



Learning from the past for the future: Signposts and landmark anniversaries in adult learning and education

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Published online: 17 May 2024

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Valuing, sharing and using our “collective memory”

The idea for this special issue of the *International Review of Education – Journal of Lifelong Learning (IRE)* emerged in 2019, when preparations were under way for landmark anniversaries of a number of associations and seminal publications in the field of Adult Learning and Education (ALE). Sadly, Chris Duke, the fourth member of our team of guest editors, died in 2023 and did not see the completion of this special issue. We have lost a dear friend and colleague, with whom we collaborated on many projects, publications and professional joint efforts. His life’s work epitomises our focus on research and engagement which builds a collective memory, learning both from the past and across cultures. His thinking was central to the development of this special issue and we are honoured to dedicate it to his memory.

This special issue is oriented towards the future of adult education, within the wider landscape of lifelong learning. In looking ahead, we believe it is important to appreciate, and build upon, past developments as part of what might be called a “collective history”, or what anthropologists term our “collective memory” – giving due recognition to the importance of knowledge gained and passed on through oral and Indigenous traditions.

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A proverb of the Mende (an ethnic group in West Africa who live mainly in Sierra Leone) encapsulates a notion of lifelong learning which goes beyond the rather clichéd phrase “learning from the cradle to the grave”. For the Mende, *learning starts in the womb and ends in the tomb*. Arguably, this view of learning seems closer to what we know today from leading research in the field of neuroscience – as reflected, for example, in a publication issued by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) entitled *Embracing a culture of lifelong learning: Contribution to the Future of Education initiative* (UIL 2020). Arguably, the Mende proverb could also be seen as underscoring the maxim chosen by the European Union (EU) in a significant Communication in 2006 on the importance of adult education within lifelong learning: “It is never too late to learn” (CEC 2006), subsequently translated into an Action Plan “It is always a good time to learn” (CEC 2007; Hinzen 2011).

Three additional considerations seem relevant here. The first concerns the importance of remembering, revisiting and attempting to build upon significant “landmarks” in the recent past. This is not because we are naive about any simple “repetition” of historical cycles – we well recognise the enormous pace of change and social, economic, political and environmental upheavals of recent decades. However, neither must we neglect the past, or even attempt to. As William Faulkner puts it in his novel *Requiem for a nun* “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Faulkner 1919).

The second consideration concerns ethnocentrism and learning. All of us have significant experience in working in many global regions. Nevertheless, we have to be constantly vigilant. As Edgar Morin put it,

Cultures should learn from each other; the haughty West that prides itself as a teaching culture should also become a learning culture. Understanding is also constantly learning and re-learning (Morin 1999, p. 54).

The third consideration brings these strands together. Many, probably most people engaged in the field of adult education work from a value position which – through research, practice and/or policy work – seeks to foster equality, for the benefit of individuals and the societies of which they are a part. From our perspective, achieving change at local, regional, national or global levels involves *both* building on past experiences *and* learning from other cultures and global regions.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(Eliot 2001 [1943], p. 197).

Signposts to a sustainable future

The diversity of adult learning and education (ALE) in policy and practice is a reality of our times. Of course, historically there are certain similarities of influences, such as, for example in the West, those coming from the period of the Enlightenment,

and the new vocational requirements associated with the agricultural and industrial revolutions. A key question underpinning this special issue is how far the “collective memory” of the adult education movement might be of value, both in itself and potentially also for this decade, in relation to the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations (UN) with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015).

Any of today’s major global and national conferences on ALE and lifelong learning for sustainable development, with their reports and declarations, consider outcomes in terms of knowledge and civic education, professional competencies and skills. At best, they look at culture, attitudes and values. But where do these orientations come from, and are they viable as frameworks and perspectives for the future? Is it important to consider theories of cultural and collective memory in anthropology and history? What can we say about influences, relationships and causalities between education and development, and how do people remember their own experiences throughout their lives?

Casting the net wider, we ask: which central historical developments globally, regionally and nationally have had lasting effects for living together today? How can we better understand a past which impacts our present and our future? How can educational institutions contribute, and what is the potential of adult education within lifelong learning? These are questions we try to address here, with a wide historical local, national, regional and even global impact.

To set the scene, this introductory essay considers a number of key ALE events and publications and examines the interconnected web they form. Some have previously been linked from a comparative research perspective (for example, Egetenmeyer 2015; Slowey 2016; Reischmann 2021), but there is much more to explore. One special issue of this journal which is particularly relevant here marked the 50th anniversary of the Faure report. In their introduction, guest editors Maren Elfert and Alexandra Draxler state:

Rather than providing a universal answer, we see this special issue as an invitation to enter into dialogue and to question the master narratives of the past, the present and the future. Many perspectives are missing and much more could have been said, but the debate continues (Elfert and Draxler 2022, p. 650).

We would appreciate a continuation of this discussion and further related contributions to future *IRE* special issues.

Chris Duke: our collective memories

As co-editors we have known each other, and learnt greatly from each other, for many decades, and from different contexts. Over the years we have collaborated on a variety of professional joint efforts, including the preparation of this special issue.

Chris Duke and Heribert Hinzen first met in 1978 while steering the cooperation between the Asia Pacific Association for Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE) and DVV International. Maria Slowey first came across Chris “remotely”, greatly

influenced by his landmark publication (with Stewart Marriot) *Paper awards in liberal adult education* (Duke and Marriott 1973). She first met him in person at a conference hosted by the Swedish National Board of Education (Abrahamsson et al. 1988), remaining impressed with his insights and humanity over the many decades which followed as a great colleague and friend.

