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CONFINTEA VI from a Canadian perspective

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Abstract The 12-yearly International Conferences of Adult Education (CONFINTEA) organised by UNESCO are significant events in the ongoing global dialogues about adult learning and education (ALE) and its role within society. Thus, the latest conference held in Brazil in 2009 offered a major opportunity to consider and review developments about ALE policies and practices worldwide and encouraged both national governments and non-governmental organisations alike to examine their approaches to adult education and lifelong learning. After a review of the process that Canada adopted in following the UNESCO guidelines for preparing its country report, this paper focuses specifically on the involvement of Canada's major academic adult education organisation and details its concerns with both the development and the substance of the report. Comparing it with the country reports of Finland, Sweden and the UK, the authors analyse the Canadian report and provide some explanatory reasons why, in their opinion, both the process and the result provided a less than complete picture of ALE in Canada and, in so doing, fell short of UNESCO's aspirations for CONFINTEA.

Keywords Comparative adult education · Policy studies · Transnational governance · NGOs · UNESCO · OECD · Canada

Resumé CONFINTEA VI dans une perspective canadienne – Les Conférences internationales sur l'éducation des adultes (CONFINTEA), organisées tous les 12 ans par l'UNESCO, constituent d'importants événements marquant les débats

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planétaires sur l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes, et sur leur rôle dans la société. Ainsi, la dernière de ces conférences tenue au Brésil en 2009 a été une opportunité exceptionnelle d'examiner et de recenser l'évolution mondiale des politiques et pratiques afférentes. Elle a en outre incité les gouvernements des pays et les organisations non gouvernementales à revoir leurs approches de l'éducation des adultes et de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. Après une brève présentation de la démarche adoptée par le Canada pour appliquer les directives de l'UNESCO sur la rédaction du rapport national, cet article examine l'implication du principal organisme universitaire de l'éducation des adultes au Canada et détaille les difficultés qu'il a rencontrées au niveau de la conception et du contenu du rapport. Établissant une comparaison avec les rapports nationaux de la Finlande, de la Suède et du Royaume-Uni, les auteurs analysent le rapport canadien et donnent quelques raisons pour lesquelles, à leur avis, la démarche et le résultat livrent un tableau qui est loin d'être complet de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes au Canada, et ne répond par conséquent pas aux aspirations de l'UNESCO pour CONFINTEA.

Zusammenfassung Die CONFINTEA VI aus kanadischer Sicht – Die alle zwölf Jahre von der UNESCO organisierte Weltkonferenz über Erwachsenenbildung (CONFINTEA) ist eine wichtige Plattform für den internationalen Diskussionsprozess rund um das Thema Erwachsenenbildung und deren Rolle in der Gesellschaft. So bot auch die letzte Konferenz, die 2009 in Brasilien abgehalten wurde, eine hervorragende Gelegenheit, sich mit Entwicklungen im Bereich der Politik und Praxis der Erwachsenenbildung in der ganzen Welt zu beschäftigen und sich ein Urteil darüber zu bilden. Regierungen und Nichtregierungsorganisationen wurden gleichermaßen motiviert, ihre Ansätze zur Erwachsenenbildung und zum lebenslangen Lernen zu überprüfen. Nach einem Rückblick darauf, in welcher Weise sich Kanada bei der Erarbeitung seines Länderberichts an den UNESCO-Richtlinien orientiert hat, befassen sich die Autoren dieses Artikels speziell mit der Beteiligung der größten kanadischen Organisation für akademische Erwachsenenbildung und begründen ausführlich ihre Bedenken bezüglich der Entwicklung und der Substanz des Berichts. Die Autoren analysieren den kanadischen Bericht im Vergleich mit den Länderberichten Finnlands, Schwedens und des Vereinigten Königreichs und erläutern, warum ihrer Meinung nach sowohl der Prozess als auch das Ergebnis nur ein unvollständiges Bild der Erwachsenenbildung in Kanada zeichnen und damit hinter dem Anspruch der UNESCO an die CONFINTEA zurückbleiben.

