

Vocational education and training for adults in UNESCO's CONFINTEA: A critical analysis of seven decades of policy discourse and governance (1949-2022)

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Abstract

How should Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) serve society – as a tool for economic adaptation or as a site of transformative adult learning and democratic participation? This article critically examines CVET discourse across seven UNESCO International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) (1949-2022). Based on critical analysis of seventeen key texts and informed by Freirean pedagogy, Lima and Guimarães' policy framework, and Biesta's critique of 'learnification', three patterns are identified. First, economic priorities consistently overshadow humanistic aims despite periodic rhetorical reaffirmations. Second, the shift from 'adult education' to 'adult learning' individualises responsibility, transferring costs from states and employers to learners while obscuring structural inequalities. Third, comprehensive policy frameworks coexist with implementation gaps, exposing CONFINTEA's limited capacity to counter neoliberal restructuring. Governance has shifted from public responsibility (1949-1960) to normalised public-private partnerships (2022). Realising CVET's transformative potential requires binding mechanisms, political-economic engagement, and democratic mobilisation beyond declaratory commitments.

Keywords: Continuing Vocational Education and Training, adult education, CONFINTEA, policy discourse, neoliberalism

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Introduction

Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) represents a critical dimension of lifelong learning systems worldwide, enabling adults to acquire, update, and transform their vocational competencies throughout their working lives (European Commission et al., 2020; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL], 2016). Unlike Initial VET (IVET), which prepares young people for first entry into the labour market, CVET addresses the ongoing learning needs of adults already engaged in or re-entering employment, encompassing retraining for career transitions, upskilling for technological adaptation, and broader personal and civic development integrated with vocational purposes (van Wieringen & Attwell, 1999).

The governance of CVET has historically involved complex interactions among multiple stakeholders – states, employers, labour organisations, educational institutions, and international bodies – each bringing distinct interests, resources, and rationalities to vocational education policy (Lima & Guimarães, 2024). Understanding how these governance arrangements have evolved requires examining not only national policy developments but also international forums where normative frameworks are articulated and legitimated. The International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA), organised by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since 1949, represent one such critical forum where CVET has been conceptualised, debated, and positioned within broader adult education agendas.

CVET as strategic instrument and site of contestation

In the post-World War II period, CVET emerged as a strategic instrument for national reconstruction, international diplomacy, and economic modernisation (UIL, 1949). The 1951 Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community explicitly recognised vocational retraining as essential to shared production and peacebuilding, thereby establishing direct linkages between CVET and geopolitical objectives (European Union, 2024). Beyond these instrumental functions, CVET has been conceptualised – at least in normative discourse – as a vehicle for fostering democratic engagement, personal development, and active citizenship. By ‘normative discourse’, we refer to how CVET should ideally serve society according to educational philosophy and international policy frameworks, rather than how it operates in practice. This vision draws on Dewey’s (1916) emphasis on vocational education fostering civic intelligence and democratic participation, Freire’s (1970) call for developing critical consciousness, and Jarvis’ (2004) framing of vocational learning within lifelong education that integrates personal growth and social responsibility with occupational competence.

However, the relationship between these humanistic aspirations and market-driven imperatives constitutes a fundamental tension pervading CVET policy development. As Ball (2012) and Olssen et al. (2004) demonstrate, neoliberal rationalities have systematically penetrated educational governance since the 1980s, repositioning education as primarily a private investment in individual human capital rather than a public good generating collective benefits. This transformation has profoundly shaped CVET, often narrowing its purposes to immediately marketable skills while marginalising broader developmental objectives (Field, 2000; Griffin, 1999a, 1999b).

Why CONFINTEA? Rationale for examining UNESCO's adult education conferences: Positioning within existing CONFINTEA research

Before outlining our rationale for focusing on CONFINTEA, we situate this study within existing scholarship on UNESCO's adult education conferences. Milana (2012, 2016) demonstrates how CONFINTEA operates as a site of global adult education governance, shaped by power asymmetries among member states, international organisations, and civil society, and how its policy frameworks have increasingly aligned with broader development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Ireland and Spezia (2014) provide a historical analysis of CONFINTEA as UNESCO's key mechanism for establishing international adult education norms, while also highlighting persistent challenges in implementation. Elfert (2015, 2019) and Rubenson (2018) critically examine tensions between UNESCO's humanistic educational vision and the growing dominance of instrumental lifelong learning and human capital approaches promoted by organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Building on this body of scholarship, our study makes three distinctive contributions. First, while previous research addresses CONFINTEA's general adult education frameworks, CVET as a specific policy domain has received limited systematic attention. We therefore offer a focused longitudinal analysis of how vocational dimensions of adult education have been constructed across seven decades. Second, we extend the temporal scope by including CONFINTEA VII (2022), enabling analysis of recent policy discourses on digitalisation, climate crisis, and post-pandemic transformations. Third, we employ a theoretical synthesis combining Freire's critical pedagogy, Lima and Guimarães' governance framework, and Biesta's critique of learnification with Fairclough's critical discourse analysis to examine continuities and shifts in CVET governance rationalities. While confirming earlier findings regarding CONFINTEA's limited implementation capacity and vulnerability to instrumentalisation, our analysis reveals specific mechanisms through which humanistic principles are progressively subordinated to market imperatives and how discursive shifts from education to learning actively construct neoliberal governance arrangements.

