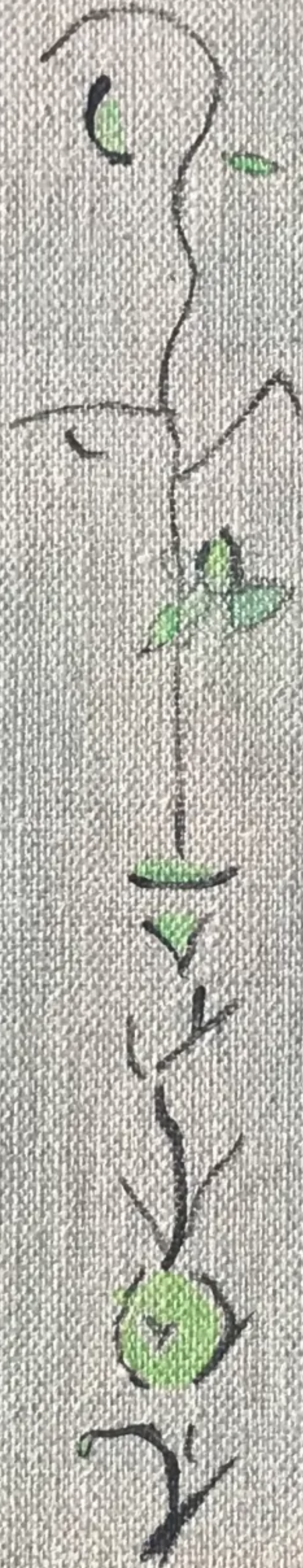


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National Policies of Adult and Lifelong Learning and Education

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Author
Lasse Sonne

Series Editors
Michael Osborne and Shalini Singh

Introduction

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Author

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Series Editors

Michael Osborne and Shalini Singh

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NATIONAL POLICIES OF ADULT AND LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATION: NORWAY

Author: Lasse Sonne¹

Series Editors: Michael Osborne, University of Glasgow, UK and Shalini Singh, Helmut Schmidt University/ University of the Federal Armed Forces, Germany

General Historical Background of ALE and LLL

Adult and lifelong learning, though not referred to as such, has a longstanding history in Norway, having its origins in and mostly organised as non-formal learning. The historical development of the Nordic folk high schools is core to understanding the historical background to the development of adult and lifelong learning in the country. As in the other Nordic countries, folk high schools in Norway were established from the mid-19th century onwards, as alternatives to the public system for young adults, and were primarily organized as boarding schools without a defined curriculum, examinations or grading (Lövgren 2015)

The schools were closely connected to the vision of Dane, N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), as a ‘school for life’ in contrast to a Latin-based educational system. The idea was to include all people in society’s democratic development through enlightenment. The folk high schools in both Denmark and Norway were, from their inception, united by a national romantic orientation (Lövgren, 2023). Strong popular engagement meant that the number of institutions grew rapidly, subsequent to the establishment of the first folk high school in Norway, Sagatun Folk High School, in the town of Hamar in 1864.

Later, adult and lifelong learning in Norway, as in the other Nordic countries, further developed through both informal and non-formal learning in the form of folk libraries, study circles for adults, adult study centres and evening schools for adults. Again, the activities were about popular education with the purpose of preparing people for democratic participation. Thus, adult and lifelong learning in Norway was a field of the public sector and civil society. Many private organisations and associations, for example, were involved

¹ *University of South-Eastern Norway, Tønsberg, Norway.*

in strengthening their influence on societal development through adult and lifelong learning, backed by the political representatives that they were associated with. Examples of this were the liberal and social democratic movements, understood as broad popular movements associated with agricultural and food producers, the manufacturing industry, and the trade unions.