Resumen CONFINTEA VI desde una perspectiva canadiense – Las Conferencias Internacionales sobre Educación de Adultos (CONFINTEA), que se celebran cada 12 años, organizadas por la UNESCO, son eventos importantes dentro de los diálogos que se mantienen a escala global sobre el aprendizaje y la educación de adultos (AEA) y su papel dentro de la sociedad. Así, la última conferencia, que tuvo lugar en Brasil en 2009, ofreció una gran oportunidad para considerar y revisar desarrollos relacionados con políticas y prácticas en AEA a escala mundial y alentó a los gobiernos nacionales y a las organizaciones no gubernamentales por igual a examinar sus modos de abordar la educación de adultos y el aprendizaje durante toda la vida. Tras la revisión del procedimiento adoptado por Canadá, siguiendo las

directivas de la UNESCO para preparar su informe de país, este trabajo se enfoca específicamente en la participación de la principal organización de educación de adultos de Canadá y detalla su preocupación tanto por el desarrollo como por la esencia del informe. Comparándolo con los informes de país de Finlandia, Suecia y el Reino Unido, los autores analizan el informe canadiense y aportan algunas razones que explicarían por qué, en su opinión, tanto el procedimiento como el resultado mostraron un cuadro incompleto de AEA en Canadá y, por lo tanto, no han llegado a cumplir con las aspiraciones de la UNESCO en cuanto a la CONFINTEA.

Резюме КОНФИНТЕА VI с канадской точки зрения – Международные конференции по образованию взрослых (КОНФИНТЕА), проводимые ЮНЕСКО каждые 12 лет, являются важными событиями в происходящем глобальном диалоге по вопросам обучения и образования взрослых и его роли в обществе. Так, проходившая в Бразилии в 2009 году конференция предоставила отдельную возможность обсудить и пересмотреть вопросы, касающиеся обучения и образования взрослых, его политики и практики во всем мире, а также поддержала правительственные и неправительственные организации в исследовании своих подходов к образованию взрослых и непрерывному обучению. В данной статье авторы проанализировали канадский вариант подготовки национального доклада-отчета согласно соответствующим рекомендациям ЮНЕСКО, отдельно акцентировав свое внимание на роли главной канадской организации по образованию взрослых, и подробно изложили проблемы, связанные как с разработкой, так и содержанием доклада. Сравнивая его с другими национальными докладами, например, Финляндии, Швеции и Великобритании, авторы данной статьи, проанализировав канадский доклад, отметили некоторые причины, почему, по их мнению, как процесс, так и сам результат предоставили не совсем полную картину обучения и образованию взрослых в Канаде, что в итоге не соответствует поставленным целям ЮНЕСКО относительно КОНФИНТЕА.

The 12-yearly International Conferences of Adult Education (CONFINTEA) organised by UNESCO are significant events in the ongoing global dialogues about adult learning and education (ALE) and its role within society. Thus, the latest conference held in Brazil in 2009 offered a major opportunity to consider and review developments about ALE policies and practices worldwide and encouraged both national governments and nongovernmental organisations alike to examine their approaches to adult education and lifelong learning.

Preparation for such a major conference is necessarily complex. All UNESCO member states were requested to compile national reports on the status and development of ALE since the previous CONFINTEA conference in 1997 and describe the current state and perceived challenges of ALE in their countries. Explicitly, these reports were to serve two key purposes related to the conference. First, they would be synthesised in the form of *Regional Reports* and presented in several regional preparatory conferences for further discussion. Second, they would provide the basis for an overall CONFINTEA VI *Working Document* and supply

critical data for a *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*. However, the country reports could also serve other, more national, functions. As the UNESCO guidelines for preparing the country reports put it: "Assessing the state of the art of adult learning and education in countries will […] generate information that can be used to extend the database on policies, research findings and effective practices in literacy, non-formal education, [and] adult and lifelong learning" (UIL 2007).

Thus, the development of country reports was intended to have important implications for national policy making, particularly in relation to those legislative, governance, financial, institutional and regulatory frameworks that sustain ALE and encourage adults to participate in it (Jones 2005). In addition, any governmental involvement in ALE requires the development of associated policies in such related areas as employment, welfare, urban and rural development and poverty reduction as well as the need to develop appropriate systems of monitoring and evaluation across ministries and agencies (Keogh 2009). With this in mind, the guidance for the preparation of the country reports acknowledged certain difficulties:

> Given the dispersed nature of adult learning and education, consistent and comparable data of good quality are often lacking. An assessment of the overall situation, therefore, requires information and data from a range of different sources. […] National reports [should] take into account the full variety of sources in your country and form a concerted effort of governmental (including ministries of education, labour, health, agriculture, gender, culture, sports and leisure, social welfare, finance and economy, and foreign affairs), non-governmental, public and private actors, trade unions, social partners and bilateral and multilateral development agencies. (UIL 2007)

Finally, once draft reports had been prepared, UNESCO also recommended that countries should hold national conferences to validate the findings and create a national dialogue involving a broad range of stakeholders.

In this paper, we review how this process played out in Canada – a country with a high level of educational attainment and a long-standing record of involvement in international adult education. We first situate CONFINTEA and UNESCO within the perspective of transnational governance. Next, we consider the organisation of ALE in Canada and review the process that Canada adopted in following the UNESCO guidelines for preparing its country report. We then focus specifically on the involvement of Canada's major academic adult education organisation and detail its concerns with both the development and the substance of the report. Finally, we analyse the Canadian report and provide some explanatory reasons why, in our opinion, both the process and the result provided a less than complete picture of ALE in Canada and, in so doing, fell short of UNESCO's aspirations for CONFINTEA.

