on qualitative research (39% in 2010). Quantitative papers and papers with triangulative approaches are also frequently presented (16% and 12% respectively in 2013). Experimental and quasi-experimental papers are rather a peculiarity in adult education research, which constitutes a sharp contrast to other disciplines like psychology or economical sciences. The category ‘Technique or practice’ includes papers which focus on educational procedures, projects or initiatives within the practical field (c. Long, 1983, p. 95). These papers in particular are in a rigid sense not based on a clear separation between research and practice, but refer rather to the origin of adult education as a movement in which research is part of actions in practice. Such papers peaked in 2007, where the connections and interrelations between adult education and community education or social work were of pivotal interest for many researchers. Again, the 2007 conference was in many respects different from all other ESREA research conferences. Relatively popular are literature reviews (17% in 2013), while historical research papers and methodological papers were rather rarely presented.

Overall, one of the most striking results is that the empirical focus of papers has increased. When adding up all empirical papers, their share of all papers increased from 36% to 60% between 1995 and 2013. In 2010, their share of 74% was even two times higher than in 1995. The qualitative paradigm is also twice more prominent than the quantitative paradigm in empirical research. This point will be discussed later.

The learning of adults can be viewed from various perspectives. There is a triangle between learner, teacher and content and the triangle can be contextualised by institutional and organizational environments, which are part of a wider context of systems (labour market, political systems, cultural atmospheres, etc.) and policies of state agencies and other interest groups or stakeholders. Arnold et al. (2000), (see also Ludwig & Baldauf-Bergmann, 2008) refer to such a pentamerous classification when structuring the research field /the national research field. The coding of each paper based on this classification enabled this overview:

Table 5: ESREA conferences and the subject of research in papers

	1995	2001	2004	2007	2010	2013
<b>Systems and Policies</b>	52%	48%	19%	21%	25%	32%
<b>Learning of Adults</b>	12%	26%	40%	27%	34%	25%
<b>Professional Action</b>	8%	0%	14%	19%	8%	19%
<b>Knowledge and Competences</b>	20%	22%	14%	15%	9%	18%
<b>Institutions and Organizations</b>	8%	4%	14%	19%	23%	7%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Own program analysis

A high mobility between conferences again becomes visible. There is no trend observable suggesting that any field of research is clearly increasing or decreasing over time. The wider context of systems and policies has been very prominent in the past (see ESREA1995). After a sharp drop, it gained ground continuously after 2004. In contrast to this, educational institutions and organisations are not as prominent as learners as research objects. The content of learning (knowledge and competences) has never been a core interest for the majority of papers. Overall, learners, systems and policies have frequently been the focus of papers. The conclusion could be that adult education research often oscillates between the individual and the societal, while intermediating institutions and professions are sometimes less prominent or even neglected.

When combining both analysis of methods and of subjects, the most frequent combination in a triennial is a qualitative study on the learning of adults (13.5% of all papers). This is clearly the most popular sub form. It means mostly doing interviews with learners (Antunes, 2003, p. 72). The next frequent forms (8.8%) are theoretical-philosophical papers on systems and policies. The following configuration is a literature review (6.6%) with the same subject focus. Then follow qualitative studies on educational personal (6.1%) or on institutions/organizations (5.2%). The first quantitative combination can be found in 6<sup>th</sup> place with 5.0% and is focused on the learners. Studies on knowledge/competences and organizations/institutions have only rarely been carried out.

## Discussion of results

### *Places matter immediately but briefly*

The role of places as physical meeting points for academic discourses is not very well researched in adult education. An influence of the titles of the conferences on papers was not evidently visible despite intensive data mining. For example, the influence of six titles with 'adult learning' in the title and only one title with 'adult education' did actually not lead to a dominance of 'learning' or 'education' in the respective conferences. Perhaps the role of such terms is not as important as one might assume or conclude (cf. Fejes & Nicoll, 2013; Nicoll et al., 2014, pp 34-41). There are generally a lot of analyses on the role of journals, but the sites of academic conferences are rather

black spots in bibliometrics. Even analysis of conferences (cf. Long, 1983; Chang, 2013) do not analyse the role of the chosen locations for conferences. The analysis demonstrates that conference location seems to have only a few long-lasting effects. Nonetheless, the immediate effects in terms of participation and representation are strong. Future research could focus on the role of places for the development of academic discourses since the analysis presented here gave some insights.