After DVV International had opened up a new Regional Office in Vientiane for Lao PDR and Cambodia, a regional partnership was established with the Centre for Lifelong Learning of Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO CELLL). Here Chris Duke and Heribert Hinzen met Huu Phuoc Khau, based there as Research and Training Manager. They cooperated with him on a UIL-supported study on promising practices of lifelong learning in Southeast Asia (Yorozu 2017), and later also on two studies on community learning centres (Belete et al. 2022; Duke and Khau 2023). Being from the post-war generation in Vietnam, Huu Phuoc Khau's input ensured additional regional, cultural and historical dimensions.

We all came together in the PASCAL International Members Association (PIMA), an offshoot of the PASCAL International Observatory,¹ whose key purpose is a combination of *promoting, interrogating and mobilising adult learning and education*. PIMA contributed substantially to the ongoing advocacy process towards ALE through global collaboration and advocacy for adult learning (Duke and Hinzen 2022); and also published a special issue of its *PIMA Bulletin* dedicated to the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII) (Denholm et al. 2022). The latter *PIMA Bulletin* served as a basis for a later special issue of the *PIMA Bulletin* honouring Chris Duke (Hinzen et al. 2023). Another intense project was the collective work on a memorial book paying tribute to Lalage Bown (1927–2021) (Slowey et al. 2023). Its introductory chapter provides an important perspective of understanding ALE as part of efforts to colonise and decolonise people and societies in the past, present and future. In an article she wrote on adult education and the development of Africa, Bown used the African proverb “a rusty person is worse than rusty iron” (Bown 1975), also calling for learning throughout life.

It was in fact a joint project of DVV International and the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) on European adult education 1914–2014 (Kelbert and Avdagić 2016) which was instrumental in encouraging us to dig deeper, go beyond geographical boundaries and current research priorities as we were preparing this special issue, bringing past and future together. The dimension of peace – learning to live together peacefully, the importance of citizenship education and education for sustainable development, and their contribution to peace – constitutes a common thread running through our introduction.

¹ PASCAL stands for Place And Social Capital And Learning. The PASCAL International Observatory is a global alliance of researchers, policy analysts, decision makers and locally engaged practitioners from government, higher education, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector. For more information, visit <https://pascalobservatory.org/about/introduction> [accessed 15 April 2024].

Our work on this special issue was accompanied by hope and fear, as we realise the enormity of the challenges the world is facing:

Current socio-political and ecological malaise requires more locally based community understanding. Many changes and developments in ALE and life-long learning are needed at this time of interlocking critical social, political, technological, cultural and ecological change, with a climate crisis and the incipient “great extinction”. The ambitious SDGs, with their goals and targets for change by 2030, seriously underestimate the centrality of ALE to coping with change, and the latent reach and wider scope of ALE within lifelong learning, as a test of what is and is not sustainable in the longer term (Belete et al. 2022, p. 281–282).

One of the reasons we return again and again to the importance of peace and the potential role ALE can play is that many people in many places are struggling to survive the absence of peace – especially children, whom we cannot exclude here, and youth. In an initiative launched in 2020, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has been collecting “Poems for Peace” from children and young people living in conflict, encouraging them to use poetry to express their hopes for a more peaceful future. UNICEF has received thousands of poems from 8-year-olds to 24-year-olds around the world including Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. This year, more than 1,700 submissions were received from children and young people affected by the war in Ukraine,² and more will be coming in from Palestinian children suffering in the ongoing Gaza conflict.

Prominent international conventions

Among the signposts marking the trajectory of ALE are prominent international conventions which offer a platform for specialists to develop strategies for making progress in ALE on a global level. These conventions include the series of International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA)³ and the World Education Fora (WEFs).

International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA)

The CONFINTEA series was launched in 1949, not long after the establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the aftermath of World War II. UNESCO’s constitution included a crucial declaration:

² For more information, visit <https://www.unicef.org/children-under-attack/poems-for-peace> [accessed 15 April 2024].

³ The acronym derives from the French designation CONFérence INTernationale sur l’Éducation des Adultes.

Since wars begin in the minds of men [and women], it is in the minds of men [and women] that the defences of peace must be constructed (UNESCO 2022 [1945], p. 5).

This clause still serves as an orientation for ALE today in terms of global recommendations on active citizenship and education for sustainable development.

The first UNESCO-initiated CONFINTEA took place in Helsingør, Denmark, where the premises of the local folk high school provided a fitting venue (UNESCO 1949). Subsequent conferences in the series have been held in different parts of the world, at intervals of roughly twelve years. The key theme in 1949 was peace and how adult education can contribute to it. During CONFINTEA II, held 1960 in Montreal, Canada, the discourse focused on decolonisation processes in Asia and Africa, and again explored which role adult education could and should play (Knoll 2014).

CONFINTEA III, held 1972 in Tokyo, Japan, was instrumental in developing adult education further as a sub-sector of the education system, as a field of practice needing certain support mechanisms, anticipating its maturation into an academic discipline. The Tokyo conference built the background for UNESCO's first *Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education*, adopted by the General Conference in 1976 (UNESCO 1976). In addition, side-meetings held in Tokyo led to the foundation of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) in 1973. CONFINTEA IV was held 1985 in Paris, France, at the height of the cold war, and Chris Duke as one of the rapporteurs frequently mentioned the frosty tensions during the sessions. But he was very satisfied with the declaration on the right to learn, which reads almost like a poem, and one of its key sentences is

If we are to avoid war, we must learn to live in peace, and learn to understand one another (UNESCO 1985, p. 67).

