

TOWARDS LIFELONG LEARNING AND LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: RETHINKING THE ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The call for the right to Lifelong Learning marks a remarkable shift from education to Lifelong Learning in global policies (UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, 2022a). For adult learning, it implies a change from provisions organised within adult education sectors to adult learning opportunities available within the framework of Lifelong Learning. This shift has resulted from a transition lasting over more than half a century and has sparked debates among stakeholders regarding the changing power dynamics among them and considerations about the future. Papers in the current issue provide insights regarding this transition and reflect upon the possibilities for stakeholders to play a constructive role in shaping the future of adult learning.

Since the late 1960s, a rise in the establishment of adult education sectors could be seen globally in correspondence with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) arguing for the creation of lifetime educational opportunities for adults. Thus, UNESCO argued for the creation of a fourth sector including *Further and Continuing Education* (after secondary and tertiary education) and *Second Chance Education* (where access to education in prior life was unavailable). The rise peaked in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries until the mid-1990s, after which a decline came and Lifelong Learning policies took over. The rise continued until the 2000s in low and middle-income countries, after which their adult education sectors started declining even though Lifelong Learning policies have not necessarily taken over.

Adult education sectors are experiencing declining attention from policy makers and the impact is visible in terms of a cut down in resources. While the offers with predominant adult literacy components are increasingly being merged with school education, the rest of the offers without an orientation towards employability are being moved under culture policies in most contexts (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2015; Singh et al., 2022). On the other hand, employability-oriented offers are being gradually integrated as adult learning within the larger framework of Lifelong Learning. These changes are evident in the CONFINTEA VII outcome document and its supporting documents that argue for placing

the learner at the centre of the (knowledge) economy and the (knowledge) society to ensure a sustainable future.

Resources play a major role in shaping this transition. To be at the centre of the (knowledge) economy and the (knowledge) society, the learner needs to be either rich or funded by other stakeholders. With the growth of knowledge economies (and hence knowledge societies), the need for constant learning has become the norm. However, it was already evident in the 1970s and 80s that the state was unable to bear all the costs for adult learners over their lifetime and alternative sources for investments in learning were to be explored. The themes regarding the rise and decline of adult education sectors globally, the integration of adult learning into the Lifelong Learning Framework and the role of resources are discussed in the paper *Beyond Education: Mapping Policy Changes From the Sectors of Adult Education to Lifelong Learning Ecosystems (1972–2022)*.

In OECD countries, two models have been most common. While some countries pushed the individual to share the costs with the state and bear the consequences for (not) investing in learning, other OECD countries adopted cost-sharing among stakeholders, including the state, private companies, collective groups (like civil society and social partners), and the individual learners (and their families). The financial crisis of 2007–08 exposed the perils of the former model and most OECD countries now ensure investments in Lifelong Learning through cost-sharing (see also Singh, 2023).

An increasing Matthew Effect among learners (participants vs. non-participants in Lifelong Learning), however, is visible in the OECD countries. Despite financial support, learners are affected by other factors, for instance the unavailability of adequate offers, the freedom to choose learning opportunities, supporting arrangements to induce learning like paid leave, etc. Two papers in this issue, *Challenging the Matthew Effect Through Individual Learning Accounts? Case Studies from Denmark and France* by Shalini Singh and Søren Ehlers, and *Promoting Equal Access in German Adult Education: Navigating Resource Mobilisation and the Commitment to “Leaving No One Behind”* by Sophie Lächer, raise this concern. While in Denmark, social partners are a leading force in developing policies and allocating resources, private companies take the lead in Germany. Nevertheless, the consequences are similar in both cases. More investments are made into the high-skilled, younger learners who comprise the workforce, whereas the low-skilled, older adults (over 40) and those who are not a part of the mainstream workforce are often left behind. Empirics shows that this is a common trend in OECD countries. The OECD argues for the development of more flexible systems or rather *ecosystems* to attract stakeholders, increase investments and enhance participation in learning. Mapping the transition in the OECD countries, at least in terms of policy, shows a move towards such learning *ecosystems* where learning opportunities could be collectively created in sustainable ways.