#### *The still fragmented European research rhizome of ESREA*

The analysis showed that the most active countries within ESREA triennials have so far been the UK, Sweden, Portugal, Germany, Belgium, Poland, Denmark, Finland, Spain and Slovenia. This result is heavily influenced by the fact that almost all of these countries have already hosted an ESREA conference. The hosting of a conference clearly results in increased participation. Many large countries like France or Italy are clearly underrepresented in the map so far. The whole area of South-East Europe is not very well represented in the map despite some interesting shifts towards the South and East (cf. Nicoll et al., 2014, pp 71).

Scholars like Rubenson & Elfert (2014) have pointed out that different maps of adult education research exist in Northern America, Europe and Asia. Even within Europe the map of research is relatively uneven or fragmented in national maps with loose connections to other national maps. European adult education research is—metaphorically—(still) reminiscent of a rhizome rather than a field. Parts of the rhizome are flourishing or diminishing over time. New connections and lines of flight are established over time. The North-South and West-East division is even within Europe an observable issue. Thus, it is very challenging to speak of a European map of adult education research, since quantitatively many scholars come from rather few countries. It still remains a challenge to involve more people from different areas in Europe and outside of Europe. A situation where previously very active countries in adult education research, like the Netherlands or the UK, ‘drop from the map’ has to be prevented or even reversed in future. The Netherlands—which had such a rich tradition of adult education research—are nowadays almost a blank spot for adult education research within ESREA conferences.

#### *The international actors and policies become more influential in the field*

The share of citations which refer to international agencies and to policy documents have both significantly increased over time. The peak so far was reached in 2010, where 10% of all citations referred to policy documents or official papers. Adult education research is a field of research which is closely connected to policy developments on the national or supranational level. It was not an analytical issue here if the citations refer mainly to these documents in an affirmative or critical way. Within the variety of transnational agencies the European Union is the most prominent actor, while (the) UNESCO has lost ground over time. This might raise the attention of ESREA as well as the UNESCO institute of lifelong learning. The role of the OECD is relatively stable.

In other bibliometric analyses, the focus of the supranational/international level and the role of policies was no research objective. This is a shortcoming of previous research since this subfield of research is established by now and seems to have become increasingly important. It would be interesting to observe what exactly the connection is between adult education research and these agencies? It might be the case that there is a field of adult education research constituted by ESREA and other actors, and there is a field of research on lifelong learning with other disciplines and actors. Do these subfields exist in parallel or partially overlap? Are some researchers active (as

‘chameleons’) in both fields? What are the influences of these transnational and policy-driven fields on the research by core actors of ESREA? Does ESREA perhaps constitute a sub field in opposition to other sub fields? Such questions seem worthy of more detailed study in future.

*Citing adult education researchers and scholars like Bourdieu and Foucault*

The authors cited most often are situated within the field. This is valid despite the frequent remark that adult education research borrows theories and methods from other disciplines or that the whole field is even interdisciplinary in shape. The only conference for which this did not hold true was ESREA 1995, which might indicate a change or even an improvement over time. The most frequently cited names from the field of adult education are, for example, Alheit, Antikainen, Baert, A. Bron, J. Field, Freire, Jarvis, Larsson, Mezirow, Rubenson, Salling Olesen or West. Many of these names were also core figures in the founding and flourishing of ESREA. (cf. Nicoll et al., 2014, p. 60) Other names are much less prominent than one might expect, e.g. psychologists or system theorists like Luhmann. But Bourdieu and Foucault (occasionally also Giddens and Lave and Wenger), were very prominently cited scholars in many ESREA triennials. English is certainly the lingua franca within ESREA, but this does not seem to result in having the main line of thought coming predominantly from the Anglophone academic world, at least when non-anglophone writers publish also in English<sup>8</sup>. Challenging is the observation that except from Freire and Mezirow, almost all frequently cited scholars come from Europe or at least started their careers here (e.g. Rubenson). This underlines that ESREA is a European society. But it also tells us something about the few connections of parts of the rhizome of adult education research between Europe and Northern America. Connections to other continents are quantitatively almost totally missing so far or are at least less visible. The globalization of knowledge does not lead to an equally balanced interconnectedness of all parts of the world, but rather to a visibility of some parts of the rhizome. Considering the high level of global challenges, ESREA might think about appropriate measures to encourage scholars from outside Europe and so-called “Anglo-Saxon countries” (see also Fejes & Nylander, 2014).

