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Utilizing Dimensions of Quality as a Framework for Comparative Analysis of Adult Learning and Education[11]

Abstract: Quality is an important component for the assessment of education, including the education for all adults. Therefore, the question arises: how can such quality be enhanced, and what are potentially the influential factors in implementation? This paper reviews the process in which a group in the 2023 Adult Education Academy used a specific framework to conduct a comparative analysis of adult learning and education (ALE) among their home countries, which include Ecuador, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Portugal, and the United States. This framework focuses on three dimensions that are required for quality in ALE: participation, performance, and partnerships. Through these dimensions, this paper summarizes important ALE themes in each country and identifies similarities and differences amongst these nations. This analysis provides the foundation for the next step, which incorporates suggestions for enhancing sustainable ALE practices in these thematic areas by leveraging policy, legislation, and financing mechanisms.

Keywords: participation, performance, partnerships, adult education, comparison

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Korišćenje dimenzija kvaliteta kao okvira za uporednu analizu učenja i obrazovanja odraslih[12]

Apstrakt: Kvalitet predstavlja važnu komponentu za ocenu obrazovanja, uključujući obrazovanje za sve odrasle. Stoga se postavlja sledeće pitanje: Kako se taj kvalitet može unaprediti i koji faktori mogu potencijalno da utiču na primenu? U ovom je radu dat prikaz procesa tokom kojeg je grupa učesnika u Akademiji za obrazovanje odraslih 2023. godine iskoristila specifičan okvir kako bi sprovela uporednu analizu učenja i obrazovanja odraslih u zemljama iz kojih potiču, uključujući Ekvador, Gruziju, Kirgistan, Nigeriju, Portugal i Sjedinjene Američke Države. Ovaj okvir je usredsređen na tri dimenzije koje su neophodne za kvalitet učenja i obrazovanja odraslih: učešće, učinak i partnerstva. U ovom su radu kroz ove dimenzije ukratko prikazane važne teme u učenju i obrazovanju odraslih u svakoj zemlji i utvrđene su sličnosti i razlike među ovim državama. Ova analiza predstavlja osnov za naredni korak, koji uključuje predloge za unapređenje održivih praksi učenja i obrazovanja odraslih u ovim tematskim oblastima primenom političkih, zakonodavnih i finansijskih mehanizama.

Ključne reči: učešće, učinak, partnerstva, obrazovanje odraslih, poređenje

Introduction

The authors of this article were members of a comparative group at the 2023 Adult Education Academy (AEA) at the University of Wurzburg. The focus of this group was *Policy, Legislation, and Financing of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in a Lifelong Learning Perspective: Arguments, Examples, and Experiences.* Professors Balázs Németh and Heribert Hinzen moderated the group, and the participants were master's students and adult education practitioners.

Prior to the AEA, the master's students wrote transnational essays and the practitioners developed "good practice" presentations. This work formed the basis of our discussions when we converged at the University of Wurzburg.

During the onsite week, we were responsible for performing a comparison between our countries in the context of Policy, Legislation, and Financing of ALE and presenting this analysis to our peers. The process was challenging,

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but ultimately, we decided on an approach and worked together to develop our perspective.

Initially, we struggled with focus. How were we going to frame the comparison between Nigeria, Portugal, Georgia, Ecuador, Kyrgyzstan, and the United States? We started off by brainstorming important general themes in ALE to get our brains working in the right direction. We then had many insightful discussions, but we often strayed off course. However, during one of our discussions, Professor Németh noted the importance of *quality* of ALE, which led us to an important question: how can quality be enhanced and what are the influential factors in its implementation? Professor Németh mentioned three dimensions of quality in ALE: *participation, performance, and partnership*. This caught our attention, and we liked thinking about ALE through this lens. We were not yet sure how this would apply to Policy, Legislation, and Financing, but we decided that these dimensions (which we started calling the 3Ps), should be the framework upon which we would conduct a comparison among our countries.

At this point, we conducted another brainstorming session, but this time we considered *participation, performance,* and *partnership* themes for each of our countries. We created a table on the whiteboard that listed the countries horizontally and the 3Ps vertically. This was a very useful exercise because it quantified our discussion and gave us a basis on which we could start a comparison.

Once we had the table completed, we were able to identify general trends of what our countries had in common and where we had differences in terms of ALE themes. The comparison of similarities and differences helped us frame the next step of the process: how we apply policy, legislation, and financing to our discussion. Emerging from the similarities and differences analysis, we identified several issues in ALE that we all wanted to address. We listed suggestions for these topics by identifying whether they fell under policy, legislation, and/or financing categories.

