

University Adult Education Related to Practice

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Abstract

The relation between universities and practice is complicated and sensible. This is true also for the discipline of adult education as science and as practice of universities as teaching organisations. There is a wide range of tasks for adult education as scientific discipline to support and develop the practice of adults learning, but also a challenge to contribute with appropriate offers in this field. In this article there are given some examples of concrete relations between universities and practice regarding adult education and learning. Coming from these examples there are pointed out the main obstacles as well as the prior benefits of such activities. The article is based on the discussions in a panel during the conference on lifelong learning at the university of Iasi in April 2014. The author was chairing this section.

Key words: lifelong learning, adult education

The following article gives some conclusions of discussions at the international conference on adult education at universities, which took place in Iasi (Romania) in April 2014. A special panel dealt with examples of activities of universities towards adults, based on examples from different countries there were discussed benefits and obstacles – for the universities and for the adult learners. In his conclusion the author points out the importance of adult education activities at universities, but also the difficulties of realization. Nevertheless he is encouraging further approaches in all disciplines, a wide range of universities and in many countries.

Introduction

One of the most difficult and sensible questions in the educational system is the relation of universities to the fields of practice. Or, to put it even more general: to society. On the one hand universities need a certain distance to practical problems and proceedings to carry out scientific work; on the other hand they need to be acknowledged by the society, which is financing them, and they need to “produce” qualifications, which are useful for the survival of a human, healthy and wealthy community. Scientific research as well as scientific education underlies thus always the critical reflection, which practical aspects are in which way regulated and integrated in the academic world.

Theoretically spoken: the society separated science and scientific education from all other fields of society in a special organization to allow a critical, reflective and innovative perspective on all the relevant matters, social and natural ones. This has of course the danger of an “ivory tower”, which is far away from the needs and the questions of society, which exists on its own with a special internal dynamic. This can be partly observed in developed countries with a long academic history and a traditional understanding of scientific production. Normally this does not only mean internal rules and self awareness, but also problems of communication with the world outside. It became even more difficult with the development of scientific knowledge, which is nowadays extremely specialized and

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transferable to the public. Initiatives and programs such as “PUS” (Public Understanding of science) and “PUSH” (Public Understanding of Science and Humanities) tried in the last decades to close the gap.

But it is not only a problem of language and understanding. The problems of the relation between universities and society, between theory and practice vary according to the discipline, the status of science in the society and the difference of research and education. A university professor for political science, who is involved in concrete activities of a political party, underlies always questions of scientific independence. The same is true for a professor for chemistry, who is partly working for a big enterprise in chemical business. But quite often the line is difficult to draw. A close relation to practice is needed for research as well as for a curriculum, which fits to the needs of the labor market.

In this generalized picture of the relation between universities and society plays adult education, since some decades in many countries also an academic discipline, a threefold role:

- (1) As an academic discipline adult education has a field of practice, for which it gives a scientific background, contributes to its development and qualifies professionals – more or less comparable to the role of pedagogy for schools. And like pedagogy in general it is an applied science, which aims to the improvement of this field of practice.
- (2) As educational activity it is one of the main tasks of universities (beside research and academic qualification), in many European countries legally fixed for the universities. That means, that all disciplines have to contribute to public education by offering courses and measures for adults, mainly of course for the academic professionals as updating and further specialization.
- (3) In terms of research Adult Education has to contribute findings about adult learning, about the difference of knowledge, qualification and competence, about motivation and learning strategies in adult age. These findings prepare the basic knowledge for the development of a scientific society; practically they are often integrated in programs between university and institutions of practice such as enterprises and liberal organisations.

In the international conference on adult education at universities all these perspectives were taken in consideration, many examples and argumentation were exchanged. Some of them are of high relevance for the future of societies.

Examples of University Adult Education Activities

To the most important examples of collaboration of universities with the practice in adult education belongs the qualification of teachers and other professionals in this field, one element in function (1) as academic discipline. There are different variations of curricula at university, from classic pedagogical studies in teaching to more modern models of managing institutions and learning processes. It can be seen that the diversification in the practice has its equivalent at university education, and it is still and ongoingly changing. The most recent elements of curricula for adult education professionals are the competences for media teaching, the management competences for quality assurance and the wider competences of counselling, counselling in case of learning difficulties as well as finding an appropriate offer.

In the recent years in some universities adult education qualification made a big step forward in modularizing the curricula an mainly the master program, thus giving a model for a future more flexible and better to practice adapted system of teaching and learning. In the field of adult education are working many very qualified people coming from other disciplines, needing an academic additional qualification in educational topics like teaching, counselling, human

resources and so on. Study offers beside work are the suiting approaches for them, combining working and learning in a holistic perspective.