This study focuses specifically on CONFINTEA rather than other international VET policy forums (International Labour Organization – ILO – conventions, OECD skills frameworks, World Bank education sector strategies, or World Economic Forum – WEF – workforce initiatives) for five compelling, methodologically and theoretically grounded reasons:

1. CONFINTEA's distinctive holistic approach to CVET. Unlike the ILO's sector-specific focus on technical training standards, workplace learning, and workers' rights, or the OECD's emphasis on economic competitiveness through skills measurement and benchmarking, or the WEF's business-centred perspective on workforce flexibility and global talent, CONFINTEA has uniquely maintained a comprehensive vision explicitly situating CVET within broader adult education frameworks. CONFINTEA documents consistently address CVET in relation to democratic citizenship, social inclusion, cultural development, and personal fulfilment – not merely as human capital investment. This makes CONFINTEA the primary international forum where the full complexity of CVET's multiple purposes can be examined rather than viewing it exclusively through economic or labour market lenses. For VET research concerned with understanding vocational education's social impacts and governance, *CONFINTEA provides richer discursive terrain than narrower policy platforms.*

2. *Unparalleled longitudinal scope.* CONFINTEA provides unique historical data spanning 73 years (1949-2022) across seven conferences, enabling systematic analysis of how major global transformations – post-war reconstruction, decolonisation, Cold War ideological competition, neoliberal restructuring, digital revolution, financial crises, and climate emergency – have shaped international CVET discourse and governance. No other international VET policy forum offers comparable temporal depth for tracing the history of VET. While ILO conventions on vocational training date to 1939, their technical-legal focus limits discourse analysis. OECD's VET work intensified primarily from the 1990s. CONFINTEA uniquely bridges immediate post-WWII period to contemporary challenges, capturing fundamental shifts in VET governance paradigms that shorter-term analyses miss.

3. *CONFINTEA as site of ideological contestation.* While ILO represents primarily labour and social protection perspectives, OECD embodies market-oriented economic rationalities, and WEF reflects corporate interests, CONFINTEA brings together member states with vastly different political systems (socialist, social democratic, liberal, authoritarian), economic conditions (advanced industrial, emerging, least developed), and educational traditions. This heterogeneity makes CONFINTEA documents sites where competing VET governance rationalities – public versus private provision, rights-based versus market-driven approaches, humanistic versus instrumentalist purposes – are explicitly negotiated rather than assumed. For critical VET policy analysis examining power relations and governance contestation, CONFINTEA's ideological diversity provides analytically richer material than more ideologically homogeneous forums.

4. *CONFINTEA's normative influence despite limited enforcement capacity.* As Ireland and Spezia (2014) document, CONFINTEA has served as UNESCO's primary mechanism for establishing international adult education norms, influencing subsequent policy developments including the 1976 Recommendation on Adult Education Development, the 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education, and integration of adult education into Sustainable Development Goal 4. While CONFINTEA lacks binding authority – a limitation we explicitly address – its normative frameworks shape what becomes legitimate and thinkable in national VET policy discourse. Understanding these normative frameworks is essential for comprehending the ideational context within which more concrete policy mechanisms (ILO conventions, OECD recommendations, World Bank lending conditions) operate. CONFINTEA provides the broad normative architecture; other organisations provide implementation mechanisms.

5. *Methodological appropriateness for critical discourse analysis.* CONFINTEA documents, as products of extensive international negotiation involving states, international organisations, and civil society, represent authoritative records of how CVET has been officially conceptualised at specific historical moments. Their status as negotiated compromises makes them ideal for critical policy analysis examining how language, framing, and discourse reflect and construct power relations (Fairclough, 2013). More technical documents from ILO or OECD, while valuable for other research purposes, offer less rich terrain for examining fundamental contestations over VET's purposes and governance.

Importantly, we do not claim CONFINTEA has been the primary driver of CVET policy globally – that would be empirically unsupportable. National VET policies emerge from

complex interactions among domestic political forces, labour market conditions, educational traditions, and multiple international influences (ILO, OECD, World Bank, regional bodies, bilateral cooperation). CONFINTEA's practical influence on implementation has been limited, as we critically analyse. Rather, CONFINTEA represents a critical normative space where competing visions of CVET – humanistic versus instrumentalist, rights-based versus market-driven, transformative versus adaptive – have been articulated, legitimated, and contested over seven decades. As Knoll (2007) observes, UNESCO conferences have continuously offered both utopian visions and practical guidance while adapting to changing times, making them uniquely valuable sites for understanding the politics of international VET governance and the history of how CVET has been conceptualised within broader adult education frameworks.

This study's contribution lies not in claiming CONFINTEA determines CVET policy outcomes, but in critically analysing how international normative discourse around CVET has evolved, what these reveals about changing VET governance rationalities, and how these normative frameworks both enable and constrain possibilities for more democratic, equitable, and transformative CVET systems. Before proceeding, we clarify key conceptual distinctions guiding our analysis. Humanistic versus instrumentalist orientations reflect different answers to the question of what CVET is for: humanistic approaches emphasise whole-person development, critical thinking, civic participation, and personal fulfilment, whereas instrumentalist approaches focus on labour market integration and economic productivity. Rights-based versus market-driven governance models differ in their understanding of educational entitlement, with rights-based frameworks framing quality CVET as a universal social right requiring public provision, and market-driven models treating CVET as an individual investment shaped by market mechanisms. Transformative versus adaptive pedagogies distinguish between CVET that develops capacities to critically examine and change social and economic structures and CVET that prepares individuals to adapt to existing arrangements. Throughout our analysis, we examine how CONFINTEA documents negotiate these tensions, often articulating humanistic, rights-based, and transformative principles while operating within contexts that privilege instrumentalist, market-driven, and adaptive logics.

Research questions

This study addresses three interrelated research questions:

- *RQ1*: How has CVET been discursively constructed within CONFINTEA from 1949 to 2022, and what do these constructions reveal about evolving VET governance rationalities?
- *RQ2*: How have global political-economic developments been reflected in CONFINTEA's treatment of CVET, and has CONFINTEA played a constitutive role in shaping international VET discourse or primarily responded to developments in other policy arenas?
- *RQ3*: What visions for CVET's future emerge from CONFINTEA VII (2022), particularly regarding sustainability transitions, digitalisation, and addressing fundamental tensions between economic imperatives and humanistic educational values?

Method

Methodological approach

This study employs critical document analysis to examine how CVET is constructed in CONFINTEA documents from 1949 to 2022. Rather than focusing solely on explicit policy content, critical approaches interrogate the ideological assumptions, governance rationalities, and power relations embedded in policy discourse (Fairclough, 2013). This approach reflects our assumption that VET policy must be understood within broader political-economic contexts and institutional arrangements.

Theoretical and methodological framework

Building on this critical orientation, we integrate critical policy theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how CVET is discursively constructed and how these constructions reflect broader governance rationalities and political-economic dynamics. CDA provides analytical tools for tracing discursive strategies and shifts over time, while critical policy theory situates these discourses within changing governance regimes and political-economic transformations.