Thus, no matter how unrealistic the call for the *right to Lifelong Learning for All* at Marakech may sound right now, it appears to project a vision which is accommodating,

sustainable, organic, and filled with possibilities for learners. The fourth paper, *“Leaving No One Behind” As a New Motto for the UN System: Its Impact on Portuguese Adult Education Policy* by Rosanna Barros, depicts a situation where the transition is evident in policy, but implementation is a challenge. The Portuguese case also showcases how the European Union (EU) is supporting its member states in providing opportunities for Lifelong Learning and trying to facilitate what UNESCO is also asking for. However, the supporting documents of CONFINTEA VII show that the EU is far ahead in facilitating the transition towards Lifelong Learning Ecosystems even though the focus until now has been on formal aspects or Lifelong Learning Systems only (UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, 2022b). The difference and its implications are discussed in the paper *Beyond Education: Mapping Policy Changes From the Sectors of Adult Education to Lifelong Learning Ecosystems (1972–2022)*.

The term Lifelong Learning is often mentioned in the policy discourse of various countries due to the increasing influence of international organisations, but the transition to Lifelong Learning is still far from being a reality in most low and middle-income countries (Singh, 2023). These contexts are characterised by economies *without* high-end knowledge business (unlike the OECD countries), abundant cheap labour, and traditional education markets with massive profits, because of which Lifelong Learning is not a pressing need. Stakeholders who control education policies in these contexts do not benefit from a transition to Lifelong Learning and disadvantaged adult learners often remain at the receiving end (Singh et al., forthcoming).

With similar nomenclature, policy makers keep introducing the same old provisions and maintain the *status quo*. For instance, in India, the education system predominated by crony capitalism (nexus between the political elite and big business) has ensured that the provisions should *appear* up-to-date but do not alter the *status quo* (Singh, 2024a). Therefore, a program predominantly meant for literacy (one of the most basic aspects of adult education) and basic skills has been renamed as ULLAS, *Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society*. Lifelong Learning has been thereby introduced as a component of Second Chance education (Adult Education; Government of India, 2024). Similar examples can be cited from all over the world where a certain terminology is adopted but actual changes cannot be identified.

To understand what is meant by the transition as per the UNESCO documents, it is relevant to compare the difference between the *Sectorial Approach to Education (and the Adult Education Sector)* and *LLL Ecosystems (and ALE within the Framework of LLL)*. Table 1 provides a snapshot of this comparison using some basic questions viz. who, what, when, where, why, and how, instrumental in the transition. The comparison is based on four UNESCO/UIIL policy documents used in the paper *Beyond Education: Mapping Policy Changes from the Sectors of Adult Education to Lifelong Learning Ecosystems (1972–2022)* as they capture some of the most relevant turning points in the transition. To highlight the differences, some basic characteristics of the *ideal type* of Education Systems and Lifelong Learning Ecosystems are discussed. While transitions take place, some of the

Table 1

Comparison between the Sectorial Approach to Education (and the Adult Education (AE) Sector) and Lifelong Learning (LLL) Ecosystems (and Adult Learning and Education (ALE) within the Framework of LLL)

Criteria	Sectorial Approach to Education and the AE Sector (Figure 3)	LLL Ecosystems and ALE within the Framework of LLL (Figure 4)
Who?	Who sets the agenda?	Choices for the learner are available and the learner may choose what is preferable and how it is preferable
	Primary stakeholders	Learners and providers of learning possibilities, facilitators in learning
	Who is the learner?	A self-directed learner able to navigate the Learning Ecosystem according to their own needs, preferences, and capabilities
	Focus of policies	Learning (learner-oriented with the learner as the centre for most considerations)
	Nature of learning outcomes	Learning outcomes based on learning parameters, e.g. average hours of learning required
	Point of departure for offers	Point of departure for education (autonomy in learning = learning techniques and other considerations related to learning)
	Type of offers	Individual offers, not necessarily institutionalised and demand-based
	Approach	Bottom-up (decisions are made primarily based on learners' needs and preferences regarding what and how to learn and there are specific mechanisms to do so, e.g. Individual Learning Accounts and Recognition of Prior Learning)
	Qualification frameworks	Single/integrated (implies that the learning outcomes of one level are qualifying inputs for the next level, e.g. in the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, learning outcomes are connected at each level)