CONFINTEA V, held 1997 in Hamburg, Germany, was attended by some 1,500 participants from governments, civil society, academia and a range of international organisations. Its outcome document combined the *Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning* with an *Agenda for the Future* (UIE 1997). Item 2 of the declaration states that

[a]dult education ... becomes more than a right; it is a key to the 21st century. It is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society. It is a powerful concept for fostering ecologically sustainable development, for promoting democracy, justice, gender equity, and scientific, social and economic development, and for building a world in which violent conflict is replaced by dialogue and a culture of peace based on justice (UIE 1997, p. 1; quoted by Ireland and Spezia 2014, pp. 201–202).

CONFINTEA VI, held 2009 in Belém, Brazil, was the first to be held in Latin America. The influence of the discourses from Porto Alegre around democracy,

transparency, emancipation and movements of the World Social Forum⁴ as well as the orientation towards popular education was well represented and palpable in official plenaries and workshops, and even stronger in all the informal side-meetings. In the outcome document of CONFINTEA VI, the *Belém Framework for Action (BFA)*, participants declared:

We recognise that adult learning and education represent a significant component of the lifelong learning process, which embraces a learning continuum ranging from formal to non-formal to informal learning ... adult learning and education equip people with the necessary knowledge, capabilities, skills, competences and values to exercise and advance their rights and take control of their destinies ... Adult learning and education represent a valuable investment which brings social benefits by creating more democratic, peaceful, inclusive, productive, healthy and sustainable societies (UIL 2010, pp. 5, 6, 7).

In the run-up to the most recent CONFINTEA, held 2022 in Marrakech, Morocco, this journal published a special issue entitled “Strengthening the future of adult education and lifelong learning for all: Building bridges between CONFINTEA and the SDGs” (Benavot et al. 2022a), which discusses important aspects of financing ALE, literacy within lifelong learning, community learning centres and approaches to monitoring in some depth. The guest editors conclude their introduction, entitled “Reimagining adult education and lifelong learning for all: Historical and critical perspectives” (Benavot et al. 2022b), with relevant recommendations including the institutionalisation and professionalisation, governance and financing, measuring and monitoring of ALE.

World Education Fora (WEFs)

Another series of prominent international meetings are the World Education Fora (WEFs). The first of these, labelled “World Conference on Education for All” (EFA) took place in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. Its outcome document combined a *World Declaration on Education for All* with a *Framework for Action to meet basic learning needs* (WCEFA 1990). From a holistic perspective of lifelong, life-wide and life-deep learning it concentrated too much on basic education for children rather than looking at the learning needs for all, including youth and adults.

The second WEF was held 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, and resulted in the *Dakar Framework for Action* (WEF 2000), adopted by more than 1,000 delegates and

⁴ The first World Social Forum was held 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Its “Charter of Principles” (WSF 2001) represents “a consolidation of the decisions that presided over the holding of the Porto Alegre Forum and ensured its success” (ibid., p. 1). The third WSF, also held in Porto Alegre, in 2003, saw “the creation of a popular university of the social movements (PUSM) with the purpose of self-educating activists and leaders of social movements, as well as social scientists, scholars and artists concerned with progressive social transformation. The designation of ‘popular university’ was used not so much to evoke the working class universities that proliferated in Europe and Latin America in the early twentieth century as to convey the idea that after a century of elitist higher education a popular university is necessarily a counter-university” (Santos 2004, pp. 140–141).

participants from governments, civil society, universities, and international organisations. It covers early childhood and schooling, vocational training and higher education as well as gender and quality. “Education for All” was stronger with respect to youth and looking beyond formal schooling. But it was not strong enough to avoid critiques from civil society asking “Does EFA stand for Except for Adults?” (Khan 2000). It was unfortunate that actually only primary education made it into the Millennium Development Goals (UN 2000).

The third WEF convened in Incheon, Republic of Korea, in 2015. It concluded with the *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration*, which pursues an overarching goal: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (WEF 2016, p. 7). Derived from that, the associated *Framework for Action* lists SDG 4’s seven targets and three means of implementation. SDG Target 4.7 is particularly important for peace and education for sustainable development:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development (WEF 2016, p. 21).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The series of CONFINTEA and WEF conventions align with respective international agendas such as the current United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015). In her critical discussion on “Lifelong learning in Sustainable Development Goal 4”, Maren Elfert (2019) explores what it means for UNESCO’s rights-based approach to ALE. But since the 2030 Agenda is a holistic strategy, there are several other goals among the 17 SDGs which are also relevant to ALE development: SDG 3 (good health and well-being); SDG 5 (gender equality); SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); SDG 10 (reduced inequalities); SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities); SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production); and SDG 13 (climate action). There is a growing understanding that to achieve these goals, what is needed are quality education for all in a lifelong perspective (Schweighöfer 2019), and a better positioning of ALE within such a lifelong learning framework (Grotlüschen et al. 2023).

UNESCO reports and recommendations

Another kind of signposts marking the trajectory of ALE are UNESCO reports and recommendations which are deeply connected with the development of ALE and lifelong learning. Among these are the more visionary Commission reports published about every 25 years, such as *Learning to be* (Faure et al. 1972), which has already had

its 50th anniversary. There is also the series of annual *Global Education Monitoring Reports (GEMRs)* prepared by UNESCO as part of its commitments of the World Education Forum in 2000, now for already 20 years. Finally, there is the series of *Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE)*, the fifth of which (UIL 2022a) was published in time for CONFINTEA VII.

Commission reports

The two ground-breaking reports on education initiated by UNESCO in the second half of the 20th century (Faure et al. 1972; Delors et al. 1996), were prepared by International Commissions and chaired by eminent politicians – Edgar Faure as a French Minister of Education and Jacques Delors as President of the European Commission. They were products of their time, but served to guide educational thinking and practice globally for decades, providing orientation for reforming education systems and structures, shaping and paving the way to a human right of lifelong learning in the age of digitalisation and globalisation. The influence of the Faure report was reflected both in an *IRE* article (Biesta 2021) and a dedicated special issue of this journal (Elfert and Draxler 2022).

