

**Thematic issue of RELA:  
30 years of research on adult education, 30 years of ESREA**

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The European society for research on the education of adults (ESREA) was created late in 1991 in a time when Europe was drastically changing. Former states controlled by the Soviet Union had freed themselves. The Berlin wall had been torn down. War was raging in what was then Yugoslavia. The 1980s in Western Europe had also been a time of dramatic political and cultural change with the shift to what is now called neoliberalism. Adult education in those days, as often, played an important role in many people's lives, trying to make sense of these changes. And researchers interested in adult education in Europe were, through the initiative of ESREA, offered a space to meet colleagues from all across Europe.

29 years later Europe has witnessed an extended financial crisis and the so-called 'migration' crisis without really being able to overcome the underlying causes. There is – fortunately – deep popular concern about precarity and growing inequality. But there is also a growing distrust in institutions and right-wing extremist parties have gained momentum across many countries in Europe. This year, 2020, the spread of Covid-19 has posed Europe, and the entire world, one of the greatest challenges in modern times. Once again, adult education may have an important role to play, supporting people in different strands of life, and in handling changing life circumstances.

The exact date is debatable and different between countries, but mainly in the 1960s and 1970s a new field of research emerged in the social sciences, in line with the growing recognition of adult education as a field of practice and a domain of policy making. In some cases, it was a kind of applied psychology aimed at improving teaching practices. In other contexts, it became codified as a new discipline dealing with adult education called andragogy (Knowles, 1980; Savićević, 1999). The scholarly work then predominantly focused on the history and ideas of adult education in the context of social movements and local communities, such as cultural associations, workers' movements, folk high schools, etc. Adult education gradually gained new societal significance, influencing the international policy agendas, while taking up positions in line with UNESCO and the Council of Europe, and promoting the cause of enlightenment and the extension of democracy (Rubenson, 1996; Salling Olesen, 2006). At a later stage, new areas of education and training popped up as a response to societal needs and new cultural initiatives engendered diverging fields of practice - community education, popular/cultural education, further and higher education, vocational training and workplace learning. Much of this research was R&D, applied research supporting and evaluating labour market and social intervention. ESREA included these intellectual strands but also introduced new types of research emerging

from the field of practice and in close connection with societal issues. Sometimes such research may have been parochial and limited by short range interests and limited outlook. But most of it engaged in social change, gender issues and similar broad political issues, with a generally critical view to societal environments.

The neo-liberal dominance in the overall political climate from 1990's onwards has privileged general policy agendas that prioritized concepts and practices of lifelong learning, thereby increasingly subordinating adult and continuing education to pressures of economic competitiveness, to labour market demands and to a narrow-minded concept of competence development (Nicoll & Salling Olesen, 2013). As the field of adult education and training has broadened and diversified and was no longer primarily based in social movements and classical popular/liberal adult education, the research field also developed more independently, recruiting new cohorts of researchers without any background in adult education practices, and drawing both on new research paradigms and the traditional discipline of education. As a consequence, practice and research have moved apart. Today it is also difficult to overview or define a practice field of adult and continuing education.

Alongside the rapid growth of the whole university sector, the influx of a new type of students, in combination with their political radicalization in the 1960s and 1970s, provoked an increased use of hermeneutic, phenomenological and critical perspectives. This development also paved the way for qualitative research methods that did not have much legitimacy and scientific status right from the start (see e.g. Larsson, 2006). In terms of methodologies qualitative methods have long been dominant: biography and life history focusing on the adult learner, field work and ethnographic studies focusing on cultural milieus but also institutions, critical discourse analysis unveiling power relations. Meanwhile, the research field of adult (and continuing) education and adult learning has developed into a rather multidisciplinary domain of the social sciences. At the same time also the institutional frameworks have developed in diverse ways. In several countries existing institutional seats of adult education research and scholarship have been integrated in traditional (school) pedagogy institutions, or the other way round in organization and management institutions.

