

## Higher education supporting the development of adult learning and education: Examples, experiences, expectations

Le istituzioni di Higher education promuovono l'apprendimento e l'educazione degli adulti: esempi, esperienze, aspettative

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### Abstract

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The article looks at global, regional, national and local dimensions in a diverse setting of the interplay of governmental, university and civil society partners. Higher education (HE) is called to support the recent discussions on the importance of adult learning and education (ALE) within lifelong learning. Therefore, during the Adult Education Academy (AEA) on international and comparative studies which met in 2024 at University of Würzburg for the 11th year as a study opportunity for PhD and Master students as well as practitioners, the authors agreed to contribute this paper to examine thematic areas related to global policy recommendations that strengthen the relationship between HE and ALE in different forms. Findings should lead to a better understanding of ALE enabling the acquisition of skills for personal fulfilment and social enlightenment.

**Keywords:** comparison and cooperation; global frameworks; logic of action; third mission; professionalization and institutionalization.

### Sintesi

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L'articolo esamina le dimensioni globale, regionale, nazionale e locale in un contesto diversificato di interazione tra partner governativi, universitari e della società civile. L'HE è chiamata a supportare il recente dibattito sull'importanza dell'apprendimento e dell'educazione degli adulti (EA). Pertanto, durante l'Adult Education Academy (AEA) sugli studi internazionali e comparativi, riunitasi nel 2024 all'Università di Würzburg come opportunità di studio per dottorandi, studenti e professionisti, gli autori hanno concordato di contribuire alla stesura di questo articolo con la finalità di esaminare temi relativi alle raccomandazioni delle politiche globali che rafforzano il rapporto tra HE e AE. I risultati dovrebbero portare a un migliore riconoscimento dell'AE come mezzo per l'acquisizione di competenze utili alla realizzazione personale e alla crescita sociale.

**Parole chiave:** comparazione e cooperazione; prospettive globali; logica dell'azione; terza missione; professionalizzazione e istituzionalizzazione.

## 1. Introduction

Institutionalization and professionalization of ALE is a growing concern for governmental, university and civil society actors. The team of authors share joint experiences in working together during the Adult Education Academy (AEA) on international and comparative studies as an opportunity for PhD and Master students and practitioners. During the AEA 2024 the authors agreed to continue and deepen the exchange and contribute a paper to this Special Issue of Form@re which will be looking at thematic areas which may best be described by the following questions which are at the same time presented in a sequence guiding through the article:

- What are current global policy recommendations that strengthen the relationship between HE and ALE?
- How can the professionalization of ALE benefit from applying the logic of action framework?
- Why is international and comparative adult education helpful for students and practitioners?
- Which are the advantages for students and universities to engage in double degree programs?
- Which are the potential avenues for the implementation of the third mission for universities?
- How can university continuing education networks share experiences on national, regional and international levels?
- What are convincing arguments to follow on the expectations of a university to start ALE programs?
- Are there any findings that could lead to recommendations for providers and in turn to improvements for adult learners?

Based on examples, experiences and expectations of colleagues involved in these areas through their universities the attempt will be made to come up with findings which may lead to further research and development of ALE as a profession, a field of study and as a sub-sector of the education system – to strengthen the future of ALE in the perspective of lifelong learning, enabling the acquisition of skills for personal fulfilment and social enlightenment.

## 2. Global recommendations on ALE and HE

Lifelong learning (LLL) as the leading paradigm for the development of education has been strengthened by global meetings, reports and recommendations during the last fifty years (Yang & Valdés-Cotera, 2011). LLL includes early childhood education, schooling, vocational training, HE and various adult education. Unesco's 2022 document claims that "adult education is part of the right to education and crucial for realizing of all human rights" (UIL, 2022a, n. x, p. 15). Signposts and milestones in the development of ALE have been deeply studied, discussed in the perspective of learning from the past for the future (Hinzen, Slowey, & Khau, 2024). Recently the role of ALE and HE has been considered central in advancing social justice aspirations (Slowey, Hinzen, Omolewa, & Osborne, 2023). The interconnectedness between global, regional, national and local perspectives is understandable through some key documents.

The Faure Report titled "Learning to Be" (Faure et al., 1972) emphasized LLL, and some

twenty-five years later the Delors Report “Learning – the treasure within” (Delors et al, 1996) was again strong on LLL. It influenced the EU’s “Memorandum of Lifelong Learning” (2000), and some of the follow-up EU documents” (Hinzen, 2011). Just recently Unesco finalized a new document on “Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education” (ICFE, 2021).

