

Agentur für Erwachsenen- und Weiterbildung (Hg.)



# Policy Making in Adult Education

A Comparative Approach  
across 21 European Regions



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# Policy Making in Adult Education: A Comparative Approach Across 21 EU Regions

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## 4. Comparative Analysis

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### Introduction

This comparative analysis consolidates findings stemming from the country profiles presented in chapter three. Partners adopted a common methodological approach for both primary and secondary research, analysis and extrapolation of key findings for the compilation of the country profiles. The analysis identifies areas of commonality and areas of difference in Adult Learning (AL) policy making across countries and regions investigated in the framework of the REGIONAL Project. It hinges on the findings of the country profiles of each country consolidating specific knowledge of the cultural and political situations of the individual countries and regions which is necessary to meaningfully interpret the information provided by interviewees and extracted from policy documents. Since this knowledge fed into the country profiles already, which systematically and comprehensively assess all available data, these documents were used as a basis for the comparative analysis of policy making processes across Europe. Therefore, where country profiles are directly referenced within this document the following format will apply;

Ireland	(Regional_ie)
Germany	(Regional_de)
Italy	(Regional_it)
Serbia	(Regional_rs)
Slovakia	(Regional_sk)
Hungary	(Regional_hu)

### Policy Formulation

The way in which AL policy is formed differs across the six partner countries (Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Serbia and Slovakia). The country profiles of Ireland, Slovakia and Serbia explicitly state that AL policy is determined at country or national level. However, while the country profiles of Serbia and Slovakia are definitive in that policy is decided at national level, there is discrepancy

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amongst Irish interviewees. One interviewee commented that in Ireland under the new Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) it is possible to make local policy which responds to the needs identified through local service plans (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3). However, this view was not shared by all interviewees. Two participants commented that AL policy was formulated primarily at national level and a further two responded that while it was formulated nationally it was possible to adapt it for local application (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3).

The country profile of Germany states that “education is a political field that is not allocated to the central government but to those of the Federal States” (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1) suggesting that AL policy in Germany is formulated at a regional level. The country profile of Italy states that while central government provides overall supervision and co-ordination for policy guidelines and targets “the regions are responsible for planning and implementing labour and AL policies” (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4). The country profile of Hungary offers another model of policy determination. Hungary notes that “the main education policy principles are defined by the competent line ministries, but principles are tailored to the real needs and expectations on the local level” (Regional\_hu, chapter 3.2).

We can determine from the country profiles of the six REGIONAL Project partner countries that AL policy is determined at national level by one or more ministries in five countries, and is determined at regional level in one country, Germany. However, it should also be noted that in Germany, where AL policy is determined at regional level, funding for AL is also budgeted for at regional level. Further the relative size of the regions in Germany suggests a level of scale that is not possible for Slovakia, Serbia, Ireland, and Hungary. This suggests that even though the European Commission highlighted regional disparities in Adult Education in “Mind the Gap: Education Inequality across EU Regions” (p.13) in 2012, in most countries researched here the individual regions are not catered for individually on a regional level, Interviewee responses cited in the country reports for five of the six REGIONAL Project countries suggest regions are not autonomous for AL policy making purposes. Rather AL policy is determined at a supra-regional level. In most cases this is at the national level. However, in Germany where regions are individual entities for EU analysis and funding, even though AL policies are made on regional or a sub-national level, the relevant processes are still located on a supra-regional level (i.e. NUTS 1).

### The Purpose of AL

While the instrumental role of AL is always recognised – to varying degrees among countries and regions – there is a difference in the way AL is perceived as a means to greater social integration and economic empowerment. In some countries, AL encompasses the entire spectrum of social and

economic development of individuals, even with differentiation among programmatic AL actions targeted at a diverse audience (this is the case of Germany where AL is considered also a key means of social integration for specific target groups of the population such as the elderly). Conversely, in other countries AL seems to be considered purely for its economic empowerment traits, sometimes at the boundaries with VET.

In the country profile of Ireland, interviewees suggested that the goal of AL policies in their experience was “predominantly economic, with elements of social and cultural education” (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3). In the country profile of Ireland there is no specific reference made to any consensus having been reached from interviews as to whether AL is predominantly formal, informal or non-formal. The interviewee responses indicate a variation in how the purpose of AL is perceived with four respondents referring to it as formal, informal and non-formal, while two commented that it was formal and non-formal, two believed it to be formal and three participants believed the purpose of AL to be formal and informal. One interviewee noted that “recent AL/further education policy documents emphasise the role of AL within the wider societal issues such as social protection, welfare, justice and health” (Ibid). The interviewee also noted that AL has not yet managed to forge an identity for itself and is still being influenced by a dominant model of training for enterprise and employment (Ibid). Another interviewee in the country profile noted that in Ireland there was a “specific funded policy for training but there was none for AL and particularly for community-based AL” (Ibid).

The text of the REGIONAL project country profiles highlights that interviewees are concerned with the goals of AL policies within their respective countries. As noted above, many interviewees in the Irish country profile noted their concern about the dominant influence of economic goals currently evident in programmes arising from AL/further education policy. Some interviewees however suggest that economic goals emanate from education that is socially and culturally engaging (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3), and they also refer to the importance of guidance and counselling services and community education to bring people together through informal courses that might encourage participants into further learning. These comments highlight the concerns of some interviewees that the ethos of AL is being colonised by market orientation and desire for economic outcomes.

The country profile of Slovakia refers to the law on lifelong learning adopted in 2009 and “amended several times and now a new law is being prepared” (Regional\_sk, chapter 3.6). Slovakia reports that in the context of AL, the national agencies deal mainly with non-formal and informal education reporting that “in interviews, the regional representatives referred to formal education and referred to secondary (professional schools) which partially offer also further education in their

premises” (Ibid). The profile states that this reflects the findings that “the concept of AL (AL) policy is not developed at the regional level”. AL in Slovakia is connected with formal education and with the perception that providers of formal education are also providers of courses for adults that can help to reduce unemployment (Ibid). The country profile of Slovakia also states that the goal of AL policy is perceived as a combination of economic and social goals but states that the social goal was connected to the economic “when the economic situation improves, also the social conditions improve”. The country profile of Slovakia reports that “most respondents see a clear link between the AL policy and actions for work” (Regional\_sk, chapter 3.6).

The country profile of Germany reports that “eight out of nine interviewees” indicated that the goals of AL in their region is social and cultural (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1). This country profile finds that only “six out of nine interviewees consider economic goals to be important but none of the interviewees from the Saxony-Anhalt region express this” (Ibid). Considering the comparatively tense economic situation in Saxony-Anhalt, the authors of the country profile of Germany conclude from this information that “it may well be that work-related AL is perceived as a social measure in more difficult economic situations and as an economic measure in more comfortable economic situations” (Ibid). The country profile of Germany notes that formal education is identified as the main type of AL goal promoted through the policy actions by interviewee responses (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1). However, the number of adults participating in non-formal and informal learning is much higher than the number of participants in formal adult education (See AES 2012). However, this is only reflected in a minority of the answers given by interviewees.