The theoretical interests and methodological expertise that has come to dominate adult education research since its emergence, connect with wider trends in society and within the social sciences and humanities at large. Much of what has dominated this field in recent times seem related to broader currents in the post-war era. The political importance of the lifelong learning agenda has now also materialized in research that – similarly to the education research – is focused on large scale surveillance and monitoring of policy initiatives (see e.g. *Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, Tables of results*, 2016; *Third Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: The Impact of Adult Learning and Education on Health and Well-Being; Employment and the Labour Market; and Social, Civic and Community Life*, 2016)

The debates about the sovereign epistemological status of the field have almost disappeared. Previously there were discussions and debates on the status of the field, where some argued that adult education should develop its own theories and

methodologies with the concept of ‘andragogy’ as an expression of that ambition (Knowles, 1980; Pöggeler, 1957). However, today this discussion might seem rather obsolete as many scholars suggest that the field is inherently interdisciplinary and pluralistic (see e.g. Fejes & Salling Olesen, 2010; Hake, 1992; Rubenson, 2000), while others stick to the idea of andragogy (see e.g. Popovic & Reischmann, 2017).

Against this backdrop, ESREA is to become 30 years old. Since its birth, the Society has evolved into an important place for researchers, not only across Europe, but also from the world beyond, to meet, discuss and debate adult education research as well as practice. Each three years ESREA hosts a big triennial research conferences, which have been analysed (e.g. Käßplinger, 2015). Today, twelve research networks are active under the ESREA umbrella. They meet at conferences, exchange result findings through papers, presentations, books and journal articles. They deal with a wide variety of topics related to adult education practices such as gender, work, globalization, migration, access to education, life histories, professional development, transformative learning, histories, policies, ageing and democratic citizenship. Through their activities they have further developed the scene of adult education research, contributed to the development and refinement of research methodologies, stimulated young researchers to find inspiration in international contacts and helped to improve the quality of adult education research. They have inscribed themselves in dominant research traditions but have definitely also contributed to the renewal of theoretical approaches and methodologies. Part of this story has already been told a few years ago (Nicoll, Biesta, & Morgan-Klein, 2014). It presents an open range of diverse contradictory developments after the millennium.

RELA would like to celebrate the anniversary of ESREA with an issue that reflects on the developments and contradictions mentioned above. Therefore, we invite researchers to contribute to the analysis of the position of adult education research in connection with societal transformations, with policy developments, with changes in the field of practice, with epistemological and methodological renewals, etc. On the one hand, we address researchers of the different ESREA networks. Their contributions could deepen and broaden the debate on adult education research, while referring to the experiences and insights coming from their own network activities. On the other hand, we address all researchers interested in practices of adult education and lifelong learning in Europe and beyond. Contributions should not strictly be confined to the domain of adult and continuing education as a well-defined story. We would rather welcome analysis and debate about the relations within and beyond what would usually be understood as adult education research. We also invite non-European researchers to compare their academic societies with ESREA.

It is of course very simplified, but we can imagine the horizon of the coming issue by means of the classical triple helix representing three intertwined or rather entangled dimensions of the field:

- The materiality of adult education and learning practices, and the practitioners – professionals as well as volunteer’s desires, ideas and engagements
- The theoretical, methodological and practical strategies of researchers
- The wider societal context for adult learning provided by socio-economic and power relations, markets, cultural identifications and political institutions

We see these as “trialogic” dimensions in almost any concrete development, although with variable significance.

### Invitation for papers

For this issue of RELA, we welcome contributions that explore relations across those dimensions, without being confined to them. Both empirical and theoretical papers are welcome. Papers could deal with (but not limited to):

- Changing patterns in terms of one of the three dimensions of the triple helix
- Interactions and tensions between two or three of those dimensions
- Elaborate on central theories and/or methodologies being used within the field
- Papers that deal with the role of ESREA in the development/changes in the field. Perspectives oriented towards history and/or present state and/or future prospects are welcome.”
- Papers as per above could relate to either more general changes (across Europe and beyond) as well as related to more local changes (for example in a specific country).

Papers should be submitted through the online system no later than 30th of April 2021.

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