

International Research-Field-Policy Collaboration in Adult Education: Mission impossible?

Prof. Anja Heikkinen & Sini Teräsahde, University of Tampere

Adult education as an academic discipline

Adult education as an academic subject and discipline has very varying status in different countries. There is a strong and powerful tendency to develop a European area of lifelong learning with Qualifications Framework and Quality Assurance Systems. High expectations are targeted to emerging adult learning profession for implementing these plans. Conventionally, a crucial condition for a profession is its own, specific academic research and study profile. While there is no coherent adult education discipline at European level, what would be the foundation of this “new profession”? Adult education policy is influenced by many different actors and the variety of different kinds of education providers is huge. The question is who, how and where are along with

- researchers
- practitioners
- policymakers

defining this “new discipline” in European context?

Case Finland

The Finnish Society for Research on Adult Education (ATS) is coordinating a project AITURI “structural innovations for research collaboration in adult education”, with a modest funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture. It is based on several years’ discussions and debates between researchers, practitioners and policy makers about the status of adult education as academic discipline, i.e. distinctive field of research and study. In AITURI a group representing popular/liberal adult education, vocational adult education, research and educational administration is together with the coordinator Sini Teräsahde now focusing on the topic intensively for a year. The aim is firstly to organize national discussion about a) the functions of adult education as a field of research and study, b) how the field is being organized – who and how are involved – and should/could be organized, and c) how the field is related and interacting with fields of practice and policy-making. The second aim is to search for new tools, practices and possible structures to improve connections, negotiations and collaboration between adult education researchers, education providers, professionals and policymakers. AITURI is

also a self-reflective research process: all activities and events, beside additional expert interviews and wider surveys, are collected into theoretical investigation.

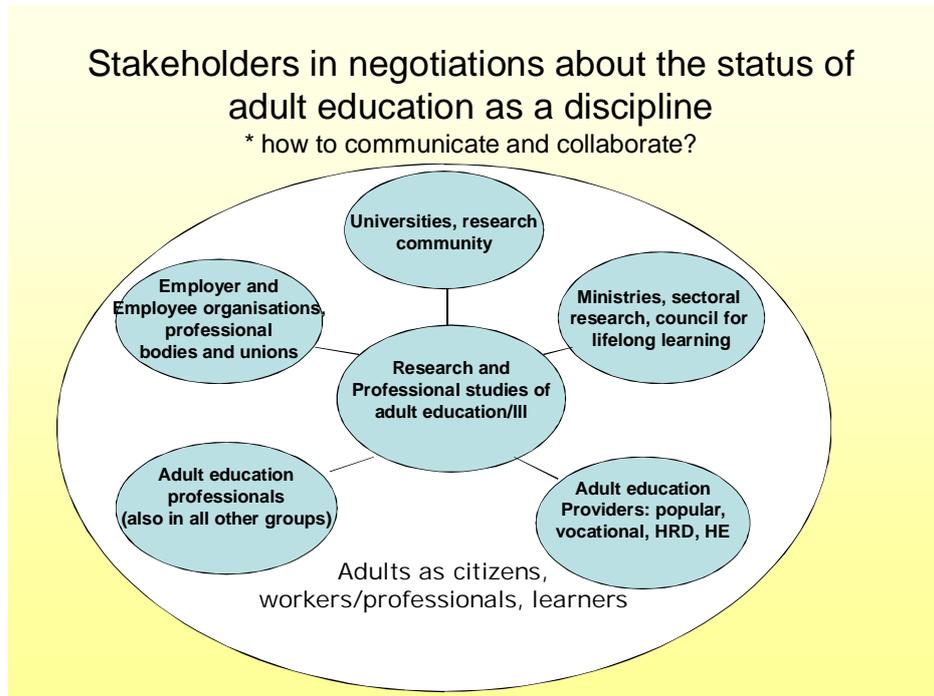


Figure. Who is interested and influences adult education as field of research and study – Finnish context.

First impressions from the AITURI-project

During AITURI-project the working group is conducting a survey to investigate the need and suitable ways to improve connections and collaboration between actors in adult education research, practice and policymaking. The research data of the survey consists of key person interviews i.e. experts of the Finnish adult education; a questionnaire that is open to all, who acts within adult education; some recorded discussion sessions; materials that are produced by the actors and contextualization of the phenomenon internationally.