AL in Serbia is governed by a new Law in Adult Education which came into effect in January 2014. The law “regulates the area of adult education in the context of lifelong learning and, for the first time regulates non-formal education” (Regional\_rs, chapter 3.5). AL in Serbia is reported as being “implemented through formal, non-formal and informal education” (Ibid). The country profile of Serbia reports that the “strategic framework of the national education policy is well developed” (Ibid). Human resource development is reported as being well developed and defined as a priority within adult education. The report refers to a number of strategies in this regard, one of which is the Adult Education Strategy (Ibid) which it states is based on the premise that “adult education is a strong factor of economic development, improvement of productivity and competitiveness of the economy, improvements of employability and reduction of regional disproportions in economic development of the Republic in Serbia” (Ibid). The report states that the social and cultural goals of AL are perceived more from the challenge of the “large rate of illiteracy in the country” and that “other stakeholders put priority on economic goal, taking into consideration the high unemployment rate both on national and local/regional levels” (Ibid).

In the country profile of Hungary the authors note that most respondents to the Hungarian interviewees support formal adult education which operates under the AL Act. The authors note that the AL Act is the most important source of regulation for the field and that AL is a standalone item (Regional\_hu, chapter 3.2). The country profile of Hungary states that AL is directly related to unemployment and for this reason it is assumed that the goals of AL in Hungary are economic rather than social or cultural (Regional\_hu, chapter 3.2). In their comments on the analysis of interviews with reference to Italy (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4), the authors report that almost all respondents highlighted the importance of non-formal and informal education for adults. However, the authors' report points out that the perceptions captured during the interviews "are not reflected in the policy documents and statement identified at secondary research stage" (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4). The country profile of Italy also mentions that in the Basilicata region in particular, some interviewees raised a concern about the lack of recognition of non-formal and informal learning opportunities (Ibid). In Italy only some regions have already implemented a system of recognition of competences. In addition the country profile of Italy refers to the complexities surrounding the goals of AL and while social and cultural goals are mentioned, the authors state "for most part of the policy, the objective of AL seems to be biased towards economic growth" (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4).

It is worth noting the disparities that exist amongst interviewees within the different regions. For instance, the country profile of Italy specifically mentions that interviewees have been carried out in five regions and included 16 interviewees for the primary and secondary research: Abruzzo (1), Basilicata (5), Lombardy (1), Piedmont (5), Tuscany (4). These regions according to the profile "were selected for their representativeness of the diversity of economic and social structures as well as for their geographical representation, covering the main geographical areas of Italy: North (Piedmont, Lombardy), Centre (Toscana), South (Abruzzo, Basilicata)". The key point here is that these regions present different economic structures and can be considered as representative of the country (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4). The implications of this are discussed later in the report under Policy Implementation. The REGIONAL partner from Slovakia chose two regions that differ in terms of structure and demographics. Bratislavský Self-Governing Region and Prešovský Self-Governing Region were chosen as examples of two very different settings in Slovakia: "Bratislavsky Region represents a central region, situated around the capital city, it is a competitiveness region, rich, urban, industrial, and covering a small area. The Prešovský Region is a remote region, lying in the easternmost part of the country, agricultural, rural, convergence region covering a relatively large area. The number of inhabitants is similar in both regions" (Regional\_sk, chapter 3.6). The country profile of Hungary specifically mentions that while interviewees were selected with consideration of project elements, regional characteristics and the covering of relevant regions, the

“almost non-existing regional AL implementation differences in Hungary and the generally applied countrywide authority of the different interviewees made it mainly irrelevant” (Regional\_hu, chapter 3.2).

Interviews in all country reports suggest a correlation between the purpose of AL emphasized and the demographic circumstances of the regions. To summarize, the country profile of Ireland concludes that the purpose of AL is predominantly economic. The country profile of Slovakia states that the social goal is connected to economic goals in that when the economic situation improves so therefore does the social situation. In Serbia, taking the high unemployment rate into account, AL is concerned with reducing that rate of unemployment and so some stakeholders prioritize economic goals. In relation to social and cultural goals the country profile of Serbia reports a concern with the high rates of illiteracy in the country.

The country profile of Germany surmises, from interviewee responses, that perhaps there is a different sense of the purpose for AL depending on the economic situation at the given time. The country profile of Germany mentions that in the case of Saxony-Anhalt it appears that work related AL is understood as a social measure in situations of economic difficulty, but in more comfortable economic situations it is perceived as an economic measure. The situation in Hungary is much like Serbia in that AL goals are directly related to unemployment and its reduction. The country profile of Italy mentions the difficulties that surround AL goals and also states there appears to be a bias towards economic growth in relation to AL policy. Consequently, the country profiles imply tensions surrounding social, cultural and economic goals of AL which are evident in the AL implementation programmes and the structuring of the AL sector.

The following figures 1 and 2 illustrate a breakdown of the roles formal, non-formal, informal and social, cultural, economic goals which have been identified from partner country interview data (the country profiles) as relevant. It is notable in Figure 1 that there is no definitive certainty of the relative importance of formal, non-formal and informal learning as there appears to be some discrepancies amongst how each term is interpreted. Similarly in Figure 2 the authors of country reports have not drawn a conclusion on predominance of economic, social or cultural goals and outcomes in AL.

Table 1 The Purpose of AL - Types of learning

Country	Formal	Non-formal	Informal
Ireland	No consensus reached		
Germany	✓	✓	
Italy		✓	✓
Serbia	✓	✓	✓
Slovakia		✓	✓



Hungary	✓		
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Table 2 The Purpose of AL - Goals

Country	Economic Goals	Social Goals	Cultural Goals
Ireland	✓		
Germany	✓	✓	✓
Italy	✓	✓	✓
Serbia	✓	✓	✓
Slovakia	✓	✓	
Hungary	✓		

### Consultation Process

While the country profiles of all REGIONAL research project partners noted that consultation is part of the policy making process in their country, differences in the methods used for consultation were noted. Interviews reported on in the country profile of Ireland noted that while consultations for policy-making take place through events such as conferences, seminars and focus groups at local and national level, the approach to consultation varies from Education and Training Board (ETB) area to ETB area. In this country profile interviewees referred to the need of involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the policy-making consultation process, and that it was evident that “consultation in policy-making in Ireland would benefit from a more open consultation methodology” (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3). The authors of the country profile of Italy note that the “active consultation process is behind the policy formulation in all the regions investigated” (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4). However, they also comment that there are some differences in the stage at which third party stakeholders become involved in the process from region to region. In some cases stakeholders become involved at identification stage and in some cases later after policy is formulated but still open for inputs (Ibid). In addition, the country profile of Italy notes that “from the primary research efforts, it appears that some regions are better equipped (with more structured consultation processes) and better empowered (with more reliable data sources) than others” (Ibid). The authors also note that “Such a fragmentation in approaches may lead to an uneven result in policy making to identify crucial issues and mismatches between labour market needs and AL approaches” (Ibid). The interviewees in the country profile of Slovakia report that consultations are undertaken at the beginning of the policy making process when a need is identified (Regional\_sk, chapter 3.6). The authors note, however, that consultation reports are only formalized and published in the explanatory memorandum (Ibid) when there is a statutory instrument in place to support a programme of action.