Critical discourse analysis: Fairclough's approach

We draw on Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional framework, which conceptualises discourse as text, discursive practice, and social practice. This framework enables us to analyse not only what CONFINTEA documents say about CVET, but how particular discursive constructions naturalise specific governance arrangements and marginalise alternatives, and how discursive shifts (e.g., from 'education' to 'learning') reflect and reinforce broader political-economic transformations.

CDA focuses on the dialectical relationship between language and society. In analysing CVET policy, we examine vocabulary choices (e.g., 'training', 'learning', 'education'), grammatical structures that shape agency and responsibility, framing devices and metaphors, and intertextual references situating documents within broader policy networks. Following Fairclough, we connect textual analysis to political-economic contexts, examining how discourse operates as an instrument of power within capitalist social formations.

Theoretical lenses

We integrate CDA with three theoretical perspectives enabling critical interpretation of CVET governance transformations:

Freire's critical pedagogy: Drawing on Freire (1970), we examine whether CVET is framed as banking education or problem-posing education. This distinction illuminates whether vocational education primarily promotes adaptation to existing labour market structures or fosters critical consciousness and transformative agency enabling workers to challenge power relations and oppressive conditions.

Lima and Guimarães' policy framework: Building on Lima and Guimarães (2024), we analyse tensions between technocratic state rationalities – emphasising centralised

control, standardisation, and instrumental economic alignment – and democratic rationalities prioritising participatory governance, flexible curricula, and CVET as a public good supporting social inclusion and personal development. This framework allows us to examine how these rationalities are negotiated and how their balance shifts over time.

Biesta's learnification critique: Following Biesta (2006, 2010), we trace discursive shifts from 'education' to 'learning' and their political implications, including the individualisation of responsibility and the obscuring of education's normative purposes. We also use Biesta's distinction between qualification, socialisation, and subjectification to analyse the multiple purposes attributed to CVET across CONFINTEA documents.

Synergies between CDA and theoretical perspectives

These theoretical lenses complement Fairclough's CDA by providing educational theory for interpreting discursive patterns. While CDA offers methodological tools for systematic textual analysis, Freire, Lima and Guimarães, and Biesta provide conceptual resources for interpreting implications for educational purposes, governance, and social justice. Fairclough's focus on how discourse naturalises power relations aligns with Freire's concern with the reproduction or transformation of oppression; CDA's attention to institutional contexts resonates with Lima and Guimarães' analysis of competing state and democratic rationalities; and Fairclough's examination of discursive shifts parallels Biesta's critique of 'learning' discourse in neoliberal restructuring.

We use these frameworks as sensitising concepts rather than rigid templates, examining how CVET is discursively constructed across CONFINTEA moments, which governance rationalities predominate, whether discourse positions CVET as reproductive or transformative, and how linguistic choices reflect and reinforce political-economic arrangements.

Data sources

CONFINTEA has convened seven times since 1949: Elsinore/Denmark (1949), Montreal/Canada (1960), Tokyo/Japan (1972), Paris/France (1985), Hamburg/Germany (1997), Belém/Brazil (2009), and Marrakech/Morocco (2022). These conferences represent UNESCO's primary platform for international adult education policy dialogue, gathering member states, international organisations, and civil society representatives to examine policies, debate principles, and establish commitments (Ireland & Spezia, 2014).

Primary data sources comprised seventeen documents accessed through UNESCO's digital repositories (UIL, n.d.; UNESCO, n.d.): seven final reports, five declarations and frameworks for action, three follow-up reports, and two mid-term review reports. All documents represent officially adopted conference outputs, ensuring authenticity and authority. Secondary scholarly literature on VET history, critical education policy, and international educational governance provided contextual analysis and theoretical resources for interpretation.

Analytical procedures

Analysis followed five iterative phases integrating Fairclough's (2013) CDA with theoretically informed thematic analysis. Both authors participated in all phases; the first

author conducted primary coding, with validation and interpretation developed through iterative discussion until consensus was reached.

Phase 1 involved identifying and coding all sections explicitly addressing vocational education, technical training, work-related learning, skills development, or employment, plus broader themes relevant to CVET (education-economy relationships, public-private sector roles, individual-collective responsibility). Initial coding employed both deductive codes derived from theoretical framework (banking/problem-posing, technocratic/democratic, education/learning) and inductive codes emerging from documents themselves.

Phase 2 analysed coded discourse in relation to major political-economic developments (post-war reconstruction, decolonisation, neoliberal restructuring, digitalisation, climate crisis) and shifts in educational policy paradigms (human capital theory, lifelong learning, competency-based education, and sustainable development), situating CONFINTEA discourse within broader historical contexts.

Phase 3 applied our theoretical framework systematically to each conference, examining:

- Through Freire's lens: Does CVET discourse emphasise predetermined skill transmission for existing roles (banking) or critical consciousness and transformative agency (problem-posing)? What assumptions about learner agency, educational purposes, and social change are evident?
- Through Lima and Guimarães' lens: Does governance discourse reflect technocratic rationalities (centralised control, standardisation, economic instrumentalism) or democratic rationalities (participatory governance, diverse purposes, social inclusion)? How are tensions between these rationalities negotiated?
- Through Biesta's lens: Does discourse foreground 'education' (institutional provision, public responsibility, collective purposes) or 'learning' (individual responsibility, private investment, measurable outcomes)? How are qualification, socialisation, and subjectification purposes balanced?

We applied all three lenses to each conference; however, our presentation emphasises whichever lens proved most analytically productive for illuminating specific developments at particular moments. For instance, CONFINTEA II's integration agenda is most effectively analysed through Lima and Guimarães' framework, while CONFINTEA V's linguistic shifts are best captured through Biesta's learnification critique. This reflects pragmatic analytical choices rather than inconsistent application – all frameworks informed interpretation throughout, but findings are presented through lenses offering greatest explanatory power for specific patterns.

Phase 4 synthesised conference-specific analyses to identify longitudinal patterns of continuity and change, tracing how governance rationalities, educational purposes, and responsibility allocations evolved across 73 years.

Phase 5 attended to absences and silences in CVET discourse, following feminist and postcolonial methodological insights that what is excluded reveals as much as what is included – asking what perspectives, stakeholders, or possibilities are systematically marginalised.