Until after the Second World War, adult and lifelong learning was to a large extent a question of a bottom-up movement having the purpose of including broader parts of the population in societal development and thus facilitating a broader influence on institutional developments. The end of the Second World War meant new beginnings in many ways that also affected Norway. The country was influenced by a new internationalisation, a popular demand for further development towards economic growth and social welfare, with economic and industrial modernisation as a tool. The goal was to continue the creation of a welfare society in line with the welfare models of the other Nordic countries (Sonne, 2009). Adult and lifelong learning in Norway after 1945 should be seen in this context. The establishment of the UN with UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the OECD, the EEC/EC/EU and other international organisations meant that Norway adapted its engagement in adult and lifelong learning to strategies developed by these organisations. The goal was, nevertheless, still to use adult and lifelong learning to both achieve economic growth and social welfare nationally, together with continuing the development of Norwegian democracy. The market, however, had now become an important third leg in a triangle consisting of market, state and civil society. Adult and lifelong learning had, furthermore, become more formal.

Compared with before the Second World War, adult and lifelong learning in Norway after the Second World War became increasingly characterized by top-down development. From a non-formal beginning, adult and lifelong learning in Norway is now largely formal.

Current relevant national legislation pertaining to adult and lifelong learning (ALE) and lifelong learning (LLL)

Norway has a long tradition of public information work. Lifelong learning was put on the agenda from about the 1960s. In 1965, the Norwegian government put forward a parliamentary proposal emphasising that with the introduction of a nine-year primary school, it was important that adults with a weak educational background received the same general education as the young. At the same time, there was a growing need for retraining and supplementary knowledge since technology and society were changing faster than before. A national committee, which in the period from 1965 to 1970 dealt with the

development of post-secondary education, pointed out in its recommendation from 1967 that it was difficult to draw a clear distinction between basic education, further education, and adult education. The committee also argued for integrating continuing education within all higher education. The new district colleges were given a particular responsibility for facilitating flexible part-time studies (Arbo, 2022). The district colleges were decentralized educational institutions that offered various types of education at the college and university level, often in combination with other studies. The studies at the district colleges usually lasted no more than two or three years.

The Norwegian Adult Education Act was passed in 1976 and introduced rules on the approval of education organisations eligible for receiving grants. Subsidies for continuing education and study work were increased, and section 3 of the act stated that adults had the right to have their practical skills assessed at all levels and areas in the public education system, regardless of how the knowledge and skills had been acquired. The same applied to areas of competence outside the education system (Arbo, 2022).

As a part of the collaborative Norwegian societal model, labour market organisations have played a role in defining lifelong learning in Norway. Through the collective agreement in 1998, the Norwegian trade unions and the industry federation drew up a joint action plan for competence development, where it was pointed out that the distinction between basic education and further education should be blurred, so that learning through daily work was documented and recognized on the same level as education from schools and universities. The proposal from the labour market organisations in Norway was considered in the Norwegian parliament in 1999, based on a government proposal. The parliament largely agreed with the government's proposal and asked the government to bring forward legislation on the individual right for adults to primary school education and the individual right to educational leave (Arbo, 2022). The so-called competence development programme, a five-year investment of around NOK 400 million to develop the market for further education, provided support for competence development in the companies, establishment of new cooperation arenas between education and working life and the creation of new educational and training offers.

In Norway, the primary focus has been on the role of formal education in offering adult learning and developing competence. Basic and further education has been viewed through the lens of systems thinking, which considers the needs of the different age groups and changing life and work situations. The reforms that have been implemented have strengthened individual rights to education. For example, the possibility to take an education loan has been adapted to adult part-time students, and public competence

programs have been launched to make education and training more flexible and accessible. Vocational training, however, still has an unclear status, and the idea of a joint venture between the parties in working life has been difficult to achieve. Participation in various forms of education and training still varies significantly with age, gender, social and ethnic background, level of education and employment situation (Arbo, 2022). The main tendency is, however, that people with the most formal education as adults participate most in further and continuing education as adults (Aspøy & Tønder, 2012). According to Statistics Norway, 85 per cent of Norwegian women and 83 per cent of Norwegian men without jobs and without a high school exam had not participated in formal or nonformal learning in 2022 (Statistics Norway, 2025).