In 2009 the Unesco World Conference on Adult Education CONFINTEA VI (Conférence internationale sur l’éducation des adultes) met in Belém and the “Belem Framework for Action (BFA)” defined priorities for ALE across policy; governance; financing; participation, inclusion and equity; quality (UIL, 2010). The World Education Forum set the goal of inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, with targets such as ensuring equal access to education and increasing relevant skills for employment (Unesco, 2015).

The full document later was included into the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as SDG4 Education (Elfert, 2019), important also for the implementation of all the other sixteen SDG (Schweighöfer, 2019). Bringing the perspectives of the BFA and SDG4 together Unesco (2016) adopted a new “Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education”. Related reflections were shared more in-depth in a new round of relevant conferences for HE and ALE (Benavot, Hoppers, Lockhart, & Hinzen, 2022) such as:

- the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (2022), when the development of a roadmap “Beyond Limits: New ways to reinvent higher education” highlighted the active contribution of all HEIs for a sustainable world development through education, research, and engagements with local, national, regional, and global communities (Unesco, 2022);
- CONFINTEA VII (2022) when governments, civil society and academia adopted the “Marrakech Framework for Action, MFA”. It emphasized multi-sectoral support for ALE governance and committed to professionalizing adult educators (UIL, 2022a).

This important aspect of institutionalization and professionalization of ALE had been asked for by the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) already in their contribution to the Futures of Education Report (ICFE) in 2020, calling for strengthened structures, improved education, training, and employment conditions for adult educators (ICAE, 2020). UIL’s publications further underscore the need for specialized centers to implement LLL in HE (UIL, 2022b; 2023a; 2023b)

All these findings show the high relevance for HE towards support to ALE in its need for further institutionalization and professionalization, in building ALE as a sub-sector of the education system, having local centers as its base, and as a profession with professionals and providers as well as an academic discipline which can support more strongly personal fulfilment and social enlightenment. This article can be seen as a contribution to this debate involving practitioners and researchers from a variety of backgrounds and countries.

### **3. Adult educators: understanding their work and the logic of action**

The field of adult continuing education is highly heterogeneous. Zarifis and Papadimitriou (2015) identify four main domains in European adult learning education: vocational education and training, second chance education, social cohesion, and liberal education. Activities are related to planning, organising and designing teaching and learning

processes. Many others, such as guidance, curriculum design based on ICT, social and cultural mediation have been arising from a wide range of jobs.

These activities allow for the development of a diverse set of professional skills (Guimarães & Alves, 2017; Mikulec, 2019), requiring a combination of professional, interpersonal, personal, and didactic competencies, as well as theoretical and practical expertise. This preparation empowers adult learners to deal with diverse social group needs (Research voor Beleid, 2010), facilitating programs that enhance personal adaptation and optimize learning for work and other purposes (Lima & Guimarães, 2011).

The training of adult educators has been framed by the academic and professional discourses on professionalization and professionalism, focusing on the needs of heterogeneous practice domains and the development of professional competencies. This requires knowledge of ALE theories, adult continuing education requirements, and current policies and social conditions. Professionalism refers to educators' experiences and professional growth, influenced by organizational and social frameworks.

According to Freidson (2001) there are three logics of action for adult educators:

1. Professionalism: it emphasizes educators' autonomy, their expertise for organizing, planning, implementing, and evaluating adult continuing education;
- Bureaucracy: it comprises standardization and organizational norms, imposed by public, professional or private bodies. This logic is important for public funding and establishing quality management systems in the continuing education market;
3. Economy: it addresses market requirements, competition, and the supply and demand for adult education offerings.

Freidson (2001) considers these logics as ideal-types, because deductively and theoretically build, but often overlap in practice, requiring educators to negotiate and reconcile these different demands. The visible increasing of bureaucratic and market logics highlights the importance of quality management, marketing, and public relations in professional work.

Professional action takes place within organizational structures and societal conditions, impacting work development and professional growth (Egetenmeyer, Breitschwerdt, & Lechner, 2019). Adult educators act within specific contexts influenced by various organizational, national, and international frameworks. These contexts lead to *hybrid professionalism* (Noordegraaf, 2015), where educators must continuously balance economic, bureaucratic, and professional requirements. This emphasises the challenges in their domains of work and the need for ongoing reflection, considering structural, organizational, and biographical aspects of educators' careers such as academic background, further education, occupational milestones, or competence development.

