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## **ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ADULT EDUCATION: DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter provides a critical overview of the contribution of economics to research and policy on adult education. It discusses three distinct political economy perspectives and links these to the shifting policy agenda related to adult education at the OECD over the last five decades. This is done to reveal the link between different political economy perspectives and the implications for analytical as well as political perspectives when approaching the study and policy of adult education. Some implications and challenges for research on adult education are discussed.

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines some of the impacts that economic-related thinking can be seen to have had on the field of adult education over the last 50 years, and discusses some of the developments and challenges to the application of the economic approach to adult education. Aspects of the human capital framework emerging out of the field of *economics of education* are outlined, but emphasis is placed on a number of diffuse yet related developments in and outside the academy. This is done so as to reveal the growing relevance and importance of economic-related thinking to issues of adult education, but also to distinguish between narrow *economic* approaches embedded within the now dominant neoclassical framework underpinning the economics discipline and often associated with the *economics of education*, and approaches embedded within the broader social sciences that can be associated with the *political economy of education*. Relevant developments within the academy have emerged often in response to the narrowness of the *economic* approach implied by the neoclassical paradigm in combination with broader and evolving socio-political tensions affecting not only research, but also policy and practice and their relationship to research. At the same time, there is little doubt that a number of policy and practice related developments have also emerged to contribute to and reinforce narrow economic applications such as the growing implementation of economic principles to the administration of public services (i.e. *new public management*), the growth of the measurement industry in education, and a narrowing view of *rigour* or *what counts* as research that is relevant for policy and practice in education (Cook & Gorard, 2007). Revolving around the rising economic significance of adult education, these dynamics have and continue to influence agenda setting in adult education as well as in an interactive way the understandings and conceptualizations of adult and lifelong learning among various actors.

## A critical overview of the contribution of the *economics of education* to research and policy on adult education

### The foundations for economists' interest in (adult) education

As a consequence of rising standards of living after the Second World War, there was growing social demand for education in the 1950s and 1960s in the Western world which coincided with an increased awareness of the potential of technological and hence strategic implications of investment in education (e.g. the launch of the first orbital satellite (Sputnik) by the Soviet Union in 1957). These factors led to an intensification of the education-economic problem leading to at least two effects that are worthwhile noting. First, it brought education to the forefront of the policy agenda in many countries. Already by the 1960s, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) joined the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in information gathering activities regarding education at an international level, for policy purposes (Papadopolous, 1994; Postlethwaite, 1994). Second, it brought the question of how educational resources could be effectively managed to meet growing demand and strategic objectives. Sowing the seeds for the growth of the measurement industry in education, economists began searching for measures of educational productivity so as to enable analyses that would inform on the most effective and efficient ways to manage education. Achievement studies led by psychometricians were particularly promising because these provided reliable and comparative measures – albeit ones for a small but highly important set of foundational skills. For example, the first International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies emerged already in the early 1960s (Husén, 1967). Both of these efforts strengthened the relationship between policy (including agenda setting) and research in education, and increased the demand for economically useful research and information. In brief, these are effectively the foundations which brought economists into a field that had been traditionally dominated by educationalists with humanistic and progressive ideals.

### The relevance of the human capital framework for adult education

The introduction of the human capital framework around the late 1950s, early 1960s provided a particularly powerful rationale for reconciling the growing social and strategic demand for education with the notion of education as a public good (Schultz, 1961). The underlying theory emphasized the investment value of education by making explicit links between the role that education plays in raising the quality of labour and in turn productivity growth. It provided a robust framework for both the scientific and policy analysis of the links between education, learning and economic outcomes. Tens of thousands of analyses within this framework have been conducted since the 1960s which provide supporting evidence for the potentially positive economic impacts of (adult) education at both the micro and macro levels. Theoretical reasoning within this framework which is well supported by empirical research suggests that education and learning boost skills, and in turn employability, productivity, wages and growth.