Both the German and Serbian partner country profiles report that consultation takes place through existing networks. In the case of Serbia it is noted that “In all sectors national or umbrella organisations provide networks and play coordinating roles in consultation procedures. As an example the National Employment Service consults with the centers for social work and national-to-local boards for education” (Regional\_rs, chapter 3.5). Similarly, in the country profile of Germany it is noted that “the stakeholders to be consulted in the policy making process are mainly selected through existing structures and networks” (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1). All interviewees from Serbia are reported as having emphasised the need for more extensive and regular intra-sectoral consultations (Regional\_rs, chapter 3.5) while the country profile of Germany states that interviewees indicated “consultation with other units, departments and services with public administration or within their organization” (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1). In the case of country profile of Hungary it is reported that consultations were a significant element and “The purpose of such consultations is to ensure the concordance of adult education and adult training policy with the general social and economic strategies” (Regional\_hu, chapter 3.2).

With regard to the consultation process a disparity was identified in how it is undertaken across regions. The country profiles of Ireland and Italy report varying procedures for consultation impacting on the effectiveness of AL policy. The country profiles of Serbia and Germany both report that existing networks play a key role in consultation procedures. Interestingly, the basic mechanism of using formal networks is similar in the regions of Germany presented in the country profile even though the processes are completely separate and in no way centrally regulated. This might be due to close cooperation of German regions through consultations at government department level. However, the networks are in all cases set up differently in accordance with the general regionalisation of the adult education field. In terms of regional disparities the Irish example is especially telling because while the country report of Ireland states that policy formulation is done on the national level, the consultations feeding into the policy formulation process are spread and individualised across the country. Arising regional needs are recognised as important inputs into national policies. This is further reflected by the newly established ETB structures.

#### The importance and utilisation of data documents

When asked about familiarity and utilisation of EU documents and reports to inform policy-making, interviewees for the country profile of Ireland referred to the range of PIAAC, PISA, OECD, and CEDEFOP documents. National level documents such as the 2014 *Further Education and Training Strategy* (2014-2019) and *An Action Plan for Solas* (the recently formed Irish Further Education

and Training Authority) were also referred to as vital documents which inform policy-making (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3).

All of the research participants interviewed for the country profile of Italy referred explicitly to national, European and international policy frameworks, strategies and tools as very important to inform policy-making. The policy formulation of AL policies in all target regions in Italy is supported by data and statistics with varying degree of corroboration according to the country profile. Some regions profiled rely on data and information provided by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) or by regional research centers (i.e. Piedmont: IRES, Istituto di Ricerche Economico Sociali del Piedmont; Tuscany: IRPET, Istituto Regionale per la Programmazione Economica della Toscana). However, the authors of the country profile of Italy note that the “non-elected and technical interviewees seemed to be better informed of the various tools available, such as Europe 2020, PIAAC and AES” (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4).

The country profile of Germany notes that documents consulted at a regional level are regional development plans and national education lifelong learning policies. “When designing AL policies all interviewees consider specific data-sources: mostly regional, but also national, European and international materials. It is striking though that three out of nine interviewees had no knowledge of the PIAAC study and two did not have knowledge of AES”. (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1).

The country profile of Serbia reports that “all stakeholders base their policy planning in accordance with the National policies and strategies” and also “all interviewees indicate the national education strategy as the key strategy, with some references that the national strategy follows the basics of European policies implied by the EC. National ministry representative indicates Europe 2020 strategy and International documents, but not specifically” (Regional\_rs, chapter 3.5). The country profile of Slovakia notes that, in relation to documents utilized, the following are considered “at national level: the Law on LLL (Lifelong Learning) and Strategy on LLL, government programme; on the EU level: Europa 2020, Structural Funds documents and AL documents. Regarding the data sources, there are Eurostat data used, national statistics (on further education, for example), regional statistics” (Regional\_sk, chapter 3.6). Interviewees from Hungary mention having knowledge of PIAAC and AES. However the country profile of Hungary states that when devising policy “National and local data are used” (Regional\_hu, chapter 3.2).

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this comparison. Firstly, it is striking that only interviewees from those countries who, at least partly, make policies on regional levels use regional data sources. This may either mean that no regional data is available in those countries, or that they are not acknowledged as useful resources by policy makers on the national level. Further, it seems that regional specifics are in many cases not taken into consideration which indicates that regional

disparities are not appropriately tackled. As in the chapter on policy formulation above, it has to be noted that Germany does not present an exception here, since the regions in this research are Nuts 1. Italy seems to be the only exception in this analysis, however, regional data is not used in all regions under research for the REGIONAL project.

Secondly, the comparison across the regions suggests that generally data at all levels is used. There seems to be no clear preference among the policy makers; rather they use a broad selection. This indicates that data from regional, national, European and international levels are useful in regional and national AL policy making.

A third interesting finding is the Italian observation of a discrepancy between elected and non-elected policy makers as to their use of data. The non-elected policy makers appear to be better informed than their elected counterparts. This corresponds to a German finding that is not related to data access but to general political structures, which emphasises the relative irrelevance of elected policy makers in the policy making process. In Germany non-elected policy makers play a much larger role (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1).

### **Policy Implementation**

While it is both expected and notable from the REGIONAL project country profiles that the implementation procedure of AL policy differs across the countries and in some cases between regions within countries, a number of important factors should be noted. The country profile of Ireland reports on the countrywide reorganisation of statutory AL/further education structures including new legislation. The report refers to the formation of the new national education and training agency (SOLAS) and the reorganisation of 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) into 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Some interviewee responses note that it is difficult to implement policy at local level due to a “dominant economic strategy” (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3) predetermining the education and training programmes delivered within the relevant region. In addition, one interviewee suggests that the newly established Education and Training Boards were now being given resources to allow an interpretation of policy through implementation at local level (Ibid). The profile also refers to Interviewees mentioning the national database being developed to support more efficient AL programme evaluation systems. The interviewees in the country profile of Ireland express concern that “evaluations and data collecting would focus primarily on the economic impacts of further education and that social/cultural further education would be further marginalised” (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3). They note that success criteria for AL programmes “are already predominantly focused on progression into employment or higher education and do not adequately assess other impacts of citizen value” (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3). The focus on AL for

economic goals is most evident in the country profile of Ireland, but this tension is evident in other country profiles. For instance as was previously outlined in the section on the purpose of AL, interviewees in the country profile of Ireland commented that they accept the merit of further education and training as an avenue for employment for those ready and able to access the world of work. However as practitioners, managers, and academics they also emphasised the wider social goal of AL as “enhanced citizenship and social participation” (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3).