We began the week with good discussions and intentions, but were unsure how we would conduct the comparison. By the end of the week, we had a framework in place and suggestions to present to our peers.

Role of Participation, Performance and Partnerships in Adult and Lifelong Learning

As part of the globally enhanced discourse on the Futures of Education (UNESCO, n.d.), a great number of universities and organizations in UN Member States have responded to the recent call to embrace the culture of lifelong learning by

trying to transform their organizations into lifelong learning universities and organizations and to initiate effective and innovative forms of knowledge transfer for sustainable economies and inclusive societies through the expansion of skills and competence development (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). In this regard, collaboration with UNESCO, IAU, ASEM LLL, EUA, LLLP and other key stakeholders has helped understand, innovate, and develop lifelong learning based on working practices, trends and issues in association with local and regional stakeholders.

Participation, Performance and Partnership are key aspirational challenges and urgent imperatives in the context of our rapidly changing world requiring of education and training institutions, together with community learning places to be alert, responsive and proactive actors in helping society address the myriad social, economic, and environmental issues we face today. *Participation* of all in reaching solutions for all is crucial to address the current global crisis. Committed *Performance*, focused on solutions and based on evidence, best practices, knowledge and respectful of all traditions, needs to be deployed to help steer humanity from the precipice. *Partnership* based on mutual respect, consent and inclusion is essential in order to benefit the whole of society. Lifelong learning is a key catalyst in helping to create the conditions of participation, performance, and partnership that society needs now.

Lifelong learning has to embrace the interrelated triangle of *participation, performance and partnership* as a paradigm influencing universities, organizations, and their partners in the enhancement of lifelong learning regarding quality, access, better forms and content. Additionally, they should adopt effective and innovative modes of delivery reflecting needs of learners, learning communities and society at large. EUCEN's Position Paper on the Sustainable Development Goals emphasised the role of participation, performance, and partnership in shaping lifelong learning to urgently address the UN Agenda 2030 on the SDGs and their 17 goals (Eucen, 2018). Universities are one of the actors involved in this process and expanded dialogue and collaboration are needed to develop learning cities and communities, to form better workplaces and living and sustainable communities. Partnerships, commitments to optimal performance and the participation of the widest possible range of actors must be emphasized and certainly they are the key to success.

Recent trends indicate that stakeholders, such as universities, will have to focus, amongst several issues of adult and lifelong learning, on urban environments to enhance learning communities, on promoting Lifelong Learning

through skills development and effective HRD for the future of work (International Labour Organisation, ILO, 2019) and, likewise, on enhancing sustainable environment and social inclusion through LLL. This analytical work will explore some special aspects of this interrelated matter to underline some key challenges to quality learning and education.

Participation, Performance, and Partnership in Each Country

The following sections include brief summaries and perspectives of Participation, Performance, and Partnership from each of the participants' countries. While we have addressed the 3Ps in slightly different ways, we believe that these differences contribute to an increased understanding of all our contexts.

Ecuador

Article 26 of Ecuador's 2008 Constitution defines education as a right of persons throughout their lives, an unavoidable and mandatory duty of the State, and as a priority area of public policy and investment.

Specifically, the education of young people and adults is offered by the national education system (Ecuador Ministry of Education, n.d.). This so-called extraordinary education is offered to young people and adults over 18 years of age, who have discontinued formal studies for three years.

On the other hand, educators responsible for training young people and adults do not have the specific professional training to serve this population. In Ecuador, the offer of university degrees in the educational field is exclusively focused on children and adolescents. Likewise, the curriculum aimed at young people and adults is the product of a superficial adaptation of the national curriculum focusing on children and adolescents.

More than 5.7 million people in Ecuador are illiterate or have not finished school (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, 2020). Approximately 32% of the population do not know how to read and write and/or have not completed their mandatory education (primary and secondary school). They are faced with a limited government offer of no more than 200,000 vacancies in face-to-face and virtual schooling modalities.

Participation

There are three modalities of formal (school) education of young people and adults: face-to-face (specific to education in prisons), semi-face-to-face, and virtual. The blended modality is the one with the most students – 92% of them. This modality is characterized by offering flexible class schedules and activities in a distance format for autonomous learning.

There are no national data on participation in non-formal education. However, DVV International developed a baseline study of non-formal education that found, inter alia, that 33% of it was extended by international organizations and 30% by local NGOs, and that their main beneficiary groups included peasant and rural communities, farmers, and small producers (Larrea & Crespo, 2022).

