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The Vocational Turn of Adult Education in Denmark – an analysis of adult education policy from the late 1990s

Denmark has a strong and versatile tradition of adult education. Over a long historical period, adult education for public enlightenment and leisure, for continuing study and for vocational and professional competence have been developed, been made part of state policy and been used by citizens. But in recent years the public and political presence of Danish adult education has changed. While education policy issues generally abound in public and political debates, adult education is given much less attention than earlier. In this article, we trace the causes of this and conclude that it reflects a turn towards focusing on vocational types of adult education and a relocation of adult education policy to networks linking the state and the social partners. Drawing on theories of policy streams, policy networks and the competition state, we provide a historical analysis of Danish adult education reforms during the past two decades and document how the vocational turn has manifested itself.

Keywords: adult education policy; vocational education; policy network; competition state; enlightenment

Introduction

In the 1980s, adult education was high on the political agenda in Denmark. The Danish policy was in line with UNESCO's emphasis on learning not only for working but also for living, and the focus was on general learning and enlightenment (called 'folkeoplysning' in Danish) as well as on qualification for the labour market. The 10-point programme of 1984 drew on humanistic ideals and balanced political objectives of democratic citizenship, personal development and (second chance) qualification for continuing education and the labour market (Jensen, Bilgrav-Nielsen, Estrup, & Helveg Petersen, 1984). Adult education was perceived as a public good and a public responsibility. However, when we look at the

period from the late 1990s, we find that adult learning for living and democratic citizenship has become a marginal concern on the political agenda and that adult education is much less visible in public political debate. In this article, we trace Danish adult education policy since the late 1990s in order to shed light on this change.

The interest we pursue here results partly from two previous studies that seemed to show waning public and political awareness of adult education among policy-makers and in the wider public.

In the first study, the media reactions to publication in 2013 of the first national results from the OECD Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) were analysed (Cort & Larson, 2015), on an assumption that a ‘PIAAC-shock’ would be likely, given the history of ‘PISA¹-shocks’ in the previous decade and the strong tradition of adult education in Denmark. However, the study showed that there was only limited public debate about the results. The fact that adult Danes did not perform very well in the test was not related to adult education policy, but to a need for reforming basic schooling, linking the PIAAC results to a major reform of primary and lower secondary school in Denmark in 2014. A preliminary follow-up on the study based on interviews with stakeholders (Cort & Larson, 2016) indicated that PIAAC has not been very influential, neither in the informal networks of employee associations, who clearly have an interest in adult education and training targeted their members, nor in a wider context.²

The second study was a survey of press releases from the Ministry of Children and

¹ Programme for International Student Assessment.

² In the case of the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F), it strengthened their existing strategy on adult literacy and was used as a window of opportunity to push for a strengthening of existing initiatives. However, except for 3F, the organisations do not seem to have used the first PIAAC results to advocate for their adult education agenda.

Teaching and the Ministry for Education and Research from November 2011 to May 2015 (Larsen & Rasmussen 2016), when a coalition-government led by Social Democrats with participation of socialists and social liberals was in power. Press releases are part of the public face of governments; they of course report on what happens in the fields of ministries, but they also signal which news and interpretations the government wants to emphasize. Since both the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals have traditionally been strong proponents of adult education, this theme could have been expected to be well represented. However, the survey showed that it was not.

During the period, the Ministry of Children and Education brought out 210 press releases of which only ten were dealing with different aspects of adult education. The Ministry of Education and Research, which is responsible for adult education at the higher education level, brought out 197 press releases of which only three were about aspects of adult education. In all only three percent of the press releases from the two ministries concerned adult education. In view of the success of the part-time continuing education system in higher education, which has been developed since year 2000, it is striking that the Ministry responsible for this type of adult education only brought out one press release with some relation to this. The emphasis on adult education as part of government policy was very limited.