While we were working on this special issue, UNESCO appointed a new International Commission on the Futures of Education, chaired this time by the President of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, Sahle-Work Zewde. In her foreword to the Commission's final report, *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* (ICFE 2021), she points out:

In particular, the futures of the following critical thematic issues which need rethinking are examined: sustainability; knowledge; learning; teachers and teaching; work, skills, and competencies; citizenship; democracy and social inclusion; public education; and higher education, research, and innovation (ICFE 2021, p. 8).

While all of these three reports were strong in developing a lifelong learning perspective for education, the strongest for ALE is by far the most recent one with a chapter on the need for rethinking ALE, bringing it closer to digital developments, but also claiming the required support to its institutionalisation and professionalisation. Upon invitation, ICAE contributed a statement on “Adult Learning and Education (ALE) – because the future cannot wait” and argued:

First and foremost, ALE is a fundamental human right of all youth, adults and older adults – both women and men – a public endeavour and a global common good, of which the state is the main duty bearer. This implies recognising its twin vocation: as a right in itself and as an enabling contributor to poverty reduction, gender equality, and sustainable development (ICAE 2020, p. 2).

Global Education Monitoring Reports

Participants of WEF in 2000 called for systematic monitoring of the EFA process. Thus the first *Global Monitoring Report on Education for All (GMREFA)* came out soon after and was entitled *Education for all: Is the world on track?* (UNESCO 2002). In the following years, the report always provided latest relevant data on education at national and global levels as well as choosing for deeper analysis thematic areas like gender; quality; literacy; youth and skills; teaching and learning; and a review of the achievements and challenges of the EFA period 2000–2015 (UNESCO 2015a). From 2016 onwards, the series was renamed *Global Education Monitoring Reports (GEMR)*, and the first in the new format was *Education for people & planet: Creating sustainable futures for all* (UNESCO 2016b).

GEMR 2021/22 was on *Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* (UNESCO 2021), envisaging ALE as a sub-sector of the education system and carrying important statements like: “Non-governmental and community organizations are the main providers of adult education” (ibid., p. 183) and “Community learning centres (CLCs) are increasingly recognized as playing an important role in providing education opportunities meeting local communities’ needs” (ibid., p. 265). Now, after 20 years of global education monitoring, the GEMR for 2023 is on *Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?* (UNESCO 2023). It includes as a supplement a review of SDG 4, dedicated to education, entitled: “Progress since 2015 has been far too slow” with a finding on “Adult education: Among 57 mainly high-income countries, the participation rate of adults in formal or non-formal education and training fell by 10%, mostly as a result of COVID-19” (GEMT 2023, p. 1).

The Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education

UIL established the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE)* soon after CONFINTEA VI, as requested by the BFA (UIL 2010), and the first GRALE came out already in 2009 with an overview on the development and state ALE had reached globally (UIL 2009). It was based on five regional and 154 national survey reports. GRALE 2, published in 2013, was on *Rethinking Literacy*, highly important in its recognition of literacy as a continuum and doing away with the older view of being either literate or illiterate (UIL 2013). GRALE 3 had to incorporate the new visions provided through the 2030 Agenda and therefore adopted a broader perspective of *The impact of adult learning and education on health and well-being; Employment and the labour market; and social, civic and community life* (UIL 2016). GRALE 4 (UIL 2019) provided relevant data also on non-participation and discussed the situation of financing ALE, followed by GRALE 5 on *Citizenship education: Empowering adults for change* (UIL 2022a).

In the *IRE* special issue prepared for CONFINTEA VII (Benavot et al. 2022a) there was a critical discussion, including one article focusing on GRALE and analysing its “strengths, weaknesses and future directions” (Boeren and Rubenson 2022), and one article exploring a variety of approaches to monitoring ALE “across

main international policy tools” (Stepanek Lockart 2022). The outcome document of the most recent CONFINTEA conference, the *Marrakech Framework for Action (MFA)*, included this related clause:

In the tradition of GRALE, we reiterate the need for reliable, valid, transparent and accessible information and gender-sensitive monitoring systems that can both produce relevant and accurate disaggregated data for monitoring periodically the enactment of this Framework for Action, and support digital platforms to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices between Member States and other key ALE constituencies (UIL 2022b, p. 11).

Recommendations

Near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, UNESCO’s 1976 *Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education* (UNESCO 1976) had become somewhat outdated. A revision was requested in 2009, and a process of integrating important points from the BFA (UIL 2010) and the 2030 Agenda led to a new *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE)*, which was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 2015. In the section labelled “Definition and scope”, clause 3 states:

The types of adult learning and education activities vary widely. Adult learning and education includes many learning opportunities for equipping adults with literacy and basic skills; for continuing training and professional development, and for active citizenship, through what is variously known as community, popular or liberal education (UNESCO 2016a, p. 7).

The MFA (UIL 2022b) integrates the conference outcomes and recommendations so far, including BFA, SDGs and RALE, but also UNESCO’s series of *Global Education Monitoring Reports (GEMR)*, UIL’s series of *Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE)* and the report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education (ICFE 2021) – all of which build on each other. However, in several aspects the MFA sharpened and thereby, in our view, improved the position of ALE. For example, Clause 40 states that “adult education is part of the right to education and crucial for the realisation of all human rights” (UIL 2022b, p. 15).

