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# 1

## Introduction: A Global Outlook on Adult Education and Learning Policies

*Marcella Milana*

This volume reviews adult education and learning policies in several countries, state-led institutions and other international organizations. Such an enterprise is not just ambitious in scope but also multifaceted, as opinions about, and approaches to, adult education and learning policies differ. Interpretations vary extensively, based on sociocultural and political environments within which authors live and research, and they are dependent upon the specific perspectives that guide their work. The Preface outlined the rationale from which this book arose, and which countries and organizations we chose to examine; this chapter expands on the rationale and offers a coherent theoretical framework for the analysis.

For our purposes, ‘adult education’ refers to all practices and processes that consider adults to be pedagogical subjects, independently of age, responsibilities, educational attainment or socioeconomic conditions, and the venues in which such practices take place. ‘Education’ stresses the intentionality, by adults as social actors, to create the conditions for them to extend and develop their knowledge, skills, judgements, and sense-making actions and capacities. In doing so, however, it also acknowledges the widespread practice of utilizing ‘learning’ and ‘education’ in intentional attempts by governments, transnational organizations and private institutions to provide such opportunities while also regulating educational and social behaviour and shaping their circumstances. So this chapter takes a public policy stand and hence restricts attention to the politics or processes ‘through which values are authoritatively allocated’ (Easton, 1965, 21) to adult education in the name of public interest.

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A public policy is whatever statement is made on behalf of the public by governments, even when ideas might come from outside governmental structures, and be directed towards desired solutions to perceived problems. This finds expression not only in what governments choose to do – through laws, regulations, decisions and orders – but also in what they choose not to do, as the absence of intentional statements is itself an implicit statement (Birkland, 2003). Thus both explicit and implicit statements affect a great portion of the population because they direct the actions of public and private actors with diverse motivations and understandings of the problem at stake and the solutions proposed.

Thus, on a conceptual level, adult education is also inclusive of those practices by higher education institutions that offer education to adults. However, the politics of adult education and of higher education often follow quite distinct routes, as reflected in the many governmental statements that treat each independently rather than considering them as complementary components. Accordingly, this chapter foregrounds adult education and learning as an area of public decision-making and intervention that is dealt with under broader lifelong learning policies that, of necessity, also include approaches to higher education.

### **Adult education as a public policy matter**

In one form or another, adult education has been practised for centuries worldwide. Hence national developments in this field are inherently entangled in wider social, political and cultural perspectives and the changes that have been experienced by individual countries and, in some cases, entire regions. This explains many of the similarities and diversities in pedagogical traditions that coexist within, and most evidently across, countries. However, as an object for public policy, adult education has a relatively shorter and, to some extent, more homogeneous history.

Throughout its history, adult education has principally been considered as the responsibility of national governments, and generally, although not exclusively, for its compensatory and remedial functions. In most countries, explicit governmental statements about the education of adults were developed in the nineteenth century, together with the institutionalization of public schooling for children. Yet throughout the twentieth century such statements have been expanded primarily as an instrument for tackling social problems in Western societies, and adult education has been strongly connected with the welfare state (Griffin, 1987, 1998; Pöggeler, 1990). This can be seen, for example, in

the USA with Roosevelt's New Deal (Roosevelt, 1938), in the UK with the Beveridge Report (Beveridge, 1942), throughout Europe, Japan and New Zealand after the Second World War, and in most Latin American countries with the shifts in social protection policies that followed the economic crisis of the 1980s. Over time, this has led to broader separations between state understandings of adult education as either a purely social or a purely developmental policy. In transitional or less economically developed countries, adult education has also served as a step towards better social, cultural and economic development, albeit under the shadow of postcolonialist relations (Gelpi, 1985). In recent decades, however, things have changed with the development of the concept of 'lifelong learning'.