Seen in the context that agendas, debates and reform initiatives have abounded in Danish primary, youth and higher education, these two studies seem to indicate that political and public interest in adult education is waning. Our preliminary research question for this study thus concerned the reduced public and political visibility of adult education and the possible causes for this. However, during our research we had to modify our initial assumptions. While adult education did in fact seem to draw much less attention in public

debates and the media, the position of adult education on the political agenda had not necessarily been weakened, but rather redefined. In line with developments in other countries (see Tuckett (2017) for the English context) we could identify a drift towards political redefinition of adult education as mainly vocational, providing useful skills for the labour market and thus to be handled as part of labour market policy.

On this background, we ask *how and why has adult education on the Danish political agenda been redefined from a broad concept with strong links to democratic citizenship towards a relatively narrow vocational concept with strong links to labour market policy? Is the reduced public visibility of adult education connected to these processes of redefinition?*

We try to answer these questions through a theoretically informed historical analysis, tracing changes and influences over the last two decades.

Theoretical framework

In the analysis, we draw on concepts developed within three different theoretical frameworks: 1) the concept of the ‘competition state’; 2) the concept of policy networks and its specific manifestation in corporatism; and finally, 3) the concept of policy entrepreneurs.

The competition state

During the last decades, the worldwide changes with increased global interconnectedness, both economically, politically, socially and culturally, have changed the conditions of national policy in many countries. Being a small country, Denmark is no exception to this, and especially the preservation and adaptation of the Danish welfare state has been a concern for Danish governments. In 2005, the Globalisation Council, set down by the then

liberal-conservative government and convened by the prime minister, spelt it out this way:

‘We must assert ourselves in competition on international markets (...).

We run the risk that in the tougher competition we may not be able to uphold our position among the richest countries in the world (...). And we run the risk that globalisation may split up Danish society, because not everyone has the education and the flexibility to do well in the labour market (...). For these reasons we should strengthen our competitive power and our cohesion’ (Danish Globalisation Council 2005, p 5).

This reflects the logic in what political scientists have named ‘the competition state’ (Cerny, 1997, 2010; Pedersen, 2011, 2013). According to Cerny, the ‘competition state’ is closely linked to globalisation. It calls for the state to focus on the development of the political, economic, and cultural institutions that give the country the capacity to achieve socioeconomic success in a global competition. Such institutional competitiveness is seen as increasingly important compared to traditional macroeconomic policies as well as traditional welfare policies. To quote Cerny, there has been a shift towards the role of the state being “the promotion of enterprise, innovation and profitability in both private and public sectors” (Cerny, 1997, p. 260). In pursuing institutional competitiveness, thus, a state will strive to coordinate policies and actors in different areas in the framework of national strategies, emphasizing the ability and motivation of individuals to work. Welfare becomes workfare, defining the role of education as providing the workforce with the competencies needed in the labour market. The competition state approach is strongly present in the mainstream of Danish politics, including education policy (Rasmussen, 2016). One of its impacts seems to be a more ‘neutral’, technical policy discourse. Objectives for welfare and social justice are

not abandoned, but they tend to become less visible, because most of the governmental concerns are about controlling public spending, improving labour supply, and coordinating policies nationally and internationally.

Differing from a traditional nation state with a sovereign government, the political process in the competition state involves not only state actors, but also representatives from the market as well as cultural actors (Cerney, 1997). This leads us to the second theoretical inspiration in this article, policy networks and corporatism³.

Policy networks and corporatism

The study of policy networks was developed in order to capture the impact on political decision-making of the many groups and individuals who, though not part of the traditional political system, nevertheless influence, often significantly, the objectives and the implementation of public policy (Börzel 1997). According to Rhodes, ‘Policy networks are sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared if endlessly negotiated beliefs and interests in public policy making and implementation’ (Rhodes 2008, p 426). Rhodes further emphasise that the different actors are interdependent and that policy is the result of the interaction between them.

In educational research, the concept has generally been used to identify the influence of actors and interests other than those officially recognized in educational practices and policies. For instance, Ball (2012) has used network analysis to demonstrate the complex linkages between educational entrepreneurs, policy think tanks and companies producing educational services in promoting private schooling and other neoliberal policies.

³ Some authors distinguish between traditional corporatism and the neo-corporatism of today. In this article, however, we do not make that distinction.

