

## *Book Review*

### *Education and Training Politics in Europe. A Historical Analysis with Special Emphasis on Adult and Continuing Education<sup>1</sup>*

This review reflects upon a recent publication of Assinger to analyse the evolution of a post-war European education and training policy, as a result of European integration through collaboration amongst nation states aiming at promoting stability, peace and economic development amongst peoples of Europe. However, it also has to be underlined that this study combined policy studies and historical analysis in order to emphasize the necessity of recognising choices and limitations of education and training policy developments referring to the last five decades in the European Community. Moreover, this study based its argument on the academic discourse to reflect the advancement of adult and continuing education in Europe as a rising part of education and training policy actions throughout the 1980s.

Dr. Philipp Assinger, a young scholar and researcher at the Karl-Franzens University of Graz in Austria, developed his doctoral paper into a thorough and accurate study upon education and training 'politics' in Europe with a special attention to adult and continuing education. His approach to investigate the evolution and the development of education and training as a political issue in the European Community, to have started with the European Economic Community in 1957 to turn into a political Union with the Maastrich Treaty after 35 years of struggles of integration and collaborative actions amongst member states, was grounded through the outline of an academic discourse regarding adult and continuing education and its influence on policy focuses both on education and on training.

In his study, Assinger argues that adult and continuing education in Europe is rather diverse and that both converging and diverging trends can be recognised. He continues that convergence in European adult education can be connected to the impacts of globalisation, economic and technological developments, professionalization and quality concerns in most member states have also been risen together

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<sup>1</sup> Assinger, P. (2020). *Education and Training Politics in Europe. A Historical Analysis with Special Emphasis on Adult and Continuing Education*. Studies on Education Vol 6. Wien – Zürich: LIT Verlag.

with the growing influence of market demands. Assinger argues that the influence of international partnerships and collaborations amongst nation states have turned education and training to become an important tool of competition and performance in labour and social actions to put skills and competences at the forefront of political discourse that education and training can develop and/or at least keep in good conditions through participatory actions of learners. This, according to Assinger (2020), may be the reason for improved structures, methods and tools in the last five decades.

In order to explain the background of policy contexts and evolutionary changes, Assinger uses the term 'European education and training politics' (p. 9) so as to reflect the complexity and interchange amongst nation-states' interests as drivers of European integration making politics out of having to open welfare interventions in education and training through democratization and marketization actions. Assinger claims that the formation of lifelong learning as a policy tool has gained a bridging function so as to connect various sectors of education and training, but also to form an 'overarching principle of social and economic policy' (p. 9) to result in a special politics at EU level to heavily influence national systems of education and training. We have to accept that the complexity of political dimensions forced Assinger to underline his argument through some identical and well-referenced elaborations on specific dimensions education and training across Europe and adult continuing education as part of it.

Although Assinger comes to the conclusion that national governments seem to have lost a great portion of their 'authority' over their policies and governance of education and training, this has to be argued, since the EU law on education and training has NOT yet provided any grounds for actions to unify education and training in the members states regarding structures, content or language(s) of instruction. This is still obvious regardless of Open Method of Coordination and may result in a concentrated set of actions so as to realise quality improvements in education and training through concrete steps realised by the members states holding responsibility to make changes for raising performance and participation in learning regardless of age, sex, social status, etc.

A valuable focus of Assinger's (2020) reasoning is that he collected particularly important reflections of distinguished researchers in the field of adult education having analysed the character of European adult continuing education in the dimension and relations of community concerns and national interest towards choices and limitations. Another important element of his approach is the historical focus which helps the reader to recognise the impact of the evolution of education and training at supranational dimensions at which nation-states as member of the European Economic Community and later the EU decided step-by-step to provide collaborative actions in accordance with the realisation of the four freedoms of the Community. Assinger accurately collected major legal

references in EU law to underline his argument and his three relevant observations reflect that he well-recognised the impact of joint actions made at European levels to respond to the economic and social crisis of the time. However, one may argue that his first two observations ought to be considered as one since a rather economy-led vocational focus was already apparent through the first European programmes realising VET policy concerns in 1976 (Assinger, 2020).

