

Book Review

*Financing Adult Learning and Education. The way forward: what works, how and why?*¹

If adult education and learning are so important, why then is it not adequately funded? This perennial challenge of under-investment has been the ongoing focus of advocates, researchers and educators. By taking an international lens, this ambitious book comprehensively dissects the question without resorting to simple solutions. The scale and complexity of challenges that result in a global underfunding of adult learning and education are explored against a backdrop of international policy agendas purporting the need for public financing of education, yet the reality is one of failed targets. A striking example that demonstrates the disparity in education funding is illustrated through a staggering statistic that investment equivalent to just 8 days of the annual global military spending would address the total global financing gap in education. With the range of common funding models clearly articulated, they are brought to life via a deep analysis of six case studies from ICAE and DVV International regional members across the Global South, North, EU and non-EU, encompassing Ethiopia, Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean, Germany, New Zealand and Serbia. The contribution of case studies support informed, globally applicable recommendations for more effective ALE funding models.

Given the stellar academic and advocacy reputation of Popović, as Professor at the University of Belgrade and Secretary General of the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE), the robust analysis, clear argument for global financing of ALE is unsurprising. Specific theoretical and philosophical foundations for financing ALE are to be expected, but the detailed consideration for framing within the 2030 agenda and the SDGs and the need for a stronger UNESCO influence is captured through detailed analysis perhaps borne from a global advocate's experience.

¹ Popović, K. (2021). *Financing Adult Learning and Education. The way forward: what works, how and why?* Bonn, Belgrade: ICAE and DVV International.

At the outset, the book offers arguments that adult education is a public good where the primary responsibility for financing should rest with public authorities, especially for basic education of marginalised learners. Challenges arising from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on financing provide an up-to-date context and the associated reprioritisation of certain parts of the education system to the detriment of ALE. This focus amplifies an already dominant neoliberal positioning of ALE financing through an over-reliance on private partnership or vocationally orientated programmes or conceptually through the position of personal responsibility.

The book uses carefully selected data that support an argument that challenges any simplistic thinking on the financing of ALE and brings a historical foundation to the concept of education as a public good whilst relating to recent UNESCO pronouncements on the holistic concept of adult education. Thoughtful handling of binary arguments between private funding and public funding are outlined using robust arguments leaving stern warning of the inherent inequalities linked to private funding models yet questioning the unlocked potential.

However, arguments offered are not merely based on an ideological position but an evidence base in addition to the dearth of research on private ALE funding. Private sector financing is presented as a relatively unexplored territory in terms of clarity of scope and potential to address need, such as basic skills development. Interesting consideration of philanthropic funding as a powerful yet unaccountable actor in the field is considered, and the related precarity of reliance on corporate social responsibility cautioned. The fundamental ethical question of privatisation and public-private partnership are critically explored together with the limitation of Official Development Assistance which may exacerbate existing national debt levels. The book relentlessly pushes our thinking from local need to national funding structures to global priorities and back again, culminating in the elaboration of Domestic Resource Mobilisation, in the hope of bringing mind-boggling levels of corporate tax evasion to bear for the good of the national public spending budget.

The case study from Ethiopia offers a hopeful model for funding that encompasses the broader purpose of learning with the aim to eliminate poverty and is a valuable addition to the book. The Canadian example (Nation Rebuilding Program) describes a large funding envelope yet with issues that potentially resonate globally; flexibility and unpredictability, excessive administrative and reporting burdens and an excessive focus on compliance over results. Proposed improvements are helpfully described: enhanced sufficiency, predictability, flexibility and autonomy of funding as well as greater engagement with communities representing the beneficiaries of the financing, i.e. Indigenous communities.

Understandably, given the scale of the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) example covering 20 countries offering a programme for basic skills, it is detailed and complex in its description. The positive strides noted, notwithstanding reduced and unequal funding distribution, offers new yet familiar insights, particularly in relation to private funding and the issue of data deficits. A dense description of the German model for part-time education provision for workers was comprehensive. However, and perhaps outside the scope of this review, questions around gender balance would have provided a more rounded understanding of the example. The very readable section on New Zealand's tertiary education system approach paints a picture of the ALE landscape, the need to increase participation of Māori and Pacific learners, together with outlining the funding system and the vital role of national advocacy organisations and policy connection to the SDGs. Thoughtful critique of a 'western, linear concept' of adult education compared to the 'holistic and integrated approach to learning which has tribal well-being as its end goal' was both contextual yet with global resonance. Although on the other side of the world, the activities of ACE Aotearoa mirrored that of AONTAS, the National Adult learning organisation in Ireland. Adult educators and advocates will surely see their work in this book also. As the final example, in terms of scope and detail, the standout case study on Serbia offered historical context, policy analysis together with funding and practice descriptions clearly linked to supranational funding structures.

By returning to the models of funding explored in the early chapters, recommendations and conclusions offer proposals to create a more effective and global perspective vitally needed within the field. Clearly, given the scale and complexity of funding ALE, additional research is needed. Recently, AONTAS published a mixed-methods research report on the impact of COVID-19 on community education in Ireland (Cobain, Dowdall, O'Reilly, Suzuki, 2021), echoing similar findings in relation to funding challenges and the role of civil society. The striking point Popović communicates is the universality of challenges in funding ALE.

While the critique is robust, the case study examples did not clarify my understanding of a good system for funding ALE, and perhaps that is the point. The level of complexity, actors involved, terms and varying levels of funding to a broad range of participants may seem disparate searching for a common thread. Yet, each of the funding models was illustrated, save for domestic resource mobilisation, as valuable initiatives that clearly engage the marginalised in society with the proviso that many are for a limited period. The thread of uncertainty, lack of stability, precarity against a backdrop of need arising from systemic issues was apparent.

The recommendations interlink with ongoing challenges in ALE, effective funding and monitoring, longer-term funding models, effective data collection, learning from the past and shaping a broader cross-policy approach to future investments. The critical role of civil society needing to come to the fore. The richness of the data provided can also be viewed as a challenge due to the density of data, acronyms and system. However, that reflects the reality for financing ALE, the overly burdensome funding systems in a complex system of funding at a local, national, regional and global level. And ultimately, when one reaches the end of the book, attempting to digest the models, mechanisms, challenges and ethical dilemmas we are left with the final recommendation. Funding matters because ALE matters; it is a question of human rights, one that requires us to navigate the challenge to make adult education and learning a reality for all.

Cobain, E., Dowdall, L., O'Reilly, N., Suzuki, A. (2021). *CEN CENSUS 2020. Community Education in a Time of COVID-19*. Dublin: AONTAS.

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