Citation regimes are sometimes also discussed in other papers. Some scholars refer to the role of some specific research institutions like St. Clair (2011). Long (1983) demonstrated that some American universities had been most cited in the AERC conferences until the 1990s. It seems worthwhile to observe the different lines of flight of adult education research more closely in future. From a disciplinary perspective, it is encouraging that adult education researchers nowadays cite authors from within the field most frequently.

*Preferred approach and method of the field: interviewing learners*

Papers in triennials increasingly have an empirical focus. While theoretical-philosophical papers were relatively popular in the beginning, nowadays empirical papers make up a high proportion of papers. The most typical form is a qualitative research design like interviewing learners. Other approaches like experiments, which are popular in other social sciences, are almost non-existent. Quantitative designs have a marginal position in relation to qualitative approaches. Overall, adult education research often oscillates between the micro level of learning and policies, cultures and systems on the macro level, while the content/subject of learning and institutions/organisations on the meso level are of lesser interest for ESREA researchers.

Existing research on the nature of adult education research has frequently pointed out that qualitative research dominates clearly over quantitative research. (Rubenson & Elfert, 2014; Fejes & Nylander, 2014; St. Clair, 2011). This observation was confirmed by the data presented here. Nonetheless, it is worth looking more closely at the data. Especially Taylor's paper (2001, p. 333) has the challenging different result that when looking at the submissions of papers (and not only at the published papers) to a journal, the share of quantitative papers is very high. It is even higher than the submission volume for qualitative papers, but qualitative papers are accepted more often. Between 1989 and 1999, 265 quantitative papers and 170 qualitative papers were submitted, but 42 (24.9%) of the qualitative papers and only 33 (12.5%) of the quantitative papers were accepted by editors and reviewers. Similar results/figures are likely for the ESREA journal RELA (e.g. when looking at CfPs). It might be the case that the quantitative papers are generally of lower quality or less adequate. But it is more likely that the editors and reviewers of the journals follow a publishing policy which is more in favour of qualitative than of quantitative approaches. Thus, other scholars' analyses of only published papers and the conclusion that quantitative research is marginal in adult education research might partly be an artefact caused by powerful selection regimes. 'Artefact' means that the analysis mirrors the results of selection processes and the implicit rules of the editors, reviewers and leading scholars. It might not mirror all of the research activities within the field. The share of quantitative papers at ESREA conferences was around 16% in recent years. This is not as low as might be expected if the person knows only the bibliometric analysis of journals.

Thus, the challenging question is, which kind of mechanisms exist in the field of established adult education research, which might lead to an underrepresentation of quantitative research? Taylor's analysis of all papers submitted to *Adult Education Quarterly* (Taylor, 2001) and the analysis of ESREA conferences here indicate that some streams of adult education research receive more or less acceptance by the current leading scholars, reviewers and editors of main journals as gatekeepers to the 'main field'. A certain lack of methodological openness and creativity for other methods like experiments, quasi-experiments, participant observations or video studies is even more challenging. Historical studies are also rather rare. Is this justified by theoretical reasons, or is it a sign of a lack of methodological plurality beyond doing interviews? Which beneficial insights might other methods besides interviews generate like the 'program analysis' applied in this paper here? Other research supports also the interpretation that more diversity and more discussion is needed in relation to the methods applied: 'The interviewees give the impression that the research within ESREA has been methodologically on the narrow end of the spectrum with little explicit methodological discussion.' (Nicoll et al., 2014, p. 71)