The roles of CONFINTEA and UNESCO in transnational governance of ALE

As we mentioned above, UNESCO's intention was that the development of country-specific reports would contribute to a revival of national debates on ALE, provide

input into the policy making process and foster effective practices in literacy, non-formal education and adult and lifelong learning. For Canada, this raises two interrelated questions. First, what is the likelihood that a UNESCO exercise of this nature would actually influence Canadian ALE, and second, what conditions might affect this? To answer these questions, we have to assess the role that UNESCO, a supranational body, plays in the transnational governance of Canadian ALE. Further, an important aspect of the CONFINTEA process was to draw on and stimulate ALE activities within social movements and civil society groups. Thus, the nature of the process of developing the report as well as the likelihood of the national report affecting Canadian ALE is dependent on the strength of Canada's social movement sector and its capacity to impact the structure of ALE on a national level.

The comparative policy studies literature has identified a shift from "methodological nationalism" – the assumption that all social relations are organised at a national scale – to acknowledging the importance of inter- and transnational policy transfer and policy learning arenas (Mahon and McBride 2009). Policy ideas of international and supranational organisations have come to provide a form of "cognitive governance" (Ruckert 2009, p. 97) that becomes embedded in new forms of policy transfers. Here, advances in information technology combine with increasing coordination of policy through international arenas to affect national policies on learning and education (Mahon and McBride 2009). From a neo-Gramscian perspective, international organisations can be regarded as a crucial instrument for transnational forces to promote a hegemonic and consensus-making order of neoliberal world development (Ruckert 2009). However, it is important to note that in the area of education in general, and ALE in particular, there are struggles over approaches between supranational organisations. So, for example over the last 40 years, UNESCO and OECD have developed and promoted quite different worldviews on lifelong learning. While UNESCO has been promoting a humanistically inspired paradigm of lifelong learning based on the influential report *Learning to Be* (Faure et al. 1972), the OECD's discourse has been solidly grounded in a much more economistic paradigm (Rubenson 2009). The potential impact of the CONFINTEA process on Canadian ALE has then to be judged in the context of an ideological struggle over the approaches of these two supranational organisations.

It is also important to note that, as in other highly-industrialised countries, the OECD rather than the UNESCO discourse drives ALE in Canada. In Gramscian terms, the OECD has achieved hegemony over the ALE discourse through its capacity to manufacture a broad consensus that then becomes the "common sense" of society. Its hegemony rests on the organisation's capacity to set policy agendas that become taken-for-granted "rule of ideas" (Adamson 1980; Boggs 1976), which come to govern national policy actors' approaches to ALE reforms. Such hegemony arises from the OECD's unique combination of being a semi-autonomous think tank capable of sophisticated long-term planning while also being a part of an international civil service and a shared state apparatus (Dostal 2004). This power rests mainly on two pillars: bureau-shaping strategies focusing on hegemony over knowledge management (Dunleavy 1991) and an extensive interface between national bureaucracies and their OECD counterparts (Dostal 2004; Henry et al.

2001; Rinne et al. 2004; Vickers 1994). In contrast to UNESCO, the OECD's capacity to authoritatively provide comparative expert knowledge affords it a significant discursive advantage. From this perspective, it seems reasonable to suggest that CONFINTEA and the preparation of a national report are unlikely to have been seen as necessarily central to Canadian ALE policy development by the various tiers of national and provincial governments. To explore this in more detail, we now consider how the process of preparing a national report played out in Canada.

ALE in Canada

Producing a national report on ALE in Canada is more complex that it might seem. The country is vast, the second largest in the world. Most of its 40 million population is concentrated in cities along the southern border, although a significant number of people live in relatively sparsely populated northern areas. The provision of education and other social services in the remoter areas is sporadic and it is often difficult to be clear about just what services are available where. Also, the country has an enormous cultural diversity, with different ethnic and historical backgrounds among First Nations, Métis, French, Anglo-Saxon, Asian and other immigrant populations from all over the world adding significantly to the variety of values and perspectives (Fenwick et al. 2006). Nowhere is this more visible than in Canada's linguistic divide where Anglophone and Francophone adult educators formally interact with each other only sparingly.