Criteria	When?	Sectorial Approach to Education and the AE Sector (Figure 3)	LLL Ecosystems and ALE within the Framework of LLL (Figure 4)
Where?	Age-specificity	Opportunities for certain types of learning during certain stages of life	Opportunities for all types of learning are always available during the lifetime
	Settings (formal, non-formal and informal)	Formal, non-formal and informal settings are relevant for valuing learning and for access to further pathways for learning and work	Settings are not relevant; recognition of prior learning provides pathways for further learning and work
	Disciplines	Disciplines are relevant for access to further pathways of learning, e.g. one can only study a discipline if they have followed certain disciplinary pathways	Disciplines are not relevant
	Contexts (socio-economic background, prior investment in learners, etc.)	Context/background of the learner could be education-system, working and non-working adults, retired or post-work-life adults; opportunities and resources are available accordingly. Usually restricted and narrow because the providers of resources have a great deal of control (e.g. collective resources provided by the state or employer resources)	Context is not important and opportunities as well as resources are independent of the adult learner's background. Comparatively free from contextual constraints because possibilities are spread across life and across settings. Also, control over possibilities and opportunities is limited in an ecosystem
Why?	Policy objectives (What are the resources spent on and why?)	Instrumental view of education (e.g. emancipation, human capital approach, pleasure, etc.) and education as an end in itself	Instrumental view of learning (for better earnings, better life conditions) and learning as an end in itself
	Methods/process/didactics	Teaching methods: pedagogy and andragogy	Learning techniques
How?	Criteria for ensuring access	Enrolments and teaching inputs	Participation in learning and performance evaluation
	Integration across policy areas	Limited, embedded in education policy and the education system	High, spread across policy areas to promote learning everywhere
	Measurement	Diversified because learning outcomes are specific to each sector, not depending on other sectors	Non-diversified and linked through learning outcomes

characteristics change gradually. Thus, the more the characteristics of Lifelong Learning Ecosystems are reflected in policies, the greater the move towards them.

Most countries have education ministries that determine education policies to support their vision of the economy and society. The state, even though it officially sets the agenda for education, might be influenced by various stakeholders including the market, social partners and/or civil society. Usually, the provisions are formulated and regulated by the state-market *duet* or a state-market-social partners/civil society *triad* wherever the social partners are well organised (for instance, in Denmark; as shown by Singh and Ehlers in this issue) and civil society is strong (for instance, in Belgium; Conter, 2024).

Since the focus of education policies is *what to teach* (content and curricula), *how to teach* (andragogy and didactics), and *whom to teach* (target groups), the primary stakeholders include teachers, education providers (for instance, universities), and students (and their families). In adult education sectors, teachers may define themselves as educators, animators, facilitators and so on because the nature of adult learners is different from that of children and adolescents. Adult learners are characterised as students or *recipients* of education, and provisions aim at teaching and evaluating them. The learning outcomes depend on parameters such as enrolment, the number of teacher-student contact hours, evaluation is based much on teacher discretion and so on. Thus, sector-based education systems are predominantly teaching-oriented (Ehlers, 2019). Learners have a negligible say in the decision-making process, even though they might have an indirect influence over the offers they pay for.

On the other hand, the OECD argues for the development of learner-oriented policies that place the learners at the centre of all provisions. The learners are free to choose what and how they want to learn. The provisions do not necessarily need to be controlled by top-down national visions of development¹ focused on employability and/or the socio-cultural-political agendas of governments. Several EU countries appear to be moving towards policies termed as national, but in fact most adult learning policies are increasingly aligning with EU policies. The EU closely monitors and shapes these policies through instruments like the *Education and Training Monitors* and the *European Semester Recommendations* (Singh, 2024b). The paper “*Leaving No One Behind*” *As a New Motto for the UN System: Its Impact on Portuguese Adult Education Policy* highlights the influence the EU has had on the Portuguese policy for adult learning.

Instead of controlling the contents, processes, and outcomes of provisions, the state and other stakeholders are supposed to facilitate the learners in becoming *self-directed* (OECD, 2019). Further, conducive environments should be provided so that learners could navigate the learning environments according to their needs and preferences. Investments, therefore, need to be channelled into developing the capabilities required for self-directed learning, removing barriers to participation, and facilitating the availability

1 The term “development” has not been included in the final declaration at Marrakech which aims at creating a *sustainable future*.

of diverse offers. Learning outcomes are based on learning parameters such as the number of average hours required to learn something, for instance, in the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in EU countries.