Methodological limitations

We acknowledge important limitations. Document analysis accesses official negotiated positions rather than contested debates producing them, potentially understating disagreements and power struggles. Focusing exclusively on CONFINTEA risks overlooking other institutional actors (ILO, OECD, World Bank, regional bodies) exercising significant practical influence over CVET policy. Our analysis cannot determine CONFINTEA's actual impact on national policies, only its role in shaping international normative discourse. Future research employing comparative case studies, ethnographic methods, and policy implementation analysis could complement this discourse-focused approach.

As with all interpretive textual analyses, our readings of CONFINTEA documents reflect specific theoretical commitments and analytical perspectives, and alternative frameworks may yield different interpretations. We grounded our analysis in systematic textual evidence and transparent procedures but acknowledge that discourse analysis inevitably involves interpretive choices. This limitation highlights the value of scholarly dialogue and multiple analytical perspectives for understanding complex policy phenomena.

Findings

CONFINTEA I (1949): Establishing CVET as distinct yet connected to adult education

CONFINTEA I convened amid post-war reconstruction when European recovery demanded both physical rebuilding and ideological reorientation toward democratic values. The 1951 ECSC Treaty's explicit recognition of vocational retraining as essential to shared production and peace established direct linkages between CVET and geopolitical objectives (European Union, 2024). This period witnessed renewed interest in adult education as integral to fostering international understanding and democratic participation (Slowey, 2016).

The conference's most significant contribution was establishing conceptual frameworks for CVET's relationship to broader adult education:

It is important to distinguish adult education from professional training. The latter has certain technical aspects which concern specialists in apprenticeship to some trade or occupation. The professional training of adults, however, raises a number of problems directly connected with adult education... An adult education which aims at being functional has a part to play in solving these problems, especially since the desire for better qualifications and wider knowledge is perhaps the strongest motive leading adults to seek further education. (UIL, 1949, p. 12)

This passage reveals several analytically significant features: acknowledging CVET's technical specificity while insisting on connections to broader adult education; recognising multiple pathways into adult vocational learning (inadequate initial training, occupational mismatch, forced transitions); and positioning vocational motivation as legitimate educational aspiration deserving institutional support rather than narrow self-interest.

However, the conference failed to develop comprehensive CVET policy, reflecting structural constraints: participating countries exhibited vast differences in

industrialisation levels, economic priorities, and educational infrastructure. As Resnik (2006) demonstrates, international organisations prioritised economic development over other educational objectives in this period, concentrating efforts on reconstruction. What emerged was general normative framing emphasising both economic utility and personal development – accommodating diverse contexts but providing limited implementation guidance.

Theoretical interpretation: From our analytical framework, CONFINTEA I reflects neither clearly technocratic nor democratic rationalities (Lima & Guimarães, 2024), instead revealing post-war uncertainty about governance models. The discourse aligns more closely with Freire’s (1970) problem-posing orientation by recognising vocational motivation as a legitimate educational aspiration requiring institutional support, rather than framing workers instrumentally as human capital. However, its limited engagement with structural inequalities in initial VET access indicates a constrained transformative vision, acknowledging problems without proposing mechanisms for fundamental change.

CONFINTEA II (1960): Integration, human capital, and public responsibility

By 1960, immediate post-war crisis had yielded to rapid industrialisation and technological change. The conference theme – Adult Education in a Changing World – signalled shifting focus from recovery to ongoing adaptation (UIL, 1960). This period witnessed human capital theory’s emergence as dominant framework linking education to economic growth (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), and UNESCO’s formal adoption of ‘education for economic development’ orientation (Resnik, 2006).

CONFINTEA II’s most significant innovation advocated integrating vocational and general education, challenging traditional institutional separation:

Traditionally, the trend in many countries has been to separate vocational and general education, to entrust them to different institutions. The social disadvantages of this practice are becoming increasingly obvious... The experience of Sweden goes to show that vocational education should be related to actual situations, that programmes should be founded on ascertained needs, that these include the human and social aspects of industry... (UIL, 1960, p. 14)

This integration agenda reflected emerging recognition that rigid VET-general education separation reproduced class divisions, with vocational tracks disproportionately channelling working-class students away from academic opportunities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The conference proposed that everywhere, all people and governments should regard adult education as a natural and necessary component of educational services (UIL, 1960), representing normative claims for CVET as universal right and public responsibility.

As developing countries expanded CVET during this period, they typically centralised provision under state control, imposed enterprise taxes for funding, implemented standardised curricula, and emphasised humanistic rhetoric about personal development alongside technical skills (Benavort, 1983; Bonoli & Gonon, 2023). While strengthening CVET as public good, this pattern simultaneously embedded vocational education within state economic planning and labour market management, reflecting technocratic rationality (Lima & Guimarães, 2024) rather than democratic governance prioritising learner agency.

Theoretical interpretation: CONFINTEA II strongly reflects technocratic state rationalities (Lima & Guimarães, 2024), emphasising centralised control, standardised curricula, and close alignment between CVET and national economic planning. Although its integration agenda and universal access commitments carry progressive potential, CVET is primarily positioned as an instrument of state economic management rather than democratic participation. The discourse remains within an 'education' framing (Biesta, 2006), presenting CVET as a public responsibility – contrasting with later privatisation trends, yet grounded in top-down governance. Through Freire's (1970) lens, this reveals an ambivalent orientation: references to personal development gesture toward problem-posing education, but the embedding of CVET within labour market management largely indicates adaptive functions rather than transformative critical consciousness.

CONFINTEA III (1972): Lifelong learning, enterprise training, and emerging contradictions

CONFINTEA III convened during global turbulence: Bretton Woods collapse, oil crises, and stagflation. The conference theme – Adult Education in the Context of Lifelong Learning – directly reflected UNESCO's Faure Report *Learning to Be* (Faure et al., 1972), which articulated comprehensive humanistic lifelong learning visions (UIL, 1972a). However, the conference revealed emerging contradictions between holistic rhetoric and instrumental CVET practice.

