

**UNESCO'S GLOBAL REPORTS ON ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION:
CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS AND POLITICAL PRIORITIES IN NIGERIA,
RUSSIA, AND SLOVENIA**

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ABSTRACT

Since 2009, UNESCO has published Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALEs), integrating an analysis of member-states' reported national data, policies and best practices. These reports focus on five action areas adopted in the Belém Framework for Action (policy, governance, financing, participation and quality), constructing adult learning and education as a policy object on a global level and strengthening UNESCO's role in the field of adult learning and education policy, particularly in terms of conceptualisation and in setting political priorities. Using the policy analysis framework by Lima and Guimarães (2011), this paper analyses the conceptual elements and political priorities of the four GRALEs and the latest national reports of Nigeria, Russia and Slovenia. Main findings indicate a discrepancy between conceptual elements and political priorities at both global and national levels, where GRALEs are observed to be closer to the democratic-emancipatory approach and national reports to the modernisation and state control approach.

KEY WORDS

adult learning and education policy; conceptual elements; political priorities; GRALE; UNESCO.



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**OS RELATÓRIOS GLOBAIS SOBRE A APRENDIZAGEM E EDUCAÇÃO DE
ADULTOS DA UNESCO: ELEMENTOS CONCEPTUAIS E PRIORIDADES
POLÍTICAS NA NIGÉRIA, RÚSSIA E ESLOVÉNIA**

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RESUMO

Desde 2009, a UNESCO publicou diversos relatórios globais sobre a aprendizagem e educação de adultos (GRALE – Global Report on Adult Learning and Education), baseados em dados contidos em inquéritos realizados nos países membros e contendo análise de políticas e de práticas consideradas relevantes. Estes relatórios centram-se em cinco áreas, adotadas no Marco de Ação de Belém (política, governança, financiamento, participação e qualidade), construindo a aprendizagem e educação de adultos como um objeto de política ao nível global e reforçando o papel da UNESCO na conceptualização e na definição de prioridades políticas para o setor em questão. Recorrendo ao quadro de análise de políticas de educação de adultos de Lima e Guimarães (2011), este artigo debate os elementos conceptuais e as prioridades políticas dos quatro relatórios globais sobre a aprendizagem e educação de adultos (GRALE) e os últimos relatórios nacionais da Nigéria, Rússia e Eslovénia. As principais conclusões prendem-se com a discrepância entre elementos conceptuais e prioridades políticas aos níveis global e nacionais, estando os relatórios globais mais próximos da abordagem democrática e emancipatória e os relatórios nacionais da abordagem de modernização e controlo estatal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

aprendizagem e educação de adultos; elementos conceptuais; prioridades políticas; GRALE; UNESCO.



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RESUMEN

Desde 2009, la UNESCO ha publicado GRALE (Global Report on Adult Learning and Education), integrando un análisis de los datos, políticas y mejores prácticas nacionales informadas por los estados miembros. Estos informes se centran en cinco áreas de acción adoptadas en el Marco de Acción de Belém (política, gobernanza, financiación, participación y calidad), construyendo el aprendizaje y la educación de adultos como un objeto de política a nivel mundial y fortaleciendo el papel de la UNESCO particularmente en términos de conceptualización y en el establecimiento de prioridades políticas. Utilizando la propuesta teórica de análisis de políticas de Lima y Guimarães (2011), este documento debate los elementos conceptuales y las prioridades políticas de los cuatro GRALE y los últimos informes nacionales de Nigeria, Rusia y Eslovenia. Los principales hallazgos indican una discrepancia entre los elementos conceptuales y las prioridades políticas tanto a nivel global como nacional, donde se observa que los GRALE se acercan más al enfoque democrático-emancipador y los informes nacionales al enfoque de modernización y control estatal.

PALABRAS CLAVE

aprendizaje y educación de adultos; elementos conceptuales; prioridades políticas; GRALE; UNESCO.



