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International Yearbook of Adult Education

Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education

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Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education

Michael Schemmann (Hg.)

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Inhalt

Michael Schemmann
Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education. An Introduction to the Topic 9

I Thematischer Schwerpunkt/Key Subject 15

Balázs Németh
Adult learning and education in Hungary. Trends and Issues 17

Martin Kopecký & Michal Šerák
Adult Education and Democracy in Czechia and Slovakia: Discontinuities, Policies, and Civic Challenges 31

Rachel Charlott Mayr & Anke Grotlüschen
Far-right Pressure on Adult Education and Language Provision for Adult Refugees and Migrants 51

Peter Schlögl
Responding and Responsibility: Governance, Resilience, and Vulnerability to Authoritarian Politics in Austrian Adult Education 71

II Vermischtes/Miscellaneous 89

Dörthe Herbrechter, Amina Burger, Tabea Leibold & Julia Koller
Collaboration Under Fragmented Conditions: Implementing Professional Learning Communities in Adult and Continuing Education 91

III Rezensionen/Reviews 115

Gwennaëlle Mulliez
Review: A Modern Guide to Adult Learning Systems 117

Timo Kann
Rezension: Gesellschaftliche Kompetenzen: Grundlage für politisches Handeln. Orientierung und Wissen für die Demokratie 121

Tabea Leibold
Review: Adult Education Research on Digitalisation: Concepts – Scopes – Understandings 125

Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education. An Introduction to the Topic

Michael Schemmann

This year's volume of the International Yearbook of Adult Education takes the fact that liberal democracies around the world but also in Europe get more and more under pressure as a starting point. Some authors already discuss the end of liberal democracies (Patzner, 2023). However, probably like no other segment of the educational system, adult education is characterized by its closeness to society and is thus highly dependent on social and political developments. Consequently, it can be assumed, that adult education is particularly affected by attempts of right-wing extremists policy actors to influence adult education. With this volume we want to contribute to this debate.

This introductory article will start off by briefly focusing on the research activities regarding adult education organizations under pressure. Next, the concept of this year's volume and articles will be presented. The article will conclude with some remarks on our own account.

1 Researching liberal democracies and (adult) education under pressure

Research on pressured liberal democracies and consequences for education is currently carried out particularly in the higher education system with a focus on academic freedom.

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) (FAU Institute of Political Science/V-Dem Institute, 2025) points to an erosion of academic freedom that can be observed worldwide. The AFI is published by the universities of Erlangen-Nuremberg and Gothenburg and presents a global ranking that measures the degree of academic freedom in 179 countries based on indicators of freedom of research and teaching, institutional autonomy, and freedom of academic exchange. The findings of the AFI 2025 point to a decline in academic freedom in 34 countries, including democracies such as Finland, Israel, Portugal, Argentina, and the United States (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The case of the United States and the threats to comparative and international education is also analyzed in an article by Salajan and Jules (2025).

The findings of the AFI 2026 update show, that academic freedom has declined in 50 countries over the last decade (Kinzelbach et al., 2026).

Furthermore, AFI case studies show that in various countries, politicians opposed to pluralism have sought to control academia as soon as they came to power (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). The same methods are employed: the institutional independence of academic institutions is eroded, academic freedom is restricted, and research that contradicts political views receives less funding or is attacked in other ways.

As regards liberal democracies under pressure and adult education there is rather little research to be found. However, one international study provides evidence of the vulnerability of adult education under populist governments. The examples of Brazil or India show that funding for adult education and literacy provision were cut dramatically (Grotlüschen et al., 2023).

I would also like to highlight a project carried out by a group of researchers at the University of Hamburg. Titled "Firewalls in Education", the project focuses on the attempts of right-wing influence on adult education organizations, as well as the organizations' counter-strategies (Buddeberg et al., 2025, p. 42). The findings demonstrate the presence of right-wing influences at all levels of the adult education system, the macro, meso and micro levels. As regards the reactions, the study shows that these range from a dialogical strategy in the sense of talking to the right to a boundary strategy involving firewalls against the right (Buddeberg et al., 2025).

2 On the concept and the individual contributions

When developing the concept for Volume 49 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education, we took the fact that adult education as a sub-discipline of educational science is more closely intertwined with society than other sub-disciplines as a starting point. Therefore, adult education is highly dependent on social and political developments. Historically, adult education has also been strongly linked, on an international level, to democratization processes within nation states and democracies.

Against this background we focused on the research question of how the increasing threat to liberal democracies affects adult education. In particular, adult education researchers were invited to analyze the changes in adult education in a particular country in which populist, right-wing and therefore anti-democratic parties are part of the government. As can be seen, the authors chose different approaches to tackle the research question which also reflects, that it is a delicate task for the authors to carry out this analysis in respect of possible repercussions. We would also like to mention that one already submitted manuscript was withdrawn due to advice by the author's university.

Balázs Németh's article *Adult Learning and Education in Hungary. Trends and Issues* analyzes the development of adult learning and education in Hungary from 1998 till 2025. Besides giving a general analysis of the development, he highlights certain phases, e. g. the Covid-19 phase and discusses their impact on the development of adult learning and Education. Furthermore, Németh also employs policy papers and surveys

from international organizations to reflect the situation of adult learning and education in Hungary.

In their article, *Adult Education and Democracy in Czechia and Slovakia: Discontinuities, Policies, and Civic Challenges* Martin Kopecký and Michal Šerák analyse the relationship between adult education and democracy in these countries. They take a historical approach, studying adult education and democracy as of 1918 to the present day. They focus particularly on the case of Czechia. However, by comparing it with developments in Slovakia, the article provides further insights into the relationship between the two countries. Despite significant differences between Czechia and Slovakia, the authors argue that the potential of adult education for democratic learning, emancipation and civic participation remains unrealised in both.

Rachel Charlott Mayr and Anke Grotlüschen use the fact that adult and continuing education is under pressure from the far right as a starting point for their article *Right-Wing Pressure on Adult Education and Language Provision for Adult Refugees and Migrants*. Their contribution focuses on language provision for migrants. Based on an analysis of ten studies identified through a scoping review, they present findings showing that right-wing and far-right influences have an impact on policy frameworks and public discourse around language provision. One consequence is that mainstream parties adopt right-wing positions. Furthermore, language provision is also redefined as an instrument of control rather than a social right. It becomes embedded in narratives of cultural threat and national unity. The contribution also outlines research gaps.

The article *Responding and Responsibility. Governance, Resilience, and Vulnerability to Authoritarian Politics in Austrian Adult Education* by Peter Schlögl aims at analyzing how right-wing and far-right policy agendas influence adult education in Austria. He particularly focuses on the governance of the adult education sector and studies which features create resilience and which features create vulnerability. As such he identifies provider diversity, loose coupling in a multi-level system of governance and strategic agency of organizations and researchers as factors contributing to resilience. Financial dependence, models of indicator-driven governance, symbolic reframing and the rapid creation of parallel institutions are considered as factors contributing to vulnerability. The contribution also drafts policy options to protect democratic adult education and also analyzes the role of adult education researchers in this process.

Next to the articles to the key subject section, this year's volume of the International Yearbook of Adult Education also includes one article in the section Miscellaneous. Dörthe Herbrechter, Amina Burger, Tabea Leibold and Julia Koller analyze the process of implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in adult and continuing education. By employing both qualitative group interviews and quantitative survey data from newly established PLCs they gain insight into the compatibility of PLCs for processes of professionalization in adult and continuing education. Overall, they find evidence for good chances of implementation.

This year's volume is completed by three reviews written by Gwennaëlle Mulliez, Timo Kann and Tabea Leibold.

3 On our own Account

I would like to thank all authors of the contributions, who prepared their manuscripts within the deadlines. What is more, I am also grateful to all reviewers of the articles and to the authors of the review section.

My personal thanks goes to Tabea Leibold who runs the editorial department of the International Yearbook of Adult Education. She constantly works on improving the quality of processes which guarantee the standard of the International Yearbook of Adult Education.

Volume 50 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education will focus on the topic "Professional Learning of Teaching Staff". We welcome contributions to the key subject of this volume as well as contributions to the sections Miscellaneous and Reviews.

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I Thematischer Schwerpunkt/Key Subject

Adult learning and education in Hungary. Trends and Issues

Balázs Németh

Abstract: This paper examines the development of adult and lifelong learning in Hungary between 1998 and 2025. It focuses on the increasing emphasis on labour market-oriented vocational education and training, which has reduced the role of basic skills education, second-chance education, and non-vocational adult learning. Although participation in adult learning has increased, OECD PIAAC results indicate declining or stagnating levels of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills. The paper also identifies shortcomings in accessibility, guidance, funding, and the professional development of adult educators. At the same time, EPALE Hungary and international research collaborations are highlighted as positive examples of professional exchange and innovation. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for a more balanced adult learning policy that promotes both employability and lifelong learning for active citizenship, resilience and community engagement.

Keywords: ALE, access, inclusion, community, VET

1 Introduction

Adult learning and education (ALE) has become the special hostage of an 'era of the post-financial crisis' as most European governments gave up balanced lifelong learning policies of integrating low-skilled adults into basic skills education and to further learning opportunities by reducing learning to VET-related programmes (Németh, 2016) and, simultaneously, downgrading second chance education as the traditional mission of adult educators. While governments gave up using the slogan of lifelong learning and shifted towards reskilling and upskilling programmes alongside the claims and interests of industrial and economic stakeholders, both participation and performance levels in adult learning fell in most EU member states, regardless of researchers in adult learning and education having called for the necessary combination of programmes in formal and non-formal structures in order to develop basic and transversal skills of adults to successfully respond to community demands and labour market challenges (Farkas, 2019). This paper examines the changing and limited role of adult learning and education in Hungary, a tool which have been made to obey to VET-based employment interests and focuses. Opposite to EU and international calls, policies in Hungary have reduced ALE either to non-formal trainings for adults through regional VET Centres (Bükki, 2019) or to limitedly accessible short-cycle programmes

to develop soft and vocational skills of adults aiming at strengthening their positions in the labour market. Not only programmes of provision, but also the number of participants in ALE programmes have risen for the last five years while former government reduced active participation in EU and UNESCO led intergovernmental dialogues in adult learning other than VET-focuses towards CEDEFOP and the OECD. Although Hungary entered the PIAAC survey in 2015 and 2018, the latest 2023 results were rather disappointing to reflect falling or stagnating skills levels (OECD, 2023).

2 Adult and Lifelong Learning in Hungary from 1998 to 2025

Adult learning and education was integrated to open educational policies right after the change of regime in 1989 when Hungarian citizens chose democracy instead of Communist rule (Németh, 2000). This clearly meant and provided a choice for integrative and multi-sectoral lifelong learning policies and related structures to get adult education recognised and developed in a three-fold way through formal, non-formal and informal settings (Németh, 2000; Sz. Tóth, 2007).

Adult education started to deeply change in accordance with the communist regime to fade away and result in the continuation of second chance schools for adult learners at primary and secondary as a late achievement of post-war adult education, however, significant steps were made to open to market and democratisation of society (Bajusz, 2013, 2015). Those two factors started to promote and develop non-formal and informal adult learning with growing significance and, in a decade of time, it grew beyond expectations while governmental policies right after the millennium kept less and less focus on basic skills development in traditional schools for adults (e. g. primary school and secondary schools for adults to provide second chance). However, although European integration was a strong challenge to make vast quality improvement of public education, higher education and VET, adult education shifted to labour market related programmes and, consequently, lost influence as a bridging policy component between school education and vocational trainings both in formal and in non-formal structures (Németh, 2014; Fodor, 2015).

In case this is considered as a certain kind of erosion or deformation of adult education, accession to the EU provided to start in 1998 and beyond provided a positive atmosphere for grounding policies with effective structures and methods to respond to EU-principles in education and training by turning attention to lifelong leaning referring to the EC White Paper (European Commission, 1995) and CONFINTEA V's Hamburg Declaration (UNESCO, 1997). Consequently, this process slowed down the process of change and provided a certain positive illusion with the lifelong learning policy discourse that the economic might be balanced with more social. The above indicated impacts signalled some inspiring issues for adult education to be dealt with as matters for research and development, like participation, methodologies, policy and governance, quality and professionalisation, assessment and evaluation, validation of prior

learning, ageing, community and culture, citizenship and identity, comparative work, history, etc. to result in a strategy for LLL based on sectoral dialogue and discourse amongst policy makers, stakeholders and researchers under National Institute for Adult and Vocational Education (HUN LLS, 2006).

In Hungary, the main bodies in research were university units and departments in Budapest, Szeged, Debrecen and Pécs, together with the Hungarian Folk-high school Society, the Association for Dissemination of Sciences/TIT and the Network of Museums and Galleries in Adult Education, which later formed the Museum-Andragogy Platform of the Pulszky-Society after 2000. Another influencing factor to promote and organise quality research work was the European programme from 1995 dedicated to adult education, later to adult learning.

The illusion of a balanced picture lasted for a decade until 2007, when the financial crisis blew up everything and employment focuses hijacked and deformed adult learning and education to fully serve economic and industrial interests. It became rather hopeless to insist on a balanced view referring to the formation of national policies since adult education and training were pushed directly to ministries of labour, of employment and labour, of national economy and recently of innovation and technology.

However, we must conclude that the Hungarian policy shift after 2008 was something similar to the process how the European Commission, right after the 2008 financial crisis, moved the adult learning portfolio from DG EAC to DG Employment. This new way of understanding the role of adult learning came into action at the very end of the budget period for 2007–13 and resulted in the merge of programmes to Erasmus+ and in the reduction of lifelong learning policies and strategies to obey to the priority of member states targeting skills and competence development in accordance with OECD priorities and recommendations based on PIAAC results (OECD, 2005; Csanádi et al., 2014).

As a consequence, research work became slightly turned to VET, upskilling and reskilling with employment concerns, and only a few higher education units/departments were shaping research with a rather holistic and innovative approaches in professional development of staff to respond to calls of EAEA (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2006, 2016, 2019) the UNESCO CONFINTEA VI and BFA in 2009 and those of the Renewed Agenda on Adult Learning for Europe (UNESCO, 2009; Council of the EU, 2011).

3 Hungarian adult and lifelong learning and OECD's adult learning priorities

In the last two decades, Hungarian Adult Education has been relatively successful in moving participation in adult learning from the average of 3 % to beyond 7 % by 2015 according to Eurostat and OECD surveys (OECD, 2025). Whilst the latest figures of CEDEFOP reflects that the rate of participation of adults in learning has risen up to 62,2 % within the age cohort of 24–64 (Bükki, 2019; European Commission, 2025), lat-

est OECD PIAAC results from 2024 resonate a fall of literacy and problem-solving skills, whereas numeracy skills stagnate. This clearly resonates that Hungarian adults performing below the EU average in all areas regardless of growing participation in learning (OECD, 2025). This clearly resonates the contradiction in between quantity and quality dimensions.

Quite recently, the 16–24 age group, who are still enrolled in initial education or have just completed it, scored significantly below the average, signalling potential issues with the quality of education. Almost one in four adults are low achievers both in numeracy and literacy (24.1 % vs EU: 21.8 %), and the impact of a adult learner's parental educational background remains influential. Accordingly, educational attainment influences labour market outcomes and wages (OECD, 2024).

It must be indicated that policy concerns in Hungary face several obstacles to realise the joint and complex handling of adult and lifelong learning with quality concerns, since governmental focuses have reduced official narratives and policy interventions. These have served only employability measures and vocational skills development through a top-down approach instead of bottom-up focuses.

As a consequence, adults' low and falling basic skills have not yet been responded to in the government's policy agenda. A project supported by the ESF+ aims to improve the basic skills of people with low educational attainment and unemployed people. This practice has resulted in a very problematic situation for being able to easily demonstrate 'ups and downs' in the same country-specific system. It also means that one cannot consider the country either as a relatively developed or, in the other way round, a relatively under-developed one. Hungary has got some advances in the formation of vocational and labour market-based training programmes for adults, through direct investments in a new vocational and apprenticeship programme. This is as part of the Strategy for Industry 4.0, to incorporate vocational continuing education for adults. However, that has been a reduced context how the former government understood and recognised adult and lifelong learning (Cedefop, 2024).

Accordingly, a number of horizontal tools as monitoring, continuing professional developments for teaching staff in ALE and VET organisations, guidance and counselling for adult learners, RVA practices, national research and development programmes in non-formal and informal learning environments, quality tools and methods have been either neglected or undervalued in the governmental programmes (Kleisz, 2015; Tratnyek, 2015).

The OECD Dashboard of 2023 on Priorities of Adult Learning, reflecting the interdependency between some particularly important factors, highlights those priorities that are considered necessary to the process of developing adult and lifelong learning. That is not to move policy and practice towards using only some of them to improve participation and performance in adult leaning. Those priorities are: i) urgency, ii) coverage, iii) inclusiveness, iv) flexibility and guidance, v) alignment with skill needs, vi) perceived training impact, and vii) financing.

Hungary, based on the figures of a relevant survey of OECD as an inter-governmental organisation, has scored with quite good results on urgency, on alignment with

skills needs and on perceived training impact. But it scored very badly at coverage, at flexibility, and at guidance and financing. Those latest three priorities as indicators well reflect the fact that adult and lifelong learning has got a rather bad social and economic reputation: it is still mainly connected to the image or presumption of constraint, with negative implications, while the lack of flexibility and guidance echoes the dominance of top-down approaches and the limited skills of organisations and individuals to make effective make use of free and autonomous structures and, consequently, a demand and claim for a helping hand. Matters of financing would have to mean something obviously and painfully contradictory. Although the former Hungarian government aimed at accelerating and increasing VET-dominated adult learning and skills development, with limited or low-level financing, together with other missing financing tools, this would inevitably result in limited and stagnating results which pulled back the output of the sector from its expected potentials (Farkas, 2015).

It is necessary to underline that the OECD Dashboard of priorities may indicate some of the aspects of an adult learning and lifelong learning system needing to change in a rather ill-formed setting. Some other missing indicators would also signal a system with severe difficulties and challenges which are not at all easy to turn towards hopeful directions or ways forward for expansion and development. Those missing items are RVA (Recognition – Validation and Accreditation), the quality development of adult learning professionals, guidance and counselling, non-vocational adult learning and monitoring of the sector (Kleisz, 2015; Farkas, 2019; Kovács, 2025).

When relating any of those aspects to the reality of Hungarian adult learning and education, it resonates with problems and constraints: for making a learner-centred system with bottom-up focus, on-going and real consultancies with economic stakeholders; and to turn adult and lifelong learning with a citizenship focus. In this regard, emphasis on making learning cities and learning communities may be helpful to bridge vocational and non-vocational adult learning for the benefit to all. (Németh, 2023) This is now very difficult in a country of centralised actions, over-dominating governmental approaches and narrow citizens' and professional NGOs' voices. I think that the right way to go, and the right scope, is to integrate, collect, share, and use voluntary actions; and have much more international professional partnerships in the region (OECD, 2023).

4 The Covid-19 situation – Making us reconsider what matters and who we are

Hungary, among many other countries, today is facing the huge challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, tomorrow it can only be successful if there are skilled and educated lifelong learners to cope with new situations in both the social and the economic aspect, while respecting dignity, equity and equality amongst our citizens.

In the context of adult learning and education, the global challenges of health and well-being have become among outstanding matters of social and economic concern in

respect of aspects of employability, community participation and family responsibilities. It turned out that the Hungarian situation reflected local/regional problems of health care and health-related services that were inherited and still resonate: challenging dimensions of system-maintenance with the issue of financing; governance resulting in temporary shortages of doctors and nurses to be directly involved in the fight against the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Popovic & Nisavic, 2023).

In Hungary today, the most challenging and necessary topic of health and well-being is to make people recognise their own responsibility towards their own health and their community members' health. In this regard, people as adult learners must learn to become and stay vaccinated so as resist viruses. This is a rather complicated issue at a time of uncertainties and a globally connected world with full of fake-news and propaganda. Therefore, adult education should help people to become and stay critical thinkers and consider what things are at stake, referring to social cohesion, stability, economic growth and prosperity, together with equitable, inclusive and tolerant environments. This whole matter definitely points out that active citizenship education needs to be developed in several contexts in Hungary.

5 Explaining the predominant focus on VET

Having scrutinized the world of adult learning and education, some recent trends show that Hungarian adult education and training have been deformed to mainly and exclusively reflect issues of VET, and more precisely, continuing Vocational Education and Training for adults both in formal and non-formal structures. From an opposite angle, this means that Vocational Education and Training has become a major and dominant field for government – recognised adult education and training with the aim of strengthening employment and employability of adults through labour-market oriented training programmes provided by VET centres in each county across Hungary and financed by the national budget (Laczik & Farkas, 2019).

It was the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MKIK) which emphasized setting up such a scheme to train adults in vocations through skills development, based on the skill needs of major big employers in the country. The Act on Adult Education and Training of 2013 (LXXVII/2013 Act on Adult Education), and its modification through a 11/2020 govt. decree aimed at registering and declaring the start of specific programmes for adults, in accordance with the aim of the National Government to raise necessary skills and competences of adults referring to labour market needs (Kovács, 2025).

This new Decree was accepted by majority vote of Government parties MPs last year to initiate further high-quality development of non-formal training programmes for adult learners. Its aim has been to keep central government actions tied to the needs to the major multinational industrial and trade firms, and still keep SMEs away from such focuses, together with minimizing the certainty of educational and training enterprises to initiate individual trainings in skills and competence development, together

with participating with their bids in particular VET programmes. These kinds of orientations can be easily linked to OECD's skills policy frames (OECD Skills platform) and seen at the CEDEFOP platform through country reports (Bükki, 2019).

One significant consequence of a fragmented and reductionist orientation is the lack of concern towards other important fields of adult learning and education demonstrated by UNESCO as needed to raise participation. That is why the former Hungarian government could not be identified as an active participant in participatory discourses at UN and at the UN High-Level Panel (UNHLP) to focus on Agenda 2030 and its SDGs, in the context of quality education and lifelong learning. Also, Hungary has not yet been very active in the Council of Ministers of the EU to enhance adult learning for the last ten years and beyond. Consequently, it has not made use of the non-vocational-oriented adult learning initiatives of the European Commission, with equitable, inclusive and equality measures of better participation by vulnerable groups of adults across Europe and its regions suffering difficulties, inequalities and deprivation.