The human capital framework is highly relevant for adult education exerting both positive and negative affects depending on whose perspective. Many economists have applied the human capital framework to *training* for work related purposes (i.e. the *economics of training*) including from a lifecycle perspective (e.g. Mincer, 1997; Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006). Less is known about the economic effects of adult education broadly defined since the majority of these studies focus on *training* which typically comprises adult education related activities that are specifically for work-related

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purposes. There is ample evidence supporting the idea that *training* can have positive impacts on a wide range of labour market outcomes, including the enhancement of employment and career prospects; performance and earnings; job satisfaction and commitment to work; and, innovative capacities (Desjardins, 2016).

## So what's wrong with the human capital framework?

The *economics of education* as a field of *academic* research is well accepted, but it often involves a highly circumscribed application of economic-related thinking to issues relevant to the field of (adult) education which may have had and continues to have negative consequences for adult education. While the framework provides an appealing rationale for the economic value of education and training that continues to influence the expansion of education and training systems to this day, a number of substantive concerns arise when the framework is applied within the prevailing conventions of the economics discipline.

First, the theoretical framing of applications can be problematic. For example, the microeconomic foundations of the neoclassical economic framework are firmly embedded within most applications of the human capital framework, and perhaps more importantly often drive the interpretation of results. These include core assumptions about human behaviour such as *rational choice* and *non-satiation* (i.e. greed) which are convenient for mathematical modelling in theoretical terms and statistical application but do not do justice to wider understandings of human and social behaviour in the social sciences. While these assumptions are helpful for analytical purposes, the framing itself tends to drive the (uncritical) interpretation of results. Perhaps the most remarkable omissions in the theory of human behaviour embedded within the framework are the existence of social and power relations, and the importance of societal norms and aspirations (beyond monetary gain) in driving behaviour. By implication, institutions are typically treated as exogenous, and in interpretations of results these are often seen as problematic because they distort the (assumed) principles by which humans behave which are embedded in the core foundations of the framework. The level of critical, political or ideological awareness on which this is premised is unclear, especially among the mass of students being trained within this framework around the world. In fact, claims to value-neutrality or the notion that normative aspects have no place in an empirically driven science such as economics can still be heard in the halls of economics departments around the world. In any case, it should be no surprise that the only institution that tends to be advocated by neoclassical economists is the *market*, since this is typically the only one being modelled within the framework and consistent with the highly circumscribed theory of behaviour embedded within it.

Second, and related to the first point, interpretations of micro-level statistical results generated within the framework often underplay the aggregation problem inherent to all micro level research in the social sciences. While there is evidence related to the impact of human capital investment at both the micro and macro levels, micro-level statistical results are often (implicitly) interpreted as having overall macro level consequences for welfare, but this is not necessarily the case (even where causality is claimed) since such results may simply be symptomatic of status or positional effects and/or redistributive effects with no clear indication of impact on net welfare effects, especially if the latter were to include distributional aspects. Such theoretical concerns are thus crucial but nevertheless often remain overlooked because they are outside the scope of the framework. For example, omitting key contextual information or understandings such as those relating to social and power relations, institutions, norms etc., may thus inadvertently lead to highly circumscribed interpretations of attempts at *rigorous* research. Moreover, analyses from this perspective can be problematic if too much emphasis

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is placed on decontextualized interpretations of statistical results. It is worthwhile to note that *contextualization* itself is part of the research process and predicated on analytical methods such as good qualitative accounts of contexts as well as logical and structural forms of comparisons but not all social scientists steeped with mathematical and statistical skills are trained to do careful contextualization's of both the framing of the analysis and the interpretation of results.