#### **4. Comparative and international ALE studies in Würzburg**

Adult education is an increasingly international field. Research and, in particular, adult education practice is cooperating across national borders (Egetenmeyer, 2017). Internationalization (Robson & Wihlborg, 2019) entails new requirements for professional work in ALE field. Professionalization processes can provide well-qualified staff who can adapt to changing international conditions. International higher education programmes offer students the chance to prepare for an international professional field (Boffo & Gioli, 2017).

The Adult Education Academy “International and comparative studies in adult education

and lifelong learning” (AEA) is an international programme of the University of Würzburg, in cooperation with 16 partners worldwide, targeting master’s and doctoral students as well as practitioners in adult education. Established in 2014 as an ERASMUS program involving five European countries and 51 master’s students, the AEA has developed steadily and has welcomed participants from all over the world (Universität Würzburg, Professur für Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung, 2023a). Additionally, the programme has continued to develop thematically and content-wise as part of COMPALL and INTALL and through the annual evaluation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the AEA implemented a hybrid model, allowing participants to join virtually (Danquah, Beu, & Egetenmeyer, 2023) or in person, thus easing access and integrating with participants’ work and family structures.

Embedded in the master’s programme “Educational Sciences” and the double-degree master’s programme “Management of Educational Services, Adult and Continuing Education”, which was newly launched in the winter semester 2023/24, the programme is divided into four phases (Figure. 1):

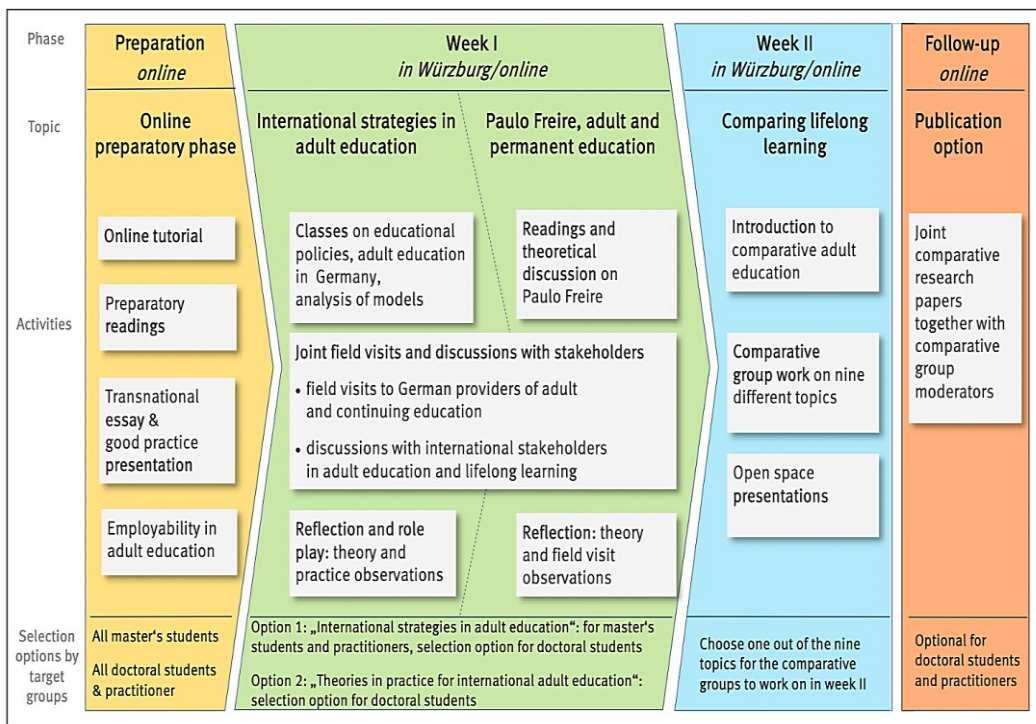


Figure 1: Structure of the adult Education Academy (Universität Würzburg - Professur für Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung, 2023b, p.4)

- Online preparation (1): from November to January, participants engage with basic content that is built upon in the following phase of the programme;
- Two Intensive Weeks On-Site in Würzburg: the first week (2) focuses on “International strategies in adult education” or “Paulo Freire, adult and permanent education,” with insights into adult education organizations. The second week (3) engage participants in comparing themes in adult education, such as “Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development in a LLL perspective.” Practitioners share their experiences, enriching the comparative groups discussions



with international practice insights;

- Follow-Up Phase (4): doctoral students, with moderator support, prepare a paper for an international peer-reviewed journal.