The interviews in the REGIONAL project country profiles highlight interviewees’ concerns with the goals of AL policies within their respective countries. As noted above, interviewees in the country profile of Ireland noted their concern about the dominant influence of economic goals currently evident in programmes arising from AL/further education policy. Interviewees suggest that economic goals emanate from education that is socially and culturally engaging (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.3), and they referred also to the value of guidance and counselling services and community education to bring people together through non-formal courses that might ease learners into further learning.

As is referred to previously in this document the country profile of Italy suggests that a fragmented picture of AL policies, actions and programmes emerged from the primary research that informs their country profile. The authors of the Italian profile note that “the AL ecosystem remains highly fragmented and the current mechanisms of consultation and dialogue may not suffice in ensuring coherence, especially at implementation stage” (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4). A challenge identified in the region of Basilicata is noted as “mapping of educational and labor market needs evolution and to promptly respond to those” (Ibid). The country profile of Italy also noted that there exists a “generalised ‘distance’ between policy statements and programmatic reality on the ground: education and learning are the main drivers of economic growth, competitiveness and social inclusion; the crucial role of AL is well-acknowledged in every national and European programme. However, the perspective from the ground is rather different with limited implementation in the region” (Ibid). Respondents from Tuscany report “an unclear regulatory framework at times generating confusion on the specific roles and responsibilities when it comes to AL programmes and actions” (Ibid). The country profile of Italy refers to a lack of an integrated approach which they attribute to a “generalised low awareness of AL opportunities available to society at large” (Ibid). The country profile of Germany also refers to the various actions which arise from AL policies including such things as grants to cover tuition, fees, materials, resources and funding of various partnerships between education institutions and industries (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1). The country profile of Germany also notes launching campaigns to encourage adults to “update their knowledge and skills as well as organizing conferences to reach adults” (Ibid). In general the funding of

institutions was considered the most important feature of policy implementation and the country profile of Germany mentions that this corresponds to the regional Adult Education Acts that emphasise and ensure such activity. However, interviewees from the Lower Saxony region “stressed that limited funds are an issue” (Ibid). Furthermore they refer to a correlation between a view of the field of AL as politically marginalized and the lack of funding available. An additional problem that is noted by interviewees from different regions within Germany is “that AL has a negative image because it is either associated with deficiencies that have to be corrected or it is reduced to arts and crafts” (Ibid).

In the country profile of Slovakia, interviewees identify activities that they state are accompanying measures to AL but are not directly linked with implementing policy. For example they refer to training courses, not reported or registered, offered by regional level secondary schools. At national level the interviewees list conferences and seminars as promoting AL to increase the interest of citizens but they also identify a lack of interest in AL/further education from the perspective of citizens in general; a lack of funds to finance actions; a lack of training offered in relation to labour market needs; that no system of recognition of results is achieved from non-formal training; that no system of recognition of trainers’ knowledge/skills is obtained through practice; the lack of definition for AL as a stand-alone policy by the Ministry of Education; the low level of cooperation between state regulatory agencies and private providers of training for adults; and the need for professional training for personal growth rather than only focusing on employability. (Regional\_sk, chapter 3.6).

Slovakian interviewees refer to the valuable AL programmes of the National Lifelong Learning Institute but also note criticisms for “not building upon what already exists, not cooperating with private providers and creating new structures that have questionable future after the project is finished” (Ibid).

The country profile of Serbia notes that AL and training policy implementation in Serbia is provided by private education services/providers. When adult learners complete basic education they then have the opportunity to continue their formal education and acquire additional qualifications from the National Employment Service (Regional\_rs, chapter 3.5). The country profile of Serbia refers to seventy primary schools delivering “functional basic adult education” and “80 high schools delivering secondary AL programmes” (Ibid). The National Employment Service in Serbia provides free non-formal AL programmes to increase the chances of the participants in securing employment. However, as stated in other country profiles, the research reported in the Serbian country profile notes a lack of co-ordination between national and local level delivery of AL programmes. The interviewees for the country profile of Serbia state that local government

authorities are often uninformed about the process and procedures of functional elementary education and that “better information and coordination between the local and national level is necessary” (Ibid). The country profile states that “from all answers it is indicated that there is an overall problem of lack of or insufficient coordination and sharing of experience with other national and regional stakeholders and partners” (Ibid).

AL policy implementation across the regions is directly related in all instances to the particular requirements of the individual regions and, as such, is utilised in such a way as to respond to need. However, where the country profile of Germany can clearly identify that funding provision is an important aspect of policy implementation, this is not the case in Italy where there appears to be a variance in how AL is understood and appreciated across the regions. In general, there seem to be a number of problems in the implementation of AL policies, but these are difficult to categorise because they are very diverse. This supports the conclusions drawn above that knowledge from the individual regions is necessary for successful policy making. Furthermore it supports the EU findings of regional disparities and the demand for regionally specific policies.

## **Funding**

Funding is reported by interviewees as being a challenge for all partner countries. All of the partners report that EU funding plays a part in the implementation of AL policy, however, for some it appears there is greater reliance upon such funding than for others. In addition, while some partners provide funding sources details others have not been able to provide clarity around these issues.

Interviewees in the country profiles of Ireland and Serbia note that they did not have information pertaining to specific funding allocation or that they did not have responsibility for funding. The country profiles of Serbia notes that “sources of funding are mainly from public sources and in cases EU funds” (Regional\_rs, chapter 3.5). They also comment on the difficulty in accessing information regarding the division of funding for AL without any input from the finance department (Regional\_rs, chapter 3.5). A similar situation is noted in the country profile of Ireland. In Ireland it was noted that funding is decided at national level but that a number of “European and non-governmental budgets contribute to funding in further education” (Regional\_ie, chapter 3.5). In addition, the country profile of Ireland notes that no budget is set aside for policy development at local level (Ibid). Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) are not a component of AL funding in Ireland while the country profile of Serbia notes that PPPs are not a means of funding except in one case where business contributes a small amount during a practice course.

The country profiles of Italy notes that funding is a “critical element affecting policy formulation and implementation” (Regional\_it, chapter 3.4), and reports that all interviewees identified the

European Social Fund as the main source of funding for AL. Furthermore, “in all the regions investigated, the EU funds are the key financial resource” (Ibid), except in the case of Lombardy region where they report that AL depends on a blend of financial resources from European, regional and national sources. The country profile of Italy reports that PPPs are not usual practice and it is noted that “the low adoption and use of PPP instruments may be due to a different set of reasons ranging from low interest of the private sector to engage in the provision of AL services; low capacity of the public sector to structure and manage PPP deals; cumbersome procedures of PPP mechanisms; and so on” (Ibid).