Emphasis on today's adult education and learning is now on stimulating both individuals and businesses to invest more in competence at all levels. The educational institutions are expected to make better arrangements for lifelong learning, and a closer interaction between higher education and working life is called for. Among the new elements in the latest skills reform agreed on in 2017 by the Norwegian government, the main organizations of the working life in Norway, the Sámi Parliament of Norway and the Adult Education Association in Norway (Meld. St. 14 [2019-2020], 2020), are more application-based competition for advertised education funds. Vocational schools can now be assigned the role that the district colleges were once intended for, and county councils are given greater competence and policy responsibility. This means that the universities may have good reasons to take a closer look at how they themselves will contribute to developing a more robust and inclusive system for lifelong learning (Arbo, 2022). The old district colleges are now more or less merged with other colleges and universities. Many have become part of universities. There are now 11 universities in Norway, 9 so-called specialised universities, 14 university colleges/universities of applied sciences, in addition to 14 university colleges with accredited study programs. The county councils in Norway are, for example, responsible for skills development measures that ensure lifelong learning. The purpose of this role is to maintain and further develop individuals' competence and adaptability and provide increased opportunities in a constantly changing labour market. The county councils in Norway are responsible for secondary and higher education for adults and other measures of importance for preparing adults for a changing labour market through competence development.

Extent of devolution of powers in ALE and LLL to regions and cities, and to social partners

The employer has a key responsibility for adult education and learning in Norway. Employers might be private companies or the public sector. The main responsibility for delivering adult education to immigrants is delegated to municipalities. General adult education is mostly subordinated to the county councils, linked to their responsibility for social development and skills development. Skills and education policy in Norway are closely linked to business policy, regional planning, and integration, for which the county councils have been given increased responsibility. The county councils are responsible for ensuring that the offer within the upper secondary education and vocational school sector is adapted to regional needs, and for connecting universities, colleges, and other providers of competence development with the regional working life (Regjeringen.no, 2020).

Influence and/or policy linkages to supranational organisations

Three international organisations were central to formulating and spreading the new ideas about lifelong learning in Norway: UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the OECD. First and foremost, UNESCO's motto "education for all" had an impact in Norway linked with a vision of a learning society that allows all citizens to develop their abilities and realise their genuine interests (UNESCO, 1970). In Norway, an emphasis on education as a source of enlightenment, social equalization and democratization has been crucial, along with a correspondingly low belief that these goals could be realised within today's education systems (Arbo, 2022). The Council of Europe was imperative for Norway because of the emphasis on the cultural dimension. The work with education was closely linked to the work for human rights and intercultural understanding. For the Council of Europe, the European democratic cultural heritage was a pillar which had to be secured. The Council of Europe advocated an open and flexible education system that could create independent, socially conscious, and responsible citizens and contribute to cultural integration (Council of Europe, 1970). The key term "permanent education" was seen as important in Norway (Arbo, 2022). Finally, the OECD have had a big influence on Norway. The OECD began working systematically with educational planning in the 1960s. A central theme was how the member states should deal with the increased demand for education and ensure the working life's need for more qualified labour, which was now defined as human capital. Keeping large

parts of the youth cohorts at school for more and more years was considered an inefficient and expensive solution that gave a low return on educational investments. The OECD wanted a closer link and exchange between education and work (Arbo, 2022).

The three international organizations used different terms (lifelong education, permanent education, and recurring education). They thus highlighted different perspectives on lifelong learning. For the OECD, it was primarily about a reorganisation of the relationship between formal education and work (OECD, 2025). For UNESCO, the ambition was to facilitate continuous learning at all ages and in all contexts of life - in school, work, family, association life and politics. This involved juxtaposing formal education, non-formal training and learning in informal learning situations. In other words, there was no agreement on what characterized a system for lifelong learning. The same applied to which considerations should weigh more heavily - the individual's personal and social development opportunities, the needs of working and business life or democratic values and social inclusion (Arbo, 2022). These influences are still at the heart of the dilemmas of a Norwegian approach to adult education and learning.