In addition, the MFA has much to offer for further advocacy work when we turn to the important point of ALE institutionalisation and professionalisation and the need to establish ALE as a sub-sector of the education system with local centres as its base, as a profession with active professionals and providers, and as an academic discipline:

- Clause 22. We recognize the value of multi-sectoral platforms to support the governance of ALE with all relevant and key actors, including in particular ministries, civil society organizations, youth, the private sector, universities and ALE providers. We also underline the importance of dialogue between workers and employers, and their organizational structures, which, in many countries, con-

tributes to governance – particularly in terms of continuing professional development (UIL 2022b, p. 8).

- Clause 26. We stress the key role of teachers and educators, including volunteer tutors and other professionals engaged in adult learning and education. We commit to implementing policies and strategies to upskill and further professionalize and specialize adult educators through pre-service, in-service and continuing training – in association with universities and research institutes – and by improving their working conditions, including their salaries, status and professional development trajectories. We further recognize ALE competency frameworks as strategic instruments for the professionalization of educators and the enhancement of their qualifications (ibid., p. 11).

Future monitoring and evaluation of impact at local, national and global levels will help us to understand how deep and wide the implementation gap remains between commitment and underachievement. Moreover, we need to keep asking ourselves: Are we learning from the past, and if not – why not?

Anniversaries of institutions and organisations

Besides prominent international conventions and UNESCO reports and recommendations, the trajectory of ALE – within the wider landscape of lifelong learning – is reflected in anniversaries of institutions and organisations operating in the field of ALE. The celebratory speeches held by adult educators and the anniversary publications produced to mark these occasions serve to consolidate our collective memory, share it with emerging scholars and practitioners, and offer potential lessons for the future.

Centenaries

In 2019, the late John Field, another great friend and colleague we mourn after his sudden death last month, drew on his extensive comparative research experience and his language skills to write a commemorative piece “Adult education centenaries: Lifewide and worldwide” (Field 2019), comparing the different approaches employed in Britain and Germany, and deepened this topic further in “1919 as a turning point for adult education? An international-comparative perspective on developments in Britain and Germany” (Field and Jenner 2019).

The year 2019 also marked an important anniversary for adult education in Germany. A century previously, World War I had ended, followed by the November revolution, the end of the emperor’s regime and the end of German colonialism in Africa and Asia. The end of something always has the potential of breeding something new and better, and 1919 saw the Weimar Republic establish the first democratic government in Germany, the introduction of voting rights for women, legal stipulation of the eight-hour-working day, and of adult education, with the institution of the *Volkshochschule* becoming a constitutional matter. Therefore, it was

appropriate that it was the President of the Federal Constitutional High Court who, in 2019, in his keynote in St. Paul's Cathedral of Frankfurt reminded us of the relevant clause in the constitution that adult education has to be supported by government at national, provincial and local levels, including the *Volkshochschulen* as local adult education centres and providers (Schrader and Rossmann 2019). Today they are important community-based adult education centres with an annual participation of almost 10 million adults in all kinds of education, learning and training activities. The *Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband (DVV)* as the national association of the local centres and regional associations was founded in 1953, now 70 years old, whereas DVV International as the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association was founded in 1969 and, also in 2019, turned 50 (Hinzen and Meilhammer 2022).

Meanwhile, another interesting reflection on “One hundred years of Vocational Education and Training (VET) discourses” (King 2023) complemented the debate, as in addition to general, civil and popular ALE, the vocational component is just as long-standing and of similar or maybe even growing importance as traditional adult education. The perspective of continuing VET has gained a new dimension in the debate strengthened by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which has looked at lifelong learning for all as an entitlement (Dunbar 2019) as well as lifelong learning in the informal economy (Palmer 2020).

Seventieth anniversaries

Japan marked 70 years of its pre-CLC *kominkan* in 2019. These local and community-based groups and centres started and gained importance when they began receiving governmental support through the relevant Social Education Act in 1949. Their orientation was towards supporting democratic development in the country, and even today they are the largest provider of community education in Japan (Oyasu 2021).

In 2022, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), founded in 1952 as the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE), celebrated its 70th anniversary in Hamburg.⁵

In 2023, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), initially established as the European Bureau of Adult Education in 1953, also turned 70. Their *Manifesto for adult learning in the 21st century: The power and joy of learning* (EAEA 2019) is an important testimony of their advocacy efforts.

Sixtieth anniversaries

Adult Learning Australia (ALA), formerly the Australian Association of Adult Education (AAAE) celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2020.

⁵ The virtual exhibition produced for this anniversary is still available online at <https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/virtual-exhibition-power-lifelong-learning> [accessed 17 April 2024].

In 2024, the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE), founded in 1964, has now also been in existence for six decades. Ten years ago, ASPBAE and its members marked its 50th anniversary very effectively with a year-long celebration, featuring highlights across the wide Asia Pacific region. It was a high-level awareness-raising and motivational campaign influenced by the traditions and experiences of ALE policies and practices in the region, and embedded in the EFA and post-2015 processes.

Fiftieth anniversaries

In 2019, the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS)⁶ celebrated 50 years since its establishment in 1969. It marked the occasion with a Lifelong Learning Summit on the future of lifelong learning (AONTAS 2019).

In 2023, the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) celebrated five decades of its vital work as a civil society organisation with a global reach. The story goes that four important delegates to CONFINTEA III in Tokyo 1972, Professor Roby Kidd from Canada, Paul Bertelson from Denmark (at the time seconded to UNESCO), Paul Mhaiki from Tanzania and Hellmuth Dolff from Germany, had a series of “side meetings”. Together they developed the idea of creating an international civil society voice, advocating for adult education – and ICAE was born one year later. Ever since, it has been a global organisation with national and regional members, a movement advancing the right to adult education, strengthening a gender perspective, putting active citizenship and education for sustainable development high on the agenda. Paulo Freire and Julius Nyerere became Honorary Presidents, and both of them posthumous members of the International and Continuing Education Hall of Fame (Hinzen 2022). “The contribution of ICAE to the development of a global lifelong learning agenda” (Tuckett 2015) is an important reflection acknowledging the contributions from civil society; another publication marking the occasion was *ICAE 1973–2023: 50 years in adult learning and education* (Popović et al. 2023).