Furthermore, the participation of the indigenous population has not increased since there are problems of trust in the government and any outsiders. Aspects of machismo and patriarchy characterizing their culture and customs render the participation of women particularly more complex (Cumes, 2009).

Performance

The education of young people and adults is carried out mainly with the support of the public (75%), state-church (16%), private (7%) and municipal (0.7%) stakeholders. As per municipalities, only Lima offers adult education.

This indicates that the government's central action concerning adult education is in the school environment, to reduce gaps in literacy and encourage completion of mandatory schooling.

One of the most serious shortcomings is the non-existence of data on the current state of education for young people and adults, which is reflected in poor decision-making and recidivism in activities that are not relevant to sustainable development. According to a study carried out by DVV International, teachers across the country generally think that the greatest weakness of youth and adult education arises from the weakness of public policies and specific educational programs for this population (Burgos, 2021).

Partnership

International cooperation in the field of adult education is limited only to support from DVV International, both technically and financially. This gives rise to problems in terms of self-sufficiency because the non-reimbursable funds depend

on third parties and have an expiration date. Likewise, the continuous change of authorities entails a delay in the processes that are not institutionalized, because every time a new official is appointed, the common objectives are reconsidered. In the field of non-formal education, there are other donors who usually support specific aspects (donation of equipment, technical training, etc.) within themes such as sustainable development, gender, good living, human mobility.

Georgia

Examining adult education in terms of the interrelated triangle of participation, performance, and partnership in Georgia provides an almost complete picture of the achievements, challenges, and opportunities in this area. It should be noted that at the institutionalized level, adult education in the country is not perceived as one of the important pillars of education, but rather it is considered as part of vocational education and is mainly presented in the form of short-term vocational training/retraining programs, as well as mechanisms of recognition of non-formal education (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2019, 2021). As for non-formal adult education, it can be said that the main actor in Georgia is DVV International, which has been working in the country for two decades. The activities of the organization are quite diverse and include the establishment of 14 adult/community education centers in nine regions of Georgia (DVV International, 2019).

Participation

In the 2020-2021 period, DVV International and the German Institute of Adult Education (DIE) commissioned CRRC Georgia to carry out a large-scale quantitative study of adult education in the country. According to this, study, only 13% of adults in Georgia are involved in non-formal and 7% in formal education; most of them are relatively young and highly qualified. The research showed that only a small share of the respondents (17%) searched for information about the opportunities of education, i.e. that motivation to participate in education is relatively low among adults. Adults do not see the need to be involved in education. Additionally, their family obligations do not allow them to participate in the process of education. There is a perception among the adult population that it is difficult to learn over the age of 30 and it is already "too late" to acquire new skills and knowledge (DVV International, 2021a).

Performance

It should be noted that, in most cases, Adult/Community Education Centers are the only places for adult education and socialization in their municipality/community. However, since the centers have limited financial resources and are far from big cities, there is a challenge to professionalize, retrain and measure the performance of adult educators. Educators are periodically retrained within various projects and activities; such retraining is, however, not systematic, reducing the effectiveness of individual efforts.

One of the key indicators of performance is the existence of quality assurance mechanisms, the implementation of which is quite difficult and time-consuming for non-formal education provider organizations, although an active process in this direction is pursued by DVV International and the umbrella organization of the centers – the Georgian Adult Education Network. The process takes time and effort, but it is prerequisite for improving performance and delivering quality educational courses.

Systematic studies and student data are also crucial for measuring performance, which is not done at the national level for adult education. In addition to the CRRC Georgia study, it is important that conduct research systematically, to provide us with the opportunity to track the dynamics of adult education in the country.

Partnership

ALE centers have many partners but only DVV International has been consistently extending funding and support. DVV International tries to make the centers self-sufficient, so that they will continue working if it ceases its activities in Georgia. This is why local municipalities should become important partners of the ALE centers and allocate funds in their budgets every year for the financing of these centers. This will be one of the guarantees of the effectiveness and sustainability of adult education initiatives in the country. However, partnerships with local self-governments are not stable at the moment, boiling down only to individual initiatives and random examples of cooperation.

Kyrgyzstan

Adult Education (AE) is referred to as Additional Education (AdE) in the Kyrgyz Law on Education. AdE is implemented in accordance with the National Qualifications System and by entities issued licenses by the Ministry of Education and Science (Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Education, 2019).

Participation

According to Skills Development Fund (2016–2021), 23,358 people were trained, including 780 persons with disabilities, where the 54% of the courses were requested by employers and the request by individual applicants. Course attendance was 97%, employment was 74%, and women accounted for 47.7% of the beneficiaries (Skills Development Fund, n.d.).