International governmental and non-governmental organisations must call for more active involvement of nation-states in the development of adult learning programmes, to raise both employment and active citizenship, with a clear and balanced format, in order to avoid reductionist views, and focus to get legitimated. Another reason for such an approach is in case we may want to help underrepresented and vulnerable groups of adults to be given more attention and care. To get integrated and get access to adult learning we need to reconfigure law, financing and policies to result in better provision in adult education with a learner- centred focus. This is very much demonstrated today by ICAE, DVV International, the European Lifelong Learning Platform and EAEA as civil society platforms of adult learning and education to strengthen the role, the visibility and necessary involvement of their voices, through dialogue, platform-building and common actions as We are ALE, which is also not at all visible yet in Hungary, at any official professional bodies' activities or platforms. One may find internationally oriented and led campaigns and activities at only a small number of civil society groups, some university departments and institutes having been engaged in the research and development of adult education and learning, which are devoted to non-vocational adult learning and education (Popovic, 2022).

6 Professional Development and Research: the Role of EPALE HUNGARY

One important and exceptional positive example is the EPALE Hungary platform (run by the National Office of Vocational Education and Training and Adult Learning), where a special platform has been formed since 2017 in accordance with the EPALE platform itself. This might be considered as the only case where non-vocational adult education practices are collected with country and topic-specific scopes.

The Adult Education Committee of the Pedagogical Commission of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has created an Open Group of Adult Education Research and

Development at EPALE Hungary to discuss certain issues for research and development recognised as current trends and issues (EPALE, 2025). These are:

- Intergenerational learning;
- Museum Andragogy/Adult Education in Museums;
- Digitalisation – the role of digital education in the learning of adults;
- Andragogy and Adult Learning Policies – In between employment and social cohesion;
- Andragogy and the profession of adult educator;
- Learning Communities and Learning Cities in the Dimension of Andragogy/ Adult Education;
- Adult Education Research and Basic Skills Development.

Those topics have generated discourse amongst some young researchers and lecturers with both academic and professional backgrounds to collect and share ideas, narratives and critical approaches to how adult learning participation, performance and partnership-based actions can be pursued in mutual commitment.

A particularly important outcome of this Adult Education Academy program is a recent collection of studies published by the University of Florence: International and Comparative Studies in Adult and Continuing Education (Egetenmeyer et al., 2020). This publication includes a paper on learning cities with reference to the case of Pécs, Hungary compared to trends in India, Palestine, and the UK.[1]

Another valuable example of Hungarian universities being involved in international research and development of skills and competences of basic skills teachers. Therefore, the University of Pécs joined EBSN and its consortium to develop an innovative framework for this purpose. Starting the European Year of Skills for 2023, the Professional Development Series (PDS) of EBSN has reached an advanced phase of applying MOOCs to develop the professional skills and competencies of basic skills teachers helping adult learning to improve with better performance. Providing contributions to policy cooperation at the European Union level, the KA3 Action of the Erasmus+ programme supported the development of six innovative Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as part of the project Professional Development Series for Basic Skills Teachers (PDS4BST). These MOOCs are designed to engage teachers, educators, mentors, and facilitators of adult learning to develop professionally in a digitalised learning environment adaptable to changing learning needs (European Basic Skills Network, 2023).

Members of the Adult Education Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences have recently tried to debate and refer to the trends and issues signalled by EAEA, ICAE, ESREA on the one hand, and also to those of UNESCO UIL, OECD and ILO on the other under the SDGS discourse. In this regard, around thirteen to sixteen members of the Committee have discussed influential aspects of the Futures of Education focus and related comments, for example that of ICAE, and collected reflections on WEF publication of Future of Jobs 2025 (WEF, 2025), and to the OECD PIAAC survey's

1 https://fupress.com/catalogo/international-and-comparative-studies-in-adult-and-continuing-education/4405

relevant materials on the changing skills of adult learners in Hungary. This means that professional academic bodies are aware of international trends; and are relating their own research work and analytical studies to highlight aspects of global trends compared to local and regional realities (Adult Education Subcommittee of HAS, 2025).

7 Concluding Remarks

The Education and Training Monitor2025 of the European Commission clearly indicates that adult learning participation has recently been measured by the Hungarian government at 62.2 %, above the EU average of 0.9 %, for 2022:

This echoes two things: one is that the indicated statistics are far beyond realities; seemingly adults participate in learning activities beyond statistical reach, resulting in higher figures than expected. Another issue is that the rate for Hungary is above expectations to reach a more competitive adult public with better skills and competences. This underlines the necessity to put clear and stronger emphasis on expanding adult learning opportunities in NVAL (non-vocational adult learning).

To address skills shortages Hungary by 2025, a regulation on short courses leading to micro-credentials and their certification was published, and the piloting of individual learning accounts between 2025 and 2027 was announced. The implementation of micro-credentials in Hungary would benefit from a single transparent approach across educational sectors and regular reviews drawing on stakeholder feedback, including learners. The adult training legal framework sets out the main features of a new adult learning fund (to be operational from 2027), which should finance policy development, labour market forecasting and large-scale training. Details on how individuals, especially the most vulnerable people, can benefit from the fund, as well as the source of funding, are not yet available.

The falling as well as stagnating figures of participation in adult and lifelong learning reflect some obvious consequences which mark urgent needs for research and development:

- The disappearance of adult basic education to promote basic skills will result in skills shortages of adults and skills mismatches in national employment structures. In order to handle such a problem, countries like Hungary need well-trained adult educators to enhance adult learning with effective and relevant methods. We need to demonstrate that adults must read, write and communicate through digital tools, according to the claims of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 1995) and adult educators have immense responsibilities to develop those skills through participatory actions of adults with accessible forms and timing;
- The challenges of intergenerational and intercultural learning will change place of community development and will definitely claim collaborative actions amongst sectors like public education, VET, higher education, workplaces, etc. and community development and culture/arts so as to realise lifelong learning mostly in urban settings. In this regard, research can help better identification of

learning needs and relevant formations to be implemented to enable adults collect and share good knowledge. The claim of the New European Action-Plan on Adult Learning to promote learning cities and learning communities for effective knowledge transfers and upskilling/reskilling might be a proper tool in the scope of continuous learning of adults (Council of the EU, 2021).

- The diverse issues of sustainability will widen the scopes of adult and lifelong learning both in social, economic and in environmental dimensions. Matters of equity, fairness, equality and inclusion will play important roles to provide relevant forms of adult learning for vulnerable groups of adults to make them becoming resilient in their communities. (Kalenda, 2024) We need more research work in adult learning and education to highlight the importance of active citizenship connecting local and global. Learning City-regions focused research work needs further collaborations (PASCAL International Observatory, 2025) and integrate HEIs for this purpose, based on the third mission of universities (Eucen, 2025; Németh, 2023).
- Developing quality research and development work in adult learning and education, needs further enhancement of professionalisation of adult educators through internationally driven programmes, project and initiatives. An important element is that young adult educators get real experience of understanding key thinkers and practitioners in adult education but also deepening knowledge on disciplinary aspects with research-based findings. All of these will help approaching adult learning and adult learners with sensitivity and care.

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Adult Education and Democracy in Czechia and Slovakia: Discontinuities, Policies, and Civic Challenges

Martin Kopecký & Michal Šerák

Abstract: The article focuses on the relationship between adult education and democratic development in Czechia and Slovakia after 1989. It argues that, despite the prominence of lifelong learning in policy discourse, adult education has remained a marginal area, particularly in its civic dimension. Drawing on a historically informed and comparative perspective, the analysis highlights discontinuities between earlier traditions of civic-oriented adult education and current developments. In Czechia, adult education has lost institutional coherence and is largely framed by economic priorities. In Slovakia, a more comprehensive legislative framework has been established, yet participation remains limited and socially uneven. The article situates these trends within processes of depoliticisation and the weakening of civil society. It concludes that the democratic potential of adult education depends less on participation rates than on its content, goals, and social embeddedness.

Keywords: Czechia, Slovakia, education policy, democracy, adult education, citizenship education

1 Introduction

This article draws on arguments informed by both theoretical and empirical research. This is because problems such as the relationship between society and education are not fully amenable to empirical investigation, not only because of their complexity. An equally important reason is the necessity to deal with values and to reflect, from moral and political perspectives, on particular conceptions of the good – whether we understand this as the very idea of education or associate it with other selected goods. No less significant is the inevitable presence of a certain degree of speculation when engaging in critical reflection on what does not exist but could (or should) exist, or on what exists but could (or should) be otherwise. It may be argued that in times of crisis such an approach is not only more demanding than usual, but also more necessary.

Addressing adult education in Czech and Slovak society in the context of the current crisis of democracy, is a relatively demanding task. We enter a space in which only partial and somewhat dated points of reference are available for the chosen line of inquiry. This makes the task more stimulating, placing demands on imagination and

critical thinking, including self-reflexivity in the sense of an awareness of the limits of the conclusions offered. To abandon this ambition would mean failing to attempt to fill a gap that calls for attention.

The text addresses Czechia and Slovakia, countries that were united within a single state for most of the twentieth century (1918–1992), although the attention is not distributed evenly between them. We are familiar – at least we believe so – with the Czech situation, and we consider our internal knowledge sufficient to offer both a detailed account and a critical assessment of societal developments. In the case of Slovakia's development since the 1990s, our approach is less detailed and more descriptive. We focus primarily on education policy, while leaving the dimension of broader social critique underdeveloped.

The article first outlines the broader approach to citizenship employed here, understood as a learned and evolving role. It then introduces the Czech case, which is contextualised through selected aspects of earlier history both before and after the establishment of Czechoslovakia. The main emphasis is placed on developments since the 1990s. Issues specific to Slovakia are subsequently discussed within the broader comparison of Czech and Slovak developments over recent decades.

2 Adult education and citizenship as a role

A defining feature of the present era, on a global scale, is a sense of unrest, or even chaos, accompanied by polarization and fragility (OECD, 2025). Such an atmosphere might be expected to foster a desire for learning as a means of achieving better orientation in a changing world. Yet successful learning is, in several fundamental respects, not self-evident – at least when we speak of forms of learning that bring benefit to individuals, support their freedom, and contribute to progress. Honneth (2011), points out that, human learning constitutes a pathway through which progress is realised as a cognitive process. However, this can only occur under certain social conditions. The historical realisation of reason is thus dependent on public conditions.

Adult education can be approached in a variety of ways. Some of these perspectives are optimistic in their belief that, under certain conditions, education can contribute to improving society. A typical proponent of such views has for decades been UNESCO (among others 2020, 2021). Its ambition extends broadly along two dimensions. The first concerns the wide range of areas in which a positive role is attributed to adult education. The second lies in its universalism, understood as an interest in all macro-regions, countries, communities, and individuals. Within this perspective, a better world is possible also through adult education and learning. Such thinking extends even to issues such as global climate change and its social implications.

Advocates of these maximalist expectations are aware that their visions are not easily realised and depend both on the contributions of educational actors themselves and on the broader environment. Nevertheless, they display a certain persistence, maintaining an idealistic stance despite the current state of the world (Milana, 2024).

This article seeks to avoid an a priori belief in the capacity of adult education to transform the world for the better, while at the same time retaining a certain degree of idealism. We are convinced that adult education is not a panacea for societal problems, just as it is not a solution to economic problems – despite how it has often been framed by neoliberal approaches (Jarvis, 2008). However, it may contribute to positive change in areas such as health and well-being, employment, and social, civic, and community life (UNESCO, 2016).

It is through this cautious rather than sceptical lens that the recent development of adult education in Czechia and Slovakia is examined within a broader European and, in certain respects, global context. One important motif will be that of discontinuity. By this we mean that realities that once existed may be abandoned and forgotten, instead of serving – after critical updating – as a source of inspiration. Longue durée is not the rule in the field of adult education. Another motif will be the emphasis on education and learning as phenomena that can and should be supported by education policy, but which, in situations where policy fails to provide adequate measures, must draw on other sources, such as bottom-up initiatives emerging from civil society.

All of this is intended primarily to illuminate one particular role of adult education – namely, broadly conceived civic education. We understand civic education as enabling individuals to adopt an active approach to the practice of democratic citizenship. It strengthens individuals' ability to orient themselves within society, fosters social bonds, and enables them to participate in social change in ways that allow them to exercise greater control over their own lifes in response to shared problems. It may focus on knowledge as well as skills, but the dimension of values is no less important. Indeed any adult education worthy of the name should foster empowerment and emancipation (Zafiris, 2022).

Democracy here denotes much more than a mere set of formal rules. It is understood in a stronger sense – as an ideal mode of relating to others, grounded in sharing, dialogue, and cooperation.

3 The Case of Czechia

3.1 Civic Culture, National Identity, and the Czech Democratic Tradition

In 2005, a television competition involving public voting entitled *The Greatest Czech* took place. Leaving aside the question of the meaningfulness of such a project, we may focus solely on its results. These may reveal something important about the self-understanding of the Czech population. First place was awarded to Charles IV., emperor, whose greatest achievements include the founding of the oldest university in Central Europe. He was followed by Tomáš G. Masaryk, a politician, founder and first president of independent Czechoslovakia, originally a philosopher and sociologist. Next came Václav Havel, president of Czechoslovakia and subsequently of the Czech Republic, originally a playwright and thinker, who may be seen, after Masaryk, as a continuation of the ideal of the intellectual as head of state. Another figure in the ranking was

Comenius, a religious thinker, writer, and above all an educator, an advocate of universal access to education and one of the pioneers of the idea of lifelong education.

Yet the point may also be found elsewhere. The competition most likely had a different winner (no official data have been provided by the organisers). This was Jára Cimrman, a fictional Czech polymath allegedly living at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This figure emerged as an explicit mystification in the late 1960s. Comedic theatre plays (purportedly Cimrman's dramas) gained enormous popularity, especially from the 1980s onwards, also thanks to their audio recordings, and effectively became part of popular culture. Many lines from these plays have entered common awareness and are used as references in the everyday language of several generations.

This anecdotal story can be interpreted in various ways. It may be read as an expression of disdain for competitions of this kind, with their pathos and at the same time misplaced competitiveness; or as an expression of a capacity for self-irony; or even as an indication of a sense of uncertainty, inadequacy, and the absence of genuine role models among historical figures. Such an ambivalent feeling may be a luxury, or perhaps a dysfunction, but in any case, it is characteristic of the post-heroic period. The absence of belief in any form of "grand narrative" as a mass phenomenon stands in contrast to the search for and development of collective identities in earlier phases of modern society.

Modern adult education in the Czech context, as elsewhere in Europe (Pöggeler, 1990), emerged from below. Its primary sources were social changes and the associated social conflicts, to which an emerging civil society responded. The main social movements determined the direction of development, as captured at the end of the nineteenth century by Schauer, who summarised the diagnosis of the time as two major questions – the national question and the social question (Menclová et al., 2000). Both were the subject of long and intense conflicts, mobilising a vast range of activities within the gradually emerging civil society, including educational activities.

Within the scope of this text, there is only limited space for a historical reconstruction of earlier stages of adult education that may help to illuminate the discontinuities of development in the second half of the twentieth century. Our point of reference will be the approach of Masaryk mentioned above. The reason is not that history is written (in the sense of interpreted) by the victors – here the founders of the new Czechoslovak state, one of the successors of Austria-Hungary – but rather that this approach very strongly shaped the guiding idea of Czech adult education until roughly the mid-twentieth century. This is because it is rooted in a political philosophy that represented the most influential current of Czech political thought and that, to some extent, also influenced the thinking of Václav Havel.

Among the key elements of this approach is the idea of *small-scale civic work*. Under conditions that are not conducive to regular political activity (here in the context of the only partially democratic Austro-Hungarian monarchy), it is nevertheless possible to engage in politics. There exists a space for activities that may fulfil a political role in a broader sense for example, improving living conditions at the local level, supporting emancipation, and fostering mutuality. Typical examples of small-scale civic work in-

clude adult education activities such as organising public debates, publishing educational materials, and similar forms of engagement. So-called *non-political politics* expands the notion of the political and partially compensates for the shortcomings of the existing political system. It turns toward the sphere of everyday life. For this perspective, democracy goes far beyond formal procedures; it is closely connected with interpersonal relations and the solving of practical problems.

This conception may be compared to the approaches of Dewey or Habermas (Šimsa, 2004), as both thinkers placed strong emphasis on cultivating a public sphere within which an active citizenry could emerge and flourish. The foundation of democracy as a way of life is understood as the capacity for discussion. Within such discussion, based on openness, equality, and mutual recognition, interpersonal relations are constituted within communities.

Education, including self-education, also occupies an important position in Masaryk's political thought. Influenced in part by the Protestant tradition, Masaryk (most concisely 1926 [1898]) developed the motif of work not only as an obligation but also as a source of self-formation. Through working on one's life project – one that is oriented toward others – we become better individuals. To live and work toward attainable goals is more meaningful than to sacrifice oneself for unattainable ones.

3.2 Adult Education and Democratic Citizenship in Interwar Czechoslovakia

The education policy of the new state addressed the issue of adult education from the very beginning. The state played an active role, particularly in the 1920s. In the following decade, however, adult education as a priority was significantly overshadowed by crises – first economic and soon thereafter (international) political. Nevertheless, it can be argued that interwar Czechoslovakia belonged to a minority of European countries for which adult education was a priority embraced by virtually all major political parties. Adult education, originally driven by a wide range of civil society actors, thus became, to some extent, a matter of state interest.

Attention may be drawn to the existence of the *Act on Civic Education Courses* adopted in 1919. This legislation established free courses in civic education aimed at providing the population with basic orientation in matters related to the functioning of the state, civic rights and duties, democracy, and national identity. Its adoption reflected the conviction of political elites that the state could not function without an active and informed citizenry – a view that was explicitly articulated in contemporary materials as the need to prevent political illiteracy among the population (Pokorný, 2003; Holman, 1968). The intention was both to strengthen the democratic character of the newly established state and to contribute to greater cohesion within an otherwise markedly ethnically and socially diverse population.

Alongside the state-supported network of local educational centres, there existed a broad spectrum of associative, professional, and political educational activities that retained a considerable degree of autonomy (Škoda, 1972). At the same time, the limitations of state policy gradually became apparent. Insufficient financial resources, reliance on voluntary work, and a lack of qualified personnel meant that the system was

unable to fully realise its ambitions (Škoda, 1972; Holman, 1968). The limited reach of educational activities, particularly in rural areas, further pointed to persistent social inequalities in access to education.

3.3 Post-1989 Transformation and the Erosion of Civic Educational Perspectives

With the end of the Cold War, the question emerged as to whether, and if so in what precise sense, it was possible to build upon earlier developments of the state prior to the mid-twentieth century. Interwar Czechoslovakia became, in many respects, the most natural reference framework. This, however, occurred largely only at the level of declarations, without a genuine effort to draw inspiration from the substantive elements of the thinking of that time. This also applied to the spirit of the republican approach to democracy and to the deliberate cultivation of a democratic way of life and the associated modes of learning. In other words, political culture in the broader sense developed along a different trajectory, shaped by several main factors, some of which stemmed from global societal trends and others from locally embedded causes.

According to Habermas (as cited in Buden, 2013), the revolutions of 1989 were hardly more than *catch-up* revolutions. They were not future-oriented in any substantial sense. Rather, their dynamic was directed toward embracing the existing model of liberal democracy and capitalism as practised in the West, or more precisely, toward removing the barriers that prevented accession to the Western political, economic, and institutional framework. Although this interpretation may be regarded as somewhat generalising, it fits the Czech case rather well. For a considerable period after 1989, Czech political discourse was shaped by notions such as a "standard democracy" and a "standard market economy."

At the same time, the prevailing atmosphere in the West was marked by a lack of interest in reforms that would transcend the mainstream trajectory of development. A defining feature of the period became the now well-known and widely criticised argument about *the end of history* by Fukuyama (2002 [1992]).

One of the first major responses to this analysis came from Derrida (1994) in *Specters of Marx*, where he sought to demonstrate that while regimes identifying themselves with Marxism had collapsed, the crises that Marx addressed had by no means disappeared.

Another prominent political thinker of the period, Dahrendorf (1991), argued that the transformation of post-communist countries into democracies and market economies would need to unfold in three waves of differing duration. The shortest would be the moment for constitutional lawyers, followed by a longer phase for economists, and finally the longest period, which Dahrendorf (1991) expected to be devoted to the development of civil society. Only this third phase was to constitute a reliable indicator of a successful transformation.

An attempt at a basic assessment within this trichotomy leads to a diagnosis of only partial and ambiguous success. The most successful dimension appears to have been the establishment of a functioning polity. In the remaining two dimensions, how-

ever, the results are at best contradictory. For anyone familiar with debates on the problematic effects of *neoliberalism*, it will be clear what we seek to convey if this concept is meant as a diagnosis.

In addition to economic inequalities and the insufficient development of the public sector, it is necessary to recall the effect of depoliticization – which is always only a pretended depoliticisation (as illustrated by the well-known principle that there are no alternatives to the market). Among other consequences, this strengthens the power of managers and, at the same time, suppresses the ethos of active citizenship. The image of society becomes shaped by the ideal of the free individual, whose position is determined by their capacity to perform. Economic and private life emerge as primary priorities, leaving the sphere of public life far behind. This is further reinforced by the rise of postmodernism in a version that promotes relativisation combined with scepticism toward politics. The citizen is thus increasingly conceived as a consumer. Freedom is predominantly understood in negative terms – as freedom from something, that is, as the absence of constraints and regulations (Berlin, 1999).

3.4 Social Inequalities and the Marginalisation of Civic Learning

Another reason for the relatively weak interest in adult education, and particularly in civic education within it, may be found in the socio-economic sphere and the cultural inequalities associated with it. According to a representative study from the end of the last decade (Prokop et al., 2019), Czech society is divided into five main social classes. None of these provides favourable conditions for the successful development of a relationship to adult education. Some lack sufficient economic capital, others cultural capital. This also applies to the so-called cosmopolitan class, which is perhaps best equipped to respond to contemporary social transformations. Although it possesses considerable cultural and social capital, some of its opportunities are significantly limited by a lack of economic capital.

Within the European Union (EU), Czechs spend an above-average amount of time in employment, yet their incomes remain relatively low. Two possible explanations for lower participation in education may be identified here. First, one may draw on (though not exclusively) a Marxist argument concerning free time and freedom – here understood as the freedom to engage in education during one's leisure time. Second, education may be viewed as an expense that limits the ability to satisfy other needs. However, the main problem in the Czech population's relationship to adult education lies in perceiving it as an externally imposed obligation, combined with the belief that it is unnecessary for the individual – many people feel that they do not face any significant deficits. As we can see, the perception of educational need framed in terms of deficits overshadows the understanding of education as an opportunity. The prevailing learning culture does not appear particularly encouraging for those who associate education with self-realisation.