In this article, we use the concept as an analytical tool, where the focus is on the governance by and through networks involving formal organisations like for instance labour unions and professional societies (Rhodes, 2006).

In the Danish context, there is a long tradition for policy networks involving the social partners (employer and employee organisations) of the labour market. This is a special version of corporatism, where the organisations of employers and trade unions are often consulted – and expect to be consulted – in matters of public policy. It has been institutionalised in for example the composition of commissions responsible for the curriculum of vocational education programmes and the boards of vocational schools. In recent years this tradition has to some degree been eroded (Blom-Hansen, 2000), and important individual companies are sometimes consulted instead of the social partners. However, corporatism is still a key element in Danish education policy networks and as shall be shown in this article, the involvement of the social partners in relation to adult education policy has been strengthened since the 1990s.

In order to better understand the way in which organisations and other actors has been influencing Danish adult education policy either directly through the corporate channels or indirectly, we combined the understanding of policy networks with Kingdon's (1984) and Zahariadis' (2003) concept of policy entrepreneurs in their multiple streams models.

Policy streams and policy entrepreneurs

Multiple streams theory addresses decision-making in the political field. The political field of policy formation is viewed as an arena through which three separate and simultaneous 'streams' flow, the problem stream, the policy stream and the politics stream (Kingdon,

1984)⁴.

Here we focus especially on the role of the policy entrepreneurs that are active in the policy stream. By policy entrepreneurs, Kingdon and Zahariadis refer to those individuals and organisations who are willing and able to invest resources in developing ‘solutions’ to policy problems and who also try to and sometimes succeed in promoting specific decisions by linking the three streams. In relation to Danish adult education we consider e.g. the social partners of the labour market as policy entrepreneurs who may use an open window of opportunity – a ‘policy window’ – or might even be active in creating one themselves (Kingdon, 1984; Zahariadis, 2003). A policy window according to Kingdon is an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems (Kingdon, 1984, p. 173). An important point is that policy entrepreneurs are not necessarily advocating for a specific policy based on recognition of a problem; they may as well be looking for problems to couple with their ‘pet’ policy solutions.

In relation to Danish adult education, the publications of international comparisons like IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) and PIAAC potentially open a window in the problem stream that makes it possible for advocates of adult education - or specific solutions related to adult education - to put forward their interest as a solution to a ‘problem’.

Methodology

The article is based on an analysis of historical and contemporary policy documents concerning Danish adult education policy since the late 1990s. The article will trace the

⁴ The problem stream consists of conditions defined as problems for instance by policy makers, the media or other participants; the policy stream consists of various ‘solutions’ or policies developed by specialists or policy entrepreneurs; and the politics stream consisting of developments involving the broader political conditions.

subtle turn in adult education policy whereby the vocational strand of adult education is prioritised over the general and popular education strand and funding is partly shifted from the state to the social partners. Informed by our research interest and the elements of the theoretical framework we give an analytical account, organised chronologically, of policy initiatives and reforms in Danish adult education over the last two decades. We draw on existing research, which is however limited, and on official sources such as laws, policy proposals, commission work and policy reports. These are generally available at the websites of government ministries and agencies. We analyse these documents, not from a discourse analysis perspective, but rather as sources for stated objectives and actual policy initiatives. The policy documents directly drawn on are included in the list of references.

The character of Danish adult education

In a broader European context, the case of Danish adult education policy is interesting because it represents an unusual combination of elements. Denmark may be characterised as a coordinated market economy (cf. (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Verdier has discussed the different types of lifelong learning present in such societies, and he describes the Danish model of adult education as a compromise between a historically corporatist regime - where companies are key educational actors and skill is conceived as mastering a trade or an occupation - and an increasingly universal regime, where the state and different social partners are key educational actors and skill is conceived as a combination of basic general knowledge and practical skills (Verdier 2017, p.475). Denmark has retained a vocational education system resembling those of the German-speaking countries, with apprenticeships and strong links to the social partners of the labour market. Unlike Germany, however, the Danish education system also emphasizes equal learning opportunities through a

comprehensive school system including lower secondary education. A compromise between vocational and general elements also characterises Danish adult education system where labour market training institutions co-exist with institutions providing personal, community and democratic citizenship education (i.e. the Danish concept of ‘folkeoplysning’). Denmark is known internationally for the folk high school tradition, which has also influenced adult education in other countries (Rasmussen, 2013).