In 2017, 7% of the urban population was involved in AdE programs, while in rural areas – only 4%. In 2000, 25 day-time general education and 4 evening schools were operating and attended by 1,851 people. By 2019, the number of evening schools increased to 23 and coverage to more than 6 thousand students (Kyrgyz Republic, 2022). Meanwhile, the level of poverty, early school departure, and unemployment in rural areas indicate that about 80 evening and shift schools should operate in Kyrgyzstan to improve the basic and functional literacy of the population.

Under the 2021–2040 Education Development Strategy, Kyrgyzstan's sustainable development entails building a system of continuous education meeting the new economic and social demands. However, the current problems include systemic problems such as legislative shortcomings, lack of funding, professional management and teaching staff, a state program, mutually recognized standards and quality assessment criteria, and limited access (Kyrgyz Republic, 2022).

Performance

AdE in Kyrgyzstan is performed through a system of formal (primary, secondary, and higher professional education organizations) and non-formal (vocational and civic) education offered by various international and non-government organizations (NGOs) as well as continuing education centers. Informal learning providers operate independently and share financial interests rather than scientific or methodological teaching principles.

Most training providers operate in the areas of language, ICT, technical specialties, tailoring, and accounting. According to the Education Development Strategy (EDS) 2012–2020 in 2012, more than 1000 providers worked in the AE sphere; their number exceeded 2,100 in 2019 (Erasmus, n.d.). The educational programs are developed and approved annually at the request of employers and take into account the demands of regional labor markets. In 2019, 91 licenses were issued to implementers of educational activities (see Table 1) (Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2022):

Table 1. Licenses for Educational Activities

Number	Form	AdE programs	
16	Formal	---	
75	Non-formal	40	Service sector
		19	ICT
		18	Retraining and advanced training of personnel

The Ministry of Labor, Social Security and Migration consults, registers, and provides the officially registered jobseekers with vocational guidance, vocational training, social work, and unemployment subsidies (61.90 USD) through the Skills Development Fund (SDF). The priority sectors of the economy for training include (but are not limited to) the food industry, mining, light industry, the service sector, agriculture, IT, construction, energy, transport, tourism, etc. (Skills Development Fund, n.d.).

Partnership

Since 2006, the AE sector has been coordinated by the Kyrgyz Association for Adult Education (KAAE), initially piloted by DVV International as a project. Twelve training centers in all seven regions of Kyrgyzstan are KAAE members. All programs and modules implemented by the association are developed in close cooperation with employers. KAAE centers so far have developed programs and modules in 30 areas (IT, crafts and applied arts, accounting, the basics of business, personal services: hairdresser, repairmen of various profiles, and florist, etc.) in collaboration with the licensed educational institutions at all professional and additional education levels (DVV International, 2021b).

Nigeria

The Nigerian education system has experienced incremental changes with a view to improving the quality of life of its citizens since the country gained independence in 1960. The first edition of the National Policy on Education was published in 1977, the second in 1981, the third in 1993 was reviewed in 1998, the fourth was published in 2004, the fifth in 2007 and the sixth in 2014. The sixth (valid) edition highlights the objectives of mass literacy, adult and non-formal education as "*all forms of functional education given to youths and adults outside the formal school system, such as functional literacy, remedial and vocational education*" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014*).*

Participation

With regard to participation, the existing programs target:

- Women in traditional household seclusion
- Rural women
- Farmers
- Fishermen/women
- Market vendors (women and men)
- Out-of-school children and youth
- Girls
- Street children with no fixed addresses
- Traditional Quranic school children (Almajiri pupils)
- Adult nomads/migrant people
- Specially-abled children, youths and adults
- Commercial motorcyclists (popularly known as "going", "achaba" or "okada" riders)
- Illiterate workers/semi-skilled workers (roadside mechanics, artisans, etc.)
- Illiterate/semi-skilled junior workers in public and private sectors
- Illiterate inmates or ex-inmates in need of rehabilitative education
- Professionals and other adult citizens.