Such provisions are possible in *ecosystems* where there is room for stakeholders to invest and grow organically and instead of a traditional *duet* or *triad* (common in education systems), could be represented by a *quad* (see Figures 1 and 2). Unlike the top-down approach in education systems where learners do not have a say in decision-making, Lifelong Learning Ecosystems offer bottom-up possibilities for learners. It is unrealistic to assume that learners will sit at the negotiation table and decide, but several mechanisms to include their voices at the decision-making level are already being implemented.

Figure 1

The structure of policy-making stakeholders in Education Systems

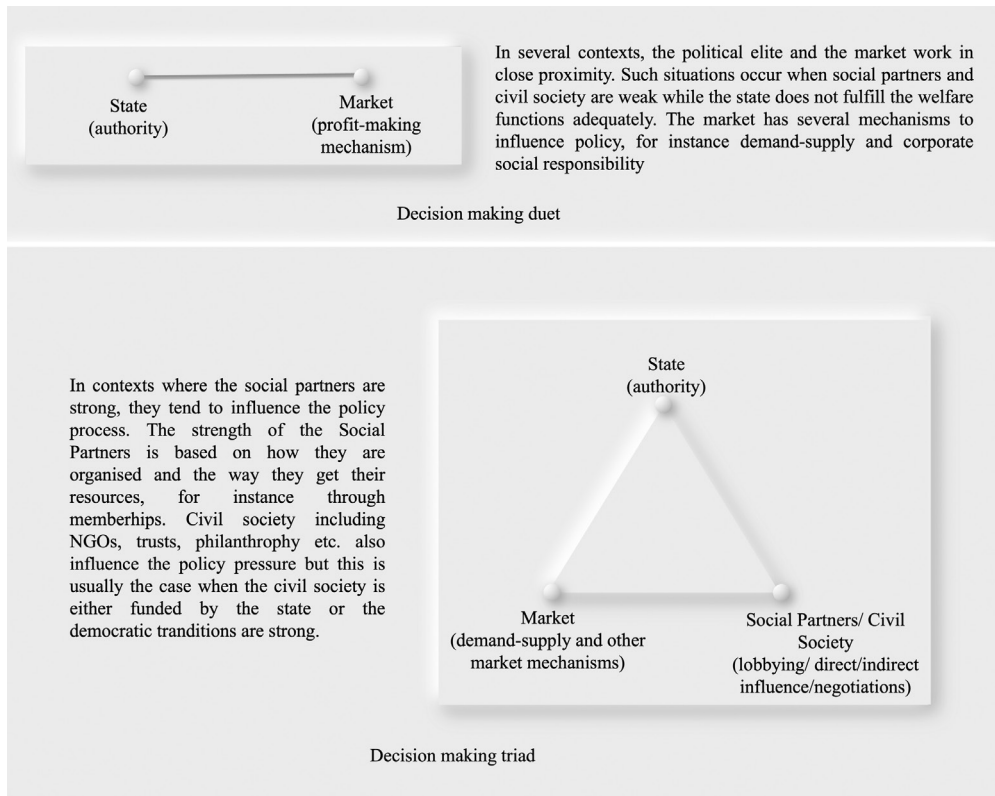
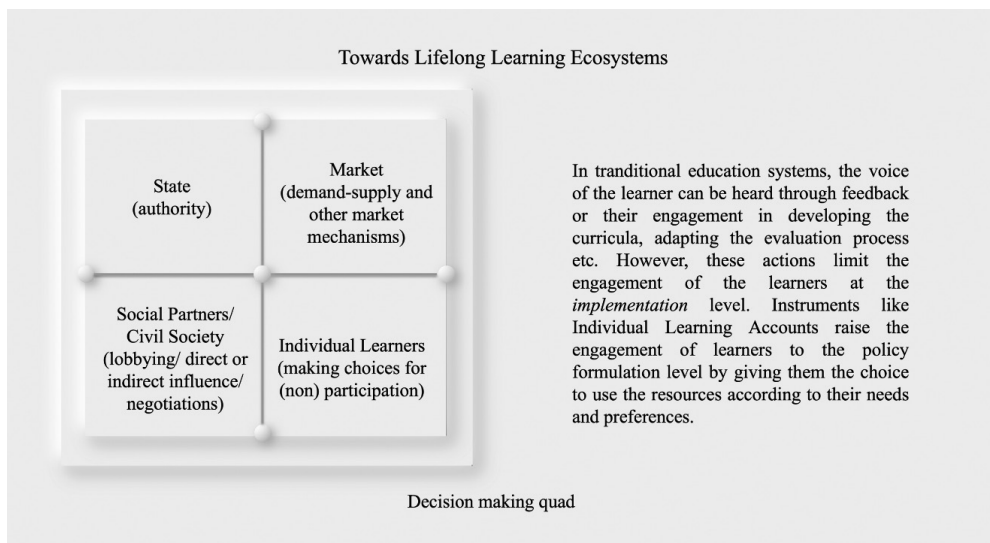