During the 20th century, viable systems of popular, general and vocational adult education were established and schemes of economic support for adult students were introduced. Adult education has been an important element in the so-called flexicurity labour market policy, combining frequent job changes with unemployment benefits and training opportunities (Jensen, 2017). The level of participation in adult education has generally been high, and politically, adult education has been seen as an important element in the pursuit of social justice and equality, because it has the potential to partially compensate for unequal participation in the ordinary system of education⁵

Two decades of adult education reforms

In Danish adult education policy, it is possible to identify two strands, each with certain characteristic problem definitions and networks. One strand relates mainly to labour market training and vocational education, focusing on problem definitions related to the access of workers to education and training and the relevance of education and training to work and employment. It also involves employer and employee associations in both policymaking and

⁵ The Danish system of adult education consists of different but coordinated programmes and institutions. Funding is based on combinations of state grants, participation fees and employer contributions to the ‘competence funds’, and the level of fees is for the most part not prohibitive. There are strong links to both higher education and secondary vocational education. These factors together contribute to a high level of participation in adult education. The participation rate in 2016 was more than double the EU 2020 benchmark of 15 pct.

policy implementation. The second strand relates mainly to general and popular adult education, focusing on problem definitions related to the access of all to literacy skills and the relevance of education for citizenship, personal development and further education, and involves mainly decision-makers from the different parts and levels of the state, though also voluntary associations can be involved. The borderline between the two strands is not clearly defined; both are part of the field of adult education policy framed by the state, and there are many transversal elements. In describing the development of Danish adult education policy, however, we try to locate the development of the two strands since the late 1990s and their relative status in adult education policy.

In table 1, we have summarised the reforms in Danish adult education during the last two decades. ‘Reforms’ is taken in a wide sense and includes not only changes in educational structures, institutional organisation and curricula, but also allocation of major grants to improve activity.

[Insert table 1 here]

The 2000 reforms and their background

The reforms introduced in the year 2000 must be characterised as a watershed in Danish adult education. One of the reforms created a new system of part-time vocational and professional education with programmes at all levels of education, including for the first time higher education. A number of already existing programmes were streamlined into the system and new programmes were added. The new system did not supplant but rather supplement the traditional three sectors of adult education, popular enlightenment education, general adult education and the labour market training.

A key objective of the reforms introduced in 2000 was to reduce public financing of adult education and shift the costs to the social partners (Nissen, 2000). Thus, the reforms included the introduction of a new system of funding and governance of vocational adult education and training (“Arbejdsmarkedets Uddannelsesfinansiering”). This system increased the responsibility of enterprises in the financing of adult education and also increased the role of the social partners in the administration of the vocational strand.

The 2000-reforms have an interesting prehistory. They were prepared in a government committee established in response to rising costs for some types of adult education. The committee was led by the Ministry of Finance and included as well officials from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour. When the work of the commission was nearing completion, it was linked to ongoing tripartite negotiations and as a result, the employers’ and employees’ organisations for the first time came to share the responsibility for a major educational reform (Mailand 2011, p 8). This has since inspired several tripartite initiatives related to education and hence strengthened the role of the organisations in adult education policy formation through a corporatist structure. On the one hand, this gave the social partners as policy entrepreneurs access to decision making in matters concerning adult education and training and thereby increased their chances for pushing their pet policy high on the policy agenda. On the other hand, it also gave the state the possibility to pursue its interest in shifting costs to the social partners. The involvement of the social partners in the policy making process added legitimacy to all partners, but at the same time, it also made the social partners responsible for the final results of the policy process and thus less likely to publicly disagree with the policy.