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UNESCO's Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education: Conceptual Elements and Political Priorities in Nigeria, Russia, and Slovenia

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INTRODUCTION

Several authors have stressed the global character of adult learning and education² (ALE) policies since World War II, which are deeply influenced by intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) (e.g., Grek, 2013; Milana, 2017; Tsatsaroni & Evans, 2014). These policies are the response to global challenges occurring on different scales in several socio-political and cultural territories. IGOs, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), have strongly contributed to international policy developments in ALE, owing, among other reasons, to their conceptual and normative role (Németh, 2015, 2016) in setting a political agenda and thus legitimising specific political interests of the lifelong learning regime. As a consequence, IGOs have somehow weakened national specificities (Field, 2018), favouring new governance mechanisms (Jakobi, 2009) and promoting a monitoring culture (Boeren, 2014).

With regard to ALE, UNESCO has promoted its vision on a planet-scale (Jakobi, 2009), initially fostering a humanistic approach and progressively favouring a global norm of lifelong learning and highlighting economic and labour market policy principles (such as employability) (Singh & Ehlers, 2020). Even though UNESCO's policy developments in ALE may vary in national political and historical accounts, the global policy scale must be taken into consideration in theoretical and empirical discussions. Favouring the global influence of UNESCO, several tools have been developed such as the International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) held in 1949, 1960, 1972, 1985, 1997 and 2009, the *Recommendations on the Development of Adult Education* of 1976 and on *Adult Learning and Education* of 2015. Additionally, as a result of the CONFINTEA VI in 2009 (UIL, 2010b), under the Belém Framework for Action, member-states have been encouraged to collect data, develop policies, incentives, regulatory frameworks and institutional structures, as well as mechanisms to include five main dimensions: policy, governance, financing, participation and quality of adult education (UIL, 2009). These dimensions have underpinned the Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALEs), a significant instrument for collecting information (both quantitative and qualitative data) from the vast majority of member-states.

Notwithstanding their utility and relevance, Németh (2016) claimed that the policy instruments developed by IGOs, such as the GRALEs, have encouraged conformity with

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² In this paper, the concept of adult learning and education promoted by UNESCO is used to refer to the concepts of adult education and adult learning, although there are differences in each of these concepts. However, the difference between them is not discussed in this paper.



norms and standards, the coordination of activities, and stimulated the international policy debate around specific ALE topics. Therefore, a thorough understanding of adult education, referred to as adult learning and education by UNESCO, has been promoted, in which lifelong learning and the centrality of a global governance scale devised by IGOs are highlighted. However, translating generalisations of the global governance scale of the afore-mentioned IGOs, or any other, into national, regional and local policy calls for careful consideration. The link between global policies and national/regional policies has been questioned by several authors, including Milana (2017, p. 88), who argues that despite potential overlaps, countries may preserve differentiated characteristics, depending on the geopolitical and socio-geographical contexts.

This paper fosters a discussion of the role of UNESCO in the establishment of a global ALE policy norm (Singh & Ehlers, 2020) through a specific instrument, namely the GRALEs. As global reports, these policy documents are based on surveys conducted by each member-state on specific national/regional/local adult learning and education policy dimensions. These dimensions allow each country to assess its adult learning and education (policy and system) and to consider the progress achieved. The purpose of analysing the GRALEs from 2009, 2013, 2016 and 2019 was to ascertain UNESCO's construction of adult learning and education as a policy object on a global scale in terms of conceptual elements and political priorities and their connections to the national reports of Nigeria, Russia and Slovenia. The selection of these three countries serves to highlight their different approaches to ALE from the standpoint of the two chosen analytical categories presented in the theoretical framework of Lima and Guimarães (2011) on ALE policy perspectives. As will become evident later in the article, the three countries form a continuum of sorts, thus revealing the differences in their views of ALE systems.

The first part of this paper develops a discussion on international organisations and large scale surveys. The theoretical framework by Lima and Guimarães (2011) on ALE policy perspectives is then presented in the second section. Following the presentation of the methodology, a comparison is made in the third section. The purpose of analysing the GRALEs from 2009, 2013, 2016 and 2019 was to ascertain UNESCO's construction of adult learning and education as a policy object on a global scale in terms of conceptual elements and political priorities and their connections to the national reports of Nigeria, Russia and Slovenia. Similarities and differences among the GRALEs and national reports of the countries under analysis are underlined. The conclusions are part of the fourth section.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND LARGE-SCALE SURVEYS

The history of international surveys on education date back to the late 1950s, when the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) was established. Meetings of international groups of researchers at the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg promoted a discussion on developing comparative studies on students' achievement. The rationale behind these studies included surveys that would allow for an analysis of educational systems that vary across countries (Gustafsson, 2018). At a later stage, the development of these studies favoured the exchange of information. Initially under the auspices of UNESCO, and later, promoted by the OECD and other governmental and non-governmental organisations, different surveys

provided comparable data that might be used for different purposes, namely for the improvement of educational systems at all levels, including ALE (Desjardins, 2014; Rubenson, 2019).