How is the AEA supporting the professionalization of adult and continuing education? The AEA promotes professionalization in adult education through an international network developed with universities and adult education organizations. In 2023 alone, 23 different countries were represented and less than half of these can be assigned to Europe. Such a diverse network, is beneficial for early career researchers, promoting international interaction and professional development for master students in AE (Staab, 2023). The program also supports joint academic standards in AE, requiring participants' preparation to earn grades that certify module completion. Furthermore, the preparation process for publication in a peer-reviewed journal meets international standards, with the essential moderators' guidance. The AEA connects research and practice (Beu, Leibinger, Rößner, & Egetenmeyer, 2023), offering insights into different fields through fields visits and international practical presentations.

The blended-learning approach is an offer for the international adult and continuing education community. It also provides academic training opportunities in AE for participants from countries where they might be unavailable, and practitioners can participate in this short on-site programme. The AEA, through the international insights develop knowledge in adult education research and practices, enhancing intercultural communication and interaction (Egetenmeyer, 2017).

## **5. The Italian AE system and the double degree of the universities of Padua and Würzburg.**

European policy considers adult education as crucial for creating a resilient, socially just, and inclusive global society (Council of EU, 2021). The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2020) recognizes the right to quality and inclusive education and lifelong learning for all, aiming for 60% of adults to engage in training every year by 2030.

The Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030 (European Council, 2021) highlights five priority areas for Member States to further develop adult learning:

- **Governance:** it enhances a holistic adult education system involving various stakeholders and coordinating across national, regional, and local levels. In Italy, five Territorial Networks for LLL (*Reti Territoriali per l'Apprendimento Permanente – RETAP*) involve universities, business organizations, and local authorities to promote best practices and effective governance models;
- **Supply and Take-up of Lifelong Learning Opportunities:** this underlines the importance of lifelong learning awareness, recognition of prior learning, and funding at all levels. In Italy, Provincial Centers for Adult Education (CPIAs) provide educational paths to improve adult education levels and act as regional research centers (Centro Regionale di Ricerca, Sperimentazione e Sviluppo - CRRS&S) managed by a scientific committee of which universities are members. CPIAs design customized learning paths and have implemented prior learning recognition since 2012;
- **Accessibility and Flexibility:** this emphasizes the character of flexible adult

learning in terms of time, place, and resources. Financial incentives and micro-credentials can widen learning opportunities. CPIAs provides free, flexible learning paths accessible to all individuals over 16. The flexibility can be identified in the tailored learning paths and in the evening learning classes provided from CPIAs (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito - MIM<sup>1</sup>);

- *Quality, Equity, Inclusion, and Success*: it guarantees a high level of professionalization for adult educators. In Italy, P.A.I.D.E.I.A. (Plan of Activities for the Innovation of Adult Education) updates the skills of CPIAs' staff. Universities act a crucial role in developing educators' competencies in adult learning, teaching methods, and digital skills (Boffo, 2020; Fedeli & Frison, 2018), and are working on providing training for micro-credentials and continuing education.
- *Green and Digital Transitions*: this focuses on adult educators' professional development and the acquisition of sustainability and digital skills. In Italy, educational institutions enhance sustainability and digital skills, and universities are implementing courses on these themes to promote adult educators' professionalism.

In Italy, following the need for further efforts to enhance adult learning education universities are actively contributing through their engagement in relevant policies and initiatives like the University of Padua's and Wuerzburg's commitment to international professionalization. Their Joint Degree is a pioneering program, launched in 2024, and it is the first of its kind in Italy and Germany. It offers students a master's degree in "Management of Educational Services and Continuing Training" emphasizing education with an enriched, international environment. This innovative learning path includes a period of attendance at the University of Padua and a period of attendance in Würzburg. Its innovative design foresees a blended-type course, with the presence of classroom activities (50%) and online activities (50%) in Italian and in English for each course of the study plan, including mandatory in-person workshops. In the end students obtain two national degree qualifications issued by the universities involved.