The situation is similar when the Czech case is examined from a perspective emphasising the role of citizenship education. If we have identified discontinuity in political culture, it is not surprising to observe an inability – or more precisely, an unwilling-

ness – on the part of key actors to engage with citizenship education, with only minor exceptions. Civic competencies did not become a subject of state education policy in the 1990s, nor did they generate significant demand within civil society. The voice of experts was also weak in this regard; the expert community largely failed to articulate the issue and instead relegated it to the periphery of interest (Hartl et al., 1995).

3.5 Adult Education Policy, Civil Society, and Democratic Learning after EU Accession

If, in the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there existed a horizon toward which hopes could be directed, it was integration into international structures, above all the EU. The relationship of the Czech Republic to European adult education policy, which has undergone several phases, has been described elsewhere (Kopecký et al., 2024). From an initial euphoria at having found a firm political and civilisational anchor, development shifted toward the position of a "pupil" who, with a certain degree of diligence, sought to complete its "homework." However, after accession to the EU in 2004, this was followed by a period marked by a much more lukewarm approach, a loss of ambition, and a restriction to the necessary minimum. Adult education ceased to function as an innovative and inspiring element and instead became a topic located at the periphery. European and other international impulses remained the only significant driving forces. The inability to debate education policy within the national context, in a certain sense, indirectly blocks the capacity to make use even of otherwise productive European stimuli. If domestic actors fail to formulate diagnoses, articulate problems, and propose solutions within the national framework, European impulses enter a kind of vacuum – they have nothing to build upon and may therefore appear artificial or misaligned with the national situation. Where such asymmetry exists – where national policy is absent or only weakly developed – the hope placed in a stronger supranational actor may prove disappointing. It may be added that this is not an isolated experience; a similar trajectory can be observed, for instance, in Portugal (Antunes & Guimarães, 2014).

If we have noted the limited capacity to draw legitimacy or inspiration for civic education from the interaction between the Czech environment and the EU, it is worth asking how this relationship functions with other international organisations. The answer is relatively straightforward. The key organisations for the conceptualisation of citizenship adult education, UNESCO and Council of Europe, remain little known outside the academic sphere, and policymakers draw almost no inspiration from them.

In the field of education policy, the greatest affinity might be found with the OECD, though this does not appear to stem from a deliberate and systematic engagement with the organisation. Rather, the intersection lies in a lowest common denominator – namely, an emphasis on the individual and their performance (Beighton, 2026).

For Czechia, and indeed for post-communist Europe more broadly, a long-term weakness of civil society is characteristic (Howard, 2003). This becomes particularly apparent when we set aside engagement in interest-based organisations focused on

sport, culture, or health, and instead focus on political parties, trade unions, organisations concerned with minority rights, or environmental issues (Frič, 2016). The level of participation in volunteer activities is likewise relatively low, as shown by PIAAC research (Straková & Veselý, 2015).

We observe only limited space for social or environmental critique, or more broadly, for engagement with complex civilisational questions. There is only a very weak public debate on topics such as universal basic income, participatory budgeting, degrowth, or even sustainability in general.

The media also constitute part of the problem, as they are subject to trends of tabloidisation. Even in those cases where this is not the case, the theme of active citizenship resonates only weakly. Questions of democracy are typically framed historically within a liberal-conservative perspective on the dichotomy between democracy and totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Cultivated civic media reach only a limited audience. A specific phenomenon is the growing influence of disinformation.

The generally unfavourable conditions for the development of civic adult education are also likely rooted in prevailing value orientations. It appears that the neoliberal emphasis on the individual and competition is not solely a product of the post-Cold War period. According to Možný (2022), the rapid and surprisingly smooth collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia can be explained not only by the loss of credibility of the old regime due to its dysfunction, but also by general desire for change motivated by an interest in developing their forms of capital – something that the (at least declaratively) egalitarian, state-controlled society did not facilitate. This refers to the strengthening of economic, social, and cultural capital, understood in Bourdieu´s terms as forms of competition among individuals and families.

A striking and troubling finding is that, according to the European Social Survey (ESS), Czech society displays the lowest interest in tolerance and understanding toward close others among all the countries examined, and this holds across all educational groups (Pospíšilová & Krulichová, 2018). It is also worth noting the below-average level of trust in other people across social groups. Other studies, such as Prokop et al. (2019), similarly indicate that roughly two-thirds of the population subscribe to the view that individuals today must primarily look out for what is personally advantageous to them (Pospěch, 2021).

3.6 Adult Education between Employability and Democratic Citizenship

The transformations of adult education in Czechia after 1989 can be interpreted as part of a broader societal transformation, the basic contours of which were shaped by economic and institutional modernisation. In this context, adult education occupied a paradoxical position: while it was reconceptualised through the innovative framework of lifelong learning, it nevertheless remained only weakly anchored within state education policy. Scholarly analyses repeatedly point out that adult education in the Czech context represents a long-term marginal area of public policy, whose importance is declared in strategic documents but only limitedly reflected in concrete measures (Šerák, 2016; Kopecký et al., 2024).

Already in the early years after 1989, political discourse focused primarily on economic reform and integration into the global market, while questions of education and culture remained rather peripheral to political interest. Adult education was therefore understood mainly as an instrument of economic adaptation and of increasing the competitiveness of the labour force (Vymazal, 2002; Kopecký, 2014). This development corresponded to broader international trends associated with globalisation and the gradual promotion of the concept of lifelong learning.

The document *Strategy of Lifelong Learning of the Czech Republic*, approved by the government, represented the first attempt at a more systematic conceptual anchoring of this field. It defined lifelong learning as a principle of modern education policy and emphasised its importance for both economic development and social cohesion (MŠMT, 2007). Despite these ambitions, the strategy did not bring about a fundamental institutional change, and adult education remained dispersed across several sectoral policies. Similar conclusions are reached by international analyses of education policy, according to which this field in Czechia is characterised by relatively weak political priority and limited coordination among institutions (Kopecký et al., 2024).

Competences in the field of adult education are divided among several ministries, primarily the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. In addition, regional governments, professional chambers, private providers, and non-profit organisations also participate in this field. The absence of a coordinating centre results in policies often being developed without broader interconnection (Šerák, 2016).

This institutional fragmentation has consequences for how adult education is conceptualised within political discourse. Adult education is often not understood as an autonomous area of education policy, but rather as an instrument for addressing other public problems, particularly unemployment or the shortage of qualified labour force. This approach leads to public institutions focusing primarily on vocational education and training, and retraining, while the broader social, cultural, and civic functions of adult education remain neglected.

The strong orientation toward vocational education is also reflected in the structure of educational activities among the adult population. Analyses based on Adult Education Survey data show that most adult learning activities in Czechia are related to work. Adult education is often primarily motivated by the needs of employers or pressures of the labour market, while the autonomous interest of individuals in education plays a smaller role (Kalenda et al., 2024; Simonová & Hamplová, 2016). Similar conclusions are also supported by international research on adult competencies, such as PIAAC, which shows that participation in education is strongly differentiated according to individuals' social status and level of educational attainment (OECD, 2024).

Another characteristic feature of current developments is the growing projectification of education policy. Many initiatives in the field of adult education are implemented within time-limited projects financed by European structural funds or other external sources. These projects often introduce innovative approaches or new institutional instruments. However, their long-term impact on the structure of the system

remains limited, as mechanisms for their systematic integration into public policy are often lacking once funding ends (Šerák, 2016). This phenomenon is not unique to the Czech Republic but is typical of many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where EU funds constitute a major source of financing for educational activities.

A specific feature of the Czech context is also the relative absence of strong professional organisations or interest groups that would systematically advocate for the development of adult education within public policy. In many European countries, there exist professional associations of adult education providers or national institutions that actively participate in shaping education policy. In the Czech Republic, the influence of such actors remains weak, which further contributes to the already emphasised marginal position of adult education within political interest (Kopecký et al., 2024).

From a broader perspective, the current situation can be interpreted as a manifestation of a deeper tension between economic rationality and the wider societal functions of education. While policy documents primarily emphasise its importance for economic competitiveness and employability, questions of citizenship education, cultural participation, and the development of democratic society remain on the periphery of interest.

The situation described above can hardly be expected to be improved by recent global developments. Czech society does not stand aside from broader trends, and its less-than-favourable condition does not provide a solid foundation for coping, even relatively successfully, with the series of crises that have unfolded over the past two decades.

We are witnessing the development of advanced populism, whose rise is closely linked to the expansion of often uncultivated and accelerated communication in the virtual environment (though not exclusively there). Within this environment, topics associated with so-called culture wars have taken root, particularly those related to migration, feminism, the position of LGBTQ+ minorities, and environmental policy. Considerable scepticism is also evident toward the EU and toward the external world more generally.

Populist far-right politics, which in the present context (i. e. following the parliamentary elections of Autumn 2025) builds in some respects on earlier trends cultivated by the previous neoliberal government (such as the disregard for environmental issues), simultaneously develops its own version of a nationally oriented political project, clearly inspired by the idea of so-called illiberal democracy. At the time of finalising this text, a proposal for legislation concerning the supervision of NGOs receiving funding from abroad has begun to be discussed. Another indication of the near future is the current reduction of resources allocated to environmental education.

From the perspective of public policy, adult education oriented toward active citizenship in Czechia currently appears to be a largely defeated issue. However, there remains the sphere of learning that emerges from civic activities. An example may be the growing sensitivity to issues of gender, minority positions, or sustainability, at least among part of the so-called Generation Z. Nevertheless, the tendency toward post-ma-

terialist values, understood as an interest in goals beyond individual concerns, appears highly uncertain under conditions of increasing economic inequality.

4 The Slovak case and its comparison with Czechia

Slovak development after 1989 emerged from the same institutional and cultural-political tradition as the Czech case. Both countries entered the transformation period with a shared experience of state-directed educational activities, strong links between adult education and cultural policy, and the predominance of an institutional conception in which adult education was not understood as an autonomous area of public policy, but rather as part of a broader system of education, culture, the labour market, and social policy. The dissolution of the federation, however, gradually led to diverging developmental trajectories. While adult education in the Czech context became increasingly fragmented after 1989 and gradually lost a clearer institutional anchoring, the Slovak Republic attempted to build a relatively more systematic framework for lifelong learning and adult education (Šprlák 2016).

This difference is particularly visible at the legislative level. In the Czech Republic, adult education remains dispersed across several partial legal and policy frameworks, whereas Slovakia adopted separate legislation focused first on lifelong learning and later directly on adult education. For a long time, the key document was the *Act on Lifelong Learning* (2009), which regulated the accreditation of educational programmes, the status of providers of continuing education, the information system for continuing education, and certain mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning. In 2024, a new *Act on Adult Education* was adopted, replacing the previous legal framework and seeking to update it in relation to new labour market demands, digitalisation, the recognition of non-formal learning outcomes, and the introduction of individual learning accounts (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2026).

A similar difference can also be observed in the area of strategic governance. Slovakia adopted *the Strategy for Lifelong Learning and Guidance for the Period 2021–2030*, which represents a relatively comprehensive attempt to connect adult education, career guidance, the development of basic skills, the recognition of learning outcomes, and labour market needs (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2021). The strategy explicitly builds upon the European Agenda for Adult Learning and emphasises support for selected target groups, particularly low-qualified individuals, as well as the development of basic, transferable, digital, and civic skills (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2026). Compared to Czechia, the Slovak system is therefore formally more conceptually coherent and legislatively more clearly defined. This does not, however, necessarily mean that adult education occupies a stronger position within public policy. The Slovak approach is likewise strongly oriented toward employability, professional adaptation, and addressing skills mismatches (OECD, 2020).

The institutional structure of Slovak adult education is also somewhat clearer than in the Czech case. Alongside the Ministry of Education, important roles are played by institutions connected to employment policy, professional qualifications, sectoral councils, and employers' associations. A significant actor is *the Alliance of Sectoral Councils*, which connects employers, professional organisations, and educational institutions and participates in defining labour market needs. This structure strengthens the link between adult education and the economy and vocational education and training. At the same time, however, it confirms that the legitimation of adult education in Slovakia, similarly to Czechia, remains predominantly economic in character (OECD, 2020; Šprlák, 2016).

From the perspective of the content and functions of adult education, it is therefore possible to speak of both partial similarities and differences. The Czech situation is characterised by weak coordination, low political priority, and project-based financing. The Slovak situation, by contrast, is formally more institutionalised and legislatively more developed, yet in practice likewise subordinated to the politics of skills, employability, and competitiveness. In both countries, the broader humanistic, cultural, and civic functions of adult education remain less developed. The difference lies rather in the form of this weakness: in the Czech case, it is primarily institutional and conceptual weakness; in the Slovak case, it takes the form of tension between a relatively well-developed framework and the limited capacity of this framework to transform actual educational participation and learning culture (Desjardins, 2017; OECD, 2020).

This conclusion is further confirmed by data on adult participation in education. According to OECD analyses, the culture of adult learning in Slovakia remains insufficiently developed, adult participation in education is low, and those adults who would benefit most from further education participate the least (OECD, 2020). Data from the Adult Education Survey and related analyses show that participation in formal and non-formal education is socially differentiated: participation is higher among individuals with higher levels of educational attainment, more stable employment positions, higher qualifications, and stronger ties to employers (Lubyová et al., 2016; Šprlák, 2016). Low-qualified adults, older individuals, people outside the stable labour market, and persons with lower levels of basic skills remain substantially less involved.

The results of the international PIAAC survey further refine this picture. In some indicators of adult basic skills, Slovakia achieves results close to the OECD average, yet similarly to Czechia it faces the problem of unequal distribution of opportunities for further education (OECD, 2023). The relationship between skill levels and participation in education has a cumulative character: those with higher skill levels participate in education more frequently, whereas those who, from the perspective of public policy, might require support the most often remain outside educational provision. In this respect, the Slovak case confirms a broader problem characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe, where the mere existence of strategies and legal frameworks does not automatically lead to overcoming social barriers to participation (Bodewig & Hirshleifer, 2011; Desjardins, 2017).

A specific feature of Slovakia is the preservation of part of the tradition of culturally oriented adult education, which became less visible in the Czech environment after 1989. Cultural institutions, local and regional educational centres, and certain forms of community education have retained greater continuity there. Older as well as more recent Slovak literature shows that adult education in the domestic tradition was understood not only as vocational education, but also as a sphere of cultural, civic, and interest-based adult education (Hotár et al., 2000; Pavlov, 2015; Prusáková, 2005). This element could represent an important resource for a broader conception of adult education that would not be reduced solely to employability. In current education policy, however, this potential remains underutilised. Cultural and citizenship adult education continue to occupy a supplementary rather than foundational position within the system (EAEA, 2018).

From the perspective of civic adult education, the Slovak case is therefore ambivalent. On the one hand, compared to the Czech Republic, Slovakia possesses a clearer formal framework for the development of lifelong learning and adult education. On the other hand, this framework primarily responds to economic and qualification-related challenges rather than to questions of democratic culture, civic participation, social cohesion, or adults' capacity to orient themselves within complex social conflicts. In this sense, the Slovak situation converges with the Czech one. In both cases, civic adult education remains at the periphery of education policy, although this marginality emerges through different institutional trajectories.

The Slovak portrait should therefore not be interpreted as a simple opposite of the Czech case. More accurately, it may be understood as a case of a formally stronger yet substantively narrowly oriented system. The Czech Republic exhibits weak institutional coordination and low political priority of adult education. Slovakia possesses a more elaborated legal and strategic framework, yet this framework remains strongly labour-market oriented and has thus far failed to adequately reach those groups of adults most distant from education. In both countries, therefore, the potential of adult education as a space for democratic learning, emancipation, and civic participation remains unrealised.

5 Summary and conclusion

While the influence of society and politics on adult education is undoubtedly strong, the influence of adult education on democratic politics is difficult to verify in measurable terms. Nevertheless, this relationship cannot be reduced to mere wishful thinking or intuition.

What is likely to be decisive, however, is the specific form of education – its content, modes, and the nature of the environment in which it takes place. If any lesson emerges from the above discussion, it is the need to emphasise not only participation in education as such. What matters is the relationship between education and certain

values, and how it shapes individuals' relationships to themselves, to others, and to the surrounding world.

In times of complex problems, for example, the development of consumer literacy appears more necessary and beneficial than financial literacy. The former concept emphasises civic attitudes and the ability to influence the economic system, whereas the latter focuses on adaptation to the existing system and the acceptance of social risks. Similarly, critical information literacy represents a greater contribution to emancipation than narrowly focused courses aimed at identifying fake news. More general and long-term objectives that support broader competencies appear to constitute the kind of "school of democracy".

An inspiring perspective is offered by the philosopher Bělohradský (2025), who reflects on the kind of knowledge that is both highly desirable today and yet insufficiently present. Modern societies are characterised by a paradox: successful integration into the social system requires specialised knowledge, yet the functioning of society as a whole depends on the ability of each individual to take the broader whole into account in their decision-making. In this sense, we may observe the following: "In globalised capitalist societies, labour productivity depends on specialised knowledge, whereas the coordination of society as a whole depends on majority-oriented opinions; deepening the process of opinion formation, which deliberative democracy seeks to achieve, is therefore, in the age of technonihilism, a matter of the survival of democracy as a rational community of 'active citizens'" (Bělohradský 2025, p. 376).

In other words, contemporary societies have a vital need for processes of long-term and collective civic learning. This outlined objective is undoubtedly demanding, linked to an unfavourable starting situation and shaped by many factors, including public attitudes, the nature of the public sphere, and, not least, education policy.

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Far-right Pressure on Adult Education and Language Provision for Adult Refugees and Migrants

Rachel Charlott Mayr & Anke Grotlüschen

Abstract: Adult and continuing education are under pressure from the right. While discrimination and restrictive integration policies are widely discussed, the specific role of far-right pressure is often not explicitly addressed. This article, therefore, examines how far-right influences affect language provision for migrants through a scoping review of the existing literature. Based on ten included publications, the findings show that far-right pressure reshapes both policy frameworks and public discourse around language provision, with mainstream parties increasingly adopting far-right positions. Language provision is redefined from a social right to an instrument of control, embedded in narratives of cultural threat and national unity that promote monolingualism and assimilation, reinforced by neoliberal logics that affect funding, implementation, and participation. The review further identifies significant gaps in the literature regarding far-right influence on language provision and counterstrategies.

Keywords: adult education; language provision; right-wing populism; far right

1 Introduction

In recent years, politics in many European countries has shifted noticeably to the right. Right-wing populist and extremist right actors increasingly seek to influence integration policies as well as state and civil society institutions, including adult education providers (Giudici et al., 2025; Hussain & Yunus, 2021). There is evidence that Radical Right-wing Populist Parties (RRPP) in governments use their bargaining power to demand restrictive policy reforms in the area of immigrant integration rather than migration policy (Lutz, 2019, p. 535). This occurs within a broader EU context in which policies have become increasingly conditional and security-oriented (Tutar et al., 2026). First findings on adult education and far-right pressure show that institutions supporting vulnerable groups in literacy and basic education are particularly affected (Buddeberg et al., 2025). Language and literacy programs for young and adult refugees and migrants operate at the intersection of migration, language, and belonging, making them a focus of far-right politics (Buddeberg et al., 2025). There is highly relevant research on integration courses (e. g., Dollhausen, 2006; Kloubert & Dickerhoff 2020; Heinemann, 2014, 2018; Käpplinger, 2017, 2020), but it focuses on discrimination and

marginalization as such, not on the strategies and influence of the far right. This article, therefore, contributes to research on migration-related language provision and emerging debates on the influence of the far right and aims to provide a better starting point for future analyses of right-wing influences on adult education. This is important for developing counterstrategies and for protecting the adult education landscape.

The article is developed from earlier German research and is a follow-up study of the project *Brandmauern im Bildungswesen*. It starts from the finding that far-right parties have attacked language provision since 2018, especially with parliamentary questions (*Kleine Anfragen*) (Buddeberg et al., 2025). The paper offers a theoretical framework to understand the terminology and then presents a literature overview on the effects of right-wing policies on adult education. This identifies the research gap as a lack of knowledge on far-right pressure against migrant language provision. Therefore, the key analysis of this article is an international scoping review to examine what is known from existing literature about far-right influences on migrant language provision.

The findings demonstrate how far-right pressure reshapes policies and discourse around language provision. Language learning is reframed from a social right into a sanction-based obligation, embedded in nativist narratives of cultural threat and national cohesion that prioritize assimilation over integration. Research on the concrete effects of far-right pressure on language teachers and learners remains limited.

2 Conceptual frameworks

Various approaches are used to conceptualize right-wing populism and extremism. We refer to two of these approaches. Populism is understood as 'a thin-centered ideology' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6), which divides society into a homogeneous *people* and a corrupt elite, and views politics as the expression of the people's general will. Following Mudde, this is the first feature of right-wing populism. Nativism, the second and central feature of *right-wing* populism (Mudde, 2007, p. 16), holds that the state should belong exclusively to the native population, viewing non-native people and ideas as threats to national homogeneity (ibid., p. 19). Authoritarianism, the third feature of right-wing populism, is defined by Mudde (2007, p. 23) as 'the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely'. However, the term right-wing populism is not uncontroversial, given the complex and dynamic interplay of völkisch-nationalist, neoliberal, far-right, and national-conservative networks and actors within the AfD (Virchow, 2016, p. 30). According to Jaschke, in addition to the features mentioned by Mudde – such as nativism and authoritarianism – right-wing extremism seeks to reverse democratization and encompasses a totality of attitudes, behaviors, and actions – whether organized or not (Jaschke, 1994, p. 30). Following Jaschke's definition of right-wing extremism, research in Germany has shown that right-wing extremist attitudes are not confined to specific parties; they can also be found among people in the center (Zick et al., 2025). The term far-right serves as an

umbrella category encompassing both right-wing populism and extremism (Pirro, 2023). Where it is unclear whether a movement, party, or discourse can be classified as far-right, this article uses the broader term *right-wing* to identify pressure on adult education.

The term language provision is used to refer to all language and literacy programs for adult refugees and migrants. Typical for language provision for migrants is the combination of language courses and civic orientation classes. Language provision for migrants and refugees is part of the integration policy. Integration policies are defined as 'policies that support and regulate civic and cultural integration' (Akkerman, 2012, p. 517). Migration policies, on the other hand, regulate who and how many people are allowed to come to a country.

3 Adult education and language provision under far-right pressure

The body of literature is thin, but we can claim that several aspects of adult and continuing education are under pressure. Far-right parties have always been problematic for liberal, political, or civic adult education (Nuissl & Popović, 2020). But these days, adult education as a whole is under pressure, partly with violent methods (Buddeberg et al., 2025). In their election campaign in 2025, the German Christian Democrats questioned a large range of civil society organizations, accusing them of not being *neutral* (Grotlüschen et al., 2026). The term *neutrality* is constantly used to delegitimize democratic civil society organizations and all areas of education (Sämann, 2021; Wischmann, 2023). Moreover, since the first Trump election and Brexit, both in 2016, the pressure from the right not only affects civic education, but it pushes against adult education as a whole, with pressure strategies on macro, meso-, and micro levels of adult education (Grotlüschen et al., 2026).

