Adult Education

What is adult education?

The 1997 Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning, an outcome document of the 5th International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), defined adult education as the “entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society”. Adult education takes different forms (formal, non-formal, informal). It is provided in different places and set-ups (community learning centres, folk high schools, on-the-job, evening classes, etc.), for different purposes (general, vocational) and at different levels from primary to post-doctoral (adult basic education, continuing education, higher education, etc). The term “adult education” has in recent years often been replaced by “adult learning” putting more emphasis on the demand than on the provision. This distinction is, however, debatable and often a compromise is struck by combining and using simultaneously the two terms as adult learning and education (ALE).

One contentious issue is the age limit, since societies have varying notions of adulthood, whether it be from the legal point of view or according to cultural norms. To capture this ambiguity, the phrase “youth and adult education” is increasingly being used in adult education policy documents. The normative stand is to consider adult education as learning and training for those after school age pertaining to the 15+ age group.

The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning summarizes the objectives of youth and adult education as: “to develop the autonomy and the sense of responsibility of people and communities, to reinforce the capacity to deal with the transformations taking place in the economy, in culture and in society as a whole, and to promote coexistence, tolerance and the informed and creative participation of citizens in their communities, in short to enable people and communities to take control of their destiny and society in order to face the challenges ahead”.

Framed in a lifelong learning perspective, adult education is considered as a key component of a holistic and comprehensive educational system. This being so, literacy, which builds the foundation for learning, is part and parcel of adult education to the extent that in some countries adult education is incorrectly reduced to adult literacy or adult basic education. In fact, the strength of adult education is that it covers a wide range of domains in our life (i.e. from basic literacy to work-related concerns to health issues to political developments to environmental problems and to leisure) and takes place in variety of settings from the family, the work place, places of worship and through media.
Why is adult education important?

Access of adults to education and learning is a fundamental aspect of the right to education and facilitates the exercise of the right to participate in political, economic, cultural, artistic and scientific life. The *Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning* looks at adult education as “a powerful concept for fostering ecologically sustainable development, for promoting democracy, justice, gender equity, and scientific, social and economic development, and for building a world in which violent conflict is replaced by dialogue and a culture of peace based on justice. Adult learning can shape identity and give meaning to life.”

Twenty years earlier, the 19th session of the UNESCO General Conference in Nairobi (1976), adopted the recommendations which considered adult education as necessary for “achieving a more rational and more equitable distribution of educational sources between young people and adults, and between different social groups, and of ensuring better understanding and more effective collaboration between the generations and greater political, social and economic equality between social groups and between the sexes”. In 1972, the Third International Conference on Adult Education, held in Tokyo, concluded that adult education should serve and address the marginalized and excluded populations. Indeed the democratizing effects of adult education and learning are possible because it strongly emphasizes participation and puts learners at the centre.

Given the above, it is evident that adult education and learning are key to the attainment of the EFA and MDG goals. Given its thematic coverage, it is an integrated and necessary component of UNLD and DESD.

UNESCO's position statement

The five international conferences on adult education (Elsinore, 1949; Montreal, 1960; Tokyo, 1972; Paris, 1985; Hamburg, 1997) are sources for the key messages UNESCO needs to promote on adult education. More importantly, these are contained in the Recommendations on the Development of Adult Education, which was adopted by the 19th Session of the UNESCO General Conference.

1. Adult education is not an addition but should be an integral part of a country’s national education system. As an integral and organic part of every national system of education, it should receive within the system the attention and economic resources which this status justifies.

2. It is the governments’ responsibility to create the conditions, both financial and administrative, in which satisfactory adult education could be carried out.

3. Active participation of civil society in adult education is essential and therefore should be recognized by governments.

4. As adult education is not limited to the education sector, efforts should be made to ensure collaboration and coordination among all agencies/organizations in all levels.

5. Adult education should address the needs of the marginalized populations. Women are considered to be among the most marginalized.
6. Adult education should be based on the needs of the learners and make use of their different experiences in the development of adult education. Since participation is essential, adult learners should play a key role in all facets of their education and learning.

UNESCO’s actions around the world

- Since 1949 UNESCO has organized a series of five CONFINTEAs, the last one in Hamburg in 1997. The next one will take place in Brazil in 2009. These conferences have helped significantly to strengthen the international adult education community and to serve as platforms to articulate common concerns and to share relevant concepts and practices. The conferences help to foster international exchange on crucial issues and instructive developments in the area of adult education.

- The CONFINTEA process includes intensive preparation on the national, regional and global levels. It entails mandatory reporting by Member States which helps to take stock of the state of the art and relevant trends in adult education from a national, regional and international perspective. Regional reports and a Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) are being prepared in the preparatory process towards CONFINTEA VI.

- Adult Learners’ Week, a recommendation made by CONFINTEA V to celebrate adult learners has become now a worldwide movement taking different innovative forms in some 45 countries

Resources

Websites
ALADIN (Adult Learning Information and Documentation Network):
http://www.unesco.org/education/aladin/
International Council for Adult Education: http://www.ICAE.org/uy/
Regional
European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA): http://www.eaea.org/
Consejo de educación de adultos de América (CEAAL): http://www.ceaal.org/
Centro de Cooperación Regional para la Educación de Adultos en América Latina y el Caribe (CREFAL): http://www.crefal.edu.mx/
Red de educación popular entre mujeres de América Latina y el Caribe:
http://www.repm.org.uy/

Recommended reading
- The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning and the Agenda for the Future:
  http://www.unesco.org/education/UE/confintea/pdf/con5eng.pdf
- Adult learning and the challenges of the 21st century: A series of 29 booklets
documenting workshops held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education 1997 (in English, French and Spanish):
http://www.unesco.org/education/ue/confintea/booklets.html

- Reports on Workshops Held at the CONFINTEA Mid-Term Conference, Bangkok, Thailand, September 2003:
  http://www.unesco.org/education/ue/publications/bangkokpub.shtml
- African Perspectives on Adult Learning:
  http://www.unesco.org/education/ue/publications/apal.shtml and
  http://www.unesco.org/ueil/en/pubs/b_radlafrica.htm#
- Beating the Drums for Attention:
  http://www.unesco.org/ueil/en/pubs/b_mtreducation.htm#
- Finger, Matthias; Asún, José Manuel (2001). Adult education at the crossroads: learning our way out. Leicester, UK, NIACE.