The country profile of Slovakia reports a similar situation whereby funding of AL at a national level is 100% financed by EU funds whereas at regional level a combination of national and regional funds were funding sources. In the case of Slovakia PPPs are not usual practice and there are no rules/guidelines in place regarding PPPs. The country profile of Slovakia also points out that several interviewees mentioned that there is insufficient funding and an absence of AL funding (Regional\_sk, chapter 3.6).

In the case of the country profile of Hungary funding is reported as being provided from EU and national funds predominantly and by private funding to a lesser extent. PPP contributions are forbidden by regulation in Hungary. The country profile of Hungary notes that this “excessive rigidity of regulation and the lack of required funding” (Ibid) pose the greatest challenge.

The country profile of the German REGIONAL partner states that all three REGIONAL project research regions have Adult Education Acts. Therefore, funding for AL providers is regulated by legislation. The country profile of Germany gives an in-depth breakdown of the regional financing of AL and notes that funding is allocated from national, regional and EU funds. Nonetheless the country profile of Germany states that “it is difficult to establish a clear figure of EU-funding because it is hardly possible to helpfully decide what is AL and what is not” (Regional\_de, chapter 3.1). The authors of the country profile of Germany report conflicting interviewee answers in relation to the ranking of funding sources and attribute this to the difficulty with defining a clear distinction of EU funding in AL programmes. It is also noted that private funding plays an important role in funding AL in Germany, mainly in the form of participation fees and of providers’ own funds in case of churches, trade unions, etc. However, as private funding is received directly by AL providers in addition to public funding the authors state that “clear statements are very difficult here” (Ibid). PPPs are sources of funding in the three German regions selected for research. However, the country profile text presents diverse answers about PPPs as sources of funding due to the varying perceptions of what a PPP is or is not.



The complexity surrounding funding is borne out across all regions with all partners reporting that interviewees found it difficult to nominate the exact amount of funding provided to AL, or where funding is sourced from. This may be due to a variety of reasons: Firstly, in many cases it is unclear which policy measures are counted as AL measures and which are not. Especially in relation to EU funding of labour market policies it is often difficult to decide which of those measures may be considered AL measures. Secondly, the multiplicity of stakeholders active in AL policies and the corresponding variety of budgets complicates the matter. In many regions or countries AL is funded from different government departments, often as a by-product or minor project. This, the profiles suggest, makes it difficult, especially for individual policy makers, to gain a funding overview. Thirdly, in many cases the origin of funds becomes blurred because the money passes through different budgets. For example, in cases, EU funds can be transferred into national budgets, that may in turn be transferred to regional and possibly even local budgets. Individual policy makers can then not distinguish where particular money for AL programmes comes from.

As a consequence it is difficult to establish a clear picture of the funding situation across the regions researched. Therefore, the conclusion that can be drawn here is rather the existence of the difficulty in AL funding itself. However the research notes that European funding plays an influential role alongside national and regional sources. Yet, the exact amounts or relative amounts coming from different sources are not clear for many policy makers.

## **Conclusion**

The comparative report arising from the research from the six countries in the REGIONAL project suggests that AL policy is predominantly formed through a top-down process (5 out of 6 countries) where statutory educational agencies and/or departments determine the direction of AL programmes and the levels of funding/resources available to support these programmes. There is a dependence on AL policy formulated at national level other than in Germany where policy is formed by federal governments. In general AL policy is not formed at local or regional level and only in some cases interpreted by local or regional administrations.

Furthermore, AL delivery remains strongly connected to the delivery of second level education and vocational training in most countries such that AL is not developed as a separate and stand-alone policy item at regional level. The goals of AL are predominantly economic and social but the expectation of the return from investment in AL is contested between countries, across regions and among stakeholders. The primary interview research in the comparative report notes that non-formal and informal AL is highly valued in practice but not adequately acknowledged in policy or supported by the allocation of resources in practice.

The concept of consultation for AL policy formation is recognised in each partner country but the process and methods of engaging stakeholders in consultation is not systematised or standardised across countries and, in some cases within countries between regions. Arising, there is uneven and intermittent engagement of AL stakeholders for the purposes of achieving optimal input into AL policy making. European and OECD published documents are important sources of background information for AL policy formation but the level of usage and the level of familiarity with these documents varies. A range of baseline data sources are accessed to varying extents leading to challenges in inter-regional and inter-country comparison. Finally, greater utilisation of regional and local qualitative/quantitative data, mapped to AL need and delivery, would enhance responsiveness to local and regional need, enhance consistency, promote quality assurance, and ensure greater adherence to policy priorities.

### Summary of key issues

Research Criteria	Germany	Hungary	Ireland	Italy	Serbia	Slovakia
Policy determined at regional level	✓	No	No	✓	No	No
Economic goals predominate	No	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
AL has an independent identity in policy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Formal learning remains predominant programme in AL	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Funding budgets for AL are separate and explicit	No	No	No	No	No	No
Country profiles confirm policy makers use specific AL data sources national and/or European.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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## 5. Informed Policy-Making: The Contribution of Comparative Research in Education

Michael Kenny

### Introduction

The report *Mind the gap: Educational inequalities across EU regions* (2012) notes that there is considerable variation in the nature, scale and effects of educational inequalities across EU regions (p.11). The implication of this disparity is that balanced regional development and economic growth is hindered (p.14), inequality between regions is compounded (p.149), and the disparity causes a brain drain towards more advantaged regions (p.11). Prior to the REGIONAL-project I would have considered this statement as a factual statement of a trend in education. I would not have considered the considerable complexity in comparing education inter-regionally and internationally. The project has made me aware of strengths and weaknesses of comparative research in education resulting in comparative educational data.

In general, the strengths of comparisons include that they can flout hierarchies and question knowledge (Radhakrishnan, 2009, *passim*) and that they can make research more universal (Zima, 2011, p.16). These strengths are, however, prone to turn into weaknesses: Comparative research in education can suggest policies and practice that can address the imbalances and inequalities in education. However, comparative research in education has weaknesses. These include the “uncritical transfer of policy and practice” (Crossley, 1999, p.251), insensitivity to social situatedness (Bruner 1996), increasing emphasis on evidence based research (Goodson 1997 in Crossley, 1999, p.254), politically inspired narrow interpretation of international league tables, undue reliance on “applied policy orientated studies” (Crossley 1998), and the dominance of un-contextualised action orientated perspectives dictated by outcome orientated government policy (Higgins and Rwanyange, 2005, p.8). Crossley (1999) notes that “highly charged” debates among governmental agencies, policy-makers, funders, practioners, academics and other stakeholders call for educational research “to be more cumulative and authoritative” (p.249).