Third, the conceptualization of adult education itself and what is considered to count as training may detract or thwart attention from some types of adult education. What counts as training and how this relates to adult education, is generally not well defined. To be sure, economists rarely use the term adult education but instead focus on *training* or variants (professional, vocational, technical education) directly related to work-related purposes. Popular or liberal forms of adult education related to personal (leisure) or social (democratic) related reasons may thus get short shrift, even if different types of adult education may be directly or indirectly linked to the development of skills relevant to the economy and motivations for participation in job or non-job related adult education are not neatly distinguishable (Rubenson, 1999). The linkages among the different types of learning for different purposes in relation to different types of skill development and overall economic and social functioning are complex, which is at odds with the principle of parsimoniousness upheld as an ideal by economists.

Empirically, it is unclear to what extent the policy attention that economists have brought to adult education via the human capital approach has been entirely detrimental to non-job related adult education. According to data made available by the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in the 1990s and the Survey of Adult Skills (also known as the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies – PIAAC) in 2012, adult education for non-job related reasons has not necessarily declined substantially. Instead, adult education for work related reasons or of the kind that is employer supported has grown dramatically over the last 20+ years (Desjardins, 2017). IALS and PIAAC were large scale international comparative surveys focusing on adult skills and adult learning (see OECD/HRDC, 1997; OECD, 2013). The net result is an enormous growth in resources now being devoted to adult education related activity. It should therefore be no surprise that economists are increasingly involved in matters related to adult education.

It is important to note however that while adult education for non-job related reasons has not necessarily declined substantially, public support and perception (including among policy makers) of such opportunities may have changed considerably. As mentioned, the human capital framework had a powerful impact in the 1960s in helping to reconcile growing demand for education more generally with justification of public support, but over time analyses within this approach led to a debate on the public vs private benefits of education. Since the 1980s, analyses (e.g. Psacharopolous, 1981, 1985; 2006, Psacharopolous and Patrinos, 2004) following the human capital approach have been used to justify or place pressure on the public good dimension of different types and levels of education. Combined with the movement to intensify the implementation of economic principles in the administration of public services since the 1980s (i.e. *new public management*), these kind of analyses continue to place significant pressure on public support for the development, provision and governance of adult education.

### **A wider social science approach: the political economy of adult education**

Since the 1980s, the mainstream of the economics discipline has been dominated by the neoclassical school of thinking which as mentioned does not take into account the dynamics of 'power relations' or concepts such as 'social transformation vs social reproduction', diversity or democracy. Consequently,

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economists following this approach can be criticized for being slow or inhibited in adapting the logic of governance embedded in modernization theory to post-structural developments since the 1970s. Instead, it might be argued that the tendency within the discipline has been to adapt the modernization framework by intensifying the same logic but wresting the focus away from the state and politics toward a narrow market based view of the world (i.e. neoliberalism). This could be construed as a highly self-referential ‘power grab’ under the guise of science (for example see the arguments presented in Friedman, 2009) – perhaps unwittingly and/or misguided given the disciplines narrow training in the wider social sciences. For example, social theory, philosophy of science or the critical approach to research do not necessarily feature high on the agenda of university economics departments. Notwithstanding, wider societal developments have clearly transformed the social sciences and should (not without challenge) eventually increasingly impact how economists frame the application of economic principles to the research, policy and practice of (adult) education. Loosely speaking, the economics discipline is closely aligned with the problem solving approach to education policy research (Desjardins and Rubenson, 2009). In de-emphasizing the relevance of norms in the neoclassical approach, the problem is usually taken as a given and it is only the solution that is of relevance. This may help to explain the uncritical acceptance and reproduction of the neoclassical framework within mainstream economics.

In contrast, when using a critical approach which is more closely aligned with the *political economy of education*, the problem itself and the solution are made to be problematic (see Cox, 1996). The *political economy of education* approach seeks to fill some of the gap left over by the *economics of education* approach as described above. Here the focus remains on economic-related thinking involving (adult) education but emphasis is placed on social theory, institutional aspects, norms and socio-political positions as well as the critical approach to research. The approach draws on economic sociology and new institutionalism (Swedberg, 1996; Crouch & Streeck, 1997). It leads to an effective critique of the human capital framework as well as analytical and policy perspectives that diverge substantially from the neoclassical approach. See Brown et al. (2001) for an analysis on the basis of this framework which outlines seven key aspects related to policy implications for skill formation (which very much relate to adult education) that diverge from human capital models.

