2nd GLOBAL REPORT ON ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION

Rethinking Literacy

UNESCO

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Adult learning is no longer on the margins of educational theory and practice, but has gained new impetus within lifelong learning as a paradigm for inclusion and empowerment. To some extent, this process reflects theoretical and socio-political evolution: access to diverse kinds of learning is a universal right and a democratic entitlement for people of all ages, whatever their personal, social and economic circumstances. However, the drivers of contemporary change – globalisation, digitalisation, mobility and ecology – are at least as forceful as democratic principles, and demand the redefinition and redesign of education in all its dimensions.

The first *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (UIL, 2010) showed that while educational policymakers in many countries had begun to grasp the importance of adult learning and its core positioning within lifelong learning, the adult education sector was poorly resourced and posed challenges for effective governance. Moreover, inequalities of access, participation and outcome persist everywhere in the world.

The *Belém Framework for Action* (UIL, 2010a) gave UIL a mandate to prepare GRALE reports at regular intervals. This second *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* concludes that thus far – on the basis of the information included in the national progress reports – not much has changed since CONFINTEA VI in 2009. The key themes and core messages of the *Belém Framework* have, however, found their way into national debates and, in some cases, have permeated policy reform processes. At the same time, UNESCO's EFA (Education for All) targets and the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are not prominent in the

national progress reports that inform this second Global Report. This was to be expected, since their potential for rekindling policy action in the adult education sector has not been realised to the extent initially hoped. International policy goals give direction to UNESCO Member States. One important lesson for the post-2015 development agenda is to ensure that adult learning within lifelong learning is accorded much greater priority, backed up with commitments open to mutual monitoring.

The second edition of GRALE has placed literacy at the forefront for several reasons. Firstly, far too many people – and in particular, women of all ages – continue to live with poor literacy skills. 774 million people cannot read and write, and 123 million of these are 15–24-year-olds; that is, young people and young adults. Given the imprecise nature of the data on which these figures are based, it is almost certainly the case that poor literacy skills – including in the most highly developed countries – are much more widespread than reported (UIS, 2013; European Commission, 2012).

Secondly, the consequences of poor literacy skills are becoming more significant than ever before for life chances and quality of life. Digital technologies increasingly pervade everyday life and demand more complex literacy skills. Literacy frames personal and social development potential, and the quality of the resourcing environment in which people live determines their access to those literacies.

Thirdly, literacy does not simply denote reading and writing competence levels, but a range of competences grounded in multiple forms and processes of human and social communication. These are acquired, used and renewed – and on

occasion lost – throughout life and across all spheres of life. Literacy is therefore the unassailable foundation of all education and learning, and it is continuously relevant for all people, in all phases of life and in all regions of the world.

For all of the above reasons, this report situates literacy at the centre of lifelong learning, and in so doing enjoins policymakers and practitioners to reconsider how to conceptualise literacy, how to measure literacy competences more accurately and usefully, and how to provide a sustainable palette of targeted literacy programmes for highly diverse populations of (potential) learners. As the EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2005) noted, the past six decades have seen multiple phases of literacy definition in the international policy world. The *Belém Framework for Action* (UIL, 2010a) seeks to anchor the concept of **literacy as a continuum** in Member States' policy and action. The national progress reports reflect a diverse range of approaches, including those that were initially adopted in the 1960s.

If literacy is to take its rightful integral place in the implementation of lifelong learning for all, policy and action must be underpinned and guided by the state of the art – conceptually, methodologically and practically. The focus should be on the creation of rich literate environments and learning societies, rather than simply on reducing illiteracy per se. Such environments and societies can best emerge when literacies and learning are embedded in broad-based educational perspectives with life-wide reach – encompassing work-related and work-based learning, community education, social and political participation, family life, health and environmental action.

The complexities that emerge in producing valid evidence about levels and dimensions of literacy offer a prime example of the measurement and monitoring challenges faced by the adult education sector as a whole. Many Member States continue to use simplistic, unreliable and proxy indicators to estimate literacy rates. They are largely aware of their limitations, but are no less aware of how difficult it is to generate better-quality data and

how constrained, in the majority of cases, their resources are. Meanwhile, international surveys – such as the Adult Literacy and Life-skills Survey (ALL), the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) together with LAMP (Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme and the on-going RAMAA (Action research on measuring literacy programme participants' learning outcomes) – have spearheaded the development of richer sets of indicators and opportunities for inter-country comparisons. However, all those involved in these initiatives are aware of how much more development work still lies ahead. For example, cultural and linguistic diversity pose significant challenges to designing and operationalizing effective measures and fieldwork methods, most of all in poor and isolated communities. And at the same time, it is important to bear in mind that evidence can take a variety of forms – that is, quantitative surveys and testing instruments do not exhaust the options. Understanding the ways in which literacy is developed, sustained and used demands a range of complementary evidence sources, including ethnographies, biographical methods and action research studies. These approaches may well be more viable and more fruitful in contexts whose physical, economic and cultural parameters are not easily conducive to conducting conventional inquiries.