Canada's geographic and demographic diversity is confounded by its political system. Canada is a country with a federal structure, with 10 provinces and 3 territories sharing responsibilities with a national government. As adult education is largely a provincial government responsibility, this means there are effectively 13 different systems of, and approaches to, adult education. Such a multifarious system supports a plethora of public institutions providing adult education – universities, colleges and local school boards – in addition to a wide variety of private schools and trainers. Furthermore, the federal government provides support for various kinds of adult education (essentially basic literacy and short-term job training) as well as student loans, research and funding for research, outreach and information. In practice, therefore, adult education is supported by a mixture of provincial and federal funds and the balance of federal and provincial responsibility influences nearly every aspect of adult education in Canada with, unsurprisingly, inevitable conflicts (Thomas 1989).

To complicate matters further, a recent report on adult learning in Canada (OECD 2002) also found three other factors that might contribute to the difficulty of producing a comprehensive report: the relationship between lifelong learning and adult education, the rhetoric about lifelong learning and the variety of forms that adult education can take. The first two factors are not unique to Canada and are already well-discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Jakobi 2009). However, the OECD report specifically identified the comparatively wide range of Canadian ALE activities. These include training provided by employers for their own workers;

union-sponsored training; training provided by governments to upgrade the skills of particular employees, or to allow individuals to change from one occupation to another; a vocational and non-vocational programme especially for certain targeted groups like Aboriginal people, immigrants, the disabled or the elderly; ABE and literacy programmes, programmes concerned with advancing citizenship; community-based programmes, personal interest programmes, distance and online education, and welfare-related education and training to enable individuals to move into the economic mainstream and become self-sufficient.

Taken together, these various factors produce considerable difficulty for anyone attempting to comprehend or capture the range of Canadian ALE practices. Describing the plethora of different approaches, perspectives, funding arrangements and organisations involved requires an overall capacity currently beyond the reach of any national organisation. For many years, Canada has had several active organisations devoted to the promotion and coordination of various aspects of ALE and other civil society groups with a less explicit, though no less committed, educational mandate. However, in recent years, such groups have either disappeared or so waned in influence that some are terming it "the death of the Canadian adult education movement" (Selman and Selman 2009). Most of those groups which are left tend to be non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and oriented towards either professional, social movement or learners' issues. Over the years, such organisations have been advocates for much social and educational transformation particularly by challenging prevailing discourses and dominant practices and promoting greater equity (Hall 2006). However, they have generally been less successful in affecting the underlying ideologies of individualism and mangerialism and tend to be conscribed to advisory roles on the margins of educational policy making. In addition, these groups are often poorly funded, limited in scope, largely run by volunteers, they operate independently from one another and have neither the mandate nor the resources to provide an overall comprehensive picture of ALE in Canada. Hence, almost by default, responsibility for collecting the necessary data and compiling the Canada country report fell to an alliance of two governmental bodies – one representing the provincial and territorial governments and one federal agency.

As education generally falls under the purview of provincial and territorial governments, they have collectively formed the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) – comprising the ministers responsible for elementary, secondary, post-secondary and advanced education – to serve a coordinating function. This group shares information and undertakes educational projects of mutual interest to the provinces and represents Canada's educational interests internationally. Although its mandate covers the broad range of educational provision, it tends to concentrate on the kindergarten to grade 12 (K-12) and higher education aspects, to the detriment of ALE generally and its non-formal approaches in particular. On a federal level, the Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCU) operates under the aegis of the Canada Council for the Arts. Its role is to act as a forum for governmental and civil society organisational participation in the UNESCO areas of education, natural and social sciences, culture and communication – which it devolves to several sectoral councils. Given the broad span of these activities,

CCU's long-standing commitment to furthering ALE in Canada should be acknowledged. For example, it coordinates the national activities around International Adult Learners' Week, promotes UNESCO's agenda for and approaches to adult education across the country, ensures that adult learners and their organisations are given a voice at national discussions and generally tries to ensure that ALE remains a focal issue for debate throughout Canada.

Together, these two agencies were tasked with compiling Canada's country report on ALE. Of course, this is a considerable assignment for two separate organisations whose priorities, responsibilities and accountabilities differ; moreover resources were limited. For governmental bodies, it is especially difficult to adequately respond to UNESCO's international reporting framework whilst at the same time not being too critical of national and provincial governmental policies and practices. In our opinion, this tends to encourage an emphasis on certain aspects of ALE (such as state functions and approaches) while downplaying others (such as critical reflexivity or learner participation). It can also lead, as Carlos Alberto Torres (1996) has suggested, to the adoption of an overly technocratic discourse that serves to depoliticise the emancipatory potential of ALE. In the next section, we describe the process of developing Canada's country report from the perspective of one of Canada's leading educational NGOs before turning to an analysis of the report itself.