In a Western European study (Berg et al., 2023), a group of researchers analyzed right-wing populist party programs in fourteen countries. They find that education is not (yet) a key theme for them. However, right-wing parties try to influence curricula, remove international openness, language programs, and insert national literature. This is confirmed by a Danish study on two populist party programs. The data show that populist education does not serve critical thinking but obeys the authority (Rasmussen, 2025).

Regarding adult education in companies, by trade unions and around employability, we find that trade unions and their educational activities face pseudo-trade unions and right-wing workers' board members (Schroeder et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2024).

Moreover, we find that the U. S. American movement against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is mirrored in continuing education (Hyrynsalmi et al., 2025). Recent research on the releases of companies' strategy papers shows that stock market companies' reactions range from destroying DEI initiatives to submarine strategies as well as strengthening DEI – it all depends on their stakeholders and customers (Evans & Nochebuena-Evans, 2025). However, companies with more diverse and open-minded cus-

tomers financially benefit from sticking to their DEI strategies (Hyrynsalmi et al., 2025). The populist idea of *nativism* is the key pressure that continuing and further education face.

Our own earlier study showed that literacy and language provision are under pressure as serving the *weak* and the *immigrants*. Both are populations that are considered less valuable than the dominant (so-called *native*) populations. Far-right parties are trying to delegitimize language provision by parliamentary inquiries (*Anfragen*). Findings show that this started early (2019) and is repeated across provinces (Grotlüschen et al., 2026). The lengthy, empirically saturated responses from the government show how difficult it is to justify language provision for recent migrants. So far, all far-right questions that aimed at attacking language provision for adults have been rejected by democratic majorities in the parliaments (ibid.).

Our own findings reported here build on data collected at the end of 2024, in a non-representative, qualitative collection of cases. In the meantime, the German government changed, and language provision for migrants faced cutbacks[1]. Earlier research on elections within political parties already shows that leftist parties advocate more for adult education than the conservative, (neo)liberal, or right-wing populist parties in Germany (Käpplinger, 2025).

Adult education research confirms that the large shares of integration courses became an important task for the providers (Käpplinger, 2017, 2020), while criticism addresses the linear model of integration (Heinemann, 2014, 2018) as well as their hegemonic function (Dollhausen, 2006), especially regarding the orientation courses (Kloubert & Dickerhof, 2020). This is in line with a long-term discourse on discrimination against migrants (Sprung, 2011, 2021). However, we seldom find a clear notion of right-wing populist policies or pressures as the reason for increasing discrimination or restrictive integration policies. It therefore seems necessary to have a closer look at far-right influences on migrant language provision. As there is little research in Germany and the far-right movement is an international phenomenon, a scoping review is employed. The following question guides the review: *What is known from the existing literature about far-right influences on migrant language provision?*

4 Scoping literature review

Following on from the conceptual frameworks of far-right pressure and language provision as outlined above, this scoping review aims to identify and map literature that attributes barriers and challenges in language provision to right-wing populist and far-right influences. Building on prior research on far-right pressure in adult education, the review extends the focus to all levels of language provision for adult migrants and refugees. The following section describes the methodological approach and its implementation.

1 https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/DE/2024/11/kabinett-integrationskurse.html

4.1 Methodological approach

Scoping reviews are done for the purpose of determining 'the scope or coverage of a body of literature on a given topic and give a clear indication of the volume of literature and studies available as well as an overview (broad or detailed) of its focus' (Munn et al., 2018, p. 2). Following Arksey's and O'Malley's (2005, pp. 21–22) reasoning to conduct a scoping review, the goal of this review is to identify research gaps in the existing literature.

The framework for conducting the review was based on the phases proposed by Arksey and Malley, including identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating, synthesizing, and reporting the results (ibid, p. 22).

4.2 Identifying relevant studies

Between October and November 2025, a scoping literature search was conducted using a sensitive search strategy to capture terminological variation in language provision and integration research (Nordhausen & Hirt, 2018). Based on an initial review of national language provision programs and policy documents, relevant terms related to language provision and right-wing populism were identified. The search strategy combined two search strands (app. 1): one addressing language provision and integration, and the other addressing right-wing populism and the far right. To ensure analytical clarity, only studies explicitly labeling political influence as right-wing or far-right were included. Search strings were adapted to database-specific requirements and applied in three databases commonly used in adult education research: FIS Bildung, ERIC, and Web of Science. Database searches were supplemented by citation tracking and manual searches of key journals and publishers. The iterative search yielded 409 records (FIS Bildung: 0; ERIC: 18 language/277 integration; Web of Science: 7 language/42 integration; Springer manual search: 49; hand search: 19).

4.3 Study selection and charting the data

The results were included or excluded by the criteria which we defined before (app. 2). Inclusion criteria were: 1) The subject area of adult education is addressed, this refers to language provision; 2) The terms of content, the focus is on language provision; 3) The text is published in English or German; 4) Up to the point of full text analysis, collective works will be included as soon as one of the contributions meets the above criteria; 5) Topic is addressed in the main/full text, not just in the appendix; 6) We limited the review to literature from EU member states and the UK, as these countries share broadly comparable institutional frameworks for language provision, as well as similar political dynamics related to right-wing populism; 7) We also only included articles based on empirical research.

After excluding records with linguistic or thematic incompatibility, 67 titles remained. We did not limit the publication period, as the scope of the literature was already quite limited. Based on abstract and full-text screening, the publications were categorized according to their relevance to the research focus. Three groups were iden-

tified: studies centrally addressing both search strands (n = 10), studies primarily focusing on one strand while addressing the other only peripherally (n = 18), and studies not directly addressing either strand or published in an irrelevant country or language (n = 40). Full-text screening of the first two groups resulted in a final sample of 10 publications included in the scoping review (app. 3). The presentation of the topics refers to all sections of the texts.

5 Findings

The following section presents the answers provided by the literature to the main question underlying this review, which is: *What is known from the existing literature on far-right influences on migrant language provision?*

To structure the findings, we searched for themes, following a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. The literature reviewed has several focal points under which far-right influences are discussed. The chapter first shows how the purpose of language provision is being reinterpreted and redefined. It then demonstrates that integration policy is under growing pressure from the right and center parties adopting far-right positions, helping to normalize these shifts. The findings also show that the system of language provision is being changed structurally, not just rhetorically. Finally, the chapter indicates that pedagogical practices in language provision are affected by far-right pressure, although research on this remains limited.

5.1 The purpose of language provision is reinterpreted

The far-right shapes discourse and frames the purpose of language provision, with influence across multiple areas. Drawing on data from an ethnographic study in Spain, Reyes et. al show that a perceived lack of proficiency in the official language is, for instance, framed as a cause of social tensions, and used to justify stricter integration expectations, as a failure to integrate, and a potential security threat associated with radicalization and terrorism (Reyes et al., 2021, p. 69). Reyes et al. point out the strong connection, as evidenced by Khan (2016), between security and English language policy in the United Kingdom (ibid.). Further, a so-called *immigrant culture* is blamed for urban problems and transforms language into a symbol of cultural compliance or deviance (Schierup & Ålund, 2011, pp. 133–134). Against this backdrop, in the UK and Austria, poor language skills are defined as a social problem and discursively linked to crime (Duncan, 2010, p. 345; Simpson & Hunter, 2023, p. 165).

Right-wing populists thus construct the idea of *the people* through language (Reyes et al., 2021, p. 63). With her discourse analysis of the Finns Party's Immigration and Language Policy in the 2015 parliament election Criss shows that right-wing populist discourse of the Finns Party constructs *the people* primarily as the Finnish-speaking majority (Criss, 2020, p. 282). In the case of Finland, this means 'to let Finns or the Finnish language 'live' others must 'die'' (Criss, 2020, p. 285). Criss stresses: ''To die' is not understood in its literal sense, but rather is used to refer to control and exclusion'

(ibid.). Right-wing populists consistently oppose multiculturalism and frame immigration as a cultural threat, as shown by a historical-comparative political analysis in Sweden (Schierup & Ålund, 2011, p. 136).

Milani et al., who did a discourse analysis and an ethnographic study in Sweden, report the 'major shift from the official endorsement of multilingualism and multicultural dialogue to the active promotion of a monolingual and monocultural Swedish norm which migrants need to acquire for them to be granted the right to stay' (2021, p. 768). So right-wing actors essentially promote a monolingualist, assimilationist ideology that seeks to control migrants through language (Akkerman, 2012, p. 523; Schierup & Ålund, 2011, p. 127; Simpson, 2019; Simpson & Hunter, 2023, p. 157). Assimilationist policies align with nativist, nationalist, and monocultural ideologies that prioritize the protection of a *native* or *dominant* culture over diversity.

By conducting a critical discourse analysis of government documents, reports, and strategies from Labour/Conservative governments (1979–2024) Flanagan shows that ESOL[2] functions as a gatekeeping mechanism (2025, p. 2). Right-wing populists frame ESOL not primarily as a right or support, but as a means of assimilation and control: 'While ESOL might promote integration, it may also reinforce marginalization when populist narratives depict migrants as risks and may frame ESOL primarily as a mechanism for assimilation instead of inclusion' (Flanagan, 2025, p. 3).

Furthermore, Migrants are discursively constructed as a cost factor. According to Flanagan, a central element of right-wing populist argumentation is the reinterpretation of education spending: 'Populist discourse portrays language provision as a fiscal liability instead of an investment in social unity, justifying policies restricting financing and accessibility' (2025, p. 3). This populist rhetoric legitimizes access restrictions and cuts. Flanagan emphasizes that right-wing populist narratives are used to politically justify restrictive measures: 'Populist policies may further limit ESOL by implementing budget cuts, imposing severe eligibility requirements, and prioritizing specific job market goals while neglecting wider educational objectives' (Flanagan, 2025, p. 3). Schierup and Ålund (2011), as well as Flanagan (2025), show that right-wing populism merges with neoliberal goals. Crucially, right-wing populist actors reshape the normative foundations of integration policy by 'challenging liberal and humanitarian visions and declaring national identity under threat from foreign cultures' (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023, p. 155). In this way, language learning becomes embedded in narratives of cultural threat, conditional belonging, and national cohesion (Flanagan, 2025; Reyes et al., 2021; Schierup & Ålund, 2011).

5.2 Integration policy is under pressure from the far right

The politicization of language courses and language testing within integration policy is not a new phenomenon. By analyzing legislative changes made by 27 cabinets of varying political composition in the period between 1996 and 2010 of nine countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland), Akkerman has shown that language requirements have long been subject to pressure

2 English for Speakers of Other Languages

from the political right (2012). At the same time, the extent to which far-right parties directly shape integration policies remains contested. Schierub & Ålund (2011) show that a more inclusive approach to integration was increasingly replaced by a right-wing and populist policy orientation after 2000. While language remained central to integration, Swedish proficiency was no longer primarily framed as a cultural or civic resource but rather as an economic requirement linked to productivity and labor market performance (Schierup & Ålund, 2011).

Based on a document analysis of 86 bills and laws on integration of the Austrian coalition government from 2017 to 2019 between the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the radical right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) Gruber and Rosenberger (2023) conceptualize the impact of right-wing populist actors as operating through 'influence in subtle and open ways' (p. 155), same as Criss (2020), Reyes et al. (2021) and Simpson and Hunter (2023). This influence manifests not only in concrete policy outputs but also through shifts in 'public opinion, media agenda and, most of all, in party competition' (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023, p. 155). Right-wing populism merges concerns over identity, security, terrorism, and immigration to legitimize exclusionary policies (Schierup & Ålund, 2011). Schierup & Ålund further argue that European liberalism has been overtaken by *illiberal liberalism*, blending neoliberalism with neo-conservative cultural nationalism (2011, pp. 137–138).

5.3 Center parties shift to the right

The effects of far-right influence on policies are particularly pronounced under conditions of party convergence. When mainstream parties adopt increasingly similar positions on migration and integration, right-wing populist actors gain greater capacity to shape the policy agenda (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023). The authors show that under these circumstances, right-wing populist actors not only translate their political demands into actual policy measures but also transform the overall style of policymaking toward a more populist logic. Changes in immigration and integration policies cannot be adequately understood without examining the interaction between far-right parties and center-right parties, both in government and opposition (Akkerman, 2012, p. 512). The electoral rise of far-right actors exerts pressure on mainstream parties to reconsider policy agendas that have been successfully politicized by these actors, particularly in the fields of migration and integration (Akkerman, 2012, p. 513; Duncan, 2010, p. 351; Simpson & Hunter, 2023). Several studies highlight that conservative parties increasingly adopt right-wing rhetoric and policy positions in response to this (Akkerman, 2012; Flanagan, 2025; Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023). Parties that have traditionally maintained more liberal and inclusive approaches to integration are 'pushed towards restrictive leanings by PRRPs' (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023, p. 157). Flanagan (2025) explicitly emphasizes that this effect transcends the electoral strength of populist parties: 'As populist parties acquire credibility, mainstream political parties encounter increasing temptation to implement restrictive immigration policies, frequently prompting even centrist or left-leaning administrations to bolster exclusionary ESOL frameworks' (2025, p. 3).

Empirical evidence from Austria clearly illustrates this process. Gruber and Rosenberger (2023) note that PRRP's claims are 'openly supported and co-opted by center-right partners' (p. 158). While the far right's direct influence on migration control has at times been limited, its impact on migrant integration policy has been more substantial, as shown by a document analysis of a 6-year period in the national government of the Austrian Freedom Party and Alliance for Austria's Future (2000–2006) (Duncan, 2010, p. 347). Beyond formal policy change, the normalization of far-right discourse within the political mainstream further reinforces these developments. As Milani et al. (2021, p. 762) argue, 'the political mainstream has moved closer to the positions of the extreme right, and there has been a normalization of far-right discourse'. Vocabulary that was once associated with right-wing nationalism – such as references to 'our Swedish values' or 'our way of life' – has become commonplace across the political spectrum, with 'all parties' now employing such language (Milani et al., 2021, p. 762).

5.4 The system of language provision is being changed

Several consequences of far-right influence on integration and language policy can be identified, particularly when such actors participate in government. In Austria, the coalition between right-wing populist and centrist parties enabled significant policy shifts. This involves strengthening regulatory tools (prohibitions, surveillance, delayed services, and segregation), weakening distributive measures through cuts or conditionality, and centralizing policy implementation at the expense of civil society (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023, p. 168). As a result, PRRPs not only accelerate the pace of policy action but also pursue a confrontational mode of governance (ibid.). A recurring pattern across national contexts is the centralization of integration and language policy combined with the systematic exclusion of non-governmental actors. As Gruber observes, 'the right-wing coalition departed from a rather pluralist approach of integration governance in the past towards centralized responsibilities, crowding out non-governmental actors viewed as being opposed to the government positions' (ibid., p. 164). This is an important finding regarding the field of diversity, human rights education, integration, and language provision.

One of the key areas of right-wing populist influence is the legalization of language acquisition. Attendance at language classes increasingly becomes a sanctioning instrument tied to residence status. In Austria, 'the Schüssel cabinets began for the first time to frame integration in terms of legal obligations' (Duncan, 2010, p. 345), putting sanctions on those not complying. Mandatory language courses for all migrants who had entered the country after 1997 were introduced (ibid.). There, language skills have been used to condition access to social assistance payments (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023, p. 163). As Duncan emphasizes, failure to comply can have severe consequences: 'For those not complying, a series of sanctions were proposed, ultimately leading up to the loss of residence permit' (2010, p. 345). Crucially, core elements of the Austrian populist policy agenda – such as these mandatory language courses – remained in place even after the FPÖ's[3] exit from government (ibid., p. 346). This persis-

3 Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs

tence suggests that right-wing populist approaches to language and integration policies have become institutionally normalized. In addition to compulsory participation, the shifting of costs onto migrants themselves is identified as a right-wing populist policy tool: In Austria '[t]he 2005 revision of the Foreigners Act increased the length of the course and by reducing the state's share of the cost, increased the fee for the individual migrant' (Duncan, 2010, p. 345). In light of this, language courses and civic orientation classes are being made politically mandatory to obtain citizenship (Milani et al., 2021, p. 762). On the one hand, democratic values and human rights are expected to be shared by all inhabitants of a democracy; on the other hand, religious and traditional value systems are discredited by the proposition that there is a single, homogeneous culture within each nation.

Access to language provision is thus increasingly linked to migration status and compliance with integration requirements. Flanagan shows this growing conditionality in ESOL provision (2025, p. 3). As mentioned before, language learning is no longer framed primarily as a social right but as an obligation subject to monitoring and sanctioning. Milani et al. (2021) analyze this dynamic as a broader disciplinary process in which migrants are shaped into normative citizens and are encouraged to abandon perceived negative habits from their home countries and adopt Swedish norms (p. 768). This logic is also reproduced in urban policy debates. Schierup & Ålund note that suggested interventions for migrant-dense suburbs include 'better training in the Swedish language' alongside policing, workfare, and surveillance (2011, p. 134).

Despite these restrictive developments, significant constraints still come from supranational bodies such as the European Commission and from national and international high courts. This highlights the importance of democratic separation of powers and strong institutional veto points as key safeguards for protecting immigrant minorities at the national level (Gruber & Rosenberger, 2023, p. 169). In addition to judicial and supranational checks, activism has played an important role in resisting further cutbacks to ESOL provision in the UK (Simpson & Hunter, 2023, p. 165)

5.5 Far-right pressure on pedagogical practices in language provision

Following the presentation of the findings regarding the changes to the system of language provision, findings show there is not a lot of research on what far-right influence looks like at the level of institutions of adult education. In the field of ESOL, Simpson and Hunter (2023) demonstrate with their document analysis and their interviews with a range of stakeholders that such governance shifts lead to enduring structural problems: 'Analysis of current policy and of interviews with key ESOL stakeholders suggests an enduring condition of fragmentation and lack of coordination to the detriment of students' (p. 155). There are only indirect hints about teachers and learners in these studies, but across countries, we can assume that teachers often have migration histories themselves (Milani et al., 2021) and learners are highly diverse by country of origin, legal status, as well as literacy and language skills (Vertovec, 2024). By investigating linguistic and cultural transformations in superdiverse wards in four UK cities, Simpson analyzed the communication challenges faced by immigrants in the area of immi-

gration law and the impact of a hostile political environment on language learning with a linguistic ethnography. Societal developments toward right-wing populism make linguistic integration more difficult, leading to the demand that language courses should prepare immigrants for the hostile environment (Simpson, 2019). Milani et al. points to tensions produced in classroom settings by the us–them dichotomy (2021, p. 769). Practitioners often face conflicting messages: on one hand, they are asked to recognize linguistic diversity; on the other hand, they face the traditional and still common idea of 'one language, one territory' (Reyes et al., 2021, p. 69). For practitioners and providers in adult migrant language education, Simpson and Hunter call for 'a supportive policy structure so that they in turn can support the students and potential students for whom they have responsibility' (2023, p. 158).

6 Discussion and conclusion

The findings show how the far-right changes policies and discourse around language provision. While migration remains a central political issue for the right, their influence is exercised through the restructuring of integration policy, with language provision becoming a key site of intervention. Language learning is reframed from a social right into a monitored obligation, enforced through sanctions such as the loss of residence status and the shifting of costs onto migrants. Embedded in narratives of cultural threat and national unity, these policies reflect a nativist ideology that promotes monolingualism and assimilation as a core principle of right-wing populist politics, reinforced by neoliberal logics. The reviewed literature confirms that far-right positions are adopted by mainstream parties and implemented into more restrictive integration policies. Post-populist governments keep the aggravated integration policies. The literature about far-right pressure on language teachers and learners is thin, and further research is necessary.

These findings suggest a shift in the *Overton Window*, characterized by the growing normalization of positions and policy preferences that were previously deemed unacceptable. The question arises whether non-populist, populist, and post-populist political contexts share common features. In non-populist governments, integration policies and discourse are influenced through pressure on center parties. In populist governments or coalitions with populists, integration policies tend to be directly restricted. In post-populist phases, such restrictions often persist, even when they no longer align with the official positions of governing parties. The existing body of literature is too limited to draw definitive conclusions, but the issue deserves further attention.

We can conclude from a meta-perspective that there is very little research on the relationship between the far right and language provision. There is also very little research from German-speaking countries. In terms of content, there is hardly any discussion of far-right pressure on language provision at the meso and micro levels. If a thematic focus can be identified, it lies at the macro level and is therefore mainly situated within political science and policy research. Coming back to our background, it is

striking how little research there is from the perspective of adult education. As mentioned in the reasoning of the research questions for the review, there are scholars in adult education dealing with language provision from diverse critical perspectives. One could argue that far-right influences can be studied or reported on without calling these influences in this particular way. Our review is dependent on other scholars linking developments in language provision to far-right pressure. But focusing on far-right influence enables an analysis of specific strategies and counterstrategies. Conceptualizing pressure on language provision as far-right influence is analytically justified insofar as this pressure is articulated, legitimized, and institutionalized through actors and discourses associated with far-right politics. This approach does not exclude other critical explanations, but focuses on a specific dimension of influence on language provision. However, the few empirical studies that link language provision and the far-right, along with the varying ways in which the concept of the far right is used, present analytical challenges.