2002: Downsizing the general strand

After a change of government, the Law on Popular Education was changed in 2002. The

main aim was to cut public spending on popular education by withdrawing subsidies to courses or subjects which were not of immediate relevance to the labour market. The legislative changes included different subsidy levels for vocational courses and courses deemed more leisure-oriented (Larson & Cort, 2019). This also shifted costs from the public to the private, but in this case to the individual participants taking part in e.g. evening courses, high school courses or courses at non-residential folk high schools, which were at the time utilised as transitional institutions for unemployed and marginalised people in the labour market. The new law changed participation patterns in popular education, excluding low-income participants, and it challenged especially the non-residential folk high schools on their continued existence (Kandrup, 2013, p. 46).

2006: Globalisation and lifelong learning as main drivers for policy reforms

The next major adult education initiative also included the employers' and employees' organisations as policy entrepreneurs. In 2006, the Danish Government published a report with the name 'Lifelong up-skilling and education for all at the labour market' based on work in a committee consisting of representatives mainly from the government, employers' associations and employees' associations ('the tripartite committee'). In contrast to the situation in 1999, this initiative had had a tripartite character from the outset (Mailand, 2011, p 10).

The mission of the committee had been to come up with suggestions on how to develop Danish adult education and training in order to promote lifelong learning for all. It is an interesting point to compare this with the title of the report. Though the explicit aim is lifelong learning *for all*, in the title, 'all' has been narrowed to 'all in the labour market'. In line with the competition state approach, the aim of adult education had been reduced to

improving the labour supply. Another interesting point is the lack of discussion of popular adult education ('folkeoplysning'): 'The work in the committee includes both vocationally oriented adult education and training for all in the labour market, including interactions with ordinary programmes, and general adult education' (Trepartsudvalget, 2006, p. 3) (own translation). While the two strands of adult education, general and vocational adult education, are both explicitly mentioned, there is no mentioning of popular adult education, which was apparently perceived as irrelevant for the labour market.

Though the introduction to the report said that both economy and personal development should be targeted by education and training, the main part of the report had a focus on education and training for the labour market.

As a direct spin-off from the tripartite committee's work, in 2006 22 adult guidance networks were established with the aim of strengthening guidance of both low-skilled workers and small and medium-sized companies. Focus of the networks was on guidance in relation to employment and competence development. The agreement furthermore included the establishing of a national council for adult guidance in which the labour market organisations were represented in parity. The task of the council was to advise the Minister of Education in matters concerning adult guidance. Otherwise, the 2006 report did not lead directly to any significant reforms of the adult education system, although the introduction in 2007 of an act on the recognition of prior learning in adult education undoubtedly was inspired by the work of the committee as well as by EU policy.

The work of the committee was closely linked to the work of the 'Globalisation Council' that was active in the years 2005-06. This was a high-level task force established by the Prime Minister and including other ministers, the labour market organisations, other stakeholders and experts. The purpose of the task force was to involve the partners in

giving the government ‘advice on a coherent strategy which can prepare Denmark as a leading growth, knowledge and entrepreneurial society’ [our translation] (Regeringen, 2005, p.1). The driving ideas were those of the knowledge society and the competitive advantage of nation states, well in line with the ideas behind the competition state.

Globalisation was constructed as an arena where the qualities of Danish society, mentality and business could and should secure competitive advantage. Other important aspects of globalisation, not least the increasing presence of migrants and refugees and the populist and nationalist reaction to them (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008; Wodak, 2015), were not discussed.

The Globalisation Council focused on education and research as part of a human capital strategy and its recommendations led to major government grants to strengthen these. Although the Globalisation Council paid little attention to adult education, a major special grant was allocated to boosting activity in this sector, especially vocational competence development. This grant was part of the agreement with the labour market partners who chipped in with the establishment of the competence funds as part of the collective agreement. Once again, the responsibility for funding was partially shifted from the public to the private sector and likewise the administration of the funds, which were in the hands of the social partners. Adult education was in this way made part of the collective agreements and included as a ‘right’ in the agreements covering the various sectors. However, it also moved adult education as a public policy into a corporatist system where the role of adult education is less publicly discussed (Biesta, 2009). As Mailand (2016) writes, ‘the interest in getting education on the agenda including the provision of enough qualified labour is shared by unions and private enterprises’. In other words, the social partners and changing governments had come to an agreement on adult education through

which different corporate and political interests had been met but which has also made adult education less visible as an important public policy area.