The National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education Commission (NMEC) (2008) highlights the components of the policy guidelines enabling adults and youths to acquire skills and knowledge in the spirit of lifelong learning and mainstreaming into the formal sector. Research reveals that learning programs have been available and implemented in adult and non-formal education centers across the country. The Government has continued to pursue successive and smooth running of adult education programs in Nigeria. The programs encourage flexibility, inclusiveness and equity, improvement of problem-solving skills, self-reliance, and community participation. Individual participation of the beneficiaries has been qualified as impressive (Obashoro-John & Abdulazeez, 2023). The programs include:

- Basic Literacy provides skills of reading, writing and numeracy in the beneficiary's native language, the language spoken in their community or in English.
- Post-Literacy provides further education through the formal or open and distance learning systems.
- Functional Literacy provides the learners with reading, writing and computation skills tailored to their occupation to boost economic productivity.
- Vocational Education develops occupational skills and provides the individual with relevant skills to live, learn and work as a productive citizen in the community, as well as the global society.

- Continuing Education enables the individual to add skills, knowledge, attitude, and information to acquired education.
- Workers Education facilitates the learning and understanding of workers' responsibilities, rights, and privileges; and facilitates the acquisition of knowledge for maintaining appropriate employer-employee relationships.

Performance

In terms of performance, there are quality assurance programs in place, but actual performance data are not available due to the paucity of funds for activities involving data collection concerning the programs. Based on observations, the planning and implementation of most programs depends on availability of resources and reflects the priorities and interests of the providers, government, and/or donor agencies.

Partnership

Concerning partnership, in Nigeria, there are multiple providers at the local, national, and international levels. These providers are governmental, quasi-governmental and non-governmental actors, with commercial undertakings on the increase. There are apparently no organizations that regulate program offerings. The NMEC is charged with regulation, but its impact is not felt. An observer will notice the lack of, or inadequate cohesion between communities and providers because programs do not readily address the needs of communities. However, the presence of international providers is recognized. Programs coordinated by these partners are properly managed and accounted for where the locally run ones suffer from accountability issues.

Portugal

In Portugal, Adult Education is enshrined in Article 73 of the Constitution, which sets out that "everyone has the right to education and culture" (Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, 2005). Furthermore, the Constitution also explicitly lays down that the State shall "promote the democratisation of education and the other conditions that enable education [...] to contribute to equality of opportunity [...], to social progress and to democratic participation in public life." (Article 73, paragraph 2).

However, the government and its policies are highly influenced by the European Union, and "this influence has become particularly evident since the country became a member of the European Economic Community in 1986" (Guimarães & Lima, 2018, p. 602). This influence is further felt by the fact that "most of the available financial resources come largely from the European Social Fund (at 85%)" (Guimarães & Lima, 2018, p. 617), with this directing the available supply towards a model that "seeks economic modernization and the production of skilled labor, led by professional orientation and the production of human capital" (Guimarães & Lima, 2011, p. 40) and "the acquisition of new knowledge and skills aimed at meeting labor market needs, employability and financial well-being" (Mikulec, 2021, p. 166).

Participation

According to Guimarães and Lima (2018), one of the most visible problems regarding the participation of adults in these initiatives is that there is a "small number of offers available in view of the number of adults who currently intend to attend them" (p. 617); around 50% of the adults, "with generally little schooling and low professional qualifications" (p. 617) have not "participated in education and training activities and do not express any intention of doing so in the future" (p. 617).

Thus, taking into account not only the path that Portugal is taking in terms of performance but also participation in adult education, it can be confirmed that these processes may be contributing to an increasingly utilitarian view of training rather than a view of necessity.

Performance

The Portuguese case is characterized by a systemic problem since there is no actual law that ensures investment into and the development, and consequently the sustainability of Adult Education. The public policies developed over the years have translated into specific programs, such as: New Opportunities or QUALIFICA, programs for the recognition of prior learning. However, despite their success, they suffer from a problem, since they are dependent on the vision and/or ideology of those in power at the material time and risk discontinuation when the government changes.

In addition to this first problem, it is also necessary to highlight the vision of Guimarães and Lima (2018), who refer to the lack of variety of offers for Adult

Education, since the existing ones are all certified, thus giving rise to another problem: the lack of recognition of and support for initiatives in the non-formal or informal sphere since most of them are not properly recognized as relevant to the labor market or the development of competitiveness. Thus, the issue of formalization and respective certification of Adult Education in the Portuguese case and consequently vocational training have stood out as: "an autonomous and parallel path, concentrating growing financial resources, mainly from the European Union, but revealing structural, political and pedagogical incompatibilities with the logic of popular education and basic education that, moreover, it always ignored" (Guimarães & Lima, 2018, p. 612).

Partnerships

The Portuguese case is marked by the lack of partnerships. Since, theoretically, the Portuguese government is the one that provides Adult Education, either through the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training or through the Training Centers of Protocolar Management (jointly managed by the state and civil society organizations) (Guimarães, 2009), it ultimately has not forged many partnerships, other than with the Qualifica Centers and other entities accredited by DGERT – the General Directorate of Employment and Labor Relations.