## Shifts in the OECD policy agenda on adult education and the role of alternative political economy perspectives

The following outlines the shift in the OECD policy agenda related to adult education over the last five decades. The shifts are linked to three distinct political economies that have manifested themselves over the years. The analysis suggests that there is a close link between the political economy perspective adopted and the diverging analytical as well as political perspectives that can ensue when approaching the study and policy of adult education.

### Recurrent education: Modernization-Keynesian framework

The *modernist* socio-political position which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War was dominant up until the 1960s in Western industrialised countries. Within this framework, the government is seen to play an important role in steering, managing and minimizing conflict. The political economy perspective reflected in so called *Keynesianism* which had emerged in the 1930s provided the primary legitimation for state intervention to steer, and even accelerate development toward *modernity*. The latter reflected ideals associated with equilibrium and harmony as well as *advanced industrialisation* and *being developed*. By the 1960s, growing complexity in the modernized world led to

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the rise of alternative socio-political positions (e.g. neo-marxism). The modernist position unravelled precisely due to emerging conflicts in social, economic and cultural realms, which were inconsistent with the prior modernist arrangements to manage such conflicts. Partly in recognition of growing complexity and the need for citizens to cope with modernization, organizations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe had by the 1960s recognized the necessity to spread educational opportunities over a lifetime. The Council of Europe elaborated the concept of *education permanente* or *lifelong education*. UNESCO elaborated the concept of *lifelong learning*. The Edgar Faure Commission under the banner of UNESCO released a report in 1972 entitled *Learning to Be* which provided a coherent philosophy of *lifelong learning* for the first time, which brought key aspects of adult education to the fore of the policy agenda (Hasan, 1996).

Around this time, the OECD introduced an alternative or planning strategy to implement lifelong education which emphasized the economic role of education, namely *recurrent education*. Aside from being seen as a strategy to cope with the changing requirements of rapidly changing economies, it could be seen as a way to moderate the social demand for education by providing an alternative to the ever lengthening period of continuing education for youth and to mitigate the financial consequences of the explosion of enrolment in upper secondary and higher education (Tuijnman, 1996). Fostering a more equitable distribution of educational resources especially between younger and older generations was very much within the picture. The idea had been first introduced by Olof Palme, at the time Swedish Minister of Education at a conference of European Ministers of Education held at Versailles in 1968, as a means to promote social democracy (Kallen, 1979). *Lifelong learning* and *education permanente* emphasized holistic and humanistic ideals, whereas the OECD emphasized the economic dimension, especially the link between education and work (Rubenson, 2008). While the 1972 UNESCO report had formulated a set of principles and recommendations, it provided no clear indications as to the structure of the future lifelong education system. The OECD, however, elaborated extensively in terms of its implications for the labour market and coherent strategies, both education and non-educational strategies (financing policies, educational leave and measures on the labour market and inside industry) to be adopted in order to implement objectives. The essence of the recurrent education was to distribute education over the lifespan of the individual in a recurring way, in alternation with other activities, principally with work, but also with leisure and retirement. Students were to be able to take up and leave study throughout their lives. The idea was that education should be lifelong and not just *front loaded*. However, by calling for a restructuring of education and training systems to integrate post-compulsory education and adult education the concept differed little from the formal education system (Tuijnman, 1996).

Recurrent education was never implemented as a consistent strategy but some of the changes advocated, did become part of education policy and practices, in a piecemeal fashion (Tuijnman, 1996). For example, post-compulsory education structures became more flexible in many countries, effectively increasing the participations rates of adults in formal education (Desjardins and Lee, 2016). However, adult education continued to remain a discrete and financially weak sector. Aside from a slowing of the economy and rise of unemployment in mid 1970s, the failure of the strategy was due to a number of factors. First, it required a major transformation of formal education system for which the sector was not ready. Second, it required a coordinated approach with other policies – labour, employment, social welfare, and income transfer policies but legislation was insufficient. Most of all, it introduced a financial burden that was not adequately worked out, and one that ultimately relied exclusively on the public purse. In other words, the strategy was conceived from a political economy perspective where the government bore the primary role for financing and implementing nearly all of the governance and provision associated with adult education including for the labour market.