On the other hand, Assinger made it clear that the development of an European education and training policy has always depended on compromises amongst member states and, simultaneously, on profound initiatives having been connected to economic interests through better employability, mobility of citizens and quality services. Those early initiatives were precisely gathered and commented upon with key references and reflections to underline the complexity and dependency upon political compromises amongst both nation states and European institutions framed by common law.

Assinger tried to reflect that the realisation of a European policy for education and training was already framed through the Maastricht Treaty, however, it could only break through the Lisbon-process after the millennium with the backing of the well-known Open Method of Co-ordination, having been borrowed from European economic policy toolkit. After 2000, the decade-delayed policy move got accelerated with specific set of tools, which Assinger (2020) considered as important to reflect the benefits of such a policy area to get strengthened in association with the member states to make this are work better.

As for the stages of the evolution of education and training as a policy area, Assinger made it clear that it is not necessarily the rationale or logic of cutting the progression of policy into phases which may matter, but the context and the quality outcome of policy formation with tools and indicators as part of a complex setting to legitimize the field itself. Periodical focus was an issue towards which Assinger stayed neutrally objective and used this dimension to demonstrate that the evolution of this policy field has always been rather complicated for its several factors and contexts which needed fairly serious measures to reach a picture of reality.

In his study, Assinger (2020) claimed that reasoning on the development of education and training policy in the European Community, later the EU which could be related to the formation of the adult education policy in Europe as an uncovered topic together with its historical dimensions and origins together with contemporary contexts. In this regard, Assinger claimed that “the current policies are the result of accretion of power innate in the evolutionary process, in the course of which the EU’s specific policy focus and governance arrangements have taken shape” (p. 21).

The specific interest of ours is a particular connection which Assinger has drawn in between adult education impacting policy formation in education and

training. Therefore, he delivered a specific historical study supported with conceptual framework, an overview of relevant EU institutions and governance structure. His methodology for the historical study was based on first and secondary documents and legal sources. Assinger (2020) clearly described that are some particular limitations of the methodological approach he used as more empirical research would underline 'political reality', however, his conceptual framework can be recognised as an additional dimension to connect the advancement of policy developments in adult and continuing education to the process of shifting education and training into mainstream policies so as to accelerate mobility, employability and related social policy tools accelerated by both economic and political crisis.

This focus can be definitely considered as innovative and advanced by a well-referenced reasoning and critical reflection to already existing literature and argument in this field. Assinger set his conceptual framework by signalling the importance and particular roles of international interaction and co-operation. In addition, he elaborated fairly and convincingly on the political subsystem to reflect the roles, choices and interdependencies of different institutions engaged in the development of adult and continuing education. It is definitely an important aspect of this study that it clearly described and analysed three necessarily crucial dimensions of politics, namely, polity, politics and policy. Referring to policy, it openly and accurately drew those three kinds of policies which represent reason and logics.

Finally, Assinger (2020) referred to old, direct and new, indirect governance, a focus which resonates not just the concept of governance, but also its relations to law, citizenship, trust and care, all which depend on quality education and training so as to establish and develop knowledge and skills in local, national to global levels impacting European level collaborations amongst nations.

This publication has strongly emphasized the need to understand, study and research education and training policies in Europe on the bases of integration, co-operation, mutual actions for welfare and well-being. Assinger consequently underlined the impact of recounting the historical development of education and training in the European Communities and the EU as a successor. This approach helps us to consider and understand how this policy aimed at developing adult and continuing education.

Accordingly, the evolution of common European decision-making and joint actions can also be better understood in the context of those indicated phases of education and training policy. In this way, one can have a broader perspective with deeper knowledge and considerations upon how some major challenges of social, political and economic situations may impact education and training and adult continuing amongst it.