Developing the report

In Canada, UNESCO's recommended approach to preparing the country report was followed more in spirit than to the letter. Rather than being generated by a national dialogue amongst the groups identified earlier, the Canada country report was prepared by CMEC in collaboration with CCU with little direct involvement of others. In May 2008, a draft report written by an educational consultant was circulated for consultation to members of CCU's education sectoral council for comment. These comments were then used to prepare a final report and presented to members of the Canadian delegation and a small selected group of others in October 2008.

Consultation on the reports was limited. Like many other countries, Canada has an academic association to represent the scholarly interests of the country's adult educators. The Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/l'Association Canadienne pour l'Étude de l'Éducation des Adultes (CASAE/ACÉÉA) is represented on the CCU education sectoral council and was sent a copy of the draft report for comment. It quickly solicited the views of its membership and also reviewed both the report and the responses to it at a hastily organised meeting at its 2008 conference. Responses from conference delegates were mixed. Although recognising that the draft report provided ample evidence of Canada's strong involvement in ALE and documented the various national and provincial governmental approaches, CASAE was still quite critical of its reach. It identified several significant limitations both of form and substance. Principally, it felt that in its current form, the report read more like a fragmented series of abstracts from

provincial reports (with some provinces better represented that others) than a comprehensive overview of the Canadian adult education landscape. It also felt that the draft report somehow missed conveying the diversity and richness of Canadian adult education or addressing many key issues that influence its current practice and future development.

CASAE offered several suggestions to enhance the draft report that, in their opinion, would make it more comprehensive and precise and present a more accurate picture. Specifically, it recommended that the report should discuss or at least mention:

(a) What Canada has done to meet the various recommendations of CONFINTEA V and any subsequent follow-up reports.
(b) Recent reports on the state of adult education and learning in Canada and the concerns, issues and considerations for further action that they raise.
(c) The various organisations that are active in the Canadian adult education field and the work that they do – whether quasi-governmental, concerned with promoting adult learning and the interests of adult learners, or providing forms of adult education to specific sectors of society.
(d) The development and presence of the Canadian Council on Learning.
(e) The presence of various countrywide and regional networks of scholars and practitioners that study and promote various facets of adult education.
(f) Journals which disseminate knowledge and research about various aspects of Canadian adult education and recent books by Canadian adult educators or those that deal with Canadian adult education.
(g) Funding agencies which variously support innovative practices and research into adult education.
(h) Some indication that adult education in Canada is a vital and dynamic endeavour.
(i) Canada's long-standing commitment to, and role in, the international aspects of adult education and international adult education organisations.

In sum, CASAE felt that, while appearing to be comprehensive, the draft report provided only a partial and largely uncomplicated and ahistorical picture of Canada's approaches to ALE. It was concerned that an emphasis on those aspects of adult education that enhance people's involvement in existing economic structures subtly downplays other, more social and cultural, aspects. It also regretted that the report failed to portray ALE in Canada as a site of contestation and struggle between differing worldviews. For example, there was no mention of several key issues which concern Canadian adult educators and which do not easily fit into the report's predominantly human capital and neoliberal rhetoric. While the draft report did contain a list of "challenges and issues", CASAE recommended that it should also mention the lack of any national coordination or a national body that promotes awareness of adult education; the paucity of resources for the provision of adult education for vulnerable people in underprivileged sectors of society (such as immigrants, aboriginal peoples, lower income and rural people and those with disabilities); education for democracy and greater participation in civil society; the growth in, and access to, information and communication technologies and their

influence on the provision of adult education; and concerns for various factors that affect the lives of Canadians such as the environment, health, poverty and homelessness.

Of course, CASAE did not anticipate that a report prepared on behalf of the CMEC would be overly critical of dominant approaches and government policies. However, it felt that the report might at least allude to recent policy changes that had not been universally welcomed and it cited a couple of examples. Finally, in CASAE's opinion, the draft report also ignored the leadership role that Canadian adult educators have played for many years. They quoted from the *Report of the Canadian Delegation on the Mid-Term Review of CONFINTEA V*:

> Canada's historic as well as contemporary engagement in the field of adult education and learning provides it with significant stature and credibility in the international community. Canada's efforts to share experiences and work collaboratively with other nations in addressing the challenges of the knowledge society afford it a unique leadership opportunity. (CCU 2004, p. 18)

Official acknowledgement of these criticisms and suggestions was muted. While some of CASAE's more factual suggestions were adopted in the final report, their more conceptual comments were not. Especially egregious was the omission of any mention of the Canadian Council on Learning – one of the more significant governmental interventions in ALE in the past decade. Since its creation, this organisation has contributed immensely to an awareness of adult education and lifelong learning in Canada through its five Knowledge Centres – Adult Learning, Work and Learning, Health and Learning, Aboriginal Learning and Early Childhood Learning – and its several crosscutting themes that include literacy, culture, learning technologies and second language learning. Nor was the draft report's overall tone or neoliberal rhetoric substantially altered. Indeed, the report's author claimed that the guidelines prepared by UNESCO and the focus of the questions often acted as limitations, citing as an example that the only direct mention of civil society in the guidelines was in the "Financing of ALE" section. Further, the author expressed surprise that:

> The guidelines for the preparation of the CONFINTEA report did not reflect the documents resulting from CONFINTEA V nor did they ask for any information related to progress on their points. Instead UNESCO asked for information on developments in adult learning and education since 1997 according to the headings and questions provided … So this is the structure that was used to prepare the draft report for Canada and hence no direct reference to development related to the CONFINTEA V documents. (Personal correspondence)

Once the final report had been prepared, it was presented essentially as a *fait accompli* to a specially selected group consisting of the Canadian conference delegation (most of whose members were provincial and federal government representatives) together with representatives of selected NGOs and civil society

groups. No summary of responses to the draft report was provided, nor was it possible to discover which groups had been invited to respond. Further, any attempts to amend the report at this stage were rebuffed with pressure of time being cited as the key reason. So, as a mechanism for encouraging a national debate, the process fell far short of what it might have achieved or indeed of the consultative processes adopted for several earlier CONFINTEA conferences (Kidd 1974). To explore why this might be so, we now turn to a more detailed examination of the text of the Canadian country report by comparing it to its counterparts from several other countries.

The Canadian country report from a comparative perspective

The selection of countries to be included in this brief comparative analysis is based on international data on the extent and pattern of participation in adult learning (OECD 2005) and an assumption about a strong link between national "systems" and practices of ALE and welfare states (Rubenson and Desjardins 2009). With these two criteria in mind, we consider the Canadian National report in the context of the reports from three other countries: Finland, Sweden and the UK. We chose these countries deliberately. Finland and Sweden, as do other Nordic countries, have the highest participation rates in adult education and training in the industrialised world. The UK, an Anglo-Saxon country that, like Canada, tends to rank in the upper range of ALE participation, has during the last 10 years focused on increasing participation rates. It should also be noted that inequalities in participation in ALE are smaller in the Nordic than in the Anglo-Saxon countries.

Our first observation is that the Canadian report (CMEC 2008) appears as a standard bureaucratic product providing a rather detailed description of the situation of adult education as it relates to the ten provinces and three territories and federal involvement. However, in contrast to the UK report (for example), the absence of any analysis is striking and it becomes obvious to the reader that the authors of the report have been careful not to inject any comments or value judgments about the provision and outcomes of ALE. As a consequence, no attempts are made to identify any particular strengths or weaknesses in the current "system(s)" or where improvements might be made.

Our second observation relates to how policy making structures and processes inform and are informed by ALE. In this, we have drawn upon two recent studies: the OECD *Thematic Review on Adult Learning* (OECD 2002) and an analysis of the so-called "Nordic Model" of adult education (Tuijnman and Hellström 2001). Both studies identified several aspects and institutional arrangements as being central for understanding national ALE performance: manifest policy ambitions, supply of learning opportunities and financial policy levers. We consider each in turn.

Manifest policy ambitions

It is important to note that expressing certain policy goals and aspirations in a document does not always lead to concrete actions. Further, there may be vital

differences in how specific goals are understood. Thus, while countries may agree that reducing inequalities is a central goal, they may define inequality in different ways. With a risk of over-interpreting the available information, the selected national reports reveal some fundamental differences in national agendas on ALE. The first thing that strikes a reader of the Canadian report is a lack of an expressed broad national policy aspiration for ALE. While there are more narrowly defined goals linked to provincial and territorial policies, there is no discussion of how ALE might relate to what Canadian politicians like to term "the Canadian way of life", how it has influenced the development of either Canada as a country or its population as citizens, or how it might promote a more equitable society or Canada's involvement in international activities. Instead, the report suggests that the overwhelming goal of ALE policies is to "ensure that workers with the right skills are available and [that] unemployed workers [are trained] in the skills required" (CMEC 2008, p. 12). To support this economic goal, most jurisdictions explicitly refer to increasing competencies in literacy and basic education.

In contrast, the Finnish report states: "The objective of adult education in Finland is to support lifelong learning among citizens and to develop society's coherence and equality" (Finnish Ministry of Education 2008, p. 1). ALE policies also aim to support raising the employment rate and to ensure that the workforce is equipped with proper trade skills. With reference to popular adult education, the Finnish report notes: "the aim of adult liberal education is to enhance the integrity of society, equality and to strengthen active citizenship" (ibid, p. 6).