While adopting lifelong learning frameworks, CONFINTEA III discussed CVET primarily through economic and social functionality. Significantly, the conference introduced enterprise-based training as appropriate delivery model:

In yet other countries, adult education at the place of work benefitted from close contact with working life; those countries wished to bring training closer to its practical applications or to introduce vocational training at the enterprise itself... They nevertheless stressed that this objective could be attained by involving workers' organization in the preparation of programmes and in their administration; they also attached importance to the possibility of organizing a type of education which went beyond purely vocational requirements. (UIL, 1972b, p. 23)

This positioned enterprises not merely as CVET beneficiaries but as appropriate provision sites, marking significant shift from CONFINTEA II's emphasis on public delivery. While acknowledging worker organisation involvement and education beyond vocational requirements, the discourse opened space for understanding CVET as primarily private sector responsibility – foreshadowing subsequent privatisation dynamics.

As King (1985) and Lowe (1986) observed, CVET faced distinct planning challenges compared to general education, encompassing diverse ministries, disciplines, and values. Singh et al. (1985) noted that CVET remained focused on technological progress often at personal development's expense. From Biesta's (2006) perspective, CONFINTEA III reveals how lifelong learning discourse, despite humanistic origins in the Faure Report, proved vulnerable to instrumentalisation – comprehensive frameworks articulated at principal level but inadequately operationalised in specific domains like CVET.

Theoretical interpretation: CONFINTEA III reveals emerging contradictions through Biesta's (2006) learnification lens. Although adopting the Faure Report's humanistic lifelong learning discourse, its treatment of CVET increasingly emphasises economic functionality and enterprise-based training, signalling early shifts toward individualised responsibility and private provision. From Lima and Guimarães' (2024) perspective,

technocratic rationalities gain ground within ostensibly progressive frameworks, as comprehensive principles remain weakly operationalised in CVET, allowing instrumentalist interpretations to dominate. References to worker organisation involvement and education beyond vocational requirements prevent a complete abandonment of democratic principles, but these appear as constraints on market logics rather than foundational commitments.

CONFINTEA IV (1985): Neoliberalism and the narrowing of CVET purposes

CONFINTEA IV occurred amid neoliberalism's global ascendancy: structural adjustment programs, public service privatisation, and welfare state dismantling (Harvey, 2005). Education increasingly became understood through market logics, with learners as consumers, knowledge as commodity, and institutions as quasi-businesses (Olssen et al., 2004).

The conference adopted systematic approaches to adult education components. However, the report revealed that CVET had become narrowly confined to immediately marketable skills transmission, 'significantly constraining learners' opportunities for sustained personal and professional development' (UIL, 1985, p. 34). This represented marked departure from earlier rhetoric about integrating technical training with broader civic development.

Despite general narrowing, CONFINTEA IV introduced potentially progressive elements: proposing vocational ethics teaching within CVET, and identifying barriers to women's education, recommending childcare facilities and leadership training to eliminate gender discrimination. However, these raised critical questions: Were these genuine transformation commitments, or tokenistic gestures providing humanistic legitimacy while core structures remained market-driven?

Theoretical interpretation: CONFINTEA IV marks a critical turning point in which neoliberal rationalities decisively penetrate CVET discourse. Through Freire's (1970) lens, this signals a shift toward banking education, with CVET reframed as the transmission of predefined, marketable skills rather than the development of critical consciousness and transformative agency. Lima and Guimarães' (2024) framework shows technocratic rationalities – now aligned with market imperatives – overwhelming democratic alternatives. From Biesta's (2006) perspective, this period initiates the acceleration of learnification: although not yet dominant in explicit language, market logics increasingly position learners as individual human capital investors rather than citizens entitled to public provision. Progressive elements such as vocational ethics and gender equity appear as ameliorative additions to an increasingly instrumentalised CVET regime rather than challenges to core market-driven restructuring.

From political economy perspectives (Ball, 2012; Olssen et al., 2004), the 1980s marked watersheds when neoliberal rationalities decisively penetrated CVET. Adults increasingly were perceived as human capital units optimised for labour market efficiency rather than autonomous social actors participating in democratic communities. The conference diagnosed this narrowing but offered limited strategic vision for resisting instrumentalisation, illustrating CONFINTEA's broader limitation: capacity to articulate humanistic principles exceeded capacity to contest material political-economic forces undermining them.

CONFINTEA V (1997): The Delors report, competency discourse, and education-to-learning shift

CONFINTEA V convened during globalisation intensification and knowledge economy emergence. The 1996 Delors Report *Learning: The Treasure Within* articulated education organised around four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together (Delors et al., 1996). While maintaining humanistic rhetoric, the report reflected emerging competency emphasis (OECD, 1996). ILO and UNESCO (1991) advocated improving CVET educators' professional status and working conditions.

The Delors Report's influence was profound yet contradictory. The four-pillar framework provided resources for resisting narrow vocationalism, but as Field (2000) observes, lifelong learning policies frequently failed to meaningfully foster inclusion or mitigate inequalities. Skills and competencies discourse emphasised pragmatic, measurable learning linked to employment outcomes, creating tensions between comprehensive vision and competency-based reductionism.

CONFINTEA V marked an important linguistic shift. The slogan – 'Adult Learning – a key for the 21st century' – foregrounded 'learning' rather than 'education' (UIL, 1997). As Griffin (1999a, 1999b) and Biesta (2006) demonstrate, this shift from education to learning discourse reflected deeper governance transformations. 'Education' implies structured processes organised to achieve publicly defined goals; 'learning' suggests individualised, self-directed processes where learners bear primary responsibility. This aligned with neoliberal emphases on individual responsibility while diminishing collective public dimensions.

Despite concerning trends, CONFINTEA V attempted reconceptualising CVET in potentially progressive directions. UIL (1999) explained the conference introduced discourse integrating VET with general education, self-directed learning, new technologies, communication skills, and problem-solving. An Agenda for the Future discussed CVET across three commitment areas: '(1) promoting rights to work and work-related learning; (2) ensuring access for different target groups; (3) diversifying contents' (UIL, 1997, p. 33).

However, critical analysis reveals gaps between progressive rhetoric and actual CVET trajectories. While articulating rights commitments, the conference inadequately addressed institutional and economic forces pulling toward marketisation. Ball (2012) demonstrates how neoliberal policy operates through subtle mechanisms – performance measurement, competitive funding, public-private partnerships – reshaping purposes without announcing themselves as marketisation. CONFINTEA V's failure to adequately address these mechanisms limited resistance capacity.