The findings of this review point to significant gaps in existing literature, particularly concerning the empirical investigation of how right-wing populist and far-right pressure translates into concrete practices within the field of language provision and how these processes intersect with beliefs about migration and integration in the field. There is limited research examining how these dynamics are experienced and what counterstrategies work and are being developed at the level of institutions and adult educators. These limitations highlight the need for a new empirical study, which is currently underway.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Searchstrings

Term 1 AND	**Term 2**
Language provision OR	Right-wing OR
Language training OR	Far-right OR
Language and literacy programmes OR	Populis* OR
Language support OR	Radical right OR
Linguistic integration OR	
Language education OR	
Language course OR	
Language assessment OR	
Second language instruction	
Integration courses OR	Right-wing OR
Language policy OR	Far-right OR
Civic orientation course OR	Populis* OR
Integration course OR	Radical right OR
Integration programm OR	
Integration policy OR	
Orientation programs OR	
Begriff 1 AND	**Begriff 2**
Integrationskurs OR	Rechtspopulis* OR
Deutschkurs OR	Rechtsextrem* OR
Sprachkurs OR	Rechte Parteien OR
	Neue Rechte OR
	Rechtsextrem OR

Appendix 2: Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	**Exclusion criteria**
• The subject area of adult education is addressed, which refers to language provision, formal areas of adult education • The terms of content, the focus is on language provision • The text is published in English or German • Up to the point of full text analysis, collective works will be included as soon as one of the contributions meets the above criteria • Topic is addressed in the main/full text, not just in the appendix • Based on empirical research	• Other areas of education (such as school, vocational training, higher education) are addressed. ` • The text is published in a language other than English or German • Collections in which none of the entries meet the above criteria • Country other than the EU and the UK

Appendix 3: References included in the Review

Title	Year	Country	Method	Data
Akkerman, Tjitske: Comparing Radical Right Parties in Government: Immigration and Integration Policies in Nine Countries (1996–2010).	2012	Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland	comparative analysis of immigration and integration legislation	legislative changes made by 27 cabinets of varying political composition in the period between 1996 and 2010 in nine countries
Criss, Marika K. :Language, immigration, and identity An analysis of the discourses of the Finns Party.	2020	Finland	discourse analysis	the Finns Party official releases on immigration and language in the 2015 parliamentary election.
Flanagan, Declan: Neoliberal Governments, ESOL Provision and Wider Implications.	2025	UK	a critical discourse analysis	government documents, reports, and strategies from Labour/ Conservative governments (1979–2024)
Duncan, Fraser: Immigration and integration policy and the Austrian radical right in office: the FPO/BZO, 2000–2006.	2010	Austria	literature review, document analysis,	6-year period in the national government of the Austrian Freedom Party and Alliance for Austria's Future (2000–2006)
Gruber, Oliver; Rosenberger, Sieglinde: Between opportunities and constraints: right-wing populists as designers of migrant integration policy.	2023	Austria	document analysis	86 bills and laws on integration of the Austrian coalition government from 2017 to 2019 between the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the radical right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)
Milani, Tommaso; Bauer, Simon; Carlson, Marie; Spehar, Andrea; Brömssen, Kerstin von: Citizenship as status, habitus and acts: Language requirements and civic orientation in Sweden.	2021	Sweden	discourse analysis and ethnographic insights	policy and media debates and ethnography in educational provision of samhällsorientering
Reyes, Charo; Carrasco Pons, Sílvia; Narciso Pedro, Laia: Language and Social Integration in Times of Increasing Anti-Immigration Discourses.	2021	Spain, Germany, Italy, and Poland	ethnographic study, focus groups, participant observation, and questionnaires	an ethnographic four-year project focused on mobility and language, and data obtained during a training and exchange three-year process with adult education teachers in the Erasmus+ ORALPHA project

Title	Year	Country	Method	Data
Schierup, Carl-Ulrik; Alund, Aleksandra: From Paradoxes of Multiculturalism to Paradoxes of Liberalism: Sweden and the European Neo-Liberal Hegemony.	2011	Sweden	historical-comparative political and discourse analysis	the paper does not provide a detailed explanation of the underlying data
Simpson, James: Navigating Immigration Law in a "Hostile Environment": Implications for Adult Migrant Language Education.	2019	UK	linguistic ethnography	interviews and recordings of interactions.
Simpson, James; Hunter, Ann-Marie: Policy formation for adult migrant language education in England: national neglect and its implications.	2023	UK	document analysis and interviews	with a range of stakeholders

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Responding and Responsibility: Governance, Resilience, and Vulnerability to Authoritarian Politics in Austrian Adult Education

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Abstract: This article examines how authoritarian politics – especially right-wing and far-right agendas – can shape adult education in Austria, and which features of the sector's governance create resilience or vulnerability. Building on constitutional ambiguity, institutional plurality, and increasingly project-based funding, the analysis focuses on *soft* steering through discourses, symbols, and steering by questions and arguments. Resilience stems from provider diversity, loose coupling in multi-level governance, and the strategic agency of organisations and researchers. Key vulnerabilities include financial dependence, indicator-driven steering, symbolic reframing, and the rapid creation of parallel institutions. Using the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) as an illustrative case, the article shows how integration provision can be instrumentalised via mandatory courses, centralised tendering, and standardised teaching materials. The conclusion outlines policy options to safeguard democratic adult education and, finally, also discusses the role of adult education scholars in these processes.

Keywords: adult education; governance; authoritarianism; integration; Austria

1 Introduction

Existing research has examined how far-right governments, parties, and policy agendas shape multiple sectors of formal education – most prominently through curricular *culture war* interventions, nationalism, nativism, and an emphasis on discipline and *native* values – while showing more ambiguous and context-dependent positions on redistributive issues such as tracking, expansion, and privatization (Giudici et al., 2025). For Austria specifically, policy-analytic work on welfare-state change and right-wing populist governance demonstrates how education-related interventions – particularly in youth transitions from school to work – intersect with activation, conditionality, and exclusionary politics, producing tangible consequences for vocational training and youth support systems (Knecht, 2024). Yet despite this growing evidence across schooling, vocational pathways, and youth-related education policy fields, these accounts remain largely silent on adult education. We therefore offer a first step toward addressing this gap by exploring how adult education is affected under far-right governments and policies, taking Austria as a key reference point.

The argument proceeds in three steps. Because the vulnerability or resilience of adult education to authoritarian politics cannot be assessed in the abstract but only in relation to the specific governance arrangements through which the field is steered, we first reconstruct in some detail the political-legal foundations and governance logic of Austrian adult education (Section 2). This reconstruction is not merely descriptive: the constitutional ambiguity, institutional plurality, and increasingly project-based funding it identifies are precisely the structural features that later prove to be either protective resources or points of entry for authoritarian influence. On this basis, Section 3 introduces the analytical lens of *soft steering*, which allows us to grasp how political influence operates not only through hierarchical command but through discourses, symbols, and the framing of questions and arguments. Sections 4 to 6 then return explicitly to authoritarian politics, analyzing the resilience factors and vulnerabilities of the field, illustrating them through the case of the Austrian Integration Fund, and examining the resistance strategies – including those enacted by adult education scholars themselves – through which democratic adult education is defended. In short, the detailed account of governance that follows is the necessary groundwork for understanding where, and by what mechanisms, authoritarian politics gains or fails to gain purchase on the field.

2 Austria's Political-Legal Foundations and the Governance of Adult Education

2.1 Federalism and Social Partnership: Austria's Political-Legal Foundations

Austria is a federal parliamentary republic comprising nine federal states. The federal constitution divides competencies between the federal government and the states, with education as a shared responsibility. The federal level holds primary legislative authority in most areas, while states possess significant administrative implementation powers and some legislative capabilities in specific domains. A distinctive feature is Austria's constitutional requirement for states to participate in federal legislation affecting their competencies through the Federal Council. Additionally, social partnership – the institutionalized cooperation between employers' associations, trade unions, and government – plays a crucial role in policy-making, particularly in economic and social affairs, including vocational education and training. This multi-level governance structure, combined with proportional representation and coalition governments at both federal and state levels, creates a complex political landscape where policy implementation often requires negotiation across multiple actors and jurisdictions.

2.2 The Constitutional Ambiguity of Adult Education

The governance of adult education occupies a distinctive position within educational systems across Europe and beyond. Unlike compulsory schooling or higher education, which are typically underpinned by clearly defined constitutional mandates, robust legislative frameworks, and sustained public funding, adult education has historically developed in a space characterized by institutional plurality, fragmented responsibility,

and what governance scholars term *limited statehood* (Risse, 2011). This article draws on an analysis of governance and coordination of action in Austrian adult education to examine a question of growing urgency: what structural features of this governance landscape generate resilience against authoritarian political interference, and where do vulnerabilities to political instrumentalization – particularly by right-wing and far-right movements – lie?

Austria serves as an instructive case, not because its situation is unique, but because it exemplifies with particular clarity governance characteristics common to adult education systems in many liberal democracies: constitutional ambiguity, dependence on shifting political coalitions, a diverse provider landscape rooted in civil society traditions, and increasing integration into state-regulated quality and accountability regimes. The analytical framework employed here – integrating neo-institutionalist organizational theory, governance studies, and the concept of soft steering – is designed for transferability to comparable contexts.

A defining feature of adult education in Austria – with significant parallels elsewhere – is its uncertain legal status. As Berka and Winkler (2010) observe, there is no independent constitutional competence for adult or continuing education within the Austrian federal framework. The closest approximation is the competence heading of Volksbildungswesen (popular education), a relic of early twentieth-century constitutional history that provides no viable basis for purposeful legislation or administration. The consequence is striking: an explicit statutory mandate for adult education cannot be demonstrated, placing this sector in fundamental contrast to schooling and higher education.

This constitutional lacuna shapes the entire governance logic of the field. Where no clear statutory mandate exists, adult education becomes structurally dependent on the political will – and ideological orientation – of the government of the day. What is not legally secured can be redirected, defunded, or symbolically reframed without parliamentary deliberation. Yet this precariousness is ambivalent: the absence of tight statutory regulation also affords adult education actors greater scope for independent operation and may facilitate resistance when political circumstances demand it.

The organizational field was characterized early on by what Pöggeler (1974) described as a strong diversity of institutional forms that resist arrangement in a clear organizational schema. A larger number of providers engage in adult education than in any other educational sector, and the free initiative of citizens and associations plays a more prominent role than elsewhere in the education system (ibid.). Drawing on the concept of spaces of limited statehood (Risse, 2011), it becomes evident that such spaces are neither ungovernable nor ungoverned, exhibiting diverse and shifting steering arrangements that resist simple categorization along the axis of state control versus market freedom.

2.3 Between Corporatist Tradition and Neoliberal Transformation

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Austrian society has experienced profound transformation. The collapse of state socialism removed the systemic alternative that had constrained capitalism throughout the post-war period, enabling what Harvey

(2007) calls the "neoliberal turn" to accelerate. Austria's EU accession in 1995 marked a significant milestone, though whether membership amplified neoliberal tendencies or served as a moderating influence remains ambiguous. This transformation has fundamentally altered the terrain on which adult education operates, creating new vulnerabilities while eroding traditional sources of resistance.

Austria's adult education system is historically shaped by corporatist traditions, strong social partnership structures, and a complex interplay between state, civil society, and market actors. Understanding contemporary challenges requires establishing this institutional context while recognizing that it undergoes profound transformation through neoliberalization, authoritarian populism, and the reconfiguration of education through migration and integration policies.

Despite venerable institutions such as the Volkshochschulen, which are well over 100 years old, the Austrian education system still maintains a clear emphasis on initial general and vocational education. Even strong traditions of qualification within active labor market policy, or comparatively recent offerings such as part-time degree programs at universities of applied sciences, have not brought significant change in this regard. The field of adult and continuing education is characterized only to a limited extent by institutional funding, being shaped instead by project-based funding, individual subsidies, targeted contract awards within labor market policy, and private contributions (Gruber & Lenz, 2023). The concept of lifelong learning is only partially reflected in political responsibilities and balanced funding streams (Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur [BMUKK] et al., 2011).

2.4 The Trajectory of Integration: From *Liberal* to *Integrated* Adult Education

The Austrian historian and longtime General Secretary of the Association of Austrian Adult Education Centers, Wilhelm Filla (2013), describes a fundamental shift: until the 1970s, adult education could develop free from state influence and regulation in its content, methods, and access for participants and staff, understanding itself as *free* or liberal adult education. Since then, development can be characterized as a process of increasing state steering and integration into the education system. Filla regards the metaphor of *integration* as more apt than the image of adult education as an additional *pillar* of the education system, noting that pillars are static and that the societal standing of *integrated* adult education is certainly higher than that of the *free* variety (ibid.).

This trajectory manifests in concrete governance instruments: performance agreements between the federal ministry and providers, quality assurance frameworks at provider level, incorporation into the Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy, and the delegation of state-valid examinations – such as the *Berufsreifeprüfung* (vocational university entrance qualification) and the adult-oriented compulsory school leaving certificate – to adult education institutions. The ambivalence of this integration forms a central motif of the present analysis: greater integration brings enhanced recognition and more stable funding while simultaneously increasing dependence on political actors who control the system's levers.

3 The Analytical Framework: Soft Steering

A terminological clarification is in order. Throughout this article, governance denotes the encompassing set of institutionalized modes through which collective action in adult education is coordinated – the sense in which Risse (2011) speaks of governance in areas of limited statehood and in which multi-level governance models (Schrader, 2008; 2019) are framed. Soft steering, by contrast, designates a specific mode within this broader landscape: the intentional, non-hierarchical exercise of influence through discursive practices, symbols, and the framing of questions and arguments (Göhler et al., 2010). Following the established lineage of steering theory in governance research (Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995), the term captures actor-driven influence that operates without recourse to hierarchical command. This distinction is analytically consequential: precisely because adult education unfolds in a space of limited statehood, where no clear statutory mandate authorizes hierarchical regulation, both democratic and authoritarian coordination must proceed largely through soft steering rather than direct command.

Despite the integration into state-regulated frameworks described above, broad areas of adult education provision – particularly cultural and political adult education – continue to align more closely with the paradigm of liberal adult education, and corporate training likewise remains outside direct state control at various levels. However, these sectors are not untouched by state interventions, even if such influence is exercised indirectly – and it is precisely this indirect influence that the concept of soft steering is designed to capture.

The governance literature distinguishes between hierarchical coordination and various forms of non-hierarchical (Göhler et al., 2010). The latter encompasses forms driven by instrumental rationality – self-regulation, negotiation, competition – and those grounded in communicative rationality, understood as collective work upon institutionalized systems of ideas and value beliefs. Göhler et al. (2010) highlight three mechanisms: steering through discursive practices (categorizations, knowledge orders, positions of legitimate speakers), steering through symbols (cognitive and affective appeals to shared values and worldviews), and steering through questions and arguments.

The last mechanism deserves particular attention. It is defined as a process in which the steering actor, through deploying specific instruments (questions and arguments), triggers a mechanism (justification) expected to alter the addressee's field of action – thereby also changing something in the actor-addressee relationship (Göhler et al., 2010). The etymological connection to responsibility is suggestive: the Latin *respondere* originates in Roman legal discourse and carries connotations of defending, justifying, and legitimating one's actions. Where mutual recognition and commonly shared assumptions can be identified, soft steering through questions and arguments can develop high binding force (De La Rosa & Gädeke, 2009).

This communicative steering presupposes what Koch (2009) terms argumentative elaborateness, substantive consistency, and logical coherence – demanding prerequi-

sites that are both a source of resilience against and a point of friction with authoritarian political styles.

4 Resilience and Vulnerability in Adult Education Governance

4.1 Resilience: What Makes the Field Resistant

Several structural features of adult education governance can be identified as resilience factors against right-wing political pressure.

First, institutional plurality itself provides protection. The diversity of providers, funding streams, ideological traditions, and organizational forms means that a single political intervention is unlikely to capture the entire field simultaneously. Unlike a centralized school system governed by a unified curriculum authority, adult education's distributed architecture creates institutional redundancy: the weakening or co-optation of one segment does not necessarily compromise the whole. Where a single Adult Learning Center may be vulnerable to municipal-level political pressure, a church-affiliated provider, trade union educational institute, or private non-profit may retain greater autonomy, and vice versa.

Second, the communicative prerequisites of soft steering provide resilience. Steering through questions and arguments demands a discursive register inherently at odds with the simplifying, polarizing communication strategies of authoritarian populism. Where coordination depends on consensus and governance legitimacy rests on argumentative quality rather than hierarchical command, the discursive shortcuts of far-right politics – scapegoating, identitarian narratives, anti-intellectualism – encounter structural resistance.

Third, the active agency of field actors provides resistance capacity. Drawing on Oliver's (1991) typology of organizational responses to institutional expectations – ranging from acquiescence through compromise, avoidance, and defiance to manipulation – it becomes clear that actors within an organizational field do not passively absorb institutional pressures but engage with them actively (Herbrechter & Schemmann, 2019). This agency implies that adult education organizations possess response repertoires including the capacity to resist, reinterpret, or circumvent politically motivated governance impulses.

Importantly, such agency is not confined to provider organizations: scholars too can become consequential field actors within soft steering dynamics. In practice, this occurs when researchers develop and legitimize indicator sets, benchmarks, or evaluation designs that structure what counts as *quality* or *impact*; act as expert advisors in ministerial task forces, strategy processes, or consultative bodies; or produce influential problem diagnoses and conceptual framings (such as *skills gaps*, *target groups*, *evidence-based policy*) that travel across policy and practice, thereby reshaping organizational opportunity structures. Simultaneously, scholars may align with and support adult education practice in resisting political influence – by co-producing counter-expertise,

publicly contesting restrictive framings, or safeguarding professional autonomy through critical evaluation and advocacy. Illustrative examples of such alliances are provided below.

4.2 Vulnerability: Where the Entry Points Lie

Against these resilience factors, significant vulnerabilities must be acknowledged.

The most evident mechanism of steering in adult education – regardless of ideological orientation – operates through funding volumes and the specification of funding conditions. In the terms introduced above, this is a hard, resource-based instrument rather than a form of soft steering: it works not through discursive framing but through the direct, conditional allocation of means, withholding support from providers that do not comply with prescribed standards.

Since adult education largely falls outside statutory obligations and mandatory service provisions, it remains particularly vulnerable to budgetary interventions. These educational services, classified as discretionary expenditures rather than mandatory governmental duties, can be reduced or eliminated with relative ease compared to legally mandated programs. This structural characteristic renders the sector especially susceptible to political influence through financial instruments: funding criteria can be redesigned, budget allocations reduced, or entire program lines terminated without encountering the legal barriers protecting compulsory education or other constitutionally guaranteed services. The absence of legal entitlement to adult education services thus transforms budgetary decisions into powerful tools of political control, enabling governments to reshape the educational landscape through fiscal rather than legislative means.

The shift from *free* or liberal adult education – or at least growing portions thereof – to one characterized by performance agreements and program financing has created structural leverage for political influence. Whoever defines funding conditions indirectly defines content. Across Europe, right-wing governments have used funding instruments to redirect adult education toward narrow employability agendas, channel resources toward enterprises, defund civic education, and impose ideological conditions on provision. The phenomenon of *teaching to the indicator* exacerbates this risk. As Munro (2011) argues, targets and performance indicators can become practice-guiding to an unintended degree, and Verbeeten and Speklé (2015, p. 959) warn that "strong emphasis on targets and incentives may result in dysfunctional behavior when goals are ambiguous and difficult to measure." For liberal adult education, whose goals – democratic citizenship, social cohesion, critical thinking – are frequently complex, long-term, and resistant to quantification, this susceptibility represents serious vulnerability. Right-wing movements need not censor curricula directly; they can achieve similar effects by restructuring funding criteria and privileging measurable labor market outcomes over democratic and emancipatory objectives.

A second vulnerability lies in symbolic steering. Göhler et al. (2010) emphasize that symbolic steering operates on cognitive and affective registers, presenting shared values and appealing to emotional self-understandings – precisely the terrain on which

far-right politics excels. The reframing of adult education from an emancipatory project to a purely economic instrument, the ethnicization of educational questions, and the nationalist appropriation of Volksbildung traditions operate within symbolic steering without requiring direct organizational intervention.

A third vulnerability arises from multi-level governance itself. The model developed by Schrader (2008, 2019) depicts nested layers from supranational policy through national frameworks, the organizational environment, organizations, and teaching-learning processes; relationships between these levels are characterized as indifferent or underdetermined. While loose coupling provides buffers against top-down capture, it simultaneously enables politically motivated actors to create facts on the ground at sub-national levels with limited visibility or accountability. The fragmentation protecting against macro-level capture can paradoxically reduce the transparency protecting against meso-level instrumentalization.

A fourth vulnerability emerges from the field's lack of primarily normative or professional regulation, allowing new institutions to rapidly take over educational services or existing institutions to be instrumentalized. A current Austrian example relates to the discursive transformation particularly associated with right-wing populist movements. The integration policy arena has become a key battlefield for right-wing influence in adult education. Not only right-wing movements but also center-right parties have used integration discourse to advance authoritarian agendas while appearing to defend liberal values, constructing integration as a security issue rather than an educational process.

4.3 Illustrative Case: The Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) as a Convergence of Vulnerabilities

While the ÖIF case most directly illustrates the fourth vulnerability – the rapid creation of parallel institutions and the instrumentalization of existing providers in the absence of normative or professional regulation – its analytical value lies precisely in demonstrating how the four vulnerabilities reinforce one another in practice. Financial dependence, indicator-driven steering, symbolic reframing, and weak regulatory protection do not operate in isolation but converge within a single institutional configuration.

The Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichischer Integrationsfonds – ÖIF) has emerged as a central actor in this transformation, wielding significant financial and regulatory power. Established in 1960 as the *United Nations Refugee Fund*, it evolved from a housing assistance organization into a comprehensive integration apparatus. Its transformation accelerated after 2017 with the Integration Act, which established mandatory measures including German language courses and *values and orientation courses*. The ÖIF's expansion embodies a fundamental shift in how integration is operationalized through adult learning provisions, both voluntary and mandatory.

The case exemplifies the fourth vulnerability most directly. The ÖIF's institutional position – formally independent but closely aligned with government policy – exemplifies new forms of indirect political control. With integration centers in all provincial capitals and coordination of German courses across Austria since 2021, the ÖIF has

created a parallel system operating alongside but separate from traditional adult education institutions. The absence of binding normative or professional regulation in the field allows such a parallel apparatus to be established rapidly and to supplant established provision. Existing organizations, in turn, must adopt prescribed teaching content and materials to obtain funding from centrally tendered programs. Core didactic paradigms of traditional adult education, such as participant-oriented course design and voluntary participation, are not applied there.

Yet this regulatory entry point is inseparable from the third vulnerability, the dynamics of multi-level governance. The creation of integration centers across all provincial capitals illustrates how politically motivated actors can establish facts on the ground at the sub-national level, building a nationwide infrastructure with limited visibility or accountability within the loosely coupled governance architecture described above.

The configuration is reinforced, in turn, by the second vulnerability, symbolic steering. Right-wing influence operates through educational materials that appear politically neutral while advancing ideological agendas – presenting one-dimensional versions of Austrian history while essentializing cultural differences. Operating on the cognitive and affective registers identified by Göhler et al. (2010), such materials reframe integration as cultural conformity rather than emancipatory learning, without requiring any direct organizational intervention. The ÖIF's training programs correspondingly emphasize technical language teaching while marginalizing critical pedagogical approaches.