Portugal Summary

We would thus like to close the Portuguese chapter by reiterating the chronic problem that is evident throughout it section, starting initially from the premise that the Portuguese government is evidently continuing to pursue a path where the market is the only model to be followed by both vocational training and Adult Education (Bernardes, 2008), since it is the only one that can ensure the development of the logic of both formalization and competitiveness, thus promoting a continuous tone in the valorization of those who have the means and seek to qualify instead of promoting actions trying to respond to the needs of their civil society (Guimarães & Lima, 2011). Consequently, the fueled processes may lead to people to stop following or exploring their self-determination and may then start to feel pressured about how they should qualify, believing and blindly following the idea that it is up to them (as individuals) to keep up with the most diverse changes in society, or else be excluded from that society. However, processes based on a market logic may not only segregate society – the Ma-

teus effect (Fernández, 2005) – but also cause a greater devaluation of non-formal education and other forms of adult education.

United States (Extension Education)

Extension education in the United States is structured through the Cooperative Extension System (CES), which is a large network of federal, state, and local government agencies in coordination with specific state universities (Franz & Townson, 2008). The universities involved in the network are part of what is called the "land-grant" university system in which certain state universities have been granted land for research and teaching, but they also must uphold an additional mission of *extension* (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.).

The CES was chosen for the contextual comparison because it has a strong link to global ALE policies and principles.

Participation

One of CES' most appealing attributes is the trust that has been built between the educators and the learning community. An important facet of the CES is that there is an Extension office in each county (municipal governing area) throughout the nation. This local presence promotes trust between the educators and the population because the educators are themselves part of the community and have an emotional stake in the success of CES programs (Brugger & Crimmins, 2015).

Understanding the local context and having roots in the community is extremely valuable for building trust (Brugger & Crimmins, 2015), and this lays the foundation for purposeful and meaningful participation from the learner population.

Performance

In recent years, there have been many competing priorities for government funding. Due to the political climate in the United States, it is imperative that government funded programs can show that they are effective. "In the last decade stakeholders, especially elected officials, have come to expect Extension to articulate how engagement with communities changes economic, environmental, and

social conditions" (Franz, 2014, p. 8). The ability to report on performance is more important than ever.

Elliot-Engel et al. (2020) argues that the study of the economic impact of these programs overly simplifies the situation and does not provide the full picture of the impact of these programs on society. They discuss how CES leverages the Social Return on Investment methodology to measure the impact of their programs (Elliott-Engel et al., 2020). "Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a framework for measuring and accounting for this much broader concept of value; it seeks to reduce inequality and environmental degradation and improve wellbeing by incorporating social, environmental and economic costs and benefits" (Nicholls et al., 2012, p. 8). This holistic approach for measuring value is useful because its principles are complementary to CES and global lifelong learning principles.

Additionally, it is not just the performance that is important, but the way that the performance is communicated to stakeholders is also critical (Elliott-Engel et al., 2020). "... [I]f Extension does a better job of documenting and communicating the impact and relevance of...education programs to funders, then appropriate financial resources will follow" (Elliott-Engel et al., 2020, p. 70).

Partnerships

Partnerships are an important factor in CES's effectiveness. Internal partnerships are already built into the CES network where the federal organization is responsible for strategy and prioritization, the state organization is responsible for research and management, and the local organization is responsible for developing and implementing the educational programs (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d). This kind of partnership can be powerful when all three levels are working together. However, it can also be a challenge because of the multiple layers of government involvement.

It is also important for the local extension offices to partner with other community organizations to strengthen educational programs and to extend their reach. A common scenario occurs where the extension personnel have specific expertise, but another organization has better training facilities and/or outreach to a segment of the local population. Alternatively, the reverse may also be true. Situations arise where the local extension office and another agency are complementary to each other. One example is the *Smart Investing@Your Library* project, a program created in partnership between the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach office (ISUEO), the Iowa Library Services organization, the American Library Association, and the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (Peich & Fletcher, 2015).

Its purpose is to strengthen financial literacy throughout Iowa. Libraries have the resources, outreach, and learning environment, while the ISUEO has the facilitators and subject matter expertise (Peich & Fletcher, 2015).

Similarities and Differences

Understanding the similarities and differences between our countries' adult learning approaches was an important step in our process. However, a full comparative study assessing six countries in one week is very challenging; a detailed analysis was not possible in that timeframe. Nevertheless, we discovered during our discussions, especially when we created the 3P table on the whiteboard, that certain general themes emerged. We chose to use these themes as the basis of our comparison.