The double degree program offers unique advantages for professionals in adult education and lifelong learning:

- comprehensive understanding: the double degree allows educators to gain thorough understanding of adult education theories, and insights into adult learning theories, instructional design, and engagement strategies;
- enhanced pedagogical skills: educators with a background in both adult education and lifelong learning possess a versatile set of pedagogical skills suited to a variety of educational settings, from formal institutions to community centers and online platforms;
- ability to address diverse learners' needs: the program equips educators with the sensitivity and skills to design inclusive education that is responsive to diverse needs;
- leadership and policy development: graduates are well-positioned to take on leadership roles in educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and government agencies;

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<sup>1</sup> Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito: <https://www.miur.gov.it/tematiche-e-servizi/istruzione-degli-adulti/apprendimento-permanente>.

- innovation in educational delivery: the combined expertise in AE and LLL fosters innovative approaches that leverage technology and flexible learning pathways;
- advancement of Lifelong Learning: professionals with a double degree contribute to the advancement of LLL through insights, research, scholarship, and best practices.

In conclusion, a double degree in adult education and lifelong learning prepares professionals to meet the complex needs of adult learners. By combining a deep understanding of adult learning principles with innovative approaches to education, these educators play a critical role in facilitating lifelong learning. Their work benefits both individual learners and the development of more educated, adaptable, and resilient communities.

## **6. The third mission in HE: The valorization of LLL at University of Padua**

The third mission in HE extends the role of universities and colleges beyond teaching and research and encompasses a set of activities aimed at community engagement, societal development, and lifelong learning. In Italy, the third mission of HEs includes community service, knowledge dissemination, and contributions to social, economic, and cultural development realized through technology transfer, innovation, entrepreneurship, public engagement, and vocational training. It emphasizes their responsibility to contribute to solving real-world problems and to support community development. “The effectiveness of the third mission initiatives is linked to the regional context in which the university operates, and therefore adequate contextualization of the phenomena is required to avoid errors in extending findings internationally” (Di Bernardino & Corsi, 2018, p. 180). Barra and Zotti (2017) studied a sample of Italian public universities and showed the positive effect of Italian graduates on the regions where the universities operate.

The University of Padua exemplifies the integration of continuing education and lifelong learning within higher education’s third mission of social impact:

- firstly, it offers General Courses worth 6 ECTs (42 hours) that are interdisciplinary in nature, accessible to the entire academic community as well as citizens. Among these, the courses “Gender, Knowledge, and Social Justice”, and “Peace and Non-violent Transformation of Conflicts” exemplify the university’s commitment to addressing crucial societal issues, inviting dialogue among citizens, students, and academic personnel;
- secondly, it focuses on continuing education offer for employees and professionals at affordable rates, enhancing knowledge at local and national levels. The University of Padua allows its alumni to enroll in one course per year for free, ensuring continued engagement with the institution. The courses and the after-degree programs are specialized and aligned with rapidly evolving sectors, with individuals’ upskilling and reskilling needs;
- thirdly, the University of Padova offers continuing education programs certified with micro-credentials and open badges. Micro-credentials are particularly valuable for fostering lifelong learning, as they certify the outcomes of smaller, targeted learning activities, facilitating the flexible acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies.

In conclusion, the integration of the third mission with adult and continuing education initiatives represents a holistic approach to education that extends beyond the confines of



traditional academic pursuits. By fostering lifelong learning, these efforts help individuals adapt to changes, pursue new opportunities, and contribute more effectively to society. They also allow higher education institutions to play a more dynamic role in societal advancement by directly addressing the needs and challenges of the community and the economy. It reflects a commitment to lifelong learning, community engagement, and the practical application of knowledge for societal benefit. These efforts are crucial for fostering an educated, skilled, and adaptable population capable of navigating the complexities of the modern world.

## **7. Role of universities continuing education networks**

Universities have a special role in addressing issues of quality development in ALE. National networks of university continuing education have been integrated into the European Universities Continuing Education Network (Eucen website, <https://eucen.eu/policy/national-networks/>) and provide an effective ground to both promoting collaborative practices in ALE where higher education institutions play a profound role and researching ALE trends and issues with concerns to relevant theories and practices, to project-based innovative actions and also to apparent Unesco recommendations on the roles of higher education in the promotion and development of adult and lifelong learning. (UIL, 2023a; 2023b).