This essay will discuss comparative research in education with particular reference to adult learning in a European context. Drawing on module readings and wider literature the essay will suggest the importance of robust comparative research in education to ensure that the European ideal to “make war unthinkable and reinforce democracy” (“Schuman Declaration and the Birth of Europe”) is supported through adult learning. In a time of growing Euro-scepticism, the rise of the far right, austerity following financial collapse, the dogged nature of disadvantage that retains a high proportion of the European population in poverty and unemployment, and the relative economic and social positioning of new EU member states, the lessons arising from comparative research in

education are increasingly relevant. Besatie and Broc (1990) quoted in Crossley (1999, p.254) note that “the health of policy making in an interdependent world must depend in part on the health of comparative education research in the broadest sense”. This essay, with a critique of the post-modern perspective on tools of international assessment, will discuss the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and the rationale for REGIONAL, which developed a toolkit for policy makers in adult learning, because, as Watson notes there is a growing criticism that “too much educational research is of little value for policy makers” (2001 p.25). This essay will review a wider theoretical context that underpins the 22 month European Commission funded project and contextualise the project by discussing it in connection to PIAAC, exemplarily focussing on the results from Ireland.

### **Comparative Education/Research in Education**

Comparative education asserted itself as an educational discipline in the 1960s and early 1970s (Watson 2001, p.9) and has become increasingly prominent in the last 20 years. Comparative education examines education within one country, or between countries, using data and insights drawn from the practises and situations in that country or countries. Vernon Mallinson notes that various attempts have been made to define comparative education since Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) and Sir Michael Sadler (1861-1943) presented the concept and concludes that it is clear that “no satisfactory definition can be obtained until the whole purpose of education as a social force has been closely examined” (1980, p.1). The purpose of education is an intrinsic question in comparative education as, according to Meade (1980), there can be no society of human beings without some kind of education system and the problems of education cannot be isolated from those of society as a whole (Mallinson 1980, p.7). Mallinson notes, when we study the purpose of education we are engaging in comparative education (1980, p.10). Watson (2001, p.28), referencing Raivola (1985), notes “[a]ll research that seeks to offer general explanations must be comparative” and, referencing Khoi (1986), Watson (2001) suggests that “comparative education is a field of study that covers all disciplines that seek to understand and explain education” (p.28). Arising comparative education is difficult to define but, directly or indirectly, encompasses all discussion on education.

However, society and the people who compose that society are in a constant process of change. The educational needs and demands of citizens will change over life time and life situation. The average expected level of education has increased significantly over time. Stevens and Weale (2003) state that “[p]rogress of the sort enjoyed in Europe was not observed in the illiterate societies” and quoting from Barro (1997) suggest that one extra year of education (for men) raises the economic growth rate by 1.2% per annum. As society moves from primitive to complex economies so education

should change to reflect this dynamic in the context of the “national characteristic” of that society. It is the national characteristic, according to Mallinson, that is the stabilising force in society. Mallinson refers to Jeffreys (1950) suggestion that education is “an instrument for conserving, transferring, and renewing culture” and that education’s prime function is the “nurture of personal growth” (1980, p.2). Mallinson also refers to Joad’s (1945) suggestion that the purpose of education is for the members of society to:

1. Make a living
2. Play their part as a citizen of democracy
3. Develop their latent powers and faculties of their nature.

However, as Europe has modernised and post-modernised the demands of European society have changed. Increasingly education is being influenced by globalisation, marketisation, information technology and the triumph of free-market economics (Watson 2001, p.9). As education is increasingly influenced by globalisation comparative education invites “a systematic examination of other cultures and other systems of education deriving from those cultures” (Mallinson 1980, p.10) and encourages comparativists to “ever closer contact with other people and other cultures” (Mallinson 1980, p.11). However engaging in comparative educational research is an engagement with tensions for which the researcher needs awareness and preparation. Delors (1996, p.15) identifies such tensions and warns of the “Tensions of the Twenty First Century” including tensions between the global and the local, the traditional and the modern, the universal and the individual, etc. Yet increasingly these tensions are being ignored especially in relation to developing and less developed countries in the name of cost effectiveness and efficiency. Watson notes that “quick-fix ideas or principles are borrowed from one society and transferred to another without thinking of the consequences” (2001, p.11).

According to Noah and Eckstein (1985) comparative education has four purposes:

1. To describe educational systems, processes, or outcomes
2. To assist in the development of educational institutions and practices
3. To highlight the relationships between education and society, and
4. To establish generalized statements about education that are valid in more than one country.

Majgaard and Mingat (2012, p.1) suggest that “[a] comparative perspective is useful not only to show the range of possibilities in key education policy variables but also to learn from the best performers in the region”. Mallinson (1980) referring to Hans (1949) notes that the purpose of comparative education is “not only to compare existing systems but to envisage reform best suited to new social and economic conditions” (1980, p.1). Mallinson expands on Hans suggesting that comparative education is also a comparison of educational philosophies evident in educational

practice prevailing in that setting. It is important that comparative education is not proscribed by analytics especially as the output possibilities of big-data interpretation become more available (See later discussion of PIAAC below).

Interpreters of comparative education research should also be aware of the influence of history. Sadler noted that “A national system of education is a living thing, the outcomes of forgotten struggles and difficulties of battles long ago” (Sadler 1900, pp.309-310). All educational systems are either products of the history of that setting or are influenced by its (the education systems’) attempt to ignore that history. Cowen summarises this history with the terms “‘National temperament’, ‘national sentiments’, ‘national traditions’, ‘national aims/ideals’, ‘national character/characteristics’” (Cowen 2009, p.44).

### **Disparity Debate Adult Learning**

Education, according to the World Bank, “enhances people’s ability to make informed decisions, be better parents, sustain a livelihood, adopt new technologies, cope with shocks, and be responsible citizens, and effective stewards of the natural environment” (World Bank Group 2011, p.11).

According to the Center for Global Development (2002) the benefits of education include:

- Improved Health: With education people are better prepared to use health services effectively. For example, educated mothers have healthier children.
- Higher wages and economic growth: In poor countries with each additional year of schooling people earn 10% higher wages. These earnings, in turn, contribute to national economic growth. For example, no country has ever achieved rapid continuous growth without reaching an adult literacy rate of at least 40%.
- Democracy and political stability: Education supports the growth of civil society, democracy, and political stability allowing people to learn about their rights and acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to exercise them.