The dual goal of promoting economic development and participation of citizens is also the foundation of the Swedish ALE policy. "The goals of adult education cover both social and individual perspectives. They promote economic development and growth and at the same time contribute to the development of democracy" (Swedish Ministry of Education and Research 2008, p. 4). In the scenario of future challenges, the Swedish report notes, in addition to vocational education, gender equality, opportunity structures of immigrants and flexibility of educational systems, that ALE has a central role in fostering international solidarity and sustainable development.

The UK ALE policy discourse, like the Canadian one, has a strong labour market focus. "Government policy has been driven by two interlinked objectives: to strengthen economic competitiveness through raising levels of skill qualifications, and to address social exclusion" (United Kingdom National Commission for UNESCO 2008, p. 11). The latter, according to the report, is best achieved through a focus on training and skills. In the section on issues to be tackled there is a recognition that ALE should not only better "contribute to improving skills of the population through their working lives" but also "build social and community cohesion" (ibid, p. 121).

What seems to distinguish Finland and Sweden from Canada and the UK is not the importance given to the economic role of ALE but the interpretation of the equity goal. Thus, in the Nordic countries the issue of combating inequalities is addressed in a comprehensive way and linked to broader democratic ambitions. The overriding policy goals on adult learning in these countries could, in Esping-Andersen's words, be seen to reflect a shift in "the accent of social citizenship from

a preoccupation with income maintenance towards a menu of rights to lifelong learning and qualification" (Esping-Andersen 1996, p. 259).

In Canada and the UK, adult learning policies are closely linked to a well-developed skills agenda. These countries – particularly the UK – raise concerns about educational and social inequalities and the need to recruit vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. However, what seems to distinguish Canada from others with high ALE participation is its more restricted perspective on inequality. It is worth noting that the UK report is far more explicit than the Canadian one in discussing how a lack of social cohesion can be addressed through ALE.

Supply of adult learning opportunities

While recognising that one can find many very interesting and innovative ALE programmes in different parts of Canada, the national report does not reflect any cohesive effort to strengthen the existing provision of adult learning opportunities, which is generally grouped into two major categories: Adult Basic Education (ABE); literacy and additional language programmes; and workplace and employment education and training.

The Canadian report's representation of the provision of ALE suggests four striking characteristics of the Canadian landscape of adult education. First, there is a strong dependence on the school and post-secondary systems with the result that adult education disappears from the policy screen to be subsumed under post-secondary education. Second, at the institutional level, ALE becomes very vulnerable to shifts in political influence and has to constantly compete for scarce resources. Third, there is a heavy reliance on ad hoc, non-profit and volunteer organisations that often lack an established infrastructure and are unable to engage in long-term ALE planning. Fourth, there has been a shift from the public provision of employment training opportunities towards employer-led approaches.

In contrast, the Swedish report outlines a comprehensive system consisting of several strands of ALE. There are three specific opportunities for adults to engage in non-traditional ALE activities. First, municipal adult education consisting of special adult schools offering ABE as well as Swedish for Immigrants. Second, a provision of advanced adult vocational education combining education in schools and training in firms. Third, there is a large sector of liberal adult education including folk high schools and study associations.

The Finnish system has many similarities with the Swedish with well-developed sectors for adult basic education, vocational adult education and liberal adult education.

In the UK, the largest body of adult learning provision is made through Further Education Colleges. Traditionally, the UK had a vibrant publicly-funded "non-vocational" adult education service. This was provided through local authorities until 2001 when the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was created and the funds were incorporated in the overall budget of LSC. The UK report notes that although this had not been the intention, the result was a weakening of the non-vocational sector.

While it is difficult to find a clear relationship between institutional structures and participation, a quick look at participation data would suggest that some historic institutional characteristics have an effect on the current supply of learning opportunities and participation rates. Thus, the high and relatively more equal participation rates in Sweden and Finland can partly be explained by the structure of their adult education sector. In contrast to Canada, these countries have a large publicly-supported sector of popular adult education that provides access to forms of ALE that can respond to different collective and individual aspirations and needs far more effectively than the formal educational system or that of employers. It is interesting to note that the Nordic popular adult education initially emerged as an alternative to the public school system that was seen as failing to serve the aspirations of the farmers and working class people. In contrast, Canada has placed a much stronger trust in the ability of the public system to respond to all its citizens' educational needs.