2006 – 2014: Adjusting the adult education system

The following years saw minor reforms with more limited involvement of the employer and employee organisations. In 2009, the system of general adult education was revised, mostly in an attempt to make the Centres of General Adult Education contribute to the objective of having 95 pct. of a youth cohort completing an upper secondary degree programme. This is considered important for preventing youth unemployment but has been notoriously difficult to achieve. This reform was, in other words, related to another education sector and not adult education per se.

Further, in 2010 another reform established regional centres of adult and continuing education ('VEU-centre'). These were not new institutions but organisational structures intended to increase collaboration between the different adult education institutions and thus provide a more coherent provision (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2012). The VEU-centres took over the responsibility for adult guidance from the guidance networks.

In 2014, the first independent act on folk high schools was introduced. The only important change introduced by the act was that the responsibility for folk high schools was moved from the Ministry of Education and back to the Ministry of Culture where it had been situated until the beginning of the 1990s. This can be seen a reaction from social liberal part of the government coalition to an increasing vocational focus in the Ministry of Education. In her vision for Danish 'folkeoplysning', the then minister of Culture, Marianne Jelved, had certainly noticed the economy's primacy in the political debate and called for an increased focus on education for democracy as well:

‘The widespread consensus that Denmark is under pressure from globalization creates a situation where some political decisions are deemed necessary and without alternatives. General discussions about societal values in a broader sense, such as ‘bildung’ and committing relationships with a view to strengthening democracy, have almost disappeared from the political agenda. Societal values have become values measured in economic terms’ (Jelved, 2014, p. 1) (own translation).

While the relocation to the Ministry of Culture probably protected the identity of the folk high schools it also confirmed their marginal position in education policy.

The general trend in the reforms and initiatives we have described here clearly show a focus on vocational and work-related adult education in order to improve the supply of labour for the competition state. This was reinforced by problem definitions from the social partners of the labour market. In the annual report from the Council for Further and Adult Education in 2014, the Confederation of Danish Employers (DA) and the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) together pointed at a need for increased focus on adult education and training in the years to come – that is: education and training responding to the needs of the labour market (VEU-Rådet, 2014).

2014 to now: Governmental eagerness to reach tripartite agreements on adult education

The vocational turn has continued in recent attempts to boost adult education and training. In the spring of 2014, the then government (a coalition of Social Democrats and Social

Liberals) worked on a comprehensive ‘growth plan’ for the Danish economy and as part of this negotiated an agreement with the labour market partners.

The plan came to include a grant of one billion DKK (135 million Euros) to be used to increase adult education and training activity over the following six years. It was estimated that 180.000 further adults would participate in courses as result of the plan (Regeringen, Landsorganisationen i Danmark & Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening, 2014). In the guidelines for the use of the grant, the following trends can be identified: 1) the teaching of general skills for adults was to be linked more closely to the teaching of vocational skills, and that the labour market training centres were to take care of this; 2) schemes and economic support for up-skilling to higher levels of education should be improved, so that for instance more adults could become skilled workers; 3) a number of fees paid by users of vocational training courses (either individuals or companies) were to be reduced in order to increase activity. This must be seen on the background of previous rounds of cutting public expenses, where the government had increased the participation fees for all types of adult education. However, the Growth Plan’s reduction of fees only applied to the vocational training courses, not to general adult education. Controlling public spending and improving labour supply thus led to vocational training being given priority by not only the government but also the social partners.

Another significant adult education reform during the social democratic and social liberal government concerned the part-time vocational education. This is an outcome of a comprehensive reform of vocational education and it lays out a framework for enrolment and teaching of adults at vocational schools in order to obtain an upper secondary vocational diploma. Recognition of prior learning is a mandatory part of this, and teaching can be conducted differently according to the character and degree of work experience that the

adults have. The reform has encountered considerable difficulties, not least because it has emphasized making the duration of study as short as possible for the individual student. The result has been a fall in the number of enrolments (EVA 2016).