Key messages on literacy:

- Substantial progress has been made towards meeting Education for All Goal 4 (50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults), but many disadvantaged individuals and groups are still left behind.

- Literacy is a continuum, not a dichotomy. Learning and using literacy skills is a continuous, context-bound process that takes place both within and outside explicitly educational settings and throughout life. This understanding implies concerted development of cross-sectoral policy.

- Literacy policy must focus on raising and developing basic skills as a whole and include creating rich literate environments and learning societies. The lens of lifelong and life-wide learning is the most promising perspective for addressing the literacy challenge.

- Literacy rates are largely based on simplistic and unreliable data and methods. Direct testing is gaining momentum, but is complex and expensive. To move forward, a dual approach is needed: developing culturally appropriate measurement tools and methods, and improving the quality of conventional, cost-effective self-reporting surveys.

- The generation and exchange of reliable and comparable research is indispensable for informed policymaking at all levels, including the international level. Consensus-building in the community of Member States to identify policy-relevant research needs and demands would bring benefits for all. It would be appropriate for UNESCO to moderate this process.

This second GRALE report focuses on the issue of literacy, but also monitors progress made since 2009 in the five fields of policy and action specified in the *Belém Framework for Action*. The conclusions reached for each field, together with the key messages and recommendations arising from the analysis, are summarised below.

Policy

The *Belém Framework* stipulated that policies and legislative measures for adult education need to be **comprehensive, inclusive and integrated within a lifelong and life-wide learning perspective**, based on sector-wide and inter-sectoral approaches, covering and linking all components of learning and education.

Although a significant majority of reporting countries have formulated adult education (92%), adult literacy (88%) or lifelong learning (87%) policies, success in translating policy into action has been limited. The reports show that little has changed on the ground since the first Global Report: broader aims are usually mentioned in policy 'headlines', but in reality human resources development in the service of labour markets dominates thematic priorities and implementation measures. In some regions, lifelong learning is now firmly situated in mainstream national and transnational policy dialogue and discourse, both in its own right and as a means to achieve other social and economic goals. But there is a danger that lifelong learning is being 'undersold' as the latest policy panacea, both for countering growing social and economic divisions within and between countries, and for meeting the challenges of social and technological change everywhere in the world.

The critical importance of learning and education in youth and adulthood continues to be unevenly recognised in policy-making around the globe. Definitions remain confused and cloudy, while non-formal and informal learning modalities and pathways remain at the margins of recognition and reward. It may still be too early to see tangible progress that can be clearly attributed to following-up on the *Belém Framework*. Yet the general tenor of the reports suggests that post-CONFINTEA VI policy debates and dialogues have absorbed and are incrementally transmitting the Belém messages into on-going policy formulation and implementation processes.

It is crucial that adult learning and education and lifelong learning are given prominence in the post-2015 strategic agenda's priorities, with human capability

enhancement balancing the weight of economic rationales. The increasing acceptance and application of the principle of lifelong learning in framing education agendas is a positive trend, demonstrating a growing awareness of the integrated nature of different formats and modalities of education.

Key messages on policy:

- Adult learning and education is integral to lifelong and life-wide learning as a framework for fostering and sustaining the development of active democratic citizenship. Policy visions have still to unfold their potential with respect to youth and adults beyond formal systems and pedagogies.

- Four years after CONFINTEA VI is too soon to assess tangible impact, yet the national progress reports clearly show that debates and dialogues have taken up the key themes and are incrementally relaying core messages into on-going policy formulation and implementation processes.

- The gaps between policy and research discourses remain wide, and constructing more robust bridges between the two is a key task for international organisations and agencies. The Asia-Europe Meeting's Lifelong Learning Hub (ASEM-LLL) may be seen as an example of good practice.

Governance

Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government services is a current priority for many countries. Decentralisation to regional and local levels is the main instrument to achieve these ends, but both funding and capacity building are pre-requisites for success. Decentralisation processes are differentially effective for several kinds of reasons, but capacity (or its relative lack), together with coherent monitoring and evaluation, are key framing factors. This is especially so in the field of adult education, characterised by the distribution of formal and practical responsibilities across a wide spectrum of actors and instances. Strong coordination capacity is therefore of the essence. But in many countries, the further the view shifts 'downstream', the more good governance for capacity building tends to dwindle; and capacity building is a long-term investment.