## Lifelong learning: Neoclassical framework

By the 1990s, the importance of the human factor as being fundamental to economic activity, competitiveness and social advance re-emerged but within a very different political economy perspective. Arising out of the 1980s the dominant political economy was now *neoliberalism* which prevails to this day. In contrast to *Keynesianism*, neoliberalism rejects the notion that the state has a strong role to play in steering development or in balancing social interests such as engaging in large scale redistribution to alleviate the ills of capital accumulation (e.g. Davies & Bansel, 2007; Gewirtz, 2002; Hursh, 2005; Pierson, 1994). Instead, emphasis is placed on the market to steer development, so much so as to encompass the steering of political and social activity since these are inseparable from economic activity. Within this framework, inequality is viewed as an individual responsibility, not the consequence of structural relations in society or a public responsibility that should be alleviated or merit any negotiated political settlement as in the case of Keynesianism. Social disadvantage can be seen as a source of incentive to be a more productive member of society and individuals should be left to fend for themselves. Much of these ideas are based on the neoclassical framework already discussed including a range of economic theories and empirical studies in the fields of international trade, growth, labour market and industrial organisation, which emphasize parsimony and quantifiability under an appealing guise of scientific rigour and validity. Consequently, neoliberal ideas have had an impact across a broad range of policy thinking, including adult education. In particular, market liberalization heightens the significance of (adult) education as an economic policy tool because education and training are seen to play a crucial role in maintaining national competitiveness. This is well reflected in the OECDs discourse of knowledge-based economies starting in the late 1980s (OECD, 1989) and lifelong learning for all (OECD, 1996) in the 1990s, which effectively subsumed the discourses of risk, competition and the consequent need to continually invest in learning throughout the lifespan so as to keep up.

The lifelong learning for all agenda at the OECD in the 1990s placed emphasis on the intrinsic as opposed to instrumental value of education (OECD, 1996). It also emphasized universal access to learning opportunities over the entire lifespan. However, learning opportunities are considerably broadened to include all kinds of learning in diverse settings, emphasizing particularly the recognition and importance of non-formal learning. Recurrent education was an alternative strategy to the lengthening of front loaded schooling, so that opportunities are spread out over the lifespan. In contrast, lifelong learning was one of continuity, a seamless view of learning, combining the non-formal and informal in a variety of settings, at home, at work, and in the community. It also emphasized core concepts such as learning to learn and other characteristics required for subsequent learning, including motivation and capacity such as foundation skills. The agenda can be seen to have promoted a master concept for thinking about the whole of the education and training system even if can be surmised that a core purpose of the agenda was to draw attention to the importance of adult education. It was thus holistic, but perhaps so much so as to be too diffuse to remain on the OECD agenda. The term remains ever present in some countries' discourse and certainly the European Commission's policies surrounding education but even the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg now emphasizes the concept of *adult learning and education* in order to ensure focus on adult education (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2012).

There are a number of key distinctions between lifelong learning and recurrent education agendas at the OECD which reveal key differences in the shift of key political economy perspectives. First, the concept of *individual demand* was emphasized over the concept of *social demand*. This reflected an increased reliance on the responsibilities of employers and individual learners for adult education which is consistent with the rise of new public management concepts such as *accountability* and *choice*. Second, and related to the first point, there is a major difference in the role of the government. In



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recurrent education, formal education was emphasized and thus a larger role was assigned for organizing, managing and financing the system to the government. In sharp contrast, the OECD lifelong learning agenda retreats from this, and emphasizes shared responsibility. Moreover, the idea of alternating work with formal education on a cyclical basis was replaced by strategies to promote *learning while working* and *working while learning*.