Although the trends in education and the composite human development index (See *Gapminder* for composite display of data, [www.gapminder.org](http://www.gapminder.org)) show a steady increase in educational achievement in Europe ‘Rethinking Education’ (European Commission, 2012c) draws attention to significant underperformance in terms of adult learning. The report highlights that 73 million adults

(approximately 25% of the adult population) have only a low level of education and that the still low participation rates in lifelong learning across the EU is well short of the European benchmark<sup>3</sup>. While the EU average is 8.9% of the adult population participating in lifelong learning country

**Table 1.**

**Percentage of the population aged 25-64 participating in formal or non-formal learning, 2011**

AT	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DE	DK	EE	EL	ES	FI	FR	HU	IE	IT	LT	LV
13.4	7.1	1.2	7.5	11.4	7.8	32.3	12	2.4	10.8	23.8	5.5	2.8	6.8	5.7	4	5
LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SE	SI	SK	UK	EU	HR	IS	NO	CH	TR	MK
13.4	6.6	16.7	4.5	11.6	1.6	25	15.9	3.9	15.8	8.9	2.3	25.9	18.2	29.9	2.9	3.4

Source: Education and Training Monitor 2012b.

figures vary from as low as 1.6% in Romania (RO) to 32.3% in Denmark (DK) as the Table 1 below illustrates.

For the purposes of this essay adult learning is defined as “... the entire range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities which are undertaken by adults after a break since leaving initial education and training, and which results in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills” (Brooks 2008, p.5). The Faure Report (Faure, 1972) and the Delors Report (Delors, 1996) suggest a learning culture that is open to all and a learning continuum ranging from formal to non-formal and informal education. Colley (2002) and the European Commission (2001), makes the distinction between “formal learning”, “non-formal learning”, and “informal adult learning”. More precisely, these reports suggest that learning is not only ‘life-long’ but also ‘life-wide’ where individuals maintain continuous learning contact in all settings (at home, at work or in the community, and including unintentional or random learning).

### Tools of Comparative research

Comparative research has evolved from its “positivistic origins in the ninetieth century” (Crossley, 1999, p.250) to a narrative, interpretivist and socio-cultural comparative analysis supported by big-data analysis and multimedia graphic presentation in the twenty first century. The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is an example of a big-data analysis tool embedded in the information collection infrastructure of, as of 2014, thirty three countries of the

<sup>3</sup> Among the five benchmarks defined the adult learning the objective of reaching an average of at least 12.5 % of adults participating in lifelong learning by 2010 was set. In 2009, the EU Member States agreed to raise this benchmark to 15 % to be attained by 2020 as part of the strategic framework for cooperation in education and training 2020 (ET 2020).



Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Twenty four countries were surveyed 2008-13, and a further nine were added 2012-16 (See Table 2).

Table 2. Countries Participating in PIAAC

Round 1 (2008-13)		Round 2 (2012-16)
Australia	Italy	Chile
Austria	Japan	Greece
Belgium	Korea (Republic of)	Indonesia
Canada	Netherlands	Israel
Cyprus	Norway	Lithuania
Czech Republic	Poland	New Zealand
Denmark	Russian Federation	Singapore
Estonia	Slovak Republic	Slovenia
Finland	Spain	Turkey
France	Sweden	
Germany	United Kingdom	
Ireland	United States	

PIAAC is a study conducted at household level under the direction of the OECD to assess key cognitive and workplace skills deemed necessary for successful participation in 21st century society and the global economy in each of these countries. PIAAC was developed in the context of changes in the demand for skills particularly in knowledge based societies. The skills assessed in PIAAC are literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology rich environments. Technological change together with changes in the structure of employment towards jobs involving the use of information technology and away from manual labour requires a different set of skills than previously.

The number of households required for survey in a PIAAC participating country is 5,000, a representative sample of the adult population. In Ireland Central Statistics Office surveyed 10,500 households (approx. 10% of total households in the Republic of Ireland) on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills for the OECD. Using 2011 Census of Population data, Ireland’s PIAAC sample consisted of:

- 700 Census of Small Areas
- 10,500 households
- One Respondent/household (Random selection)

PIAAC Ireland recruited fifty survey Interviewers and four team co-ordinators to survey 10,500 households between 1st August 2011 and 24th March 2012. Using a laptop computer, PIAAC interviews were conducted in respondents’ homes following the PIAAC standardised interviewing procedures as follows:

- Capture names, age and gender of all household members
- Computerised random selection of 1 respondent per household
- Respondent replied to Background Questionnaire questions
- Respondents with Computer Experience were directed to complete a Computer Based Direct Assessment (CBA)
- Respondents without Computer Experience were directed to complete a Paper Based Direct Assessment (PBA)

DATA COLLECTION 2011-12	
☐ Surveyed Households	<b>10,500</b>
☐ PIAAC Requirement	<b>5,000</b>
☐ Completed Interviews	<b>5,983</b>
☐ Response Rate	<b>72%</b>
☐ Computer Assessments	<b>70%</b>
☐ Paper Assessments	<b>30%</b>

Source: Central Statistics Office of the Republic of Ireland

PIAAC's extensive background questionnaire provides information on the range of other skills and personal traits that are important for success in the 21st century global economy. The questionnaire also collected information on the relationship between the respondents' cognitive domains and a number of key indicators including demographic characteristics, educational attainment, employment status, and skills used at work and at home.

There are seven key findings from the EU report published in Ireland (PIAAC Ireland 2013) that are presented as specifically relevant for EU education and training policies<sup>4</sup>. These are:

- 20% of the EU working age population has low literacy and low numeracy skills;
- Education and skills increase employability: This represents a challenge for the one in five unemployed who have low literacy and numeracy skills;
- The high-skilled are progressing well through adult learning, but people with low proficiency are easily caught in a 'low skills trap' as they are less likely to participate in learning activities;
- There are significant differences between individuals with similar qualifications across the EU member countries: Upper secondary graduates in some member states score similar or better than higher education graduates in others;
- 25% of adults lack the skills to effectively make use of ICTs (information and communications technologies);
- The skills of a person tend to deteriorate over time if they are not used frequently. The gap in literacy proficiency skills between generations is more than two thirds of a proficiency level (equivalent to five years of education);
- Sustaining skills brings significant positive economic and social outcomes.

The PIAAC data results also offer comparative insights on:

<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/piaac\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/piaac_en.pdf)

- What adults can do in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments
- How certain socio-demographic characteristics are linked to skills proficiency
- How skills are used in the workplace
- How skills are developed, maintained and lost
- The relationship between skills proficiency and economic/social well-being.

Due to the methodological design chosen, the results are comparable to PISA results and those of the preceding adult skill surveys International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS).

Yet, with a greater emphasis on cost minimisation and on a fix-all solutions Watson (2001) suggests that one of the greatest challenges for robust comparative educational research is “the use of decontextualized data and statistics” (p.12). Watson (2001) clarifies this as a situation where raw data gives no information about the underlying educational philosophy about a country or educational setting, nor gives detail of the social, economic or cultural context of that setting. Watson recalls the comments of Sandler (1900) and Noah (1984) in relation to these concerns. Watson (2001, p.28) notes that research data, upon which policies are based, are often too superficial to be really meaningful. Watson also notes that “We [...] ignore [...] historical perceptions and insights” of educational settings “at our cost” (2001, p.24).