Eucen addresses some key issues for lifelong learning at, in and through academic communities. Eucen is demonstrating its concerns towards digital learning, professional learning, responsible learning, and inclusive learning. Its project-based activities call for international university collaborations to research, develop and innovate sensitive approaches towards adult and lifelong learning by discovering responsible orientations of universities. The third mission of HE results in advanced programmes for vulnerable adult learners, equitable learning offers with inclusive settings and partnerships with several stakeholders in community with practical claims upon fostering both participation and performance in learning referring to European lifelong learning initiatives for skills developments and sustainable futures.

Eucen is organising its annual University Lifelong Learning Conference dedicated to a specific theme around learning and, accordingly, 2024 has taken Eucen to the University of Cork which hosted the Global Lifelong Learning Week on “University Lifelong Learning leading positive change in challenging times”. Eucen also has a special set of publications in university lifelong learning (see Eucen website), one is the Position Papers of Eucen to influence policy making in Europe upon adult and lifelong learning, and the other is the European Journal of University Lifelong Learning to offer place and visibility for analytical papers on lifelong learning at universities and on university lifelong learning actions, practices with research focuses.

National networks in university lifelong learning and continuing education also focus on matters of ALE in the scope of policies, strategies and governmental initiatives and may be influenced by policy focuses of the New European Agenda on Adult Learning (Council of European Ministers, 2021) and by the MFA of CONFINTEA VII (UIL, 2022a) in the future. National networks highlight the involvements of universities in the development of adult learning as a profession through degree programmes in adult education, doctoral programmes in educational science with attention to ALE and, accordingly, special continuing education programmes for educators and trainers working with adult learners

through mentoring, guidance, counselling, and facilitation activities.

Another layer for universities in national contexts is to organise annual national university lifelong learning conferences with special attention to adult learning. For example, the Hungarian Universities' LLL Network (MELLearn, <http://mellearn.hu/>) has organised, in the last ten years, a number of such conferences dedicated to trends in adult and lifelong learning and channelled into a series of e-books. Several other thematic events help colleagues at universities having been engaged in research, development and innovations for quality adult learning to collect and share experience around practice-based activities through intensive workshops, seminars and other digitally supported virtual programmes in webinars, podcasts as thematic events.

Such examples resonate the fact that universities can effectively react to upcoming issues with strong influence on ALE, therefore, collect examples of good practice and, moreover, rely on quality-centred claims to develop ALE with relevant programmes, tools, methods and frames. Such orientation is reflected by the University of Pécs to have joined EBSN, the European Basic Skills Network in the formation of digitally constructed MOOCs in Professional Development Series to help educators developing basic skills of adults collect some good knowledge and understanding practice when entering the field with necessary engagement and concerns (EBSN PDS project at <http://basicskills.eu>).

One must underline that a further specific international initiative also influences ALE with incoming reflections and actions from universities. This is the Unesco initiative of learning cities which influence and claim HE involvements from local to global (see UIL website). The formation of learning cities and learning communities across Europe reflects local, regional and national contexts into which universities have helped to widen inclusive, learner-centred practices and concerns based on collaborations with a wide range of stakeholders to balance the economic with more social (Németh, 2022).

## **8. Strengthening ALE professionalism in Palestine**

For several years now there are participants from Palestine involved in the AEA. They are mostly coming as experienced practitioners, and from the partnership of DVV International and its Regional Office based in Jordan. In the discussions with Palestinian partners the idea evolved to strengthen ALE professionalization through a degree programme on university level.

The Palestinian educational stakeholders, represented by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, MoHESR, the UN, and NGOs, have committed jointly to improve the quality of learning outcomes and reduce the socioeconomic, gender and geographic disparities in educational achievement among Palestinians, in line with the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (UN, 2015). Dar Al-Kalima University (DAK), as part of this commitment, in cooperation with DVV International have initiated interdisciplinary programmes on ALE in arts and culture, aiming at educating the future generations of creative leaders through an innovative approach that is supported by a culture of entrepreneurship, research, civic engagement, and heritage promotion.