Several scholars have dealt with the conceptual move from education to lifelong learning in academic and policy environments (Biesta, 2006; Aspin and Chapman, 2007; Milana, 2012). Despite diversity in their views, most agree that lifelong learning serves as a broader policy framework that facilitates reform of the welfare state in line with predominant neoliberal thinking (Griffin, 1999a, 1999b; Lima and Guimarães, 2011). Official accounts, and their effects on the public provision of adult education, are found in the national reports that are produced worldwide in response to specific calls by UNESCO, and summarized in their recent *Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education* (UIL, 2009, 2013). What emerges from these accounts confirms the regulatory function that governments play in this field. Yet the authoritative allocation of values that results from these accounts varies greatly in terms of both processes and actors involved, as do governmental understandings of the purposes and functions of adult education. In some parts of the world, adult education is mostly equated by governments with the opportunities for underserved groups of citizens to increase their literacy. This is often the case with countries that have experienced sociopolitical turmoil for most of their history as independent nations, such as in Africa (e.g., Botswana, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Nigeria) or the Arab region (e.g., Iraq, Jordan). These regions also show a comparatively higher involvement of governmental bodies (other than ministries of education) in the making of public policy for the education of adults. Here, ministries of defence, interior/home affairs, agriculture and health stand out (UIL, 2013).

In other parts of the world, governments associate adult education mainly with technical and vocational education and training for youths and adults who are experiencing difficulties in getting or retaining work, resulting from either low personal educational achievement or broader

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alterations in the labour markets (UIL, 2013). Also, in North American and several European states, adult literacy is frequently seen as an important appendix of immigration policies. Nonetheless, these regions have recently turned attention back to the literacy capacities of their indigenous populations (EC, 2013; OECD, 2013a) and show a comparatively high level of involvement of ministries of education and labour in the making of adult education policies (UIL, 2013). In Latin America and Asia, governmental approaches still tend to equate adult education with literacy. Yet they are gradually incorporating complementary understandings of adult education (e.g., technical and vocational education and training) to accommodate the development of democratic processes or economic expansion (e.g., Argentina, Brazil). In these regions, ministries of education are by far the most active governmental bodies to produce policy statements on adult education (UIL, 2013).

Scholars of political sociology have looked closely at state rationales that could account for such differences. Torres (2013), for instance, argues for at least five models of public adult education, each resulting from a distinct rationale that is propelled by state institutions to justify state intervention. The welfare state model addresses individual and social deficits through welfare measures; the recruitment franchisement model also faces these deficits but from the perspective of a lack of social participation and representation by certain groups. The forced modernization model directs attention to the productivity deficiency in rural areas, and the absence of social organization and services; while the revolutionary/transitional model, most notably during political transitions in Latin America, aimed at structuring peoples' organizations through state control. Finally, the popular public model attempts to resolve conflicts between the state and civil society through multidimensional deliberations that occur via partnerships and alliances.

The first four models are grounded in substantive fieldwork in North American, Latin American and selected African countries, while the fifth is more a potential projection than an existing reality. Accordingly, state rationales might only partially, if at all, reflect public policy rationales that are propelled in other countries and regions of the world. However, they call for a nuanced country-by-country analysis to better understand the commonalities and diversity that exist within and across regions, not just in terms of broader governmental understandings or official involvement of different governmental branches, but most importantly in terms of explicit (and implicit) policy statements, how these are put into practice, the problems that they attempt to solve and the difficulties that they encounter.

In short, legislative frameworks and rationales at regional, national and local levels are an essential component of adult education provision and afford significant opportunities for it to flourish or wither. For this reason, a substantial part of this book – parts I and II – dig deeper into these aspects to gather insights from the various regions of the world through the adoption of multiple theoretical and methodological lenses. However, state rationales and law-making within national contexts are not the only conditions when considering the following questions: Who makes adult education policy? Where and how is public policy made? What are the influences and constraints upon it? What is it for? For instance, civil society in its diverse ramifications often compensates (either historically or geographically) for the absence of the state in educating young people and adults who are left behind by public education. In recent decades, international and worldwide organizations that operate at either intergovernmental or non-governmental levels have increased in number, visibility and capacity so as to contribute to policy development, thus making adult education policy into a global concern.