Theoretical interpretation: CONFINTEA V crystallises learnification (Biesta, 2006) as a defining feature of contemporary CVET governance. The shift from 'education' to 'learning' discourse reassigns responsibility from public institutions to individual learners, obscures structural barriers, and privileges measurable competencies over broader educational purposes such as subjectification. From Lima and Guimarães' (2024) perspective, technocratic rationalities adapt to neoliberal contexts through market-directed skill formation, with states increasingly facilitating rather than providing CVET. Competency frameworks, while framed as objective and efficient, narrow legitimate educational purposes and marginalise critical and civic dimensions. Through Freire's (1970) lens, CVET increasingly operates as sophisticated banking education, with

competency discourse obscuring how predefined frameworks reproduce existing power relations and constrain transformative possibilities.

CONFINTEA VI (2009): Expansion, complexity, and CVET marginalisation

CONFINTEA VI occurred after the 2008 financial crisis, which exposed financialised capitalism's fragility and prompted renewed debates about inequality and sustainable development. The theme – Living and Learning for a Viable Future: The Power of Adult Learning – emphasised adult education's role in sustainability challenges (UIL, 2010). Paradoxically, despite CVET's evident relevance to employment and sustainability, CONFINTEA VI engaged least substantively with vocational education among all conferences. CVET was overshadowed by broader adult education discussions. This marginalisation cannot be explained solely by conference design but reflects how CVET had become institutionally positioned by 2009. As vocational education increasingly was perceived as private sector concern – with businesses expected to train workers, and individuals responsible for maintaining employability – CVET became less visible as public policy priority requiring UNESCO's normative guidance.

By 2009, adult education literature had expanded significantly (UIL, 2010, 2017, 2018), producing vast policy documents, frameworks, and evaluation tools. However, this proliferation did not translate into outcome improvements. CONFINTEA VI organised discussions around five themes: policy, governance, financing, participation/inclusion/equity, and quality, combined with regional priorities. The goal was incorporating VET into international development plans and national policies with shared stakeholder responsibility.

However, this response – more frameworks, monitoring, coordination – risked intensifying bureaucratisation contributing to implementation failures. As critics observe, proliferation of frameworks and reporting requirements can consume resources supporting actual provision (Moutsios, 2009). From political economy perspectives, CONFINTEA VI's CVET marginalisation reflected neoliberal governance triumph: vocational education was increasingly privatised, individualised, and marketised, rendering it less amenable to UNESCO's normative functions.

Theoretical interpretation: CONFINTEA VI's marginalisation of CVET- despite heightened employment concerns during economic crisis – signals the consolidation of neoliberal governance rationalities (Lima & Guimarães, 2024). CVET is so thoroughly privatised and individualised that it no longer appears as a public policy domain requiring UNESCO's normative guidance, but as a market-mediated private responsibility. Through Biesta's (2006) lens, this absence reflects the completion of learnification, where vocational education is displaced because 'learning' is framed as an individual obligation rather than a social right. From Freire's (1970) perspective, this silence indicates the near erasure of CVET's transformative potential, rendering critical consciousness and collective agency unthinkable within dominant policy discourse. The expansion of monitoring frameworks and coordination mechanisms further entrenches technocratic rationalities, reframing political-economic challenges as technical management problems rather than structural governance issues.

CONFINTEA VII (2022): Digital transformation, climate crisis, and calls for new social contracts

CONFINTEA VII convened in Marrakech following COVID-19's devastating impacts. The theme – Adult Learning and Education for Sustainable Development: A Transformative Agenda – reflected recognition that humanity faces interconnected crises requiring transformative rather than adaptive responses (UIL, 2023). The conference attracted 1,126 representatives from 149 countries.

Three factors significantly influenced CONFINTEA VII's CVET approach: (1) UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay's call for a new social contract ensuring quality and equity (UNESCO, 2021); (2) rapid digital technology development; (3) COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis exposing and exacerbating inequalities.

The conference identified fundamental labour market transformations driven by 'demographic shifts, the fourth industrial revolution, globalisation, and climate change' (UIL, 2023, p. 52). In response, CONFINTEA VII raised critical CVET issues: flexible learning opportunities; strengthening CVET systems ensuring dignified livelihoods; addressing local needs; utilising digital platforms while ensuring equitable access; tackling inequalities; and providing career guidance for complex, non-linear pathways.

Significantly, the conference expressed concerns that unequal technology access would deepen inequalities rather than democratising opportunity. This marked important shifts from earlier techno-optimism, demonstrating growing awareness that digitalisation's social impacts depend fundamentally on governance structures and distributional arrangements.

Theoretical interpretation: CONFINTEA VII presents contradictory trajectories. Discourse on transformative change, sustainability, and new social contracts gestures toward Freire's (1970) problem-posing education and Lima and Guimarães' (2024) democratic rationalities, recognising that structural challenges require CVET enabling critical analysis and collective action rather than individual adaptation. Acknowledging that digitalisation may deepen inequalities reflects a more reflexive stance than earlier techno-optimism. However, through Biesta's (2006) lens, learnification remains dominant: responsibility is primarily placed on individual learners pursuing *flexible learning opportunities*, while structural reforms necessary for transformative CVET – public investment, democratised governance, and challenges to corporate power – receive limited attention. Normalised private sector engagement may further entrench market rationalities in governance. The persistent gap between transformative rhetoric and concrete mechanisms underscores a recurring pattern in CONFINTEA: progressive principles are articulated more readily than actionable strategies to contest political-economic pressures toward instrumentalisation and privatisation.

CONFINTEA VII noted that the previously dominant linear relationship between education and work is now being replaced by more complex and diverse career paths (UIL, 2023). This captured significant labour market changes: contemporary workers increasingly navigate multiple transitions, precarious work periods, and constant skill updating. Traditional CVET models premised on initial training preparing for stable careers become inadequate. Instead, CVET must enable ongoing adaptation, support transitions, and develop transferable competencies.