According to interviews of Finnish adult education experts - in liberal and vocational adult education and in educational administration - it is easy to conclude that the worlds of research, practice and policymaking are in need of integration. Separateness is evident and there is a lack of systematic connections. Research collaboration happens now sporadically and relies on individual activity.

Especially in liberal adult education, actors feel a need to closer connections with universities and adult education research. Efforts to revitalize traditional connections between liberal adult education and academic life are expected. However the biggest obstacle for research collaboration is the scarcity of resources and worries that there will be even more cuts in the future. Among vocational adult education, the attitudes towards

academic research are little more reluctant. Education providers expect research to be more practice oriented and results to be delivered in a simplified format in order to gain the interest of busy professionals. Also policymakers are interested in research collaboration if it produces explicit benefits to their work.

All but two out of ten interviewees regarded new structures and forums for interconnectedness and collaboration in adult education needed; however, totally new organization is not considered necessary while the potential new unit could be located in existing organizations. Those two thought that collaboration will improve, if people just start to communicate more with others spontaneously. Finnish adult education experts suggested numerous possibilities for suitable ways to collaborate and new structures to do it systematically. First of all the research should be more easily accessible and available for all. There is also a need for some kind of adult education body which would involve all crucial actors and could influence adult education policy. Networking and communication can be organized using ICT, but also face to face meeting and seminars are needed. Common discussions should have clearly defined goals and collaboration should be concretized e.g. through projects. Little new finance is expected from administration to establish new structures, but some would be needed to get it started. EU-level action and EU-projects were seen as a good possibility to enlarge the collaboration and also for finances.

Interviewees also raised up many prerequisites and challenges for the research collaboration. First of all collaboration requires common understanding and language, which enables discussion between people from different backgrounds. It also needs collectively set targets. There should be genuine interest to collaborate and the collaboration must be beneficial to all. The collaboration model should respect the diversity of different actors. Biggest challenges seem to be the lack of time and money, skeptical attitudes and the uncertain status of adult education in the newly reorganized ministry and in educational policy in general.

Bringing questions to the European level

Adult education is no more a national business – as policy, practice or discipline. The problematic of AITURI is conditioned by increasing trans-nationalization of policies and practices (e.g. qualification frameworks, quality assurance systems and standards) and globalized markets. Is there a need and possibility to widen discussion about research-practice-politics-relation beyond national borders? Who should be involved and how?

We invite you to debate the topic in the ESREA triennial conference, on 23-26 September, 2010, in Linköping, Sweden. On Saturday 25th we are chairing a two-hour workshop "The Status of Adult Education as an Academic Discipline". In relation to this would also like to know and discuss, how adult education researcher communities (if they form one) are organized in different countries (e.g. in research associations) to develop the academic status of adult education. Universities are under deep structural changes and the future and profile of adult education is very uncertain. Should adult education professionals mobilize beyond national borders to reflect, negotiate and defend the

discipline? Could and should we encourage discussion among European practitioners, research communities and policy-makers, and how to organize it? As we know, the adult education practitioners are a very scattered group and don't have one representative body either at national or European level. The adult education providers – institutions, Civil society organizations – are more organized, but in quite different ways. One important body is the EAEA; where most national liberal and vocational adult education organizations are involved. But how do other stakeholder groups and national policy-makers operate at European level? And finally: how and where do adults in Europe – as citizens, professionals, learners – articulate their needs and expectations to adult education: should researchers, practitioners and policy makers share concern about social and political responsiveness of adult education research and studies? (see appendix)

Choreography for the workshop

The workshop will be opened up with invited inputs that are:

- Experiences of AITURI-project in Finland
- German experiences, Bernhard Schmidt
- Experience from Southern and Eastern Europe, Georgios Zarifis
- EU-commission view, Martina Ní Cheallaigh
- EAEA view, Johanni Larjanko

After inputs we would like to engage participants to discuss and debate research-practice-policy relations especially from the perspective of researchers. We are interested in reflections about specific situations in each participant's country, the ways in which dialogues between actors in adult education has been organized, as well as in debating collectively who are the crucial European actors defining and deciding adult education – as field of research, practice and policy. To start reflections, you may consider following questions in advance:

- Is there a need for closer collaboration among researchers, practitioners and policymakers? Why yes and why not?
- What inhibits open discussion and collaborative working? Why?
- What kinds of forums and resources are needed to develop discussion which would enable engagement in collaboration?
- What kinds of methods would be suitable for discussion and collaboration?
- Who's responsibility it should be to establish the forum and maintain it?

We wish you all very welcome to the session!