### **Adult education as a global concern**

Productive approaches to education policy analysis that look beyond and across national contexts consider how international governance frames education as a human right protected by various universal declarations (Singh, 2010) or acts as a service provision that is subject to market policy (Dale, 2000; Robertson, 2003). They also question to what extent these intersect (Robertson, 2008) and shed light on several issues: the role played by the EU as a pooling of sovereignty (Lawn and Lingard, 2002; Novóia and Lawn, 2002; Milana and Holford, 2014); governmental relations with interstate organizations, such as the OECD or UNESCO; access to monetary loans by the World Bank; and the expansion of public–private partnerships in the management of public policy (Wettenhall, 2003), including the management of more accessible and cost-effective education in low-income countries (Verger, 2012). Such analysis shows vividly that education-as-a-public-policy is influenced not only by nation states but also by those international organizations that contribute to shaping national responses to the needs of ‘vulnerable’ adults, especially at times of socioeconomic crisis.

Capturing the implications of these various actors’ involvement in national policy formation requires a fuller appreciation of the very working of governance. Governance is a familiar concept in the social sciences that has risen to prominence in the study of power and policy

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issues (Bevir, 2011; Hale and Held, 2011; Levi-Faur, 2012; Enderlein et al., 2013). It has also been fruitfully applied to educational issues and captures the coordination of mutual interdependencies among a variety of political actors in educational governance and their 'new arenas' of power (Martens et al., 2007). Thus recent studies in adult education have looked at the workings of interstate organizations, their efforts in legitimizing specific interests, and shaping international agendas for adult education (Rubenson, 2009; Panitsides, 2013; Milana and Holford, 2014), through the adoption of new governance mechanisms (Ioannidou, 2007; Jakobi, 2009), and the promotion of a monitoring culture (Hamilton, 2014; Tett, 2014). More often than not, such studies draw on literature about globalization, governance and education emphasizing Europeanization (Nóvoa and Lawn, 2002; Lawn and Grek, 2012), and 'governance by numbers' (Grek, 2009; Martens and Niemann, 2010) processes. But in these accounts, territorially bound polity as also an influential political setting for public policy is sometimes out of sight or less visible.

For example, governments subscribe to state-led institutions, receive conditional loans and policy advice from financial institutions and look at other countries' positioning in international rankings. Meanwhile, organized civil society organizations gather and connect adult education professionals not only across but also within national borders; observe and react to intention statements by governments, state-led organizations and financial institutions; lobby to raise public awareness; and advocate for better conditions for adult educators and learners, more adequate responses to citizens' learning needs and higher public spending in adult education.

It is no surprise then that a plethora of policy actors (albeit with different responsibilities and potentials to be heard) have been involved in UNESCO's planned revision of its *Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education* (UNESCO, 1976), to date the only international normative statement in this area. However, this initiative has coupled with other political processes in the making with which a number of regional and global agendas for adult education intertwine and mingle, benefiting from enhanced cross-collaboration between governments and international organizations. At least two such processes have taken place over the last few years, prompted largely by the 2008 global economic and financial crises that affected some of the most economically advanced regions of the world.

First, in protest over the decision by UNESCO to accept Palestine as one its members, in 2011 the USA suspended its dues to the

organization, thus curtailing UNESCO's overall budget of 22 per cent, and affecting the operation of its headquarters and those specialized agencies with responsibility for various forms of adult education. Further, in the aftermath of the prolonged financial crises that hit Southern Europe particularly hard, in 2013 the Spanish government decided to maintain its obligatory quota to the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI), but it dropped the voluntary quota (approximately €25 million in 2011–2012), a substantial contribution for the implementation of its education goals for 2021 (OEI, 2010) that were agreed by OEI's member states. While these events have proved to be detrimental to policy and advocacy work in adult education by these organizations, they have also created a new scenario in which increased cross-institutional collaboration becomes mutually beneficial for pursuing aims that are no longer achievable due to the scarcity of economic resources. However, we should not ignore the fact that such cross-institutional collaboration has vastly differential impacts on various regions of the world.