In 2016, after an election and change of government, a new liberal-conservative Government negotiated a tripartite agreement on labour market integration of immigrants and refugees (Regeringen, Landsorganisationen i Danmark & Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening, 2016). Education was an important element in the agreement. The courses in Danish language for adult immigrants, which had existed since the 1990s, were given new frameworks and a new programme called Basic Education for Integration, aimed at adult refugees, was established. Education under this programme combines internship in companies with teaching done by adult education institutions. Administratively the programme is located in the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, not linked to the rest of the adult education system. At a time when government increasingly tried to close Danish borders to refugees, these initiatives represent an increased emphasis on social and cultural integration on refugees who were allowed temporary access.

The new government also appointed an expert group to come up with suggestions for a reform of the adult education system in close cooperation with the labour market organisations (Danish Government, 2016). Once again, in line with the competition state, the ‘problem’ was defined as a need for Denmark to be competitive and once again, the focus was only on competence development related to the labour market:

‘The competitiveness of Denmark depends on having a talented labour force, able to adjust to new demands for competences continuously over time (...) The labour market’s demand for qualified labour is constantly

developing, and the companies' need and opportunities changes' (Danish Government 2016, p. 1).

In June 2017, the expert group published the results of its work (Ekspertgruppen for voksen-, efter og videreuddannelse, 2017). In the report, the group referred to a Danish tradition for adult education and training, but did not include the long tradition of popular adult education:

'Denmark has a fine tradition for adult education and training that other countries often see as an example. The engagement of the labour market partners and the state has been crucial. Adult education and training, thus, constitute a pivotal building block in the foundation for a flexible labour market in continuous chance' [own translation] (Ekspertgruppen, 2017, p.3).

What is new in the report compared to the previous years is that the group questions the political and public focus on the ordinary education system for those under the age 30 years. This is especially interesting in light of the almost absent public interest in PIAAC and adult education policy described in the introductory part of this article. In fact, the report explicitly refers to the Danish PIAAC-results as one of the reasons for promoting competence development for adults. In October 2017, the government and the labour market organisations presented a new tripartite agreement based on the recommendations from the expert group (Trepartsaftale, 2017). In the agreement a shift in the perspective on adult education can be detected, from the needs of the individual to the needs of the

enterprises and the supply of labour. ‘Adult, continuous and further education thus has to ensure that public and private enterprises have access to qualified labour, and that the competences of the labour force are on par with the changes taking place in the labour market’ [own translation] (Trepartsaftale, 2017, p. 2)

The individual, on the other hand, is made responsible for his or her own lifelong competence development; competences being perceived as a means for ‘finding security’ in life (Ekspertgruppen, 2017, p. 3).

Among the initiatives agreed on and confirmed in legislation is an elimination of fees for labour market education in Danish and mathematics, two of the competences tested in PIAAC, combined with other labour market training courses. Another initiative is the possibility to establish higher education courses outside the existing part-time system to an extent of up to five ECTS. The agreement further includes numerous initiatives aimed at making it more economically attractive for mainly the employers to make use of the adult education and training provision. The agreement continues the turn of adult education policy towards industrial policy, more or less leaving the broader purposes of adult education behind.

Concluding discussion

Our documentation of adult education policies from the end 1990s until today has shown that adult education policy in Denmark today is to a high degree made in policy networks involving the state as well as policy entrepreneurs in the form of the social partners and different experts. The broad 1980s focus on versatile options for adult learning has narrowed down into an interest in competence development for the labour market, securing the supply of a suitable labour force for the competition state.