Similarities

Similarities can help identify our countries' strengths but can also highlight where there can be improvements. When similarities occur, we can leverage each other's knowledge on successes and failures. We can also identify similar ALE gaps that need to be closed. Several similarities became apparent during our discussions; while the similarities were not necessarily for all six countries at once, some common themes emerged.

Participation

We found that motivational factors and public awareness of programs are themes that affect participation in some of our countries. In some of our situations, the population is not motivated about adult education, likely due to the lack of support and offers. Additionally, people are often unaware of the programs that are available.

Performance

Several of us noted that there is a lack of data and statistics to adequately rate performance in our countries, mainly due to funding deficiencies. Additionally, in several of our countries, there is a stronger emphasis on formal education, leaving

non-formal approaches under-supported, which also means less data is available to determine the impact of these programs.

Partnerships

We recognized the important role(s) that partners play in each of our countries' adult learning infrastructure. We additionally noted that this importance can also lead to dependence (and perhaps over-dependence) upon these partners in several of our countries.

Differences

Understanding the differences between our countries can also be a powerful tool. The differences in approaches can help provide ideas and guidance to each other. We can investigate examples of success (and of failure) from each of our countries and learn from those experiences, and this in turn can assist with helping to close the identified gaps.

Participation

We observed that some of our programs were inclusive of many different populations and provided a wide variety of offers, while other nations' programs only served specific population segments and had limited variety in terms of educational offers. Additionally, the learners' trust of government programs differed in our countries. Some of our countries' programs gained a high level of trust that has been built up over many years, while others were on the lower end of the spectrum, possibly due to mistrust of the government based on historical and current contexts.

Performance

We noted that some of our countries have a sturdy adult learning policy structure, including specific laws, departments, and programs that cover adult learning and education. However, some of our countries do not have any policies (or have very few) that specifically address ALE, which makes it exceedingly difficult to gather data, and thus problematic to determine ALE performance.

Partnerships

Some of our countries have very strong networks with multiple sets of partners, which is an important factor for increasing outreach and for leveraging different sets of skills and expertise. However, some of our countries have no major partnerships, placing a large burden on government programs. Furthermore, some of our nations have only one large partner, which is useful for ALE infrastructure, but can also lead to over-dependence, which is not sustainable in the long term.

Policy, Legislation, and Financing Suggestions

Once we established the 3P comparison framework and discussed the similarities and differences, the big question we asked ourselves was: *How do we apply what we have learned to the topic of policy, legislation, and financing?* It is not a direct leap from one to the other, but we determined that the comparison we conducted between our countries gave us a foundation on which we could start a new conversation. The themes that we discussed earlier helped us think of suggestions that utilize policy, legislation, and financing. Table 2 identifies the key suggestions that we developed, also identifying whether Policy, Legislation, and/or Financing is involved in the explanation.

Table 2. ALE Suggestions involving Legislation, Financing, and Policy

Suggestions	Policy	Legislation	Financing
Monitor funding distribution. *Due to possibility of corruption.*	X		X
Build Trust at a community level. *Trust has been shown to be a key component for ALE participation.*	X		X
Increase awareness about the existence and benefits of ALE programs. *The population is often unaware of the very useful programs they have at their disposal.*	X		X
Focus data collection on all forms of ALE. *In many situations currently, only formal education is the point of focus for data.*	X		
Seek and maintain multiple partnerships to avoid dependencies and strengthen network. *Partners play an important role, but it is important to have a balanced network.*	X		X

Suggestions	Policy	Legislation	Financing
Create a government task force on ALE. *It is important to make ALE more visible to the population and to other parts of the government.*		X	
Raise awareness of the existing legal framework. *In many situations, the valid laws can be utilized to address ALE.*	X	X	X
Develop bottom-up planning policies. *It is important to keep the intended learners in mind when developing ALE programs.*	X		
Promote professionalization and curriculum development. *Professionalization helps make the ALE structure more sustainable over time.*	X		X

Discussion

A reference point presented at the beginning of this article is the *future of education process* which UNESCO organized again, 25 years after the presentation of Learning: the treasure within (Delors et al., 1996) and which now culminated in the publication of *Reimagining our futures together. A new social contract for education* (ICFE, 2021). Both reports are strong on the lifelong learning paradigm, but the Zewde report is much stronger on ALE as a sub-sector of the education system, as an academic discipline with research and training functions, and even as a social movement. Therefore, the need for adequate ALE policies, legislation and financing is posed almost as a prerequisite if promises and pledges have to turn into practical reality. The International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) said the following in its respective statement for the Zewde Commission: "The quality of education and ALE is not possible without high quality staff, complemented by quality infrastructure and programmes" (International Council for Adult Education, 2020, p. 14). That is an indirect call for ALE policy, legislation and financing to ensure quality.