Financing of LLL

It is difficult to estimate the proportion of adult and lifelong learning as a proportion of GDP. Likewise, it is difficult to estimate the proportion spent by local and regional governments. The reason is that the national budget is not developed in this way. Adult education and lifelong learning are mainly integrated parts of the formal education system in Norway. For example, adult education is part of the national curriculum of secondary and upper secondary school education. A tendency is that most national funding is channelled to this area of adult education in Norway. Measures for lifelong learning in general seem to be decreasing. The measures planned for lifelong learning in Norway for 2024 are much lower compared with 2022 and 2023. In 2022, the amount for lifelong learning measures in the national budget was about 147 million NOK. In 2023, the amount decreased to about 129 million NOK. The measures planned for 2024 have decreased once again, to about 112 million NOK (Regjeringen.no, 2024).

The role of sectors and involvement of community stakeholders

Formal and non-formal education and learning are well-developed in Norway. The Norwegian folk high schools are an important institution in adult non-formal education. The folk high schools are often used as a stepping stone between school and college/university level for young adults. Formal education for adults is, however, most developed in the form of adult education centres. These centres are organised under the municipalities and offer education in Norwegian, mainly for immigrants, and in other subjects in the Norwegian school. The characteristic of the Norwegian adult education system is that it is, to a great extent, included in the national qualification framework for lifelong learning. This means that adult education is a step in the national qualification process. Immigrants, for example, are included in the qualification framework at the secondary or upper secondary school level. The purpose is to allow these groups to qualify for further formal education at colleges, universities, or vocational colleges. The reason is the lack of people in the workforce in Norway. The unemployment rate is very low in Norway. The Norwegian policy is therefore to include immigrants as soon as possible into the formal education system to qualify for the Norwegian labour market as soon and effectively as possible.

The role of non-formal and informal entities supported nationally, such as libraries, museums, galleries, parks, and trade unions, is more difficult to map. An important reason is that the budgets of these entities are usually not earmarked for adult education and learning activities. Often, they plan their own activities and might have visions and strategies for adult learning. Others might not have. The role of lifelong learning in these kinds of organisations is therefore something unmapped, where new research is needed.

In Norwegian cultural policy, adult education and lifelong learning are often part of a cultural strategy. An explicit strategy does, however, not exist. However, the opinion by the Norwegian government is that Norwegian culture policy should be an engine of economic growth with an emphasis on creative industry development (Regjeringen.no, 2018). Despite this, it is still a tendency that adult education and lifelong learning are not acknowledged to play important roles in relation to cultural development in Norway. Most actors involved will probably acknowledge the importance of adult education and learning in the non-formal and informal entities that culture is a part of. However, for some reason, adult education and learning have not managed to become a core investment area in these entities.

There is no clear strategy for adult education and learning in Norway that includes the different areas of society. The mechanisms of consultation with stakeholders are mainly based on a voluntary practise. There is no clear practise developed on stakeholders' meetings in adult education and learning. Therefore, the area is mostly developed by individuals and others with an interest in adult education and learning.

The tracking of the effective implementation of policies

In Norway, the most effective implementation policy has had a focus on formal education. Norwegian reforms on adult education that have been implemented have strengthened individual rights to formal education. The possibility for the learner to get a state loan has been better adapted to adult part-time students. Furthermore, public skills programs have been launched to make education and training offers more flexible and accessible (Arbo, 2022). Vocational training, however, still has an unclear status. The idea of a joint venture between the parties in working life has been difficult to achieve. Participation in various forms of education and training also varies significantly with age, gender, social and ethnic background, level of education and employment situation. In the area of non-formal and informal learning, the success has probably been limited or at least unclear and thus difficult to measure.

A reason for this is that there exists a tension between two competing mindsets on lifelong education and learning. One is that lifelong learning is a part of a humanistic and democratic project. It is about empowerment, liberation, and social justice. Here, the learner is put at the centre. In the second, lifelong learning is defined as a neoliberal project, based on new self-disciplining management techniques. The aim in this mindset is to create a greater readiness for learning and adjustment that can promote innovation, flexibility, and mobility. The driving force is fear of falling short or falling outside the competition on the labour market (Arbo, 2022).

Probably because of the two competing mindsets, there is no clear vision and strategy for adult education and lifelong learning in Norway.

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