### **Concluding remarks: research in ESREA between field and rhizome**

The paper started with a brief discussion of the terms field and rhizome, which have been used in reflecting on adult education research in recent times. In general, the term field presupposes a constituted area, while the term rhizome is applied when looking for diversity and fluidity. ESREA and its research can be perceived as a field or as a rhizome when looking at the results of this analysis. Some lines of flight and trends became visible. Adult education research might be not 'as pluralistic as assumed' (Rubenson & Elfert, 2014, p. 31) since there are some established, unwritten methodological mainstreams and preferences clearly visible. Nonetheless, it has become

clear that the development of ESREA and its triennial conferences are very dynamic, diverse and complex. The rhizome is flourishing. Simultaneously, some parts are decaying. Perhaps this is even more the case for research conferences than for journals? This might justify specifically analysing the developments in conferences rather than journals. Using the metaphor and the concepts connected to rhizomes helps heuristically to search for the unknown, the less prominent over time. Key actors—people and organisations—within the field have become visible. There is mostly no simple genealogy, but rather a magnitude of ups and downs. A number of developments were different than expected (e.g. the relatively low influence of scholars cited outside adult education research).

There are of course methodological limitations connected to this analysis. The classification schemes can certainly be debated. ESREA might engage in establishing and discussing international classifications schemes or handbooks for international or even comparative adult education research. Despite the high level of internationalization nowadays, many shortfalls become visible and real comparative research in adult education research remains a challenge. The rhizome of ESREA might have to develop in this direction in order to support a new quality of research beyond national borders. Encouraging multiple authors with bi- or even tri-national backgrounds might be one way in order to encourage more comparative research.

The focus of this paper on quantitative analysis could be criticised as a loss of meaning. For example, it was the case in some papers that only one quote referred to an author in the references of a paper, but this author was a main influence for this paper. Quantitative analyses entail a loss of meaning. The process of coding involves qualitative judgements. Additional methodological critiques could be added. Nonetheless, I hope to have given some new insights in the histories and the developments of ESREA which might intensify the debate about the character of ESREA as a research association. (cf. Nicoll et al., 2014) I could only present a glimpse of possible analysis of the data. Such an analysis is of course also affected by the person who does it (cf. Garfield, 2013). I invite readers to contact me if they would like to use the data collected and to produce more (other) analyses. This could promote a better understanding of heterogeneity and homogeneity within ESREA.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Translation of quote by author.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rizoma-freireano.org/index.php/editorial/editorial-en>

<sup>3</sup> I am deeply thankful for the advice and support I received from Gerhard Bisovsky, Andreas Fejes, Barry Hake, Ewa Kurantowicz, Emilio Lucio-Villegas and Henning Salling-Olesen. Emma Fawcett was as native speaker a critical-constructive proof reader.

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<sup>5</sup> For each paper, all citations were counted. In a second step the number of cited policy documents – national and inter-/transnational ones - was counted. National documents meant all kind of publications which refer to national state institutions like governments, ministries, statistical offices on all federal or regional levels. Inter-/transnational documents were differentiated between various EU documents, OECD documents, UNESCO documents and a category “other documents” with miscellaneous contributions from the World Bank, International Labour Office, the Council of Europe or other agencies.

<sup>6</sup> The tag clouds were built and saved via the freeware program Tagxedo ([www.tagxedo.com](http://www.tagxedo.com)). (Therefore) the data of the citations were freed from all information other than the full last name and the initials of the first name. Some names received special treatment, because of their special spelling. Popular last names like Smith, Schmitt or Andersen were controlled in relation to the first name.

Institutions/organisations were coded in categories (NationalPolicy, EUPolicy, OECD, OtherTrans). Other organisations like national research institutes were quantitatively of no relevance. Tagxedo build the clouds based on the 50 most frequently names. Persons more often cited are written bigger than persons less often cited. The tag clouds were configured visually. The changed parameters of Tagxedo were: Emphasis: 60%, Tightness: 60%. Other parameters of the algorithm were not changed. The tag clouds can thus be reproduced, although Tagxedo allows images to be saved, but not the parameters.

<sup>7</sup> Intensive definitions and discussions on this classification can be found in Long (1983).

<sup>8</sup> It would be interesting to observe more closely what influence the ‘re-importing’ of Bourdieu and Foucault had after their success in North America.

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