### Skills strategy: New political economy of skills framework

Following the *lifelong learning for all* agenda and the International Adult Literacy Survey of the 1990s (OECD/HRDC, 1997), the OECD embarked on a thematic review of adult learning systems in 17 countries between 1998-2002 which resulted in number of useful publications on adult education (e.g. OECD 2003; 2005). By the late 2000s, however, very few project or staff working at the OECD were addressing adult education issues. In the lead up to the OECD skills strategy published in 2012, the agenda could be construed as having shifted nearly exclusively to *skills* (OECD, 2012). The latter however can be seen to have largely incorporated the *new political economy of skills* approach by shifting policy concern to the demand for skills rather than simply the supply of skills.

Already by the early 1990s, the shift of OECD economies toward information and knowledge based economies brought attention to basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. Much of the policy focus tended to be on the supply of basic skills needed for the new economy, and on the negative consequences of deficits for individual workers and economies, which provided a boost to adult education of a certain kind, namely basic skills training or compensatory adult education. However, growth in demand for skills was taken for granted or as an inevitable consequence of development in market economies. Thus little attention was directed to actual skill demand and the possible incentives in place in a neoliberal economy for priced-based competition strategies to prevail which might undermine investment in skill development (Finegold and Soskice, 1988). Moreover, less thought was given to how a lack of use and low levels of demand for these skills is linked to skill loss (Krahn & Lowe, 1998; Reder, 2009) and by extension restricts large groups from receiving adult education. A related but opposing debate on the idea of *over-education* and *over-skilling* emerged in mid to late 2000s suggesting that market imbalances for skill may be driven by over-investment in education (Desjardins, 2014).

Some of this short sightedness related to the debate on over-education may be partly attributed to the dominance of the neoclassical and hence human capital framework, which tends to emphasize a supply side view of the labour market. This approach can impact the formulation of analytical as well as policy perspectives on adult education in a number of ways. Foremost it portrays skill imbalances as a phenomenon driven by supply side conditions. For example, it highlights inadequacies of education and training systems as a reason for imbalances in the labour market (Lorenz et al., 2016). The key policy implication is to promote the reduction of qualifications, which can negatively impact access by adults to formal education (due to perceived over-education). Another implication is to ensure quality of education and training systems and their responsiveness to labour market needs. Better guidance and information are also seen as helpful for mitigating the incidence of skill imbalance.

In contrast, the *new political economy of skills* framework leads to the formulation of an alternative analytical perspective which can lead to very different policy implications. The approach emphasizes the demand side view of the labour market and thus portrays skill imbalances as a phenomenon driven by demand side conditions (i.e. incentives of employers, and the technology and organizational models employer use). For example, it highlights the possible inadequacies of labour market practices as a reason for imbalances. The key policy implication is to promote the adjustment of work and organisational practices in ways that optimize skill use and skill gain, and avoids skill loss over time; as well as foster employer training including for the development of generic skills. A key point from this

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perspective is that economies can remain competitive without upgrading skills, because the market does not necessarily provide the incentives consistent with a high-skills strategy or high-skills equilibrium (Finegold and Soskice, 1988; Brown et al. 2001; Mason 2011; Buchanan et al. 2010; Evesson et al. 2009; Froy, Giguère & Hofer 2009). Perhaps most importantly, it highlights that politics and aspirations that surround institutions involved in skill formation systems matter and accordingly that routes to high skill formation and the policies that may be required vary according to context.

## Some implications and challenges for research on adult education

### The diversification of research and perspectives

It is now well recognized that the production of knowledge is no longer the privy of universities. Research is now widely undertaken directly by various stakeholders with varied interests including public and private. Therefore, there are now clear distinctions emerging among different types of researchers: *academic* researchers, *policy* researchers, *technical* researchers, etc. How these researchers relate with one another and how they relate to knowledge production such as disciplinary bodies of knowledge differ widely across disciplines and fields. In education including within a lifelong perspective, this has become particularly diffuse.