Overall, our analysis confirms the increased focus on vocational education and training. General adult education and popular enlightenment education, including the folk high schools, still have some political attention but the main focus is on programmes and institutions offering vocational competences. This is in line with a previous study of lifelong learning policy in Denmark in the years 2000-2009 (Larson, 2011), which concluded that lifelong learning policy was mainly related to the economic challenges of globalisation, and that policies related to increasing participation in adult education and training were primarily targeted vocationally oriented adult education and training. With the latest tripartite agreement this trend has been further accentuated

Our analysis indicates especially two elements contributing to the vocational trend. One is the leading role of the social partners in key initiatives. Although policy is mainly developed in the different sections of the Ministry of Education, based partly on the political platforms of the governments, the associations of employers and employees have become more important actors in the major reforms and initiatives during the last two decades. The organisations have accepted to administer and co-finance education and training through the competence funds. Today, adult education has become more of a public-private partnership where the interests of the social partners are incorporated into national policies and the interests of the state are incorporated into collective agreements and sectorial competence development funds.

A second element is movement from structural and institutional reforms towards broader initiatives based on special grants. Both the 2006 globalisation initiative and the 2014 growth plan initiative mainly consisted in giving a large special grant to the sector in order to boost activity. The specific ways that activity was boosted then reinforced the vocational trend.

The increasing role of the social partners in adult education policy is reflected in the reduced public visibility of adult education policy. Political news reporting in the media is dominated by issues of state policy and by initiatives and position statements from political parties represented in parliament. These actors have information resources and strong interests in securing public attention. The social partners have strong interests in securing resources and opportunities for their members, but primarily through direct negotiations rather than through the public sphere.

The increasing focus on vocational adult education is clearly in line with the competition state approach, which demands a high degree of labour market participation in order to secure competitiveness. This gives renewed importance to the policy networks connecting the state and the social partners, networks that have otherwise been partly undermined by neo-liberal elements in Danish public policy. In the period studied here these networks have increasingly influenced adult education and contributed to the vocational focus. Both employers' associations and the labour unions take interest in ensuring an efficient skills formation system, albeit out of different reasons. The interest of the organisations in this field can also be seen partly as a reaction to declining influence of trade unions in other fields such as wages and labour market policy (Jørgensen & Schulze, 2011).

The strong influence of the social partners keeps the focus on vocational education, with the result that more general and popular types of adult education tend to move beyond the "event horizon" of public and political discussions of adult education. The policy networks around general and popular adult education are much less influential than are those around vocational education. Because of these factors, the social partners possess a

key role in calling, locating and using policy windows for promoting adult education.

Further, apart from focusing on policy solutions with direct relevance to the labour market the organisations are traditionally much less inclined to handling problems and solutions in the public sphere, preferring to negotiate in less open fora.

Pursuing the objectives of the competition state implies that adult education policy is characterised by the need of balancing the national budget and allocating public funds to best improve competitiveness. Conflict-ridden themes such as inequality and social justice are handled in subdued ways and political settlements often takes the form of allocating special grants to initiatives and sectors. The logic of negotiating and deciding the national budget tends to extend to all fields of public policy. This also leaves its mark on adult education policy. The provision of education for adult immigrants and refugees is a telling example. This is a complex task involving issues such as relationships between cultures and religions, citizenship obligations and rights as well as workplace culture (Morrice, Shan & Sprung, 2017). But the educational provision established, although well designed, focuses on Danish language skills and integration of refugees as workers.

In perspective, we find both the limited visibility in public debates and the narrow focus on vocational competence in Danish adult education policy worrying. There is clearly a need to keep the competences of employees up to date, to up-skill many in the labour market and to meet the growing interest among professionals in part-time education. However, the narrow focus on meeting the demands of the labour market may be counterproductive. Tuckett (2017) describes how learning out of interest – whatever the subject or activity – may actually have positive outcomes for the companies in the sense of transfer. He also points to the aspect of life stage learning i.e. that interest in learning shifts over a lifetime and that adult education systems should be able to meet changing needs in

the population. We argue that it is important to keep a balance between a narrow labour market focus and more open adult education offers; popular adult education gives vital contributions to well-being and democratic citizenship, and general adult education is necessary to give many adults a second chance and access to higher education, for instance professional bachelor degrees in welfare work.

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