Finally, the first vulnerability, financial dependence, binds the configuration together and renders it durable. The economic dependencies on commissioned training programs, course placements, and success rates for adult education providers acting as service contractors based on externally imposed standards – together with the accompanying precarious employment conditions of integration course instructors – create dependencies that discourage critical questioning. The susceptibility produced by *teaching to the indicator*, discussed above, here acquires concrete institutional form: providers oriented toward measurable throughput and externally defined success criteria possess little structural latitude to contest the pedagogical model imposed upon them.

Taken together, the ÖIF case shows that the four vulnerabilities are not discrete alternatives but mutually constitutive dimensions of a single mechanism of political instrumentalization. It is this convergence – rather than any single entry point – that makes the configuration so consequential, and it is the same convergence to which the concluding section returns.

4.4 Structural Conditions of Vulnerability

The susceptibility of Austrian adult education to authoritarian influence extends beyond far-right strategies to structural conditions creating opportunities for such influence. The financial dependence of integration course providers – often relying entirely on ÖIF contracts – enables rapid policy implementation without institutional resistance. The fragmentation of provision across multiple sectors, funders, and regulatory

frameworks, while historically ensuring pluralism, becomes vulnerability when facing systematic pressure. The lack of unified advocacy structures enables divide-and-conquer tactics.

New Public Management reforms since the 1990s have transformed adult education institutions into quasi-market actors competing for resources. Despite these market pressures, successful collaborative networks have emerged at multiple governance levels. At the federal level, the Conference of Austrian Adult Education Institutions (KEBÖ), established in 1972 as the field's most venerable platform, serves as a key coordinating body, while regional initiatives continue to develop – notably the recently established *Educational Hub Carinthia* (Gfrerer & Schlögl, 2026), a collaboration platform linking adult education providers and universities in the federal state of Carinthia. This platform facilitates infrastructure sharing, joint staff development, and co-creation of innovative educational programs. Nevertheless, marketization generally undermines solidarity between institutions while creating pressures for conformity. Performance indicators marginalize harder-to-measure goals; institutions become skilled at producing metrics rather than education. The projectification of funding creates temporal instability undermining long-term planning, while professional precarization – prevalent part-time, temporary, and freelance contracts – means educators lack job security and collective bargaining power. Precarious workers cannot afford to challenge problematic curricula or organize collective resistance.

The retirement of educators trained and socialized in the democratic traditions of the 1970s and 1980s removes institutional memory and embodied knowledge of democratic practice, while younger educators may lack exposure to critical pedagogical traditions. Institutional isomorphism reduces diversity as funding requirements and regulatory frameworks push institutions toward common forms, while the institutions themselves retain ever less capacity for development, both in terms of time and professional expertise. The organizational diversity that characterized Austrian adult education for a long time gradually erodes under pressures for efficiency and accountability. The weak articulation between adult education and other educational sectors creates isolation, while the decline of traditional civil society organizations – trade unions, churches, cultural associations – leaves adult education more exposed to direct political pressure.

5 Responsibility as Pragmatic Coordination of Action

This underscores that adult education institutions are not primarily *objects* of political governance but rather actors within a complex field who bear responsibility for how that field develops. Hart's (1968) typology distinguishes between causal responsibility, role responsibility, capacity responsibility, and liability responsibility. Applied to adult education governance, this clarifies that responsibility constitutes a shared, albeit differentiated, undertaking among all field actors.

Within neo-institutionalist theory, this collective engagement is conceptualized as *institutional work* – the purposive activities of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Institutions, as Altrichter (2015) emphasizes, function simultaneously as the presupposed context of action and as the object of actors' shaping efforts – because they store essential offers for coordinating action. The value beliefs embedded in these institutions are not fixed deposits but ongoing accomplishments of collective institutional work.

In this domain, confrontation with authoritarian politics becomes most consequential. Right-wing movements seek to transform the normative infrastructure of fields – to redefine legitimate knowledge, legitimate participants, and education's purposes. The governance architecture of adult education, with its dependence on communicatively sustained value beliefs, means that such normative contestation is an internal challenge to the field's mode of self-governance.

6 Resistance Strategies and Democratic Resilience

Despite significant challenges, Austrian adult education demonstrates remarkable resilience through multiple forms of resistance. Given the previously discussed example of the ÖIF and its role in integration course provision, it is particularly relevant to examine resistance strategies within the specific context of migration and adult education. Migrant self-organizations have effectively challenged paternalistic integration policies, while professional associations – notably the Austrian Society for Political Education (ÖGPB) – have developed sophisticated critiques of authoritarian tendencies while defending principles of participant orientation.

Critical migration pedagogy, as conceptualized by Heinemann and Ortner (2018) and Sprung (2012), offers a particularly important counter-narrative to the instrumentalization of adult education in migration contexts. It reframes migrants as subjects and producers of knowledge rather than objects of intervention, prioritizing critical consciousness over assimilationist imperatives. Educators working within and beyond official integration programs often engage in what might be termed pedagogical resistance: they repurpose prescribed materials as prompts for critical dialogue, create informal spaces enabling participant agency, and cultivate solidarity across cultural boundaries. Legal strategies drawing on international human-rights frameworks have had some success in challenging restrictive policies, while cross-sector coalition-building can generate broader movements capable of sustained opposition.

Alternative educational spaces – including autonomous social centers and community education initiatives – preserve traditions of popular education while sustaining radical pedagogical experimentation. Academic research plays a vital role in making visible those dynamics that dominant actors often seek to normalize or obscure, while the preservation of institutional memory through structured mentorship and systematic documentation helps safeguard democratic educational traditions against generational discontinuity. The development of alternative assessment frameworks – such

as participatory methodologies, portfolio-based evaluation, and narrative forms of assessment – directly challenges the hegemony of standardized metrics as the primary arbiter of educational quality and *success*, offering practicable alternatives to narrow, institutionally imposed competency regimes.

This opens a bridge to the role of adult education research more broadly: much like critical scholarship intervening in migration discourses by questioning deficit framings, exposing governing rationalities, and amplifying marginalized perspectives, research in adult education can function as democratic counter-infrastructure. By documenting tensions, legitimizing practitioners' professional judgment, and providing concepts and evidence for public debate, it can carry – and at times actively catalyze – resistant tendencies within the field, helping defend values-based, learner-centered practice against managerial and technocratic reductions.

Memory culture exemplifies how adult education functions as democratic resistance. It is sustained not only through schools, museums, and official commemorations but also through a dense ecology of adult-education practices. Adult learning initiatives in Erinnerungsarbeit (educational engagement with the National Socialist past) counter historical revisionism and the long-dominant *victim thesis* by creating public spaces for critical engagement with National Socialism, antisemitism, racism, and local complicities – often in formats accessible beyond formal education (public talks, guided walks, commemorative projects, and community-based research). A particularly illustrative example is the Austria-wide digital platform DERLA (Digital Memorial Landscape), launched in 2023, which documents memorials to victims of Nazi persecution and provides didactic modules designed not only for school use but explicitly to enable broader publics to engage in inquiry-based, place-based learning (Wutti & Danglmaier, 2024). Their Carinthia-focused analysis shows how a persistent *hierarchy of memories* remains materially inscribed in public space – war memorials to *dutiful* soldiers occupy central and prominent locations, while remembrance of persecuted groups has often been peripheral and belated – yet also demonstrates that new memorials since 2010 increasingly contest these spatial orders (Wutti & Danglmaier, 2024). By making dispersed memorial knowledge searchable, mappable, and teachable, DERLA exemplifies how adult education can operate as counter-public infrastructure: it supports critical historical judgment, invites multi-perspectival interpretation of contested sites, and strengthens civic agency by connecting local remembrance work to broader debates on responsibility and democracy (Wutti & Danglmaier, 2024; Gstettner, 2012).

Another example of how research can enact resistance through advocacy comes from scholarship on adult basic education (ABE). In their comparative study of values-based adult learning and education fields in Austria, Scotland, and South Tyrol, Cennamo et al. (2024) intentionally foreground practitioners' voices to show how neoliberal governance – via intensified monitoring, standardized outcomes, curriculum control, and funding logics tied to employability – pressures and delegitimizes critical-emancipatory practice. Importantly, the article does not treat these pressures as neutral *reforms*; it renders them contestable by documenting their pedagogical and ethical costs (reduced time for dialogic work, demotivation through assessment regimes, and the

reconstruction of learners as measurable human capital). The research functions as advocacy infrastructure for the field: it provides evidence-based language for public and policy debate, affirms ABE as values-driven democratic practice oriented toward social justice, and legitimizes *repertoires of resistance* (workarounds, alliances, and practitioner-led reinterpretations of imposed curricula) as professional judgment rather than non-compliance (Cennamo et al., 2024). This is scholarly resistance because it strengthens practitioners' capacity to "hold the line" on learner-centered, holistic, and emancipatory approaches under hostile conditions – supporting collective agency, visibility, and recognition of ABE beyond narrow upskilling agendas.

7 Implications for Theory and Practice

Filla's (2013, p. 9) call for developing a comprehensive "state theory" for adult education – one transcending the reductive binary opposition between state control and market mechanisms that continues to dominate contemporary financing debates – retains its analytical urgency and political relevance. In the current historical conjuncture, characterized by rising authoritarianism and democratic erosion, this theoretical project must be fundamentally expanded to incorporate a robust democratic-theoretical dimension: specifically, how can adult education be institutionally embedded and legally safeguarded as essential infrastructure for democratic societies – establishing protective mechanisms against authoritarian capture and instrumentalization while simultaneously preserving its constitutive characteristics of pedagogical plurality, institutional diversity, and openness to emergent social needs and movements?

Several directions emerge. Constitutional or legislative safeguarding would reduce dependence on political conjuncture. This remedy is itself ambivalent, however: the statutory anchoring that protects adult education from budgetary arbitrariness would in all likelihood also entail more direct state influence on curricula and standards – reproducing, in a new form, the constitutive tension between the protection of integration and the autonomy of remaining outside the state apparatus. Diversification of financing structures limits any single political actor's leverage. The discursive and argumentative capacities of the field – the *argumentative elaborateness* (Koch, 2009) demanded by soft steering – require conscious cultivation through research, professional development, and inter-organizational exchange. The institutional work of maintaining shared value beliefs must be understood as an ongoing democratic practice of collective self-determination. Dräger's (2017) reminder that in cultural-historical terms, andragogy precedes pedagogy points to the fundamental significance of what is at stake: adult education is the medium through which societies deliberate upon their own development. To protect this deliberative function is a democratic imperative of the first order.

8 Conclusion

This analysis reveals a complex landscape of challenge and resistance, vulnerability and resilience. The intersection of neoliberalization, authoritarian populism, and the dynamics of migration and integration policy has created unprecedented pressures on parts of democratic adult education. The transformation of integration policy represents a crucial site where these forces converge. First, the construction of migrants as a population requiring disciplinary education normalizes authoritarian pedagogies that, once established as legitimate, are readily extended to other groups marked as deficient or deviant – the long-term unemployed subjected to mandatory *activation* programs, welfare recipients required to demonstrate compliance, or young people in precarious circumstances enrolled in coercive training schemes. What is first justified as exceptional treatment for a stigmatized minority thus becomes a generalizable model of governing through education. Second, the coupling of education with surveillance – attendance monitoring, data sharing with immigration or security authorities, and the conditioning of legal status or benefits on educational performance – establishes precedents that erode the foundations of democratic education more broadly: its voluntary character, the confidentiality of the pedagogical relationship, and its orientation toward learners' self-determined development rather than state-defined conformity. The ÖIF's expansion and the mandatory values courses it implements embody a fundamental challenge to principles of participant orientation, voluntary participation, and critical dialogue that have historically characterized Austrian adult education.

Yet the analysis also demonstrates significant capacity for resistance and renewal. The persistence of democratic principles within the sector, the development of critical migration pedagogies, and the organization of migrant communities show that authoritarian transformation is neither complete nor inevitable. The contradictions within integration policy – between inclusion and exclusion, liberal values and authoritarian practices – create spaces for critical intervention. Structurally, fragmentation ensures diversity preventing complete capture, while marketization generates contradictions that can be exploited for democratic purposes.

The struggle over adult education is ultimately a struggle over society itself. The defense of democratic adult education requires solidarity that transcends the divide between the so-called native-born population and migrants, as well as recognition that right-wing ideology constructs an ever-expanding spectrum of *others* – ranging from migrants and refugees to racialized minorities, and from queer and trans people to those holding left-liberal views. It further demands recognition of common interests in opposing both neoliberal exploitation and authoritarian domination, and a commitment to education that enables critical consciousness and collective transformation. The path forward demands abandoning the illusion of educational neutrality in favor of explicit democratic commitment, replacing faith in market mechanisms with recognition of education as a public good, and complementing educational programs with comprehensive approaches that address the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of inclusion.

Dräger's (2017) insight that adult learning historically precedes the transmission of knowledge to subsequent generations underscores the democratic significance of what is at stake. In an era of rising authoritarianism, the governance of adult education is not a technical question of institutional design; it is a political question about the conditions of democratic self-governance itself.

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II Vermischtes/Miscellaneous

Collaboration Under Fragmented Conditions: Implementing Professional Learning Communities in Adult and Continuing Education

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Abstract: Professional learning communities (PLCs) are considered a promising approach to collaborative professional development "near the job", yet they have received little empirical attention in adult and continuing education (AE/CE). In AE/CE contexts, regular opportunities for collegial exchange are often limited due to high proportions of part-time employment and fragmented employment structures, suggesting particular potential for structured collaborative formats such as PLCs to support professional learning. The present study examines the implementation of PLCs in AE/CE. Using an exploratory mixed-methods design, qualitative group interviews and quantitative survey data from four newly established PLCs ($N = 13$) were analysed. Participation was perceived as professionally relevant across formats, particularly due to the combination of collaborative task work and structured reflection on work-related demands. Collaboration was primarily shaped by PLC design features and organisational conditions, with participation during regular working hours and organisational support emerging as central. Perceived effects on personal resources were moderate, indicating the importance of longer implementation periods. The findings provide initial empirical evidence suggesting that PLCs represent an adaptable format for professional learning in AE/CE contexts.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities; Adult and Continuing Education; Implementation; Professional Learning; Professional Resilience

1 Introduction

The extent to which organised adult and continuing education (AE/CE) can fulfil its overarching goal of enabling adult learning depends not least on the qualifications, competencies, and professional engagement of its staff (Martin & Schrader, 2021). At the same time, the structural conditions under which AE/CE staff work differ markedly from those in many other educational sectors. Employment structures remain highly fragmented across European contexts, particularly in Germany, where heterogeneous qualification pathways, limited career prospects, and a high prevalence of freelance and

part-time employment are characteristic features of the sector (Milana et al., 2018; Martin & Schrader, 2021).

These conditions are reinforced by organisational structures in AE/CE. Educational programmes are typically delivered by relatively small organisations with only a limited number of permanently employed staff and a comparatively large number of freelance or part-time instructors. Adult education organisations employ a median of seven permanent staff members, while programmes are frequently provided by a broad pool of externally contracted teaching personnel (Echarti et al., 2023). Part-time employment constitutes the norm rather than the exception, and secondary employment in teaching is widespread (Schrader, 2019). Such fragmented working arrangements create considerable challenges for everyday organisational collaboration, including establishing sufficient interaction density among staff, coordinating activities across differing working hours, and ensuring consistent educational standards (Schrader & Martin, 2021; Ulich, 2011).

Moreover, many freelance staff work simultaneously for multiple organisations and therefore have limited access to stable collegial structures, regular internal meetings, or professional development opportunities (Autorengruppe wb-personalmonitor, 2016). As a result, developing a shared professional understanding may be difficult despite the diverse qualifications and expertise of teaching staff (Tippelt & Lindemann, 2018). These conditions can increase the risk of professional isolation while reducing opportunities for collegial exchange, mutual support, and collaborative reflection. Such opportunities are widely regarded as important resources for professional practice and coping with work-related demands in educational professions (Anders et al., 2022; Gräsel et al., 2006; Klusmann & Waschke, 2018).

Evidence from school effectiveness and teacher stress research suggests that collegial support and cooperative collaboration can positively influence professionalism, engagement, and professionals' capacity to cope with work-related demands. Although findings are not entirely consistent, several studies indicate that collaboration is positively associated with organisational climate, organisational commitment, and instructional quality (Fussangel & Gräsel, 2014; Kullmann, 2016). Furthermore, sustained forms of collegial collaboration have been shown to reduce perceived stress and strengthen professional resilience (Fussangel & Dizinger, 2014; Muckenthaler et al., 2019; Owen, 2016).

While these findings primarily stem from the school sector, they highlight the potential relevance of collaborative structures for AE/CE contexts characterised by fragmented employment conditions. At the same time, such conditions may be experienced ambivalently. Limited employment security and restricted career opportunities can create uncertainty and strain, whereas flexible employment arrangements may also allow for greater autonomy and self-determination (Hahnrath & Herbrechter, 2022; Jambon, 2015). Against this background, the question arises how collaborative opportunities can be created that provide professional support while remaining compatible with the structural characteristics of the AE/CE context.

One approach that aims to structure collegial collaboration close to everyday professional practice is that of professional learning communities (PLCs). Through recurring interaction and shared reflection among teachers, PLCs are intended to support both individual professional learning and collective knowledge development.

Empirical findings on PLC implementation suggest that contextual and structural conditions, such as organisational composition and interaction format, may shape collaboration processes and participants' experiences, although results remain heterogeneous (Kelchtermans, 2006).

Within adult education research, collaborative formats resembling PLCs have so far received limited empirical attention and have primarily been discussed conceptually (e. g., Biel et al., 2018; Herbrechter et al., 2018; Jenner, 2022; Müller-Naevecke, 2019). Initial evidence suggests that such formats are generally perceived as adaptable and desirable in AE/CE contexts, while cooperation-related beliefs, motivational considerations, and temporal resources have been identified as important conditions for implementation (Hahnrath & Herbrechter, 2022).

However, little is known about how PLCs are perceived when implemented in practice in AE/CE contexts, which conditions facilitate or hinder collaboration, and how participants evaluate potential benefits for their professional work and personal resources relevant for coping with work-related demands. Consequently, empirical evidence on the practical implementation and perceived value of PLCs in adult education remains scarce.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the implementation of PLCs in AE/CE and explores how participation is perceived by pedagogical staff involved in teaching within Catholic adult and family education. The focus lies on participants' perceptions of collaboration processes, the conditions shaping these processes, and the perceived benefits for professional practice and personal resources (e. g., professional resilience). Given the limited empirical evidence available, the study adopts an exploratory perspective and combines qualitative and quantitative data to examine participants' experiences across different PLC formats.

The study is guided by the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: How do adult education staff perceive participation in PLCs implemented in AE/CE contexts?
- RQ2: Which organisational and interactional conditions are perceived as facilitating or hindering collaboration within these PLCs?
- RQ3: To what extent do participants attribute benefits of PLC participation to their professional practice and personal resources for coping with work-related demands, and how do these perceptions vary across different PLC formats?

To address these questions, the study examines PLC participation from an evaluation perspective focusing on participants' reactions (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). From an implementation perspective, analysing participants' reactions represents an important initial step, as research on educational innovation indicates that sustainable adop-

tion is more likely when new approaches are perceived as useful for addressing practical demands and compatible with existing organisational conditions (Hascher & Schmitz, 2010). Investigating participants' experiences in concrete implementation contexts can therefore provide insights into acceptance, perceived usefulness, and contextual conditions relevant for the further development and transfer of collaborative formats in AE/CE.

Accordingly, the study employs a mixed-methods design combining qualitative group interviews with descriptive quantitative survey data to examine participants' perceptions of newly established PLCs. Four PLCs differing in organisational composition and interaction format (face-to-face vs. online; familiar vs. newly formed groups) were implemented, enabling exploratory comparisons across formats.

The following sections first outline the theoretical and conceptual framework, followed by the methodological approach and study design. The findings are then presented and discussed in relation to existing research as well as implications for practice and future research.

2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This section first introduces the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) as the central framework of the study. It then discusses collaboration as a potential source of personal resources before considering PLCs in the specific context of adult and continuing education.

2.1 Professional Learning Communities: Concept and Core Characteristics

PLCs are widely regarded as a collaborative approach to professional development that combines collegial exchange with situated learning. Originally developed in the context of school improvement research, PLCs are typically described as small groups of educators who meet regularly over an extended period to reflect on professional challenges, jointly develop solutions, provide feedback, exchange pedagogical knowledge, and collaboratively refine teaching practices (Bonsen & Rolff, 2006; Buhren, 2015).

Although definitions vary, common characteristics include shared goals, collaborative learning, reflective dialogue, and structurally supported opportunities for exchange (Herbrechter et al., 2018). A central element is the de-privatisation of professional practice, enabling participants to discuss experiences and challenges openly and to develop new perspectives through collegial feedback (Fussangel, 2008; Warwas & Schadt, 2020).

Theoretically, the PLC concept is rooted in perspectives on situated learning and organisational learning. From a situated learning perspective, professional knowledge develops through participation in social practices and communities of practice rather than through isolated individual learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). PLCs can therefore be understood as structured opportunities for such situated professional learning. In addition, PLCs are closely related to concepts of the learning organisation, which emphasise collective reflection, shared vision, and continuous improvement through collabo-

rative processes (Senge, 1990). These theoretical perspectives highlight interaction and shared reflection as central mechanisms underlying professional learning within PLCs.

PLCs can differ in organisational composition and interaction format. Groups may consist of members from the same organisation (intra-organisational) or bring together participants from different organisations (inter-organisational; Rolff, 2015), and collaboration may occur face-to-face or online. These structural characteristics may influence collaboration processes in several ways. For example, working with familiar colleagues may facilitate interaction through shared experiences and existing trust, whereas collaboration among previously unknown participants may allow for greater openness and critical reflection by reducing established role expectations (Avila de Lima, 2003; Kelchtermans, 2006; Meyer, 2002; Staessens, 1993). Similarly, online formats may increase accessibility and flexibility, particularly in geographically dispersed professional contexts, while face-to-face interaction may support trust development and more intensive professional exchange (Schuck, 2003). Such variations suggest that contextual and structural conditions play an important role in shaping collaboration processes across different PLC formats (Kansteiner, 2021; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

2.2 Collaboration as a Source of Personal Resources

Research from school contexts indicates that collegial exchange contributes to professional learning, instructional development, and coping with professional demands by providing feedback, knowledge sharing, joint problem solving, and collegial support (Fussangel & Gräsel, 2014; Heider, 2005; Muckenthaler et al., 2019). Research on PLCs extends these findings by linking collaborative participation to professionals' capacity to cope with work-related stress and challenges (Fussangel & Dizinger, 2014; Owen, 2016; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

These relationships are consistent with relational perspectives on resilience, which conceptualise resilience as developing through supportive social interaction and access to professional support (Gu & Day, 2007, 2013; Jordan, 2006). PLCs provide a structured framework for such interaction processes through regular meetings, shared reflection, and collegial support. These processes are theoretically associated with the development of personal resources such as professional resilience (Le Cornu, 2009).