Fortieth anniversaries

In 2019, the Department of Andragogy at the University of Belgrade, a leading university department in the field, also turned 40 with its notable journal *Andragoške studije/Andragogical Studies: Journal for the Study of Adult Education and Learning*.

The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), which was founded in 1982 by merging the National Association for Public and Continuing Adult Education (NAPCAE) and the Adult Education Association (AEA) (Henschke 2007) also celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2022. AAACE holds an annual

⁶ The acronym stands for Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach, which means “national adult education through voluntary unification”.

conference and publishes three journals: the *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Adult Learning* and the *Journal of Transformative Education*.

Tenth anniversary

Also worth noting is the University of Würzburg, which together with a consortium of some 15 university and civil society partners, celebrated a decade of organising the Adult Education Academy (AEA) in 2023. A reflection on the experiences of this decade of teaching comparative studies in adult education to PhD and Master students is captured in “Ten years of Adult Education Academy: Contributing to internationalisation in higher education” (Beu et al. 2023).

Festschriften and journals

Festschriften

Some organisations marked their anniversaries with commemorative publications of various kinds, so-called *Festschriften*. These were diverse in depth and length, but all of them full of interesting stories, figures, people and pictures.

Some of them were printed in a ceremonial manner: for example, the one for the centenary of German *Volkshochschulen* (Schrader and Rossmann 2019) was laid out with a double page for each year since 1919, along with an associated story and illustration of a major event; in the same year, DVV International published *50 years: Half a century of adult education* with accounts of each country where it had been active since 1969 (Hirsch et al. 2019). Both of these books include substantial historical chapters. DVV International’s institutional and organisational development as well as its contributions to the international agenda and movements are also documented in two earlier publications, marking its 25th (Hinzen 1994) and 40th (Samlowski 2009) anniversaries. They are complemented by three other publications marking 50 years of adult education in Tanzania (Heinze and Hinzen 2021; Bhalalusesa et al. 2021; Hall et al. 2022).

Many other *Festschriften* were produced as e-books or in additional e-versions; and online sources include interesting information provided in historical sections on organisational websites like those of ASPBAE or ICAE. EAEA produced an infographic timeline with milestones of developments since 1953.⁷

Journals

Although *Convergence – An International Journal on Adult Education* is not itself marking an anniversary, it is worth celebrating that it was relaunched in 2021. Its first issue was published by the Ontario Institute of Education in 1968, with Roby

⁷ The timeline is available at <https://eaea.org/about-us/history/> [accessed 19 April 2024].

Kidd, Lalage Bown and later Margaret Gayfer involved as editors. It became ICAE's journal in the mid-1970s and was later published through the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) up until 2010. For financial reasons, it ceased publication for a number of years before being brought back to life as an e-journal in 2021, when the UNESCO Chair in Global Adult Education was established at the University of Malta, in cooperation with ICAE and with UNESCO Chair holder Peter Mayo as editor. Throughout those decades, *Convergence* has been an important ALE journal, discussing all the relevant issues through the lenses of civil society as well as academia. A recent article entitled "Does what goes around come around? The late 20th century adult learning and education agenda today" (Duke 2023) was the last substantial professional piece which Chris Duke wrote a few months before his untimely death.

A special issue of *Convergence* was guest-edited by Timothy Ireland and Shermaine Barrett to commemorate the 50th anniversary of ICAE. In their editorial they muse:

we look back and look forward. We look back over the 50 years since the ICAE was founded in 1973 and, at the same time, with the experience and wisdom accrued over this half century, we look forward to the next half century (Ireland and Barrett 2023, p. 80).

The special issue also included a piece by Budd Hall (ICAE Secretary-General 1979–1991), thanking ICAE for "50 years of Hope" (Hall 2023), and a tribute to our dear colleague, friend and mentor, Chris Duke (Hinzen 2023), who had originally come up with the idea of the present *IRE* special issue.

In 2019, the journal *Studies in the Education of Adults* (until 1984 called *Studies in Adult Education*) celebrated its 50th anniversary. To mark the occasion, it published a special issue aiming to provide a historical record and reflective account of the journal, and also to republish some key articles. In their interesting and challenging "50th anniversary editorial", Jim Crowther and Miriam Zukas delve deep into the journal's early history, its authors, readers and themes, and conclude with a section headed "Looking forward: threats and opportunities" (Crowther and Zukas 2020).

Indeed, "looking forward", this journal, the *IRE*, will be marking its own 70th anniversary in 2025, as the world's longest-running peer-reviewed journal of comparative education, serving not only academic and research communities but, equally, high-level policy and practice readerships throughout the world.

Additional milestones – some eminent publications

Besides prominent international conventions, UNESCO reports and recommendations, the anniversaries of institutions and organisations operating in the field of ALE, and *Festschriften* and journals, there are many other landmark publications relevant to our collective memory. Among them is Philip Coombs' *The world educational crisis: A systems analysis* (Coombs 1968), which he followed up 17 years later with an evaluation of the progress made (Coombs 1985) with

respect to changing learning needs, matters of expansion, financing and growing inequalities. With Manzoor Ahmed from Bangladesh (both were working for the International Council for Educational Development [ICED]) he wrote *Attacking rural poverty: How nonformal education can help* (Coombs and Ahmed 1974) published by the World Bank in their search for the relevance of education beyond the formal sector for development.

Pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire 1970) recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, and the centenary of his birthday was celebrated in 2022. For many, Paulo Freire has been one of the most influential educational thinkers and practitioners of the 20th century, not only in Latin America, but also internationally. His legacy reaches deep into the ALE community, especially in the form of popular education and his pedagogy is still relevant in ALE today. We are fortunate that we were able to include a contribution on this topic in this special issue.

Malcolm S. Knowles' highly influential *The modern practice of adult education* (Knowles 1970) is another seminal work, which turned 50 in 2020. And when today we reflect on the relevance of quality education for the sustainable development agenda it is also worth going back to *The limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind* (Meadows et al. 1974), which already highlighted economic and ecological developments which threaten our future today.

It was also 50 years ago that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published *Recurrent education: A strategy for lifelong learning* (Kallen and Bengtsson 1973). It had become obvious that successful economies required improved education systems which should be provided throughout life, or – from the OECD's perspective – at least throughout citizens' working life.

One of the primary tasks of a system of recurrent education is to create the conditions for cross-fertilisation between learning in educational situations and learning occurring in other social situations (Kallen and Bengtsson 1973, p. 80)

Twenty-five years ago, Paul Bélanger and Albert Tuijnman, at the time working for UIL and OECD respectively, edited a six-country comparative study on *New patterns of adult learning* (Bélanger and Tuijnman 1997). It included a most interesting chapter by Allan Quigley and Stephen Arrowsmith on “The non-participation of undereducated adults” (an issue taken up again in GRALE 4 [UIL 2019] and in vol. 46 of the *International Yearbook on Adult Education* [Schemmann 2023]). They concluded their chapter noting:

If the issue were less how many participate in education and training versus how many do not; if we could ask how society learns, how it teaches its members; if we could ask those who cannot and often will not join the normative knowledge paradigm how they learn in a print-oriented society, then we would be in a better position to value and learn from the contributions made by all members and sectors of society (Quigley and Arrowsmith 1997, p. 101).

Drawing some conclusions from the six-country comparative study, Abrar Hasan and Albert Tuijnman state quite clearly:

delivering adult education programmes requires collaboration among a range of actors and stakeholders. Policies for adult education need vertical integration of adult learning with other forms of formal learning. For a variety of reasons, this has been difficult to achieve. Equally, governments have failed in delivering a coordinated set of horizontally linked education, labour, social, and economic policies ... The role of government is to ensure that incentives are in place and that a framework is available for setting standards and assessing and recognizing the outcomes. Governments also need to provide the necessary information and data bases not only for their own policy development purposes but also to individuals for making informed decisions (Hasan and Tuijnman 1997, p. 246).

Unfortunately, decades later these suggested changes and improvements are still lacking, both at system level and at individual level, as Richard Desjardins and Alexandra Ioannidou (2020) show. We still do not see ALE embedded in education systems as a sub-sector with sufficient attention given to the golden triangle of ALE policy, legislation and financing.

Again, these documents are not only relevant for their time. They should inform our future thinking, planning and practice of ALE and serve as inspiration for the coming years, when the integration of the SDGs with the goals and targets of CONFINTEA VII will be at the top of the future ALE agenda.

Rethinking – reimagining – reigniting – revitalising – remaking

The advances in ALE and lifelong learning towards sustainable development during the past decade have been quite important and obviously inspired, encouraged and enabled by certain global meetings together with their follow-up reports and recommendations. We have provided several examples of this above.

At the same time it is interesting to note that the titles of quite a number of relevant books or articles begin with the word “Rethinking” (UIL 2013, UNESCO 2015b; Gartenschlaeger 2019; Hanemann and Robinson 2022, Boffo and Egetenmeyer 2023), “Reimagining” (Delors et al. 1996; ICFE 2021; Benavot et al. 2022b), “Reigniting” (Hall et al. 2022), “Revitalising” (Bhalalusesa et al. 2021) or “Remaking” (Derrick et al. 2010). Clearly, there is a dimension of learning from the past and present for a better future.

Themes addressed by the articles in this special issue

The authors of the articles we present in this special issue come from a range of disciplines and perspectives. They investigate and reflect upon major ALE “signposts” at national, global regional and international levels.

In their article “The role of adult learning and education in the Sustainable Development Goals”, Anke Grotlüschen, Alisa Belzer, Markus Ertnier and Keiko Yasukawa reflect on the SDGs, specifically SDG 4, which focuses on ensuring “inclusive

and equitable quality education and promot[ing] lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN 2015). Their article reports on an important comparative study which explored the role of adult learning and education in lifelong learning in eight case study countries: Australia, Brazil, India, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, South Africa, Thailand and Ukraine. Their findings indicate that while SDG 4 did not feature prominently as a driver for ALE activities, ALE initiatives are focused on the issues targeted by SDG 4. The authors’ analysis points to the unequal policy support given to formal and non-formal ALE activities, and the crucial role of ALE networks and associations in strengthening ALE in addressing some of the most ambitious SDG 4 targets.

The second article, “Tracing the effects and impacts of the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* in the scholarly debate since its inception” by *Ekkehard NuiSSL* and *Simona Sava*, investigates the impact of a major international policy document some twenty years after its publication. This scoping review explores the long-term effect of this *Memorandum* (CEC 2000) both on policymaking and on scientific debates in different member states of the European Union. The authors do discern an impact, mainly in terms of understanding the importance of adult education in political debates. Furthermore, while there has been a decline over the past two decades in explicit mentions of the document, they find that some of the *Memorandum*’s “key messages” can be still identified in recent policy documents.