The *Belém Framework for Action* adopted **two key principles** for the promotion of good governance: **effective, transparent, accountable and equitable implementation** of policy and programmes; and **stakeholder representation and participation** to guarantee responsiveness to learners' needs. It also recommended three modes of applying these principles: creating and maintaining mechanisms for participation; undertaking capacity-building measures to support informed involvement; and promoting inter-sectoral and inter-ministerial cooperation.

The national progress reports show an overall shift towards mixed governance models between state and NGO actors. National ministries of education are usually prominent, but responsibility is shared in a variety of ways, even more so for adult literacy than for adult education as a whole. More than 80% of reporting countries confirm that they have national coordinating entities for adult education, and even more for adult literacy. These are generally located within the national ministry of education.

The involvement of all relevant actors remains a key requirement for good governance in adult education, and mixed governance models require highly effective

consultation and coordination mechanisms and practices. There is no single solution, but a shared goal: assuring a critical mass of trained professionals and well-networked providers who together ensure effective policy action at all levels, especially regional and local.

Key messages on governance:

- Decentralisation to regional and local levels has become a key instrument, but its effective implementation demands both adequate funding and comprehensive capacity building. Strong coordination capacity is of the essence.

- The involvement of all relevant actors remains a key requirement for good governance in adult education, and mixed governance models require highly effective consultation and coordination mechanisms and practices.

- Adult learning and education is an inherently complex sector of policy and action, yet capacity-building activities and coordination mechanisms remain at an early stage of development. UNESCO could act as a clearing-house for the exchange of good practice between Member States.

Financing

The first challenge for analysing the financing of adult education is that accurate assessments of both investment needs and investment realities are very difficult to make. Adult learning and education is linked to a range of social and economic policy goals, so is also funded in a myriad of direct and indirect ways across ministries and between public and private sources. Underreporting of investment is therefore inevitable.

Many Member States were unable to provide accurate information on financing in their national progress reports. Given the diversity of adult education programmes and the variety of financial channels, it will take much effort before reliable and valid data on the costs of adult education become available at national and international levels. Robust empirical research and data collection tools on the financing of adult education are still needed, not only to deepen the understanding of the cost benefits from investment in the field, but also to mobilise more financial resources.

The country reports suggest three current trends in public financing of adult learning and education: rising attention to equity and adoption of pro-poor policies; greater efficiency in the direct public funding of institutions; and decentralisation of funding and delivery to regional and local levels. Countries report the application of various innovative and effective funding mechanisms, including cost-sharing partnerships, tax breaks for educational spending, subsidised or paid educational leave, education/training vouchers, and interest-free/low-interest personal loans.

Because the concrete benefits of learning can be difficult to measure and demonstrate, those making the case for increased funding have adopted mechanisms such as Social Return on Investment (SROI), which assigns monetary values to the benefits of adult education, and to the costs it saves in other sectors, such as health, law and order or social welfare. Nonetheless, global investment in adult education remains low, despite declarations of nominal funding

increases from 2009 to 2010 by more than half of reporting countries. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that lack of political will plays a significant role.

Quality adult education is costly, and methods need to be found by which governments, employers, civil society, international development partners and individuals contribute in different ways to guaranteeing adequate resources. It is evident that low-income countries cannot mobilise the necessary resources by themselves. In order to close the resource gap for adult education in the poorest countries and among the poorest segments of the population, richer countries need to fulfil their pledges.

Key messages on financing:

- Notwithstanding the difficulties Member States encounter in securing accurate and valid data, the reality of under-investment in the adult education sector is undeniable. Investment levels do not meet international targets and fall far short of meeting demand.

- Diversity is an inherent characteristic of the adult education sector, so mobilising resources requires multi-faceted and innovative strategies. Member State governments and their agencies at national, regional and local levels must find new ways to mobilise financial resources that can make a difference by assuring quality adult education provision.

- Basic information about financing systems and practices is still lacking, whilst the demonstration of the concrete and wider benefits of learning remains elusive. Member States, in cooperation with UNESCO, would benefit from a robust knowledge base upon which to shape effective and efficient financing models for adult learning and education.

Participation

While many Member States have reported that they provide for a wide range of adult education programmes beyond literacy, there are no comparative global data showing the numbers and backgrounds of learners these programmes reach. The national progress reports indicate the existence of varying models, some of which show potential for large-scale replication. As this information covers different types of learning and different measuring methods, the data could be useful in tracking progress over time but not in comparing across countries.

The evidence regarding barriers to participation indicates that low education attainment and low income negatively affect participation. As national and international studies have repeatedly and consistently shown, those who have more get more. In order to motivate learners, whatever their age and stage of life, it is important first to understand the different barriers to inclusion and participation, and which strategies have been successful in overcoming such barriers.