These considerations appear particularly relevant in the AE/CE context, where fragmented employment conditions can limit access to stable collegial networks and informal professional exchange. PLCs therefore represent a structured approach to supporting the development of personal resources for coping with work-related demands in this sector.

2.3 Professional Learning Communities in Adult and Continuing Education

In AE/CE, collaborative professional development formats resembling PLCs have so far received only limited empirical attention and have primarily been discussed at a conceptual level (e. g., Biel et al., 2018; Dimmitt, 2019; Grotlüschen & Pätzold, 2020; Herbrechter et al., 2018; Jenner, 2022; Müller-Naevecke, 2019; Schrader, 2018; Schreiber-Barsch, 2007; Stewart, 2014). At the same time, structural characteristics of

the AE/CE context – such as fragmented employment conditions, heterogeneous qualification profiles, and limited opportunities for stable collegial exchange – suggest a particular relevance of collaborative formats (Müller-Naevecke, 2019). Teaching staff often combine teaching with other professional activities and maintain only loose organisational affiliation, which may restrict access to informal professional learning and increase the risk of professional isolation. Structured opportunities for collaboration may therefore provide important support for professional exchange and development in this sector (Herbrechter et al., 2018).

From an organisational perspective, collaborative formats such as PLCs may also address coordination challenges arising from the heterogeneous and often loosely connected teaching workforce typical of AE/CE. Establishing shared pedagogical standards and a common professional understanding across diverse qualification backgrounds can be difficult, particularly when many teaching staff members are only weakly integrated into organisational structures (Tippelt & Lindemann, 2018). PLCs may therefore support not only individual professional development but also organisational alignment and quality development by fostering exchange and shared reflection across teaching staff while respecting flexible employment arrangements.

Existing empirical evidence in AE/CE mainly focuses on perceptions of feasibility rather than experiences from implemented formats. Hahnrath and Herbrechter (2022) examined implementation conditions and identified cooperation-related beliefs, motivational and economic considerations, temporal resources, and leadership support as central prerequisites for initiating PLCs in AE/CE. However, empirical insights into PLCs implemented in practice in AE/CE contexts remain scarce.

Contextual and structural variations in PLC implementation may be particularly relevant in AE/CE. Digital collaboration formats can expand opportunities for collegial exchange by enabling interaction across organisational boundaries and reducing spatial constraints (Dille & Røkenes, 2021; Zhang et al., 2017). At the same time, differences in organisational composition and interaction formats (e. g., intra- vs. inter-organisational groups; face-to-face vs. online) may influence collaboration processes, trust development, and perceived usefulness of participation, which appear especially important in AE/CE contexts characterised by flexible employment arrangements and heterogeneous organisational affiliations (Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Taken together, PLCs can be understood as structured opportunities for collegial interaction that are theoretically linked to processes supporting professional learning and the development of personal resources for coping with work-related demands. At the same time, existing research suggests that collaboration processes and perceived usefulness depend strongly on contextual and structural characteristics, such as organisational composition and interaction format. Despite the potential relevance of PLCs for AE/CE, little is known about how such formats are perceived when implemented in practice, which conditions facilitate or hinder collaboration, and how participants evaluate potential benefits for their professional practice and personal resources across different implementation formats. The present study addresses this gap by examining participants' experiences in newly established PLCs within AE/CE using a mixed-methods design.

3 Method

3.1 Study Context and Sample

The study was conducted in the context of Catholic adult and family education in Germany as part of a project funded by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia. Within this project, PLCs were implemented as a personnel development initiative aimed at strengthening collegial exchange and professional reflection among pedagogical staff involved in teaching. All PLCs were newly established and can therefore be considered early-stage groups (Bolam et al., 2005).

Four PLCs were formed, differing with regard to organisational composition and interaction format. Two PLCs consisted of participants from the same organisation who were already familiar with each other and met primarily face-to-face, whereas two PLCs brought together participants from different organisations who had not previously collaborated and interacted exclusively online.

Overall, 13 participants took part in the study, all of whom were professionally active in adult and continuing education (AE/CE). The sample included twelve permanently employed pedagogical staff members responsible for planning, coordinating, and delivering educational programmes – most of whom were also actively involved in teaching – and one freelance educator. Participants were predominantly female (n = 8), and the mean age was 53 years (SD = 9.6; range: 34–69). Educational backgrounds were heterogeneous, ranging from vocational qualifications to doctoral degrees, with most participants holding academic degrees in the social sciences or education. The relatively high proportion of academically qualified staff, the age structure, and the diversity of professional responsibilities reflect common characteristics of the German AE/CE workforce, although permanent employment represents only part of the sector's employment structure, which also includes substantial freelance and part-time work (Autorengruppe Nationaler Bildungsbericht, 2016, 2024).

Participation in the PLCs was voluntary. All participants were informed about the study procedures and provided consent for data collection and analysis. To minimise expectancy effects, information about the broader research interest in potential effects of PLC participation on personal resources was communicated only after data collection had been completed.

3.2 Study Design and Procedure

The study followed an exploratory mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative data to examine participants' perceptions of PLC participation, conditions influencing collaboration, and perceived benefits for professional practice and personal resources.

The implementation of the PLCs began with a kick-off workshop in June 2023, which aimed at networking participants and collecting baseline information via an online survey. Following this workshop, the PLCs collaborated over a period of approximately three months. During the approximately three-month PLC phase, participants engaged in three to four group sessions, each lasting between one and four hours, to

discuss professional challenges, exchange experiences, and jointly develop course concepts for pedagogical practice. Depending on the group, meetings were conducted either face-to-face or online. To document collaboration processes, participants completed brief protocol forms after meetings. These data served process documentation purposes within the broader project but are not part of the analyses presented in this article.

Data collection took place after completion of the PLC phase. Participants completed a post-participation survey assessing perceived usefulness, acceptance, and perceived benefits of PLC participation. In addition, qualitative group interviews were conducted with each PLC to capture participants' experiences and perceptions of collaboration processes in depth.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative data enabled methodological triangulation and provided complementary insights into participants' experiences across different PLC formats. This approach allowed both an in-depth exploration of subjective perspectives and a structured comparison of subjectively perceived outcomes under varying contextual conditions.

3.3 Data Collection

Qualitative Data: Group Interviews

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured group interviews conducted with each of the four PLCs after completion of the PLC phase. Group interviews were chosen to capture shared experiences and interactional perspectives on collaboration processes, as they allow participants to reflect jointly on collective practices and negotiate meanings within the group context (Kruse, 2014).

A semi-structured interview guide comprising six core questions addressed participants' acceptance of the PLC format, perceived added value, functionality, and overall satisfaction, as well as perceived benefits and challenges of participation. Particular attention was given to experiences related to professional practice and dealing with work-related challenges. The guide allowed for flexible probing to explore emerging topics in greater depth.

All interviews were conducted online via videoconference in German by members of the research team, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim according to established transcription rules (Kuckartz, 2010). Transcripts were anonymised prior to analysis. The interviews lasted on average 48 minutes.

Quantitative Data: Survey

Quantitative data were collected using online questionnaires administered before and after the PLC phase via LimeSurvey.

Pre-participation survey

The pre-participation survey captured background information on participants' professional biographies, training activities, and professional tasks (wb-personalmonitor). In addition, baseline indicators of professional resources and collaboration contexts were

assessed to contextualise existing working conditions prior to PLC participation. Professional resilience (as a personal resource) was measured using selected subscales from the AVEM instrument capturing work-related resilience (Schaarschmidt & Fischer, 2008), including distancing ability, resignation tendency, proactive coping, and inner calm/balance. Behavioural reflection and collaboration conditions were assessed using adapted instruments from the VERA framework and the Hessian School Quality Framework (Institut für Qualitätsentwicklung Hessen, 2013). Additional project-specific items captured prior experience in course development and components of course planning.

Post-participation survey

The post-participation survey focused on participants' perceptions of PLC participation. The same AVEM scales were administered to provide exploratory descriptive information on personal resources across the PLC phase. Professional self-efficacy was measured using the BSW-5-Rev scale. Behavioural reflection within the PLC context and collaboration experiences were assessed using adapted VERA (Helmke, 2015) and PISA-based cooperation scales (Frey et al., 2016; also Institut für Qualitätsentwicklung Hessen, 2013).

Project-specific items were developed to assess acceptance, satisfaction, and perceived usefulness of the PLC format, including perceived benefits for course development, reflection on professional challenges, perceived support in dealing with work-related demands, and perceived advantages of different PLC formats. Additional items captured satisfaction with supporting materials. Responses were recorded predominantly on four-point Likert-type scales, although some instruments (e. g., adapted VERA items assessing behavioural reflection) used six-point response formats.

All 13 participants completed both the pre- and post-participation surveys. Given the exploratory character of the study and the small sample size, quantitative data were analysed descriptively and primarily served to complement and contextualise qualitative findings.

3.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using focused qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2021). The analysis proceeded in two stages: an initial deductive basic coding based on the interview guide and research questions, followed by an inductive fine coding to further differentiate categories based on the interview material. The resulting coding system comprised eight main categories with ten subcategories.

Transcripts were coded using MAXQDA. To ensure intersubjective transparency, the coding framework was iteratively developed within the research team through pilot coding, mutual review, and discussion until consensus was reached. Two researchers conducted independent test codings, refined the coding guide, and subsequently coded the interviews separately while resolving discrepancies through discussion. The analy-

sis focused on participants' perceptions of collaboration processes, conditions influencing participation, and perceived benefits of PLC involvement.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, as well as graphical representations (e. g., boxplots) to explore patterns across different PLC formats. Given the exploratory character of the study and the small sample size, analyses focused on descriptive comparisons rather than inferential statistical testing. Quantitative findings were used to complement and contextualise qualitative results and to provide exploratory insights into participants' perceptions of PLC participation, including acceptance, perceived usefulness, and perceived support for dealing with work-related demands.

4 Results

The results are organised according to the research questions. Qualitative interview data provide the primary basis for analysing participants' perceptions and collaboration processes, while quantitative survey data are used descriptively to contextualise and compare perceived outcomes across PLC formats.

4.1 Baseline Context: Existing Collaboration and Reflection Practices

Baseline data collected in addition to the qualitative interview data, provided contextual information on participants' professional practices prior to PLC participation. Overall, participants reported comparatively well-developed reflective practices related to their professional work. Many indicated that they regularly exchanged ideas with colleagues ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.12$), sought support when facing professional difficulties ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.90$), and used participant feedback to improve their course concepts ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.58$). These findings suggest that reflective engagement was already part of participants' professional routines before entering the PLCs.

At the same time, perceptions of collaboration conditions within existing work contexts were more heterogeneous. While some aspects of collegial cooperation were rated positively, indicators related to structured coordination and conflict management were assessed more moderately (e. g., clear agreements: $M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.49$; conflict management procedures: $M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.65$). This pattern indicates that participants operated in professional environments where opportunities for exchange were present but not necessarily systematically structured.

Taken together, the baseline data suggest that PLC participation did not introduce collaboration into previously isolated professional contexts but rather built upon already existing reflective orientations and collegial interactions while potentially providing more structured opportunities for exchange and coordination. This context is important for interpreting participants' subsequent perceptions of PLC participation.

4.2 Perceptions of PLC Participation (RQ1)

Participants' perceptions of PLC participation were overall positive. Across all PLCs, interview data indicated that participants perceived the structured exchange and collaborative reflection as professionally meaningful for generating new perspectives, refining ideas, and addressing work-related challenges. Regular meetings, a shared goal, and supporting materials were frequently described as contributing to focused and productive collaboration. Descriptive survey data contextualised these perceptions, indicating high perceived benefits for professional practice, particularly regarding course development and reflection on work-related demands and challenges (see Appendix, Table 1). Descriptive differences suggested somewhat stronger perceived benefits for course development in intra-organisational PLCs ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.38$) than in inter-organisational groups ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.41$), whereas perceived support for reflecting on work-related demands was rated positively in both formats (intra: $M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.54$; inter: $M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.41$). Continuation intentions were also strong, with participants expressing willingness to continue working in the existing constellation ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.28$ on a 3-point scale).

Some differences between PLC formats emerged. Participants in inter-organisational PLCs particularly emphasised networking opportunities and exposure to diverse perspectives, whereas participants in intra-organisational PLCs highlighted advantages related to shared organisational knowledge and easier coordination. Format preferences appeared linked to prior experience. Participants from inter-organisational PLCs, who had collaborated exclusively online, evaluated both online and face-to-face continuation options similarly positively, whereas participants from intra-organisational PLCs, who had worked primarily face-to-face, expressed clearer preferences for in-person continuation and more sceptical attitudes toward exclusively digital formats. This pattern corresponded with moderate overall preferences for exclusively online continuation ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.77$) compared with somewhat stronger preferences for face-to-face formats ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 0.66$).

Taken together, PLC participation was perceived as beneficial and feasible across implementation formats, while contextual factors such as group composition (intra- vs. inter-organisational) and interaction format (face-to-face vs. online) influenced participants' experiences and preferences.

4.3 Conditions Facilitating and Hindering Collaboration (RQ2)

Interview data identified several conditions influencing collaboration within the PLCs. These conditions could be differentiated into structural features of the PLC design, organisational conditions, implementation format characteristics, and individual engagement.

Participants across groups emphasised that *clearly structured working procedures* facilitated collaboration. In particular, the protocol forms and the shared goal of developing course concepts were perceived as helpful for maintaining focus and organising discussions. Several participants reported that the provided structure supported efficient collaboration and contributed to the quality of outcomes (e. g., PLC3). Small

group size (three to four members) was also described as conducive to participation and coordination. At the same time, variation in the use of structural tools represented a potential hindering condition. One group reported limited engagement with the protocol forms, which was associated with less structured collaboration processes compared to other PLCs (PLC2), indicating that the effectiveness of structural supports depended on participants' uptake.

Organisational support emerged as a central condition influencing collaboration. Participants repeatedly emphasised that sustainable continuation of PLCs would depend on institutional recognition and the possibility of participation during working hours. Descriptive survey data further contextualised this interpretation: participants strongly preferred continuing PLC participation during working time ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.28$) and showed very low willingness to continue outside working hours ($M = 1.15$, $SD = 0.38$). Interview statements further highlighted that organisational approval was perceived as essential:

"There would need to be supervisors who know what a professional learning community is… and give the go that you may do it during working hours" (PLC4).

Time constraints related to workload and scheduling were also described as challenges when organisational demands competed with PLC participation (e. g., PLC1). Organisational conditions therefore functioned both as facilitating and hindering factors depending on available time resources and institutional support.

Implementation format also influenced collaboration processes. Participants in inter-organisational PLCs described initial challenges in building familiarity and trust, particularly in digital settings with limited opportunities for informal interaction. At the same time, digital collaboration was perceived as enabling focused work and reducing travel effort (PLC3). Participants in intra-organisational PLCs emphasised advantages related to shared organisational knowledge and easier coordination but reported fewer opportunities for new external perspectives. Overall, format characteristics created different opportunities and constraints rather than uniformly facilitating or hindering collaboration.

Individual engagement and motivation were also described as relevant conditions. Participants noted that sustained collaboration depended on members' commitment and willingness to invest time and effort, particularly beyond project conditions, indicating that personal engagement interacted with organisational support in shaping collaboration feasibility (e. g., PLC1, PLC2).

Overall, collaboration within PLCs was shaped by an interplay of PLC design features, organisational conditions, implementation format characteristics, and individual engagement. Clear working structures and institutional support facilitated collaboration, whereas limited time resources, coordination challenges, and insufficient organisational recognition represented potential barriers.

4.4 Perceived Benefits for Professional Practice and Personal Resources (RQ3)

Qualitative findings indicated that participants perceived PLC participation as beneficial for their professional practice, particularly through the combination of collaborative task work and structured reflection on work-related demands and challenges. Descriptive survey data further contextualised these perceptions, indicating positive evaluations of the protocol materials as supporting meeting structure and reflection (e. g., maintaining focus on goals: $M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.73$; structuring meetings: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.71$).

Interview data further illustrated that working on a shared, practice-relevant task – developing course concepts intended for actual programme implementation – was experienced as motivating and meaningful. At the same time, the structured reflection component of the PLC meetings encouraged participants to jointly examine professional challenges and established routines. Several participants described that this reflective dimension represented a particularly valuable impulse that they intended to integrate into their everyday professional practice beyond the PLC meetings (e. g., PLC3, PLC4). The combination of joint product-oriented work and systematic reflection was therefore perceived as supporting reconsideration of existing practices and the development of new approaches relevant to participants' professional work.

Regarding personal resources, quantitative indicators suggested moderate perceived effects. Participants reported moderate agreement that PLC participation strengthened their professional resilience ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.73$ on a 4-point scale). Descriptive post-measures of work-related resilience and self-efficacy were generally at comparatively high levels (e. g., self-efficacy: $M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.40$ on a 4-point scale), with no consistent differences across PLC formats. Interview data suggested that more substantial effects on personal resources might require longer collaboration periods, as some participants noted that the relatively short PLC phase limited the extent to which changes in coping capacity could emerge. Given the exploratory design and absence of pre–post analyses, these findings should therefore be interpreted cautiously and primarily reflect participants' subjective perceptions rather than measurable change.

Taken together, the results suggest that PLC participation was perceived as particularly beneficial for professional practice through structured collaborative reflection processes, while perceived effects on personal resources such as professional resilience appeared more moderate within the comparatively short implementation period.

5 Discussion

The findings indicate that PLC participation was perceived positively and as professionally meaningful across different implementation formats. Collaboration processes were shaped by an interplay of PLC design features, organisational conditions, implementation characteristics, and individual engagement, highlighting that the perceived

effectiveness of collaborative professional learning depends not only on the format itself but also on how it is embedded in participants' work contexts.

Although the study was situated within Catholic adult and family education in Germany, several identified conditions – such as fragmented employment structures, limited opportunities for collegial exchange, and heterogeneous organisational affiliations – correspond to broader characteristics of the AE/CE sector. At the same time, the specific denominational and organisational context may have shaped participants' experiences, for example through existing organisational cultures, cooperation routines, or support structures. The findings should therefore be understood as context-sensitive exploratory evidence rather than as directly generalisable results.

The positive evaluations suggest that PLCs represent a transferable collaborative format for AE/CE despite structural differences from school contexts. Previous adult education research has primarily addressed PLCs conceptually and identified organisational and motivational prerequisites for implementation (Hahnrath & Herbrechter, 2022). The present findings extend this literature by providing initial empirical insights from implemented PLCs and indicate that structured collaboration can be perceived as both feasible and professionally meaningful in AE/CE practice.

Several findings correspond closely with conditions identified in school-based PLC research. First, structural features – such as small group size, clear working procedures, and shared task orientation – were perceived as facilitating collaboration. This aligns with evidence emphasising the importance of transparent processes, task-related goals, and stable team structures for effective PLC functioning (Bonsen et al., 2013; Buhren, 2015; Verbiest, 2011). Second, organisational conditions emerged as critical, particularly the availability of time resources and participation during working hours. This finding corresponds with research identifying infrastructural support as a key prerequisite for collaborative professional learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2017) and reinforces conclusions that institutional embedding strongly influences collaboration sustainability (Fussangel & Gräsel, 2014; Hahnrath & Herbrechter, 2022). The strong preference for participation during working time suggests that collaboration is perceived as an organisationally supported professional activity rather than an individual responsibility.

With regard to implementation formats, only minor differences in perceived benefits emerged. Participants across both intra- and inter-organisational PLCs reported comparable advantages related to collaboration and reflection, with only a slight overall preference for face-to-face interaction. Preferences appeared linked to participants' prior experience with specific formats rather than indicating superiority of one mode. This pattern suggests that the PLC approach is flexible across digital and face-to-face settings as well as within and across organisational boundaries, consistent with the diversity of formats examined in previous PLC research (Vangrieken et al., 2015).

At the same time, the findings indicate that PLC composition may influence the functional emphasis of collaboration. In intra-organisational PLCs, collaboration was more closely connected to shared organisational contexts and routines, suggesting benefits for both individual and organisational learning processes, consistent with theoreti-

cal perspectives on learning organisations (Senge, 1990). Inter-organisational PLCs, by contrast, were more strongly associated with networking opportunities and exposure to diverse perspectives, which may be particularly relevant in AE/CE contexts characterised by fragmented employment structures and limited opportunities for stable collegial networks. Across both constellations collaborative task work and structured reflection were perceived as equally important, indicating that reflection represents a core mechanism of PLC functioning independent of organisational composition.

A central contribution of the present study concerns the perceived benefits for professional practice. Participants described the combination of collaborative task work and structured reflection on work-related demands as particularly meaningful. Working on a shared, practice-relevant task while simultaneously engaging in guided reflection was perceived as motivating and supporting for reconsidering established routines. This pattern is consistent with theoretical perspectives on situated and organisational learning, which emphasise practice-related activity and collective reflection as mechanisms of professional learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Senge, 1990). The intention to transfer reflective practices into everyday work suggests that PLC participation may contribute to longer-term changes in professional routines beyond the immediate collaboration context.

At the same time, the findings indicate that PLCs may function not only as formats for collaborative professional learning but also as protected spaces of collegial reflection that temporarily counteract the fragmentation associated with dispersed professional interaction in AE/CE contexts (Koller, 2026). In this sense, PLCs create structured and institutionally legitimised opportunities for interaction that reduce coordination uncertainty and enable focused engagement with professional issues.

Perceived effects on personal resources related to coping with work-related demands were more moderate. This finding may reflect both the relatively short duration of the PLC phase and the comparatively high baseline levels of reflective engagement within the sample. From a relational perspective on resilience, however, qualitative data indicate that collaborative reflection and collegial support were perceived as potentially relevant for strengthening coping capacities, suggesting that more substantial developments may require longer implementation periods (Gu & Day, 2007; Le Cornu, 2009).