Next, the research note by *Rajesh Tandon* and *Sumitra Srinivasan* shifts the focus from the European region to the Asian region. In “Learning from life: The value of everyday knowledge for empowerment and change”, they explore how the non-profit research and training organisation Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) developed, practises and promotes the use of the participatory research methodology for empowerment of excluded and marginalised communities in the Asian region. Participatory research involves using people’s knowledge and agency to bring about change in their lived situation. It acknowledges the value of everyone’s experiential knowledge and capacities to learn, even if they have not been formally educated up to secondary or tertiary levels. PRIA’s founder Dr Rajesh Tandon and his co-author Sumitra Srinivasan outline the impact of their work in urban poor informal settlements and with female domestic workers, as well as rural and tribal communities. Efforts to promote active citizenship learning amongst “educated” youth through both face-to-face and online practices are also analysed.

The fourth contribution is “Adult learning and education in the Mediterranean – a view from southern Europe” by *Peter Mayo*, who explores ALE developments in another geographical region, the Mediterranean. He outlines certain characteristics which define the construct of “the Mediterranean”, in both its North African–Middle East and its European dimensions. Issues discussed include literacy, faith-motivated projects, industrial democracy, community education, itinerant provision, language, outdoor manifestations, external funding (USAID and EU), and rhythms of life (climatic conditioning, cultural affinity or dissonance).

The next two articles go back a bit further in history, reflecting on pre-and post-First World War periods in the UK and German colonial Africa respectively – as we mentioned above. In the first one of these articles, “A design for democracy: Britain’s 1919 Report, the context of its creation and its relevance today”, *Paul Stanistreet* and *Alan Tuckett* analyse the significant impact of a report on adult education

(MoR 2019) a centenary after its publication, which they suggest reflected optimism at the time for the possibilities for a more socially just society. Its central thesis was that adult education is “a permanent national necessity” (ibid., p. 5) for an active, informed democracy. It defined adult education, perhaps for the first time, as a distinctive domain of education, and while the report’s initial reception was lukewarm, it has continued to exert significant national and international influence, particularly in the English-speaking world. This article critically examines the context of the report’s creation, at a moment not only of conflict but also of a declining empire and an emboldened labour movement, considering its core arguments, reception and impact, and ending with some thoughts on the contemporary relevance of the report and its delineation of the boundaries, content and organisation of adult education.

The other article going back to the very early 20th century is “Colonial education and the world market: The cotton school experiment in German Togo (1900–1914)” by *Christel Adick*. She reflects on German colonial education systems in Africa and new debates on coloniality and post-coloniality, highlighting the long-term effects of colonial domination, exploitation, oppression, racism and cultural hegemony. She argues however, that colonial education tends not to be among the key topics of such debates, and that regarding education in post-colonial societies as “a colonial heritage” and labelling it as “European” or “Western” – thereby omitting general historical educational developments in the modern capitalist world system – is a stereotype. She draws on the work of Freire to highlight the ambiguous nature of education everywhere in the world: domesticating on the one hand, and empowering on the other. In her analysis of colonial education as part of “the colonial situation” which predetermined the roles of “the coloniser” and “the colonised” – including contradictory relations, Adick draws on Albert Memmi’s classical treatise on the topic, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* – originally published in 1959 (in French), and recently reprinted in 2021 as a “signpost” of revitalisation of debates on post-colonialism (Memmi 2021 [1974]).

The topic of post-colonialism in Africa, and the impact of Paulo Freire, are taken up in more detail in *Mpoki Mwaikokesya*’s article “‘First we must educate adults’: Nyerere’s policy on adult education and lifelong learning and its implications for modern-day Tanzania”. The year 2020 marks fifty years of an “iconic moment” when the Tanzanian founding president, Julius K. Nyerere, one of the chief figures in the field of adult education, an educator and a progressive educational thinker gave a memorable new year’s speech to the nation on the relevance of adult education, and declared 1970 to be “adult education year”: “First, we must educate adults. Our children will not have an impact on our economic development for five, ten, or even twenty years” (URT 1964, p. xi), meaning that for immediate development, education for adults should be a priority. The article points out similarities between Nyerere’s and Freire’s approaches to individual and collective learning and reflects on the extent to which some of the ideas and philosophies proposed by Nyerere are still relevant in modern-day Tanzania.

Appropriately, this special issue wraps up with a research note dedicated to the work of Paulo Freire – for so long an influential and iconic advocate for adult education. A century after Freire’s birth, *Afonso Celso Scocuglia* explores to what extent his work might still act as a “signpost” for current and future practice, policy

and research in ALE. In “Paulo Freire: An educator of the present and the future”, Scocuglia makes a strong case that Freire remains as relevant as ever, contrary to views that have relegated him to the past. He analyses Freire’s “thought-action” over five historical periods, highlighting the relevance of Freire’s ideas for the 21st century by reconstructing concepts, arguments and paradigms that bring his work up to date. This includes the relevance of dialogic–communicative action in the learning process, valuing the knowledge of the learning subject as the starting point for elaborated knowledge, the importance of the school in the practice of freedom, autonomy, anti-racist democracy and diversity: and, centrally, Freire’s defence of the pedagogy of the question and research against the pedagogy of belief and the deposit of knowledge.

Concluding reflections

Not only is there no “single model” of ALE which might provide some magic “blueprint” ready for all future eventualities; in our view this would not in fact be desirable. What we can, however, discern within the diversity of strands, practices and approaches are some important common underlying values concerning equality and social justice for individuals and societies.

It is here we believe that it is important to reinforce the “collective memory” of those working in research, practice and policy relevant to ALE and lifelong learning across a wide range of disciplines, occupations and situations. In this way, we hope to discard that which has outlived its relevance and build upon that which best supports us in our collective aim to achieve the shared objectives epitomised in the SDGs.

Data Availability Not applicable.

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