Financing

With increasing concern on how to better recruit low-skilled and unemployed workers into ALE, financial policy options have become a central issue. Current policy discussions on the financing of ALE focus largely on how to structure co-financing schemes. While ALE often results in substantial private returns, it is understood that because of market uncertainties, governments also need to play an active role in financing ALE, particularly when it comes to reaching disadvantaged groups (OECD 2005). Despite the multiple government departments involved in Canadian ALE and its varied programmes, the Canadian report notes that no financial overview of spending on ALE in Canada is available. Provincial and territorial governments do provide funds for ALE through various means: funding institutional, community and voluntary providers, subsidies directly to the learners themselves, special project funding and/or subsidies and cost-sharing programmes with industry and business. However, much of this funding comes in the form of block grants for post-secondary institutions. Funding of volunteer and community organisations is often limited to short-term funding initiatives for specific purposes. The federal government is a major funder of training programmes either through providing resources to the provinces under the Labour Market Development Agreements or through direct funding of individual short-term projects such as schemes to reach and retrain older workers. Private industry also makes a large investment in training its employees. For example, a recent survey of Canadian business organisations indicates that they spend on average 1.8% of their payroll or $ CAN 852 per employee on training, learning and development (Conference Board of Canada 2007). However, this level of investment has not changed significantly over the past decade and, in fact, has declined in recent years. The report notes that, when adjusted for inflation, expenditures are 17% less than a decade ago (Conference Board of Canada 2007, p. 23). Quebec is the only Canadian province with legislation that requires employers to invest in the provision of staff training.

Regrettably, the report does not discuss the appropriateness of the overall level of funding available for ALE in Canada, issues of market failures or the use of

financing mechanisms to reach special target groups. However, it is possible to make some general observations. In some of the project-based schemes, governments structure their funding so that it affects institutions as well as individuals. For example, it has been increasingly common to allocate funds based on some form of performance criteria like educational gains and/or labour market success of programme participants. However, this strategy can backfire and lead to the unintended outcome of institutions focusing not on the most vulnerable but those with the best prospects to succeed (Heckman and Smith 2003). Thus, there is evidence to suggest that unless they receive specifically earmarked funding for the target groups, even organisations with proclaimed ambitions to reach disadvantaged groups actually provide a service that corresponds better to the demands of the advantaged and thereby increases inequality.

To address this issue, Finland, Sweden and the UK, in contrast to Canada, have a generous targeted allowance support system for low-skilled adults. In this context it is interesting to note that targeted public support seems to have a crucial effect on the participation of those least likely to enrol in adult education and training. "Thus it may be the case, more generally, that public support for disadvantaged groups is the main, defining characteristic of Nordic approaches to adult education" (Tuijnman and Hellström 2001, p. 9).

It should be noted that the UK report provides an in-depth discussion of financial incentives in support of ALE and states that state funding for non-traditional adult students is essential to addressing market failures. A more controversial UK strategy is the move to create choice through a voucher system. In order to make "adult education provision more responsive to 'customer' demand" (UKNC 2008, p. 55), the UK is experimenting with different forms of learner accounts funded or partly funded by the state. The UK report notes that a clear risk in such a customer-driven approach is that individuals will lack insufficient information about the opportunities in order to make an informed choice.

This strategy is met with scepticism from Finland and Sweden where governments have tried a different approach aimed at encouraging institutional pluralism through public funding. The rich funding of liberal adult education is one such example. Thus, for example, if Canada allocated the same percentage of public investment in education to this sector as Finland, there would be $ CAN 1.7 billion available per year for liberal education. Figures aside, one of the serious flaws with the Canadian report is the total lack of any analysis of the link between funding regime and participation patterns.

Conclusion

In this paper we have reflected on why CONFINTEA VI seems to have lacked the capacity to stimulate a pan-Canadian debate or maintained the political momentum for ALE that was generated at earlier conferences. Our analysis focused on two partly overlapping explanatory circumstances. First, in contrast to the situation in the 1960s and 1970s, UNESCO seems to have lost its capacity to manufacture the "common sense" of society, and in Canada at least, its agenda can no longer be

taken for granted in governing national approaches to educational reform. Instead, the "OECD approach" has now achieved primacy in Canada's increasingly dominant neoliberal political climate. Second, what took place in Canada has to be understood in the steady weakening of the Canadian ALE movement over the past two decades. Thus, a lack of national infrastructure of ALE made it difficult, if not impossible, to initiate the process necessary to fulfil UNESCO's aspirations for CONFINTEA.

Our comparative reading of the Canadian CONFINTEA report reveals five significant findings. First, the report reflects a laissez-faire attitude of governments toward adult education and there is no sense of urgency to create a mechanism for a coherent approach to ALE. Second, ALE tends to be subsumed under a general postsecondary umbrella and therefore disappears as a separate policy issue. Third, the Canadian report does not reflect an ability to engage in a discussion on how different policy levers can be applied to drive ALE in ways that would support governments' broader goals. Fourth, while the international discourse on ALE is shifting from exclusively addressing the role of ALE for the economy, the Canadian discourse seems to be more or less stuck in an economistic paradigm. Fifth, Canada appears to lack the structures and ability to engage in, let alone generate, a comprehensive national debate on ALE.

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