The pre-conference Private Sector Forum discussed work's future, recognising transitions in green skills, digital skills, and automation (UIL, 2023). This explicit private sector engagement reflects recognition that CVET requires employer involvement. However, it raises critical questions insufficiently explored: On what terms should

engagement occur? How can policy ensure business involvement serves public interests rather than enabling corporations to externalise training costs? What governance mechanisms prevent private priorities from overwhelming humanistic purposes?

CONFINTEA VII's projections emphasised transformative rather than adaptive approaches. The conference highlighted persistent systemic issues – poverty, structural inequalities, power dynamics – requiring CVET to move beyond reactive responses (UIL, 2023). Rather than simply training workers for existing structures, CVET should equip learners for building sustainable, just societies (UNESCO, 2021). However, conference documents provided limited concrete guidance for operationalising transformation, leaving crucial questions about specific pedagogies, institutional arrangements, financing mechanisms, and governance structures inadequately addressed.

Discussion

Persistent tensions in CVET governance

This critical discourse analysis reveals three overarching patterns in CONFINTEA's discursive construction of CVET across 73 years, illuminating how language, framing, and textual strategies both reflect and constitute governance transformations. First, persistent tension between humanistic aspirations and economic imperatives pervades CVET discourse. While conferences consistently articulate principles emphasising democratic citizenship, personal development, and social transformation, material political-economic contexts – initially reconstruction, later industrial modernisation, subsequently global competitiveness, recently technological adaptation and sustainability – exert powerful gravitational pull toward instrumentalist conceptions privileging labour market outcomes.

From Freire's (1970) perspective, this manifests as ongoing struggle between CVET as 'banking education' (reproducing existing relations) versus 'problem-posing education' (developing transformative agency). Our analysis demonstrates that while CONFINTEA frequently gestures toward transformative approaches, material contexts consistently pull toward adaptive models. This pattern intensified from the 1980s onward as neoliberal rationalities penetrated policy (Ball, 2012; Olssen et al., 2004), progressively marketising, commodifying, and privatising CVET. Discursively, this manifests through specific linguistic and rhetorical strategies: shift from collective to individual grammatical subjects ('workers need training' becomes 'learners must acquire skills'); increased use of market metaphors (education as 'investment', learners as 'consumers', qualifications as 'credentials'); passive constructions obscuring agency and responsibility ('CVET must be improved' without specifying who bears responsibility); and proliferation of measurement and accountability language that positions education primarily through economic efficiency criteria.

Lima and Guimarães' (2024) framework illuminates why this persists. They distinguish state rationalities oriented toward technocratic control versus democratic rationalities prioritising participatory governance. CONFINTEA documents reveal continuous tension, with technocratic-economic logics consistently gaining ascendancy despite periodic commitments to humanistic purposes. This reflects broader patterns whereby market-driven imperatives systematically overwhelm social democratic values in adult education policy (Griffin, 1999a, 1999b).

Second, the discursive shift from education to learning language carries profound political implications extending beyond mere terminological preference. As Fairclough

(2013) demonstrates, linguistic changes reflect and actively construct social transformations – they are not neutral relabelling but ideological work naturalising new governance arrangements. As Biesta (2006) demonstrates, this linguistic transformation repositions adults as autonomous learners responsible for continuous skill updating rather than citizens entitled to quality educational opportunities as public right. This ‘learnification’ effectively privatises educational responsibility – transferring costs and risks from states and employers to individual workers – while obscuring structural barriers (poverty, discrimination, geographical isolation) preventing many adults from accessing opportunities regardless of motivation.

This discursive shift accelerated during intensifying neoliberal restructuring. CONFINTEA V’s slogan marked explicit embrace of learning discourse, with subsequent conferences continuing to privilege ‘learning’ over ‘education’. This linguistic pattern reflects and reinforces governance transformations whereby provision increasingly operates through market mechanisms rather than democratic planning oriented toward collective welfare (Griffin, 1999a, 1999b).

Third, the paradox of comprehensive frameworks and limited implementation reveals fundamental problems. Each CONFINTEA produces more elaborate declarations and monitoring mechanisms, yet implementation gaps persist, and inequalities continue reproducing social hierarchies (UIL, 2010, 2017, 2018). From political economy perspectives, this reflects crucial limitations: CONFINTEA’s capacity to articulate normative principles far exceeds capacity to contest material forces undermining them. CONFINTEA represents valuable normative space where humanistic visions can be articulated, but it lacks mechanisms for compelling compliance, mobilising resources, or fundamentally altering power relations shaping actual policy and practice.

CVET governance and the private sector

Our analysis reveals significant evolution in positioning private sector roles. Early conferences emphasised CVET as public responsibility. CONFINTEA III introduced enterprise-based training with worker involvement caveats. By CONFINTEA VII, private sector engagement had become normalised through dedicated forums and relatively uncritical embrace of public-private partnerships.

This reflects broader educational privatisation patterns (Ball, 2012). As public funding stagnates under austerity, partnerships emerge as ostensibly pragmatic solutions. However, such partnerships rarely remain neutral technical arrangements. They typically introduce market logics and profit imperatives fundamentally reshaping educational purposes – privileging economically valuable skills over critical thinking, and individual employability over collective empowerment.

CONFINTEA documents demonstrate insufficient critical engagement with privatisation dynamics. While acknowledging governance challenges, conferences have not developed robust frameworks ensuring business engagement serves public interests rather than enabling cost externalisation. This governance deficit becomes especially concerning given historical evidence that private involvement frequently subordinates educational purposes to narrow economic interests (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2025).

Digital technologies and sustainability transitions

CONFINTEA VII devoted substantial attention to digitalisation and sustainability, reflecting recognition that these fundamentally transform CVET. However, documents reveal tensions between techno-optimism and techno-realism. The conference

appropriately acknowledged that unequal access to technology would deepen existing inequalities (UIL, 2023) but offered limited strategies for preventing this outcome. How exactly should CVET systems ensure digitalisation democratises rather than stratifies opportunity? What governance arrangements, regulatory frameworks, and resource commitments are necessary?

Moreover, digitalisation raises governance challenges extending beyond access: platform-based CVET generates vast learner data, creating surveillance possibilities; algorithmic management may intensify workplace control. Who owns educational data, how it can be used, and what protections learners possess represent urgent questions inadequately addressed.