The examples of qualification given in the conference in lasi put it in a wider frame. Qualification of professionals in adult education were not only seen as the improvement of the competences of the professionals, but more directly seen in relation to the learners. One of the examples pointed out the relevance of competences in adult education for the concept of learning cities. Learning cities are mainly based on the development and the learning of the adult inhabitants, not only individually, but as a social network. This network creates more than the mere addition of the individual learning outcomes, has an added value for all. Thus the investment in the competences of adult education professionals pays directly back in the development of the cities, their competitiveness and future perspectives. Consequently the curricula are shaped more in the direction of networking and local and regional development. And the university offering this qualification is the regional one, thus playing a direct role in the local setting.

In another example the qualification of adult education professionals is split in learning about general teaching on the one hand and learning in concrete environments, mainly VET (vocational education and training), on the other hand. Like this the professionals working in enterprises and for vocational aims learn about the procedures and needs in general education – and the other way round. This fosters a mutual understanding of different approaches and contexts of adult learning. To make it real it is needed a close collaboration not only of the university with enterprises and educational institutions, but also amongst them – the creation of a working institutional network with the university in the centre.

Another given example is the development of curricula in collaboration with enterprises or other institutions and universities, in the case of adult education mainly regarding concrete fields of practical applicability. In one case it was about the competence of human resources development, which was integrated in the curriculum of an university; this element of curriculum was tailor made for the needs of a collaborating enterprise, but at the same time keeping the scientific distance by generalizing and enabling the students to work also at other places.

In the middle between education and research (role 2) are the examples of doctorate schools, which are in the given examples set up by a group of universities in different countries, in Asia as well as in Europe. The European example, ESRALE, started in 2013 and combines the scientific graduation in adult education at nine European universities out of nine countries such as Germany (coordinator), Romania, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands and others. In these doctorate programs the students deal – in a comparative way – with questions and demands of different societies, finding causes and solutions by a common analysis. Like this the doctorate curricula are enlarged by the international dimension, the students learn from and work with each other, and concrete problems are in the focus of the research. In the ESRALE doctorate program there are topics like illiteracy, integration of older people, migration and the follow up, unemployment and ecological sustainability; practically all these topics are subject of intensive discussion in all member states. Like this the doctorate schools are not only good examples for links between qualification and research, but also – and this is important in adult education – for the link between scientific work and practical questions.

An example for research with an increasing importance is the evaluation of learning processes and the accreditation of study courses as well as pedagogical institutions on the basis of empirically relevant criteria. Adult education as well as the higher education pedagogy did a lot of analysis in this regard in the last years, with a high level of evidence and acceptance. Most of these evaluation and accreditation researches were carried out together with their specific objects, which caused a high expertise and a high acceptance at the same time. A participative and discursive way of empirical research seems to be a typical part of the research methods in adult education.

Related to the research activities in adult education at the universities is the fact, that actually adults are learning in all contexts of society, of work and daily life. Even many of that is not considered to be adult education, it fundamentally is. Guided tours in museums, participation in conferences, discussions and work in voluntary associations are part of adult education. The border lines between formal, non-formal and informal learning are slowly disappearing, learning of adults is more and more an integrative way of improving individual competences. The policy of the European Union, stressing lifelong learning as crucial element of a competitive knowledge society, is based on this fact and is strengthening it at the same time.

Thus, regarding the role of adult education in the third respect (3), the future development of society depends to a high degree on research in learning of adults and on the special activities, which are part of adult education in theory and practice. The universities are playing an important role in this context, if and as far they have a department for adult education and if and as far they are involved in adult education activities. This might be via collaboration with other universities and institutions (like in the case of university of Bucuresti and the Romanian Institute for Adult Education – IREA – in Timisoara), this might also be in the development of bigger departments and collaborations in one university. Above all is counting the collaboration of universities with practical institutions and practitioners.

Benefits and obstacles

Describing the benefits of activities in adult education for the universities as well as for the practice the votes in the conference were unison. Whenever universities are active in Adult education research and teaching they open up opportunities for practitioners and academic staff to share experience, to find common ways of analyzing and to come closer to solutions of practical problems. Combined with the European dimension of education in the line of lifelong learning this provides a new approach to individual and societal development.

For practitioners the existence of adult education in the universities is a necessary support for their reflections, a kind of mirror for the daily work. And the comparative aspect of lifelong learning means, to learn from others, universities in other countries and further progress in adult education in solving social problems and those, which are related to the quality of the work force and the individual wellbeing. Like in other disciplines the link between theory and practice is fundamental for the future of the field.