Figure 2

The structure of policy-making stakeholders in Lifelong Learning Ecosystems



The paper *Challenging the Matthew Effect Through Individual Learning Accounts? Case Studies from Denmark and France* argues for developing instruments like *Individual Learning Accounts* that give considerable direct and indirect control to learners for influencing the nature and volume of offers they receive. While other stakeholders provide resources to the learners, the learners have the choice to use these resources according to their needs and preferences. The model is successful in France, is being tested in the Czech Republic (see Kopecký et al., 2024), and is recommended by the EU for implementation in its member states.

However, *Individual Learning Accounts* and other such instruments are context-specific, and their success depends on investments being made in the learners in the initial period of their lives. This is also why Lifelong Learning Ecosystems need to be designed so that learning opportunities are integrated in a manner that allows learning experiences to support further learning. Some examples of this are initiatives like Recognition of Prior Learning, creating pathways for interdisciplinary learning across qualification frameworks, open access to research, use of digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence for self-directed learning, and promoting offers with transversal skills.

As elaborated in the paper *Beyond Education: Mapping Policy Changes from the Sectors of Adult Education to Systems of Lifelong Learning (1972–2022)*, education systems are ideally characterised by offers organised in sectors which are collective, institutionalised (accredited and recognised by certain authorities) and supply-based (aligned with national visions; Ehlers, 2019). A move towards individual (especially using digitalisation and artificial intelligence), not necessarily institutionalised (e.g. offers through YouTube), and

demand-based (depending upon what learners want) offers, not organised according to sector-specific outcomes is, however, visible in several contexts. Lifelong Learning Eco-systems are supposed to provide flexible pathways for learners to build their learning profiles by moving amid offers and choosing what appears relevant to them across disciplines, settings (formal, non-formal and informal), space (i.e. different education systems) and time (at any age). Accordingly, offers are integrated *vertically* (throughout life) as well as *horizontally* (across disciplines and settings). Moreover, valuing prior formal, non-formal and especially informal learning (for instance, through Recognition of Prior Learning) is already being implemented and measurements are non-diversified, implying that learning outcomes are not specific to (sub)sectors of education (Singh, 2020). They are rather linked to ensure that learning outcomes from one offer might act as a learning outcome for another opportunity.

The often-fragmented qualification frameworks with limited flexibility to move between offers in most education systems do not fulfil this condition. In some contexts, more than one qualification framework exists (for instance, in India), which implies that in the process of ensuring the autonomy of sector-specific stakeholders, learning pathways often lead to dead ends or scarce opportunities for further learning. Learning outcomes from one (sub)sector may not necessarily be relevant for the learning outcomes of other (sub)sectors, which reflects the lack of an integrated framework. Integrated frameworks can in fact save resources by avoiding repetition and dead ends and create synergy by enriching the learning profile of the learner (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3

The basic structure of a standard Education System with Sectors of Education having autonomy in varying degrees (some variations might occur depending on the context)