This may be facilitated by the sharing of experience between countries and within regions through structured programmes (for example, the EU's Grundtvig programme in Europe and the Ibero-American Plan for Youth and Adult Literacy and Basic Education). This is also an effective strategy for promoting participation of excluded groups in adult education through the provision of target-specific funding in many countries. Another platform for disseminating good practices in local learning provision is the network of Community Learning Centres in Asia. These centres bring adult learning and adult literacy activities closer to the target groups and thereby reduce situational barriers to learning.

Overall, the national progress reports indicate that exclusion of adult learners is connected to the availability of information on excluded groups and their demands for learning. Furthermore, a low level of information flow among those with low access to education seems to hinder inclusion. The challenge for a majority of Member States remains to reach those

who are difficult to reach. All told, there is a huge amount to be done by governments and adult educators alike if fair and equal access is to be extended to all and the barriers to participation are to be broken down.

Key messages on participation:

- It is essential for countries to design effective monitoring frameworks that track the depth and breadth of participation in adult education and learning. These should include the full range of providers and be compatible with global or regional frameworks.

- International comparative studies are needed to inform countries where they stand in relation to other countries facing similar issues. To promote and support this process, UNESCO could help to build statistical and analytical capacity.

- It is important to study carefully the factors that inhibit or prevent participation. The elimination of such hurdles is a multi-layered process, which cannot be tackled in a single step. An initial step would be to identify and map the barriers for each target group, for example through small sample surveys.

Quality

The *Belém Framework for Action* defines quality as **holistic, multidimensional and as a continuous cycle of action and reflection**. Many countries are now developing national qualifications frameworks to introduce equivalences between formal, non-formal and informal learning, and to align literacy and adult basic education to vocational qualifications. These could contribute to equity and effectiveness in adult learning and education.

At the same time, the shift to learning outcomes-based assessment and certification can contribute to relevance and efficiency, since it permits diversification of provision and pathways. Eighty-seven of 127 countries (68%) now have a policy framework for recognising, validating and accrediting non-formal and informal learning (though this is less prevalent in Asia-Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean).

The principal focus of the quality criteria currently in place is on curricula, but attention is quite evenly divided in all regions and between all quality dimensions (curricula, learning materials, training, methods, and assessment of outcomes). The assessment of learning outcomes is less prominent in Africa, whereas curricula and assessment are particularly to the forefront in Europe and North America.

The professional quality of adult learning and education teachers/trainers also plays a significant role in quality policies. In the majority of countries, adult education practitioners' training, qualifications, professional status, pay and working conditions are lower than those of teachers/trainers in other sectors. The adult education sector remains generally poorly regulated in relation to professionalization, though some countries have established national competency standards, including with legal frameworks and institutional accreditation. Formalised professionalization can be a contentious issue, especially in the case of adult literacy practitioners, where some argue (with research-based support) that personal and social qualities are pedagogically more effective than formal training and qualifications.

Key messages on quality:

- Recent years have seen the continuing development of national qualification frameworks (NQFs) in Member States, which in turn have prompted the development of mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and competence (RVA). VET systems face the challenge of accommodating a broader range of vocationally relevant adult learning, merging general with vocational education, and formal with non-formal and informal learning modalities. These developments are part of the redesign of education and training systems and practices in conformity with the paradigm shift towards lifelong and life-wide learning.

- Professionalisation and regulation, together with research, monitoring and evaluation, still require concerted action. Professionalisation and regulation require judicious calibration in the interests of affirmative consolidation of both experienced and novice practitioners.

- Many Member States have developed and apply quality criteria, yet with wide variance in their conceptualisations, definitions and uses of quality indicators. UNESCO could act as a global clearing-house for an integrated and critically reflective debate with respect to the benefits of heterogeneities for quality in adult learning and education.

In conclusion, today's societies are heterogeneous and multi-faceted. Their potential – at both individual and community levels – can best flourish in rich and open environments that foster learning and development throughout life. Such environments include all actors – not only those who design, fund and manage educational systems and learning opportunities of all kinds, but also active learning citizens and critically reflective educational professionals and facilitators. Decentralised, mixed governance models are an effective way to ensure the sustainable development of these kinds of social and educational environments. They provide the foundation for assuring quality in lifelong and life-wide learning processes and outcomes.

Contemporary societies and their educational needs and demands set challenging agendas for governments in the decades to come, and there can be little doubt that cross-sectoral policymaking that rests on a robust evidence base will prove to be an essential component for addressing these agendas successfully.

Finally, the global landscape of adult learning and education depicted in the first GRALE finds its confirmation in this second report: a sector characterised by distinctive guiding principles and diverse practices that faces demanding challenges in a persistently difficult resourcing environment, but which is determined to improve the quality and effectiveness of its contribution to cultural, economic and social development for all.

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