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the small sample size limits generalisability and precludes inferential statistical analyses. The exploratory design therefore provides initial insights into participants' perceptions rather than evidence of causal effects. Second, participation was voluntary, and baseline data indicated comparatively well-developed reflective practices among participants, suggesting a possible selection bias toward individuals already inclined toward collaborative and reflective professional learning. Third, the PLC phase covered a relatively short period, which may have constrained more substantial developments, particularly regarding personal resources for coping with work-related demands. Relational

perspectives on professional learning and resilience suggest that such developments typically unfold over longer periods of collaborative interaction, indicating the need for longitudinal research designs. Fourth, the sample consisted predominantly of permanently employed pedagogical staff, whereas freelancers and part-time instructors represent a substantial proportion of the AE/CE workforce. Teaching staff with loose organisational affiliation often lack stable collegial structures that provide regular opportunities for professional exchange and reflection. Collaborative formats such as PLCs may therefore be particularly relevant for these groups. Future studies should examine PLC implementation more systematically with samples that include a larger proportion of freelance and marginally employed teaching staff. Finally, the study focused on participants' subjective perceptions rather than objective changes in professional practice or organisational outcomes. Future research should therefore combine longitudinal and multi-method approaches to examine behavioural and organisational effects of PLC participation more comprehensively.

Implications

The findings have several implications for future research and professional practice in AE/CE. From a research perspective, the results suggest that PLC implementation in AE/CE represents a promising field for further investigation, particularly with regard to contextual and organisational conditions. Future studies should examine longer implementation periods, larger and more diverse samples – including freelance and loosely affiliated teaching staff – and potential outcome indicators beyond self-reported perceptions, such as behavioural changes and organisational developments. Given the importance of institutional support identified in the present study, multi-level designs that consider both individual and organisational factors may provide deeper insights into the mechanisms and sustainability of collaborative professional learning in AE/CE contexts. From a practice perspective, the findings indicate that PLCs may represent a feasible approach for strengthening collegial exchange, professional reflection, and networking opportunities in AE/CE, particularly when structural conditions such as protected time and organisational recognition are ensured. At the same time, the results suggest that successful implementation depends not only on participants' engagement but also on organisational readiness to integrate collaborative formats into existing working conditions. This appears especially relevant in AE/CE contexts characterised by heterogeneous employment arrangements and limited opportunities for stable collegial interaction. The flexibility of the PLC framework across organisational compositions and interaction formats indicates that collaborative structures can be adapted to diverse institutional contexts, provided that sufficient organisational support and resources are available.

6 Conclusion

This exploratory study provides initial empirical insights into the implementation of PLCs in AE/CE contexts. The findings suggest that PLC participation is perceived as feasible and professionally meaningful across different organisational compositions and interaction formats when supported by clear working structures and institutional conditions. In particular, the combination of joint task-oriented work and structured reflection on work-related demands emerged as a central mechanism supporting professional practice. At the same time, the results highlight the importance of organisational embedding, as sustainable collaboration appeared closely linked to time resources, institutional recognition, and opportunities for collegial exchange in fragmented employment contexts. Overall, the study indicates that PLCs represent a promising but context-dependent approach to strengthening collaborative professional learning in AE/CE.

7 References

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Appendix

Table 1: Perceived usefulness and continuation intentions of PLC participation

Variable	*Total Sample* (*N* = 13) *M* (*SD*)	*Intra-organisational PLCs* (n = 7) *M* (*SD*)	*Inter-organisational PLCs* (n = 6) *M* (*SD*)	*Scale*
Perceived benefit for course development		4.86 (0.38)	3.83 (0.41)	1–5
Perceived benefit for reflection on work-related demands and challenges	4.43 (0.54) / 4.17 (0.41)	4.43 (0.54)	4.17 (0.41)	1–5
Continuation in same constellation	2.92 (0.28)	2.86 (0.38)	3.00 (0.00)	1–3
Continuation in another constellation	2.38 (0.77)	2.43 (0.79)	2.33 (0.82)	1–3
Continuation during working time	2.92 (0.28)	2.86 (0.38)	3.00 (0.00)	1–3
Continuation outside working time	1.15 (0.38)	1.29 (0.49)	1.00 (0.00)	1–3
Preference online only	1.62 (0.77)	1.14 (0.38)	2.17 (0.75)	1–3
Preference face-to-face only	2.54 (0.66)	2.86 (0.38)	2.17 (0.75)	1–3

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III Rezensionen/Reviews

Review: A Modern Guide to Adult Learning Systems

Gwennaëlle Mulliez

Richard Desjardins & Jan Kalenda (Eds.) (2025). *A Modern Guide to Adult Learning Systems*. Cheltenham & Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 409 Pages.

In *A Modern Guide to Adut Learning Systems,* Richard Desjardins and Jan Kalenda present a comprehensive anthology that defines adult learning systems (ALS) as an independent analytical framework for comparative continuing education research. They begin with the observation that comparative studies of the historical development, institutional design and transformation of ALS in the 2010s and early 2020s have so far been limited in scope. In order to address this, the editors combine a historical-institutionalist perspective with an international comparative approach. Understanding ALS as historically evolved institutional arrangements that encompass organised learning opportunities for adults, their governance structures, relevant constellations of actors, and the mechanisms of their coordination is particularly relevant for continuing education research. By explicitly including actors on both the demand and supply sides, as well as governance structures and coordination mechanisms, the editors broaden the scope beyond narrower understandings that focus primarily on participation or programme structures. Of particular note is the conception of ALS as historically conditioned and continuously evolving institutional arrangements, rather than static entities. In this understanding, well-developed, open and flexible ALS appear to be a central prerequisite for the broadest possible participation of adults in organised educational settings, as equitably as possible.

The anthology is divided into three parts: The first part, *Adult Learning Systems through the Lens of Historical Institutionalism*, presents the theoretical and methodological foundations in three chapters. The focus lies on the conceptual definition of ALS and their prospective roles (see Chapter 1), the potential of historical institutionalism for researching ALS (see Chapter 2), and the analysis of the institutional elements and dynamics that shape ALS (see Chapter 3). Chapter 2, in particular, offers a concise yet nuanced introduction to key historical institutionalist concepts such as path dependence, critical junctures, gradual institutional change, intercompetition and institutional plasticity. Unlike the synchronous system descriptions often found in comparative adult education research, this approach enables a diachronic understanding of the emergence, stabilisation and transformation of ALS. It also provides explanatory frameworks for why, despite facing similar demographic, economic and technological challenges, countries produce different institutional arrangements for organised adult education. The first part is not intended to be a comprehensive theory of adult educa-

tion; rather, it is a repertoire of theoretical concepts and analytical tools that can be flexibly applied to the study of governance and delivery structures in adult education.

The second part, *Country Studies*, brings together fifteen case studies on ALS in advanced post-industrial democracies: Sweden (Nylander and Rubenson), the Netherlands (Hake), Hungary (Kalenda, Karger and Vaculíková), Germany (Ioannidou and Kohl), Norway (Bæck), Austria (Walder), Denmark (Rasmussen), South Korea (Jang), the United Kingdom (Boeren), the Czech Republic (Kalenda, Karger and Vaculíková), Portugal (Barros), Belgium (Boeren), Italy (Milana and Bussi), Bulgaria (Boyadijeva and Ilieva-Trichkova) and Greece (Ioannidou and Zarifis). These studies reconstruct the historical development paths and institutional configurations of the respective national ALS. Notably, despite sharing a common temporal framework, the case studies avoid a standardised analytical model, instead highlighting various theoretical and empirical approaches to historical-comparative analysis of ALS. While this opens up a wide range of possibilities for future research, it also makes direct comparison of the findings difficult.

In the final section, *Conclusion*, the editors summarise the findings of the country studies to provide a "panoramic view" (p. 382) and identify key trends and patterns of development through an international comparison. Central to this is the insight that the transition from modern to late-modern ALS is closely linked to the emergence of knowledge-based economies, as well as new societal challenges such as migration and demographic change. At the same time, the editors demonstrate that despite global convergence trends, significant differences between national ALS persist.

Overall, *A Modern Guide to Adult Learning Systems* is an important contribution to comparative adult education research. The volume is compelling in its combination of a coherent conceptual framework with well-founded empirical analyses of national ALS, thereby providing a solid foundation for future international comparative research. Adopting a historical-institutional perspective, the editors expand the scope of previous examinations of ALS, which were predominantly synchronous, to include a diachronic dimension. This opens up new perspectives on continuity and change in organised adult education. At the same time, the volume highlights gaps in the research. For example, the concept of ALS, which has thus far been developed primarily for advanced post-industrial democracies, could be extended to other social and political contexts in order to test its scope and explanatory power. Furthermore, it remains unclear how the analysed institutional arrangements manifest themselves in concrete pedagogical practices and organisational negotiation processes. Future research could therefore supplement the macro-level perspective that has dominated thus far with perspectives from actors at meso- and micro-levels, such as institutions, instructors and participants, as well as addressing questions of power and inequality. Despite these open questions, this anthology has the potential to become a key reference point for future international comparative research on continuing education.

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Rezension: Gesellschaftliche Kompetenzen: Grundlage für politisches Handeln. Orientierung und Wissen für die Demokratie

Timo Kann

Christine Zeuner (2026). *Gesellschaftliche Kompetenzen: Grundlage für politisches Handeln. Orientierung und Wissen für die Demokratie*. Frankfurt am Main: Wochenschau-Verlag. 536S.

Kaum eine Publikation der politischen Erwachsenenbildung kommt an Oskar Negts Diktum vorbei, dass Demokratie gelernt werden müsse. Damit hat er einen zeitlosen Kern der politischen Erwachsenenbildung auf den Punkt gebracht, der bis heute als Leitlinie nachwirkt. Seine Vorstellung dessen, wie diese Staatsform gelernt werden könne, formulierte er konkret als gesellschaftliche Kompetenzen aus. Wenngleich er diese vor dem Hintergrund der Krisen der 1960er bis 1980er Jahre ausformulierte, enthalten auch diese ein zeitloses Element. So wurden seine Ideen, angepasst an die Krisen um die Jahrtausendwende, Anfang der 2000er Jahre in einem Verbundprojekt aus Forschung und Praxis mit dem Titel: „Politische Partizipation durch gesellschaftliche Kompetenz: Curriculumentwicklung für die politische Grundbildung“ in pädagogisches Handlungswissen für eine kritische politische Bildungspraxis gegossen. In den vergangenen 20 Jahren leben wir in einer Zeit neuer Polykrisen.

Christine Zeuner hat sich der Aufgabe angenommen, mit dem vorliegenden Band: *Gesellschaftliche Kompetenzen: Grundlage für politisches Handeln* die Ergebnisse des Forschungsprojektes aus den 2000ern neu aufzulegen, sie zu erweitern und Negts gesellschaftliche Kompetenzen an die veränderte Gestalt der Gegenwart anzupassen.

Der Selbstbeschreibung nach adressiert das Buch auf 536 Seiten in 7 Kapiteln zwei Zielgruppen. Bildungspraktiker*innen auf der einen und auf der anderen Seite an einem Selbststudium Negts gesellschaftlicher Kompetenzen Interessierte. Damit hat das Werk zum Ziel, die Konzeption Negts didaktisch für das Selbststudium aufzubereiten und gleichzeitig dessen didaktisch-methodische Umsetzung in Bildungsveranstaltungen anzuleiten. Aufgrund der inhaltlichen Breite und Tiefe des Bandes kann der Inhalt im Folgenden nur sehr knapp wiedergegeben werden.

Das erste Kapitel führt in die inhaltlichen Grundlagen der gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen ein. Dazu werden vor dem Hintergrund von Negts Gesellschaftsanalyse und Demokratiebild ihre Zielsetzung und Historiographie in Oskar Negts Schriften nachvollzogen sowie kritische eingeordnet. Außerdem wird das im Buch genutzte didaktische Konzept zur Vermittlung der gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen ausführlich offengelegt. Bezugspunkte sind das exemplarische Lernen nach Oskar Negt, die kritisch-konstruktivistische Didaktik Klafkis sowie die Pädagogik der Unterdrückten nach

Paolo Freires. Der Band profitiert durch seine zweifache Zielgruppe von dieser umfangreichen Darstellung seines didaktischen Konzepts, da dieses für Bildungsprakter*innen auch als Rahmenkonzept für Veranstaltungen übernommen werden kann, die sich mit den gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen auseinandersetzen.

Das zweite Kapitel kontextualisiert die gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen anschließend im Denken Negts und den Diskursen seiner Zeit. Inhaltlich wird dabei auf die wissenschaftliche und politische Debatte um Schlüsselqualifikationen und Kompetenzen eingegangen sowie das Verhältnis von kritischer Theorie, kritischer Erziehungswissenschaft und politischer Erwachsenenbildung dargestellt. Zudem folgt eine kurze Biographie Oskar Negts sowie ein Umriss seines pädagogischen und politischen Denkens insgesamt.

Das Herzstück des Bandes stellen das dritte (S. 65–392) und vierte Kapitel (S. 393–439) dar. Kapitel 3 ist entlang der sechs gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen (*Identitätskompetenz, historische Kompetenz, Gerechtigkeitskompetenz, technologische Kompetenz, ökonomische Kompetenz und ökologische Kompetenz*) in Unterkapitel geteilt. Die einzelnen Unterkapitel zu den Kompetenzen sind jeweils nach dem gleichen Schema strukturiert. Zunächst werden für die jeweilige Kompetenz die zugrundeliegenden Begriffe (*Identität, Geschichte, Gerechtigkeit, Technologie, Wirtschaft, Ökologie*) in ihrer historischen Genese, ihrer Bedeutung für die heutige Gesellschaft sowie in Negts Konzeption einer gesellschaftlichen Kompetenz beschrieben. Die Entwicklung der Kompetenzen soll durch die Linse von Freires Dreischritt Sehen, Urteilen, ermöglicht werden. Im Dritten Kapitel werden dazu die ersten beiden Dimensionen des *Sehens* und *Urteilens* für jede Kompetenz ausgearbeitet. Ziel des Schrittes *Sehen* ist, ein Bewusstsein für das der jeweiligen Kompetenz zugrundliegendem Thema zu entwickeln. Für die historische Kompetenz wird beispielsweise auf 20 Seiten die Entwicklung des liberal-demokratischen Staates ideengeschichtlich nachvollzogen. Im Anschluss wird das *Urteilen* für jede der gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen ausgeführt. Das im Schritt *Sehen* erlangte Bewusstsein eines Themas soll durch das *Urteilen* ermöglichen, eine kritische Haltung zu diesem zu entwickeln. So werden im Falle der Gerechtigkeitskompetenz verschiedene Gerechtigkeitstheorien beschrieben, die als Grundlage des Urteilens dienen sollen. Da Negt die einzelnen Kompetenzen nicht losgelöst von den anderen betrachtet, wird in einem letzten Schritt die Verbindung der jeweiligen Kompetenz in den Gesamtzusammenhang aller gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen gestellt.

Freires didaktischer Dreischritt wird anschließend im vierten Kapitel durch den Schritt *Handeln* vollendet. Dabei wird das Ziel verfolgt, im Zuge der Entwicklung der Kompetenzen, von der Wissensebene auf die politische Handlungsebene gelangen zu können. Dazu wird zunächst einmal grundlegend der Begriff politischen Handelns definiert sowie dessen Erscheinungsformen und deren Legitimität, rechtliche und organisationale Rahmenbedingungen für politisches Handeln in demokratisch organisierten Staaten sowie die möglichen Wirkungsräume umrissen. Im Anschluss wird die Handlungskompetenz für die einzelnen gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen ausbuchstabiert. Dies geschieht für jede Kompetenz durch eine Beschreibung der möglichen Zielrichtungen einer didaktischen Umsetzung, die durch konkrete Beispiele aus der Bil-

dungspraxis unterfüttert werden. Abschließend soll eine Sammlung von Reflexionsfragen ermöglichen, den Zusammenhang aller Kompetenzen didaktisch herstellen zu können.

Mit dem fünften Kapitel wurde auch ein etwa dreißig Seiten umfassendes Glossar in den Band aufgenommen.

Das sechste Kapitel schließt den Band inhaltlich durch einen zielgruppenorientierten Verwendungshinweis ab. Für jene, die sich mithilfe des Buches Negts gesellschaftliche Kompetenzen im Selbststudium aneignen möchten, enthält das Kapitel eine kurze Anleitung zum selbstgesteuerten Lernen im Allgemeinen und mit dem Buch im Konkreten. Darauf folgt eine Hilfestellung zu Planung und Durchführung von Bildungsveranstaltungen mithilfe des Buches, mitsamt einer Darstellung der subjektwissenschaftlichen Lerntheorie nach Holzkamp und transformatorischer Lerntheorie nach Mezirow.

Das siebte Kapitel schließt den Band mit einer Sammlung relevanter Weblinks ab. Insgesamt legt Zeuner ein beeindruckend umfassendes und didaktisch gut durchdachtes Werk vor. Das didaktische Konzept mit den Bezugspunkten Negt, Klafki und Freire zieht sich durch gesamten Band – die teils sehr ausführlichen und grundlegend informierenden Texte zu Geschichte und Bedeutung von Begriffen und Theorien werden regelmäßig ergänzt durch Infoboxen mit Definitionen, weiterführenden Literaturhinweisen, Klafkis Forderung nach Gegenwartsbezug folgenden Erläuterungs- und Anwendungsbeispielen sowie zahlreichen Reflexionsfragen. Damit wird der Band auch dem eigenen hohen Anspruch gerecht, die gesellschaftlichen Kompetenzen Negts sowohl für das Selbststudium aufzubereiten als auch der Bildungspraxis als Ressource zu dienen.

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Review: Adult Education Research on Digitalisation: Concepts – Scopes – Understandings

Tabea Leibold

Bellinger, F., Bolten-Bühler, R. & Rohs, M. (Eds.) (2025). ***Adult Education Research on Digitalisation: Concepts – Scopes – Understandings.*** **Bielefeld: wbv Publikation. 272 Pages.**

The anthology *Adult Education Research on Digitalisation: Concepts – Scopes – Understandings* comprises 12 articles, providing an overview of the current academic debate on digitalisation in adult and continuing education (AE/CE). The volume originates from the Network for Adult Education Digitalisation Research (NED), which is part of the Adult Education Section of the German Educational Research Association (GERA). The anthology is divided into three main parts. These are outlined below and illustrated by a more detailed discussion of one of their contributions each. The selected contributions are particularly relevant to both practice and research in the field of AE/CE. The anthology presents new opportunities offered by digital developments, but also discusses the risks involved. Against the backdrop of a digital transformation accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the editors argue that a systematic examination of digitalisation is indispensable for AE/CE. At the same time, they emphasize that "digitalisation does not only impact educational practice – it also fundamentally reshapes the conditions and methodologies of adult education research itself" (Bellinger et al., p. 12). The aim of the anthology is to analyse the hidden effects of digitalisation, in particular power structures in AE/CE, to reflect on their significance for an open and participatory educational environment. The editors outline the need to develop conducive, sustainable and competence-oriented approaches to digital learning processes. In the introductory part the editors highlight key dimensions for a critical examination of digitalisation and AE/CE (p. 11). These include, in particular, the requirement to provide all people with access to digital technologies and the relevant skills in the spirit of lifelong learning in order to promote social justice and employability in a dynamically changing world.

Part One comprises three articles on the level of micro-didactics, meaning teaching-learning interactions. They examine how technological developments such as artificial intelligence (AI), immersive applications and digital learning opportunities are shaping the practice of AE/CE and discuss opportunities and limitations. In their article Ines Himmelsbach, Tjard de Vries, Michael Doh, Siglinde Bröder, Linda Grieser and Christina Klank focus on older adults as participants. The authors combine approaches from empirical educational research, gerontology and media education and conduct a case study in assisted living and long-term care facilities. The aim of the

study is to gain in-depth insights into the use of digital technologies (ICT) by vulnerable older adults on the basis of a case study and using data and method triangulation following a grounded theory approach. The study points out a correlation between biographical educational experiences and the use of ICT.

Part Two focuses on the social and institutional framework conditions of digitisation at the meso and macro levels. The five articles examine digital infrastructures such as platforms, for example in the health sector or in the context of social media and political education. In addition, issues of control and governance and their impact on educational offerings, organisations and forms of cooperation are examined. The article by Franziska Bellinger and Lisanne Heilmann analyses how social media, especially TikTok, shape adults' political learning and opinion-forming processes and how media use and political socialisation are becoming increasingly intertwined. Based on Negt's concept of democratic education, the article advocates for a systematic combination of media education and political education in order to promote reflective and democracy-strengthening action competence.

Part Three is devoted to theoretical, research and methodological issues at the meta-level. The four articles discuss competence requirements for different actors in dealing with AI, reflect on suitable methodological approaches to analysing the use of AI in AE/CE, and address both conceptual clarifications and the conditions for successful exchange between research and practice. The article by Katja Buntins, Anna Heinemann & Insa Reichow addresses the gap between research and practice as a central challenge in educational research and expands this perspective to include the role of technological development in digital AE/CE. Based on an interview study, communication and cooperation problems between researchers, practitioners and developers resulting from different logics, expectations and working methods are identified. The authors advocate for more research into structured cooperation models and communication strategies in order to make research results compatible with the development of practical educational technologies.

In summary, the anthology presents a differentiated picture of current research on digital transformation in AE/CE at various levels. The contributions highlight the relevance of the topic for a wide range of actors and areas of activity in the field. The anthology covers a broad spectrum of topics, from micro-didactic issues to institutional and social conditions to theoretical and methodological reflections. In doing so, it succeeds in presenting an internationally oriented academic discussion that brings together different perspectives. At the same time, many of the contributions reveal new research desiderata, for example with regard to power structures, political media education, or cooperation between research, practice, and technological development. The anthology raises numerous follow-up questions that suggest further theoretical and empirical discussions. Overall, the work is primarily aimed at academics who deal with digitalisation in AE/CE, but it also offers practitioners ideas for critically reflecting on current developments and integrating them into their own work. Therefore, it is worth reading for academics as well as actors in the field of AE/CE.

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2026

Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung

International Yearbook of Adult Education

Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education

Volume 49 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education focuses on the growing pressure on liberal democracies and its implications for adult learning and education. As adult education is closely intertwined with social and political developments, it is particularly vulnerable to democratic backsliding and attempts by right-wing populist and extremist actors to shape educational policies and practices.

The main section examines how pressures on liberal democracies shape adult learning and education across different national contexts. The contributions explore developments in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria. An additional article takes as its starting point the growing pressure that the far right places on adult and continuing education, focusing specifically on language provision for migrants. The "Miscellaneous" section includes an article that analyzes the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in adult and continuing education. The volume concludes with three reviews.

Im **Internationalen Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung** (IJEB/IYAE) werden gegenwärtige und grundsätzliche Fragen der Bildung im Erwachsenenalter in international-vergleichender Perspektive diskutiert. Dabei widmet sich jede Ausgabe einem Schwerpunktthema, das in englischen und deutschen Artikeln aus verschiedenen Perspektiven wissenschaftlich betrachtet wird. Beiträge zu aktuellen Themen und ein Rezensionsteil ergänzen die Ausgaben.

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