However, the most recent document the ALE community has at hand is the *Marrakech Framework for Action (MFA)* as the outcome document of CONFINTEA VII, the UNESCO-led series of World Conferences on Adult Education (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). Note should be taken of the recommendations and suggestions of the MFA as it has been adopted by UNESCO Member States and has thus acquired a certain normative function. Quite close to the topic of our working group and our findings is paragraph 23:

"Recognizing the increasing diversity of ALE providers resulting from the emergence of complex learning ecosystems, we reiterate the need to strengthen the role of governments in establishing mechanisms and regulations and in allocating financial and human resources to support structures for ALE and to regulate, incentivize, stimulate, coordinate and monitor ALE as a public and common good within strengthened public education provision" (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022, p. 6).

In this respect there are a number of interesting findings from the countries represented in our group and the global ALE discourse and recommendations. Here we concentrate only on the following three:

- A major one is the gap between the right to education which can be found in the constitutions compared to the reality of the presented countries. Education is generally not further regulated in constitutions, but, in most cases, it is related to formal education on the level of formal schooling only. More recent discussions that the right to education for all includes necessarily the right to education for all adults also is less visible (UN, 2016). One can hardly see that the growing debate within ILO and UNESCO circles on the right to lifelong learning or even on the entitlement to lifelong learning (Dunbar, 2019) has spread in countries under observations with respect to policy, legislation and financing processes.
- Recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal education, training and learning are weak and even negligible when it comes to ALE in most countries we looked at. On the other end, there is the perspective towards lifelong learning systems where non-formal ALE acts like a sub-sector just like early childhood, schooling, vocational or higher education, and therefore to function well are in need of governance structure and support. This has been identified and stated in paragraph 25 of the MFA and additionally related to the field of work and the labor market: "[...], we underscore the importance of recognition of prior learning as well as the validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning, wherever appropriate and relevant, to include all sections of the population – particularly disadvantaged and underrepresented groups such as people with disabilities – into open and flexible learning eco-systems [...]. Establishing flexible learning pathways is key to allowing mobility between different programmes, levels of studies and sectors of employment, and for learners to choose their learning trajectories according to their talents and interests, taking advantage of

the opening up of bridges across education sub-sectors and the labour market" (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022, p. 7).

- Actually, all the countries lack systematic and robust data on ALE in its formal, non-formal and informal variations. Knowledge on who participates is limited. Data collection on ALE participants, providers, and programs is not part of the national education statistics. ALE monitoring is hardly implemented. At best, second chance schools for adults are included. It is therefore more than understandable that the MFA includes a separate paragraph 45 requiring "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" (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022, p. 11). This is also a clarion call for partnership at national and global levels.

Of course, neither our working group's findings of country realities nor the recommendations from the global level can be seen as strictly evolving from cause-and-effect relationships. However, they are almost in line with certain plausibility that such advanced governance structures and mechanisms are conducive to higher participation, better performance and stronger partnerships. And as this is an assumption which the group followed, it may only be fair to end with a major finding of a study which looked at ALE within the contexts of CONFINTEA and the Sustainable Development Goals:

> ALE financing should be fully embedded and concretised in policy and legislation and move beyond well-intentioned political commitments. Without an urgent increase in financing, the potential role of ALE to respond to the major crises of our time will go under/unrealised (Benavot et al., 2022, p. 188).

Conclusion

This presentation and discussion can be seen as a meta reflection of participants who took part in an AEA 2023 working group that had a closer look at ALE policy, legislation, and financing. To conduct a comparison between our nations, we focused on *quality* and investigated the question of how quality in ALE could be enhanced by examining the dimensions of *participation*, *performance*, and

partnership. We discussed similarities and differences of these dimensions when employing a comparative lens on policies, legislation, and finances in respect to ALE mechanisms and regulations in their home countries.

It is certainly a success that, even half a year after the on-line preparatory phase and the hybrid version of the on-line and on-campus period, our group stayed together to come up with a joint effort and identify areas and issues that may be of interest and impact beyond the group itself through a final product for a wider readership. The AEA has obviously created and served a strong interest of participants and professors to extend the common work and arrive at a situation which can be called a successful ending.

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