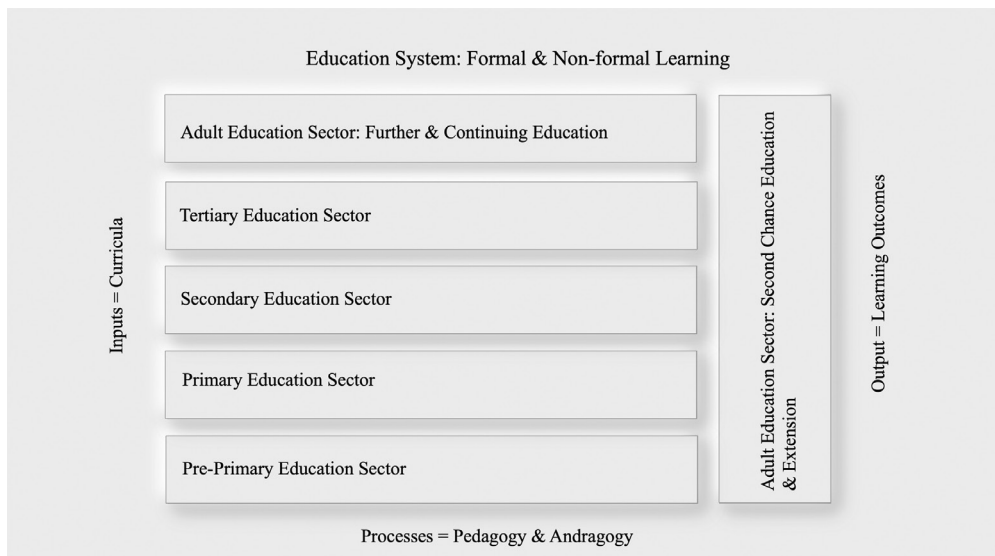
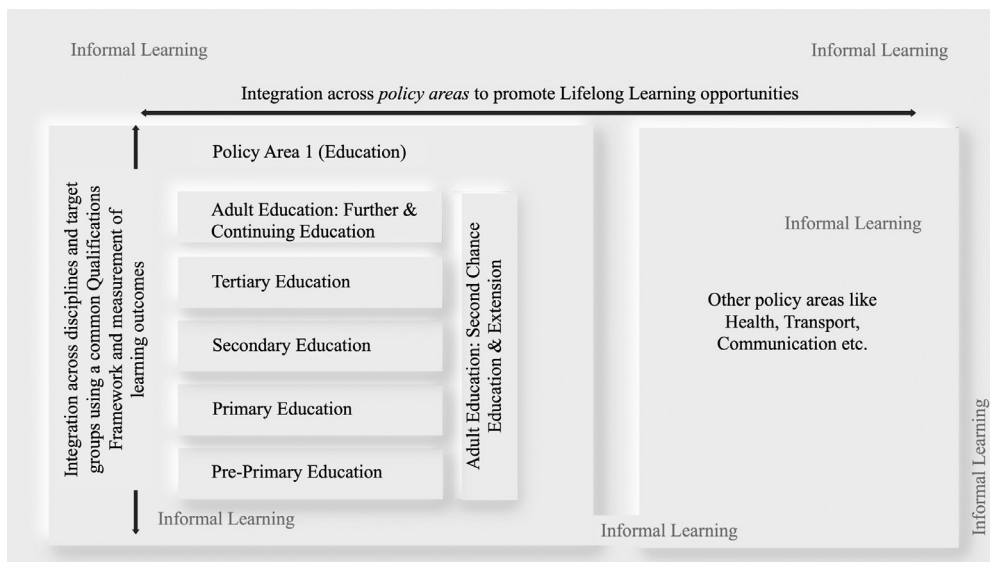


Figure 4
Evolving Lifelong Learning Ecosystems



Including all types of provisions across disciplines, settings, and ages, aligning the measurement of their outcomes accordingly, and keeping learning as the point of departure for all activity within a Lifelong Learning Framework is the core idea behind Lifelong Learning Ecosystems that promise to provide a central place for the learner.

It is imperative to note that while education systems epitomise an instrumental view of education, implying the purpose of education is emancipation, human capital, pleasure and the like, Lifelong Learning Ecosystems represent an instrumental view of learning. For instance, learning for employability, a better life, pleasure and so on. It is difficult to claim that Lifelong Learning Ecosystems are not instrumental, but they certainly provide more room for learners because the control of the state is decreasing. It can be argued that the market could get a free hand in such a situation and especially the disadvantaged learners would be increasingly left behind. This is what needs to be shaped with instruments like Individual Learning Accounts and adult educators have a major role to play in this through research (for instance, through the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults – ESREA), practice (for instance, through the German Adult Education Association – DVV), and direct/indirect influence (for instance, through the International Council for Adult Education – ICAE).

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