There are concerns that big-data based comparative surveys such as PIAAC do not contextualise learning needs, adequately accommodate indigenous knowledge history and culture, or are informed by the educational philosophy underpinning education in the setting where the information/data is collected. However, initiatives such as PIAAC and others, such as PISA, offer opportunities for comparative researchers to further interrogate and to qualitatively complement the findings of the international statistical comparative surveys. For example Usher (2013) compliments the Statistics Office of Canada (StatsCan) and the Council of Ministers of Canada (CMEC) for going “the extra mile to not only oversample for every province [...] and for aboriginal populations”. Usher (2013) goes on to say “this allows us to take some truly interesting looks at several vulnerable sub-segments of the population.”

### **Policy & Practice Going Forward**

Since Jullien in 1817 (Fraser 1964) and comparativists thereafter, the potential of compiling large, cross-national surveys of education is discussed regularly. Mayer and Benavot (2013) note that the advent of international comparative studies of performance such as the Educational Testing Service (ETS) surveys, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)

studies of student achievement, and the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of 15-year-old pupils' scholastic achievement in mathematics, science, and reading have attracted more frequent analysis and critique commentary (Crossley 2014). Such big-data studies have now extended to adult competencies, PIAAC, and are "increasingly favoured by decision makers and research funders alike" (Crossley 2014, p.18). This narrative fits neatly within the concept of new managerialism that is highly favoured by political and administrative elites that, it can be suggested, know the cost of everything but the value of nothing.

The advantage of quantitatively accumulating international comparative studies is qualified by commentators who write about their reservations of exporting a "fix-it' educational technique to another country" (Cowen, R. 2009, p.315) and uncritical comparative interrogation disregarding issues such as hegemony of the North (Barrett et al. 2011), Weltanschauungen or lived experiences and existential phenomenology (Kim 2014, p.49), and the 'historical-philosophical-cultural and liberal humanist motif in comparative education' (coined by Kazamias, 2009, quoted in Phillips, 2014). Such reservations give rise to the terms such as Policy Borrowing and Lending in Education (see Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow, 2012). It is evident that educational policies and enthusiastically adopted educational practices based on big-data are often too superficial to be really meaningful according to Watson (2001, p.28). It seems that the negative side-effects of comparative approaches such as simplistic universalisms and reinforcement of hierarchies take effect. Furthermore, because of their apparent cost effectiveness, these studies can starve and marginalise other forms of research and scholarship as noted by Crossley (2014). Narratives arising from big-data studies borrow "legitimacy from the predominance of economic discourse in contemporary society, from a quest to measure and evaluate performance in all walks of life" (Crossley 2014 p.20).

Watson (2001, p.11) suggests that "one of the main purposes of comparative education has always been that of reform ... learning for other situations ... looking comparatively, using comparative data and ideas to inform policy decisions". In comparative reform there is a double challenge of reform 'from' and reform 'to'. If the situation 'from' which reform originates is not completely reported the full implications of the reform will not be understood. Equally, if the situation 'to' which reform is applied by transferrance is not adequately critiqued then reform will be a misfit. Referencing Jameson (1988) Watson (2001, p.25) refers to "... the disappearance of a sense of history" in comparative educational research and Cossley (1998), referenced in Watson (2011, p 28.), argues for greater emphasis on qualitative and ethnographic research that will rebalance the dominance of quantitative big-data.

It is likely that traditional areas of comparative study will continue for the foreseeable future given that formal structures of education are set to remain and that the demands for education

performance are still predominantly dictated by international and national structures of economic control. The advent of big-data studies makes the transnational transference of outcomes faster and more likely. The almost universal adoption of league tables is evidence of this. However, the weakening of the nation state, marketization of education, shadow education systems, trans-national educational provision corporations, the rise of private schools, etc. also offer opportunities for new comparative research. Watson (2001, p.25) warns of limiting the vision of comparative research to people living in “a perpetual present and in a perpetual change” and Crossley warns of “what some see as a search for ‘certainty’ in times when this is hard to find” (2014 p.20). The dominance of the present and illusion of the now can be a devastating weakness in comparative research. King (1979) suggest that education should be focused on uncertainty rather than certainty.

Comparative researchers have greater access to qualitative and ethnographic data from a widening range of sources which can be used effectively to qualify dominant international quantitative comparisons. The compilation of appropriately informed data on educational inequality is an important tool in addressing inequality and in the empowerment of local and regional responses to educational need. Comparative spatial studies, such as the Small States Studies, that present disparities in educational opportunities and outputs can also reflect wider inequalities impacting on marginalised populations. Comparative research needs systematic collection of data, especially qualitative and ethnographic data at sub-regional and local level and the application of outcomes from this research to international studies.

### **The REGIONAL Project**

The REGIONAL project originates from the need to identify and exploit factors to improve the effectiveness and impact of planned and managed adult learning throughout Europe with the overall objective of reducing the major geographic disparities that persist in educational opportunities and outcomes across and within EU regions. Rethinking Education (European Commission 2012c) draws attention to significant underperformance and identifies areas where joint actions are required in the adult learning sector. The Communication highlights that 73 million adults have only a low level of education and that there are still low participation rates in lifelong learning across the EU. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (Keogh 2009) argues that differences in adult participation in lifelong learning can be found in gaps between legislation, policy and implementation and in weak relationships between formal policy-making and practise. While there is an extensive body of literature discussing the importance of adult learning for the society as a whole and for the individuals that constitute this society, there exists

very little research to date that discuss the reasons behind “the regional disparities in terms of adult participation in lifelong learning in the EU” (European Commission, 2012a).

The objective of REGIONAL is the development of a policy making toolkit comprising research methodology and guidelines, the country profiles and a set of case studies presenting a comparative analysis of regional policies, their formulation, implementation and funding in six countries across EU as a resource for policy makers and stakeholders actively engaged in the formulation and implementation of adult learning policies in Europe.

## **Conclusion**

Crossley refers to the need for a “comprehensive reconceptualization” (1999 p.249) of the comparative and international studies field in light of the dramatic changes in factors such as greater internationalisation/globalisation, development in information and communications technology, demand for greater coherency in the research-policy-practice continuum, greater emphasis on cross disciplinary, growing tension between economic and cultural dimensions of social reform and challenges to the dominant models of development. This essay discussed comparative education in a time of change and progressed to focus on one particular tool of international assessment, the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The essay discussed the weaknesses and the opportunities potentially available to comparative education in a time of change. Finally, the essay presented the REGIONAL project that seeks to develop a policy-making toolkit that can better address disparities in adult learning policies across European regions.

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