Notwithstanding, it is arguably policy thinking grounded in the 'logic' of what mainstream economics is now built on (i.e. the neoclassical framework), and thus *policy* research of a technical kind, that has had most impact on the field of adult education over the last 50 years, rather than the discipline itself or economic-related thinking in adult education, although the two are related. *Academic economists of education* are crucial in this regard, since more generally the *academy* continues to play a central role in defining, delimiting and reproducing the *accepted* body of knowledge surrounding different disciplines. Yet, academic economists arguably do not do justice to economic-related thinking that has emerged outside of the neoclassical model. This is particularly important because of the continuing dominance of *neoliberalism*. Combined with the rising significance of adult education as an economic policy tool, economists continue to gain power at the highest levels of governance which may increasingly impact policies on (adult) education.

It is accordingly important to foster diversity in research and perspectives that frame research and interpret results. The danger is to favour particular kinds of research and to set standards on research from a particular discipline or approach. Thus fostering a balanced evidence base is crucial. Yet in many policy and research circles micro-level statistical research and experimental methods are seen as synonymous with 'evidence', and as the gold standard for informing policy making so as to achieve the ideal of evidence based policy making. While results generated from these types of studies can be helpful for informing the debate they often produce a fragmented and incomplete picture; circumstances that are not helpful for making informed decisions. Given the difficulty in measuring or quantifying many of the relevant factors needed to carefully generate and interpret results relevant for policy and practice, other analytical methods are necessary. Moreover, interpretation of results from such studies need to carefully contextualized and often depend on good qualitative accounts as well as logical and structural forms of comparisons.

Moreover, as ambitions to predicate policies on research and evidence continue to pervade, it is particularly important to foster critical awareness among knowledge producers. That is, for knowledge producers to have clear understanding of the political and social basis and implications of their research.

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Subscribing to ideas of value-neutrality in social science may be problematic since social scientists' choices may affect the lives of millions all the while claiming neutrality.

### Reframing perspectives on the role of adult education in society

Despite the shortcomings of mainstream economic approaches described above, economic-related thinking remains crucially important to the field of adult education. In the face of scarcity and complexity, decisions need to be made and resources need to be managed – circumstances which the so called economic sciences claim special competencies. Indeed, education including the lifelong aspect has increasingly become an economic policy tool. Therefore, how economists frame questions surrounding the worthiness or purpose of adult education has arguably become more important than ever. Viewing adult education activity as worthwhile (i.e. Investment), whether it is for reproductive or transformative purposes, individual agency or social and institutional reform remains crucial and needs to be developed further.

To be sure, economic applicability and investment is not just limited to productivity effects or the economy. Attempts to cast aside social and power relations, norms, aspirations, or to approach economics as something distinct from social and political activity is too circumscribed and can lead to highly perverse or misguided analytical and policy perspectives. It is ill advised to attempt to separate the economic realm from political and social realms. As a concrete example even at the micro level, the importance or applicability of economic-related thinking to the study of incentives among individuals and employers in relation to motivation is important regardless of purpose (i.e. job, personal, civic; productivity vs democracy; reproductive vs transformative; innovation). The same warning could be voiced regarding the approach by non-economists and their perspective on economics, namely that adult education is not just for humanistic purposes. Adult education is closely related to economic, social and human functioning – these are fundamentally linked and cannot be neatly distinguished. Adult education plays a central role in society by enabling complex communication and governance across distinct but interdependent sub-systems and should be framed and approached as such rather than in piecemeal fashion. A broader social science approach is thus particularly vital at the macro and policy level for framing the discourse surrounding the formation and reformation of public policy and institutional frameworks relevant to adult learning in ways that are consistent with societal objectives, including (sustainable) economic development, and not least the distribution of welfare in ways that are consistent with our concern for the human and social condition.

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