Regarding sustainability, CONFINTEA VII positioned CVET as critical for green skills development and just transitions. However, achieving this requires not merely rhetorical commitment but substantial public investment, regulatory frameworks, and active labour market policies creating decent green jobs. As Kovalchuk et al. (2022) and Norkulovna (2023) emphasise, CVET faces complex challenges including evolving requirements, technological advancement, and financing sustainability.

CONFINTEA's role: Contributions and constraints

This study demonstrates that CONFINTEA has played significant but ultimately limited roles in shaping global CVET discourse. CONFINTEA's primary contribution lies in consistently articulating humanistic principles positioning CVET within comprehensive educational, social, and cultural frameworks rather than reducing it to economic instrumentalism. From 1949 to 2022, conferences provided normative spaces where vocational education's multiple purposes could be recognised.

However, CONFINTEA's capacity to translate principles into material outcomes remains severely constrained. As non-binding conferences producing recommendations, CONFINTEA lacks compliance mechanisms. It operates primarily at discourse levels rather than engaging directly with material structures shaping actual provision. Focusing exclusively on UNESCO necessarily overlooks other institutional actors (ILO, OECD, World Bank, regional bodies) exercising greater practical influence. CONFINTEA documents reflect negotiated compromises requiring vagueness accommodating diverse interpretations rather than precise implementation guidance.

Despite significant limitations, dismissing CONFINTEA as irrelevant would be mistaken. Normative frameworks, however, imperfectly implemented, shape what becomes thinkable in policy discourse. By asserting CVET serves multiple purposes beyond economic utility, CONFINTEA creates discursive resources that educators, civil society, and reform-minded policymakers can mobilise nationally. The gap between principles and practice represents not merely implementation failure but ongoing political struggle over educational purposes – a struggle where CONFINTEA declarations provide important legitimation for humanistic alternatives.

Conclusions

This study has traced CVET discourse across 73 years of CONFINTEA history, revealing persistent tensions between humanistic aspirations and economic imperatives, progressive rhetoric and constraining practice, comprehensive frameworks and limited implementation. Throughout this history, CONFINTEA has articulated important normative principles positioning CVET as integral to democratic citizenship, personal

development, and social transformation rather than narrowly instrumental to economic productivity.

However, the analysis also exposes significant limitations in VET governance. The conferences operate primarily at discourse levels, producing declarations depending on voluntary implementation by member states facing diverse pressures. Powerful forces – neoliberal rationalities, austerity politics, private sector interests – consistently pull CVET toward marketisation and instrumentalisation despite periodic commitments to humanistic purposes.

Yet recognising these limitations need not lead to despair. Normative frameworks matter, even when imperfectly implemented. They shape what becomes thinkable in policy discourse, create resources that reformers can mobilise, and establish benchmarks against which practice can be critically evaluated. The gap between CONFINTEA principles and CVET practice represents ongoing political struggle over educational purposes and control – a struggle where critical scholarship and engaged practice play essential roles.

While our analysis reveals these constraints, we conclude with reflections on possible pathways forward – recognising these as contestable normative positions rather than predictions of likely developments given current political-economic conditions.

International governance could move beyond declaratory commitments toward action-oriented mechanisms through technical assistance, innovation funds, and robust monitoring, although such initiatives require political will and resources currently constrained by nationalism and austerity. Critical engagement with political-economic structures shaping CVET, including marketisation and public-private partnerships, remains essential, yet transnational organisations face resistance from powerful states and corporate actors. Greater coordination between UNESCO, ILO, and OECD could challenge narrow skills discourses, but divergent mandates and constituencies limit deep collaboration. Equitable digital governance frameworks are increasingly urgent, although current trajectories suggest corporate interests are likely to dominate digitalisation processes.

At the national level, resisting CVET instrumentalisation requires preserving broad curricula, multiple success measures, and robust public provision, despite intensifying political pressures toward narrow vocationalism and fiscal austerity. Integrating sustainability and climate justice into CVET is imperative but demands substantial investment and confrontation with entrenched economic interests.

Future research should expand methodological approaches, address implementation gaps, and advance critical political economy analyses of financialisation and governance dynamics, while acknowledging constraints within contemporary academic systems. We frame these directions as a normative horizon rather than near-term expectations, articulating what democratic and transformative CVET would require while recognising formidable political-economic obstacles. Their value lies in sustaining alternative visions and informing ongoing struggles over educational purposes.

Moving forward, realising CVET's transformative potential requires moving beyond declaratory politics toward sustained engagement with political economy, institutional reform, and democratic mobilisation. VET transformation cannot be separated from broader struggles for economic justice, democratic governance, and ecological sustainability. It requires centring voices of those most marginalised by existing CVET arrangements – not as objects of benevolent intervention but as subjects of their own educational and social transformation.

For CVET systems globally, the challenge ahead involves navigating persistent tensions between economic adaptation and social transformation, between market

efficiency and democratic participation, between individual responsibility and collective provision. CONFINTEA can contribute to these transformations, but only if future conferences transcend historical limitations by developing action-oriented mechanisms, engaging critically with governance structures, strengthening international coordination, and building solidarity with movements advancing educational and economic justice. The history analysed in this study reveals both CONFINTEA's enduring value as normative space and its persistent constraints as instrument of material transformation – a duality that future VET scholarship, policy, and practice must carefully navigate.

Understanding global CVET governance more comprehensively requires examining how UNESCO's frameworks interact with other influential organisations. Future research could usefully complement this discourse-focused analysis through several directions. First, examining ILO conventions and technical cooperation, OECD skills assessments and peer reviews, World Bank lending conditionalities, and regional bodies' policy coordination would illuminate how different international actors shape CVET governance. Second, comparative implementation studies showing how these international influences interact within specific national contexts – revealing which mechanisms prove most influential under what conditions – would substantially advance understanding of transnational governance dynamics.

As VET systems worldwide confront unprecedented challenges – technological disruption, climate crisis, persistent inequalities, democratic backsliding – the need for robust, democratically governed, humanistically oriented CVET becomes increasingly apparent. Whether CONFINTEA and broader international VET governance structures can rise to this challenge remains an open question, but one with profound implications for individuals, communities, and societies worldwide.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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