The utmost benefit of university activities in collaboration with practice is the wider perspective of adult learners as the basis of societal development. Intercultural understanding f.e. in times of migration is supported by adult education, mutual understanding of generations in times of aging society as well. The benefits for the people and the society through adult education at universities are obvious and empirically proved. Inside the universities the benefits might also be of high value, but – and here are starting the obstacles – some of the aspects of adult education are not streamlined to scientific disciplines. Mainly the practical view of adult education brings difficulties, since other disciplines are more in distance to society – for several reasons. Some of them do not have a practical “field” in society with people working, with institutions, aims and tasks. Others are so much specialized that it needs a big transfer (by adult education....) to make their work be generally understood. In some cases (that differs from country to country) the academic language in the respective discipline is so much specialized that it needs for a real “translation” (another task of adult education).

A big reason for so far not very much developed collaboration between universities and practice with means of adult education (open university at its best) is the widely missing pedagogical competence of the university teachers. Professors are specialists in their topic, not specialists in teaching, and they consider themselves like this. It is in the teaching where can be clearly seen the difficulty of relation between the world of science and research at universities and the world of practice outside. The problems are clearly visible in adult teaching: the adult learners have in most of the cases a lot of experiences in the topic, practical experiences and knowledge. University professors have only little competence in making use out of that, taking it as material in the teaching-learning process. And they hardly know the relevance of the practical test of the adult learners, who compare all theoretical input with their own experience and do not accept it, if it is not “empirically” proofed like this.

In this sense adult education as task of the universities is a challenge for their internal organizational development, more (and better) teaching competences for the professors, more flexibility and openness in the didactical arrangements. Also the management of courses in non-formal learning is quite different from regular lectures, needs advertisement, open access and motivation of the learners. Many universities are confronted with these new demands, since the organization of studies too is more and more comparable to open and modularized adult education forms.

From the part of practitioners, of institutions in the field of practice, there are obstacles mainly regarding the usability of theoretical offers from universities in concrete contexts. They consider quite often the contributions of universities to the field of practice as little helpful, not precisely shaped for use. In models of collaboration with universities the practitioners and their organisations sometimes are not seriously enough acknowledged, their questions, demands and problems not enough responded. Another fact hindering collaboration, mentioned in lasi, were finances and status of universities. Compared with most of the educational enterprises and organizations the universities are rich, they don't have to fight and struggle for money like their practical equivalent, and the status of universities (formal and legally) is not as fragile as in many cases of pedagogical institutions.

The collaboration of adult education at universities with the fields of practice became more intensive since there are programs of the European Union supporting both in that direction. In these projects can be seen once more one of the most basic elements of collaboration between theory and practice: trust in each other and mutual respect. The participants in lasi underlined the need to improve reliable structures and networks to allow this trust and respect.

Comparative and evaluative aspects

A last phase of the discussion was oriented towards the role of comparison and evaluation for a better relation between theory and practice.

By several participants was pointed out the difference of the theory-practice-collaboration in different countries. Some countries and universities have a stronger tradition in that regard, universities in UK f.e. started with the concept of open university and collected a lot of experiences in opening academic studies for the people. In other countries there is less tradition and a different understanding of academic teaching and research. So, it has to be pointed out that there is still a big need for common reflections in an international, at least European, perspective to improve this relation. Umbrella organizations like EUCEN are a good step in that direction, they might be supported in a better and more sustainable way. Also research networks on a European level in adult education such as – above all – ESREA deserve a stronger support in influencing the opening of the universities to the fields of practice by the means of adult education.

Another point, quite a weak one, is that in hardly any evaluation concept for universities occurs the indicator of “successful collaboration with the practice”, neither an indicator such as “improvement of teaching competences of professors”. The evaluation concepts focus mainly on publications in reviewed journals and on the acquisition of money beside the public funding. Since the evaluation of educational institutions has become more and more important there would be a big impact of the integration of indicators regarding the relation to the practice.

In the end of the discussion one representative of an university came back to the view of an practitioner, that the universities are the reflection body for practice and kind of a mirror for practical work. Resuming the discussion he pointed out that the “practice”, the practitioners and their institutions are providing in the same way a mirror for the universities. In the opinion of the practical institutions and their interests in collaboration the universities can clearly see whether they are still an important and integrated part of the society or whether they are more existing in the direction of an ivory tower.

This mutual exchange of views between university and practice was considered to be one of the most important elements of collaboration. And adult education was considered as one of the most important and most appropriate means to establish a working and fruitful collaboration between theory and practice.