Second, data on adults' skills that were gathered in 2008–2013 across 23 countries in Europe, Canada, the USA, Japan, Korea, Australia and the Russian Federation, which adhered to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (OECD, 2013b), have provided fresh snapshots at individual and cross-country levels of the reservoirs and conditions of skills among the adult population. An additional nine countries from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Oceania and South America joined PIAAC's second round (2012–2016), and more countries are still under recruitment for its third round. Similar assessments, which were run in cooperation between Statistics Canada and the OECD (2005, 2000, 2011), have been the object of careful investigations into the policy implications for participating countries (Benseman, 2006), the growing interconnectedness between measuring and assessing adult skills across national and international scales (Hamilton, 2013), the ways in which this type of performance measure legitimizes national strategies (Tett, 2013), and the power of media coverage to strain the link between these measurements and governmental policies on adult education (Walker and Rubenson, 2013).

Growing concern about adult education and learning in both OECD and EU countries is not new. It was sparked more than two decades ago by the *Lifelong Learning for All* report (OECD, 1996) and the proclamation of 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning. Accordingly, intercountry and interinstitutional collaborations in this field are not new either. Yet owing to the drawbacks of the 2008 global financial

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crisis, some regions of the world, such as Europe and North America, have seen an increase in unemployment rates among their populations. Thus political responses by governments, their pool of sovereignty and other state-led organizations have attracted new attention to ‘rethinking education’ (EC, 2012) to improve investments in skills-upgrading or ‘reskilling’ of the adult population (EC, 2013; OECD, 2013a, 2013c). The OECD and the EU are among the global actors that are in support of such recommendations. So what we note here is a growing interdependence between the organizations, and the governments that join either or both. Since 2011 the EU has adopted a series of measures to strengthen European governance through closer coordination and surveillance of its economic policies (Tutty, 2012), which include crafting country-specific recommendations that are concerned with national budgetary and reform policies, among others, in education and employment. Only two years later the EU and the OECD agreed to ‘join forces in three important aspects of education and skills development: Skills Strategies, Country Analyses and International Surveys’ (EC, 2013). As a consequence, EU member states that participate in future rounds of the PIAAC can finance its costs through the Structural Funds (EC, 2013), a financial tool to implement communitarian policies in member states. Other forms of cooperation include European support of the OECD’s Education and Skills Online Assessment which is ‘designed to provide individual level results that are linked to ... PIAAC measures ... and can be benchmarked against the national and international results available for the participating countries’ (OECD, 2013d, par. 1), while the PIAAC’s findings are taken into consideration in the abovementioned country-specific recommendations to EU member states.

In sum, policy and advocacy work in adult education is no longer territorially bound, nor does it resonate only within specific geographically and politically delimited countries or regions. For this reason, we supplement the country-based analysis in this book with a number of contributions in Part III that look closely at selected state-led and professional organizations that operate at the transnational level, and their institutional contributions in raising public awareness about adult education. These chapters attempt to tease out intra-institutional shifts in foci and attention towards adult education as a growing area of policy cooperation that occurs via multiple devices and technologies. These single-institution analyses are important preconditions to understanding the following: What happens to adult education policy? How is it implemented or translated into practice? What are its effects on sites of learning? How does it affect adult education professionals and learners?

All of these cannot find adequate answers unless better attention is paid to adult education policy processes in the making, such as those outlined here.

## Conclusion

When paying close attention to the politics of adult education from a public policy standpoint, legislative frameworks and rationales at federal, state or municipal levels are essential factors in determining whether adult education and learning opportunities flourish or perish. However, we also acknowledge the importance to public policy of global governance beyond and across the purview of governmental structures that operate within single countries. Still, we do not intend this book simply to be a collection of governance studies on adult education policy, but rather an analysis of relevant policies that are either institution- or country-based. We believe that these cannot be dismissed because they constitute a precondition for governance studies to grow in adult education policy scholarship, as they help an understanding of whether and how global governance actually impacts on legislative measures that are enforced by national governments to publically support adult education in their own territories. In this way we acknowledge that such decisions are not independent of distributed power in the politics of adult education as a public good, but oppose those tendencies to dismiss governmental structures as having the ultimate say about what share of national budgets goes to support adult education, and what justifies such public expenditure.

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