In Palestine, the concept of ALE is commonly understood to be illiteracy education for adults. Also, the non-formal education has not functioned effectively in the Palestinian educational institutions. Fannoun (2014) stated that before 1997 there were very few adult education efforts, apart from literacy campaigns, which were handled by educational NGOs

and the civil society in general. MoHESR attempted with some NGOs to incorporate adult education planning with curriculum development. Yet, the best way to enhance awareness of and build positive trends towards ALE is through initiating an educational program at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, where learners' skills on the educational and psychological levels are developed, enabling them fully to perform their tasks, in a way that corresponds with the circumstances and reality of Palestinian society.

Field (2009) argues that programs can enhance participants' self-esteem and social networks, improving their overall social and psychological well-being, especially when they concentrate on arts and culture, which DAK University specializes in. Given that ALE contributes to transforming conflicts and promotes sustainable peace, Palestine shall benefit enormously, especially that it faces several political and social conflicts. Hence, an ALE programme can directly contribute to the reduction of violence through conflict transformation by implementing emancipatory pedagogic practices that relate to social and political issues (Schweighofer, 2019).

An obstacle that hinders the development of an ALE education programme in Palestine is the lack of specialized trainers in this field, the lack of adult education methods, and the scarcity of qualified professionals to lead institutions and ALE programmes. The proposed ALE programme will target diploma and bachelor's students, who are keen to develop their competencies and who shall be working in ALE institutions, both governmental and NGO's. This programme shall also provide the ALE community centers with assistance in the form of educational support and services, in accordance with international standards.

After formulating the strategies and justifications that reflect the potential for establishing an academic ALE programme in Palestine, DAK University and the DVV International commissioned a professional academic consultant, to do an economic and socio-cultural feasibility study for the operating an ALE programme at DAK University, focusing on arts and culture. The study found about 80% of the surveyed believed in the necessity to have this new specialization at the university for educational diversity. However, 39% were uncertain to study it, due to unfamiliarity with the concept of ALE. This indicates that there is an interest to learn more about the ALE, as a new academic field that creates further diversity in the educational programmes available. On the other hand, the survey showed that about 90% of the respondents are concerned about the idea of partnership with local and international academic institutions to foster the sustainability of the programme and to share experience. In addition, the study also listed the main competencies that could be acquired by the ALE programme, based on respondents' priorities, including personal and professional development, community participation, vocational training, cultural awareness, citizenship education and finally art education (Khawaja, 2021).

The question that remains is whether it should be a training course for trainers at the community centres, or a post-graduate program for bachelor graduates. For sustaining the validity of the ALE education program in Palestine, the most important tasks that need to be done are raising the local community's awareness regarding its importance, as well as marketing and the dissemination of information to the Palestinian local community in relation to ALE. As such, structuring an educational program for ALE will contribute effectively to the socio-cultural transformation of the local communities.

## **9. Conclusions**

There is a wide diversity between universities which have quite advanced studies in ALE

and those where the academic leadership still has to be convinced of the relevance of ALE as a profound academic discipline. It may also be a contributing and decisive factor if the state of ALE and its support through policy, legislation and financing through Government is considered. The examples, experiences and expectations chosen and shown above indicate to some extent where ALE is coming closer to what the global recommendations are calling for.

In this respect it has been an interesting journey of the team involved to look more carefully at the contributions which HE is making in the different countries to the diverse field of ALE. Having a comparative lens on, it was obvious that the areas in which ALE is involved (Großlütchen, Belzer, Ertner, & Yasukawa, 2023), and the levels of achievements have potentials for further joint research and development.

ALE can play a critical role for personal fulfilment and social enlightenment, and HE can be strong support in this development of ALE as a sub-system of education. Universities and their third mission can help in facilitating lifelong learning, personal development, and the acquisition of new skills for adults. ALE in HE encompasses a wide range of learning formats, from formal degree and post-degree and programs to informal learning opportunities, aimed at adults who wish to continue their education beyond the traditional schooling age. ALE has the potential as a key to enhancing employability, adapting to changing labor market demands, and promoting personal fulfilment. It supports the idea that learning is a continuous process, vital for personal and professional development at any stage of life.

Continuing education specifically focuses on providing learning opportunities for individuals who are already part of the workforce or have completed their initial education. It includes professional development courses, certification programs, and vocational training designed to help individuals keep up with the evolving demands of their professions, develop new competencies, and advance in their careers. Continuing education and various forms of university lifelong learning activities are essential both to workforce development, economic competitiveness and to social cohesion by enabling individuals to remain relevant and adaptive in a fast-changing world with better skills and extended knowledge in becoming active citizens in their communities.

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