Whatever their focus, international surveys have brought changes to education systems, and ALE is no exception. According to Singh (2020), international surveys have played an instrumental role in creating major shifts over the last fifty years. The first was the shift in educational priorities from “idealistic (socio-cultural) to materialistic (economic)” (p. 284), whereby the main targets of these studies became skills and employability linked to economic growth. The second shift was in the formation of the transnational lifelong learning policy agenda. IGOs have devised several surveys that complement each other, based on a learner-centred approach, considering for instance the learner as a customer of education provision. Finally, the third shift was the rise of employability as a global norm, linking it closely to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) promoted by the United Nations and the World Bank (Singh & Ehlers, 2020). In the same vein, Tsatsaroni and Evans (2014) argue that international organisations have facilitated construction of the skill and competence agenda and with the support of these studies turned the issue of ALE into a comparative one.

International surveys have also been highlighted for their possible influence on national educational policies. Some argue that international surveys lead to the practice of piecemeal policy borrowing. The adoption of best practices and certain policies by participating countries can ultimately lead to the standardisation of content and curricula across states, and even to the simplification of the very concept of knowledge (Johansson, 2016). Tsatsaroni and Evans (2014) also claim that international surveys are not simply providing neutral descriptions and data on ALE. Due to their inherent comparative nature, these studies serve as a driver for policy changes in many countries. This is especially true for countries positioned at the bottom of international rankings and which regard themselves as lagging behind in international competitive tables. Gorur (2017) states that these studies have exercised a significant amount of influence on the configuration of the very purpose of schooling by ‘shifting the focus to a fiscal appreciation of education and appraisal through international rankings’ (p. 341). Boeren (2014) claims that, at least in the European Union (EU), the widespread usage of and reliance on international surveys has led to the formation of the *governing by numbers* approach, by which surveys are viewed as a technological and impartial instrument that helps this supranational organisation indirectly influence and shape educational policies in its member-states. Grek (2013), in turn, calls this approach trust in numbers, underlining that the idea is not only to create an international set of measurable objectives that national governments can examine but also to fill them with meaning and openness to a great variety of stakeholders. Thus, the idea of governing by numbers signifies a reliance on the numerical data provided by the surveys for the analysis and comparison of the condition in different countries and subsequent recommendations for change; it is also a means of legitimising a specific domain in ALE when another might be disregarded in public policies (Walters & von Kotze, 2019). Additionally, it serves as a succinct and accurate summation of the role that international surveys play for ALE at both global and local levels.

Currently, several international surveys are developed by IGOs, some focusing on schools and university students’ achievement, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), others seeking to measure skill development and preparedness for entry in the job market, such as those promoted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The focus of surveys varies according to the international organisation entrusted with their charge and the aims established for the study. As far as



ALE is concerned, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) considers adults' skills on the basis of three dimensions, namely literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technologically rich environments, while simultaneously gathering background information on respondents (Grotlüschen, Thériault, Nienkemper, & Capstick, 2019). The EU's Adult Education Survey (AES) collects data on the participation of adults in member-states in all forms of education and training, including formal, non-formal and informal. The results include a large statistical database, shedding light on the various ways that the adult population is engaged in learning activities (Boeren, 2014; Popović, 2010). Other surveys specifically examine the education system. UNESCO's GRALEs employ a systemic approach, fostering an overview of each country's ALE (sub)system. In general, the results are frequently presented in such a way that participating countries can compare themselves with each other and outline the areas for improvement, while highlighting and shadowing other domains in ALE (Elfert, 2015; Walters & von Kotze, 2019; Walters & Watters, 2017).

Since its establishment in 1945, UNESCO has tried to influence the ALE policies of member-states in different ways: a) by developing recommendations, calls, protocols and publications, in which the role of ALE is emphasised; b) by organising meetings and seminars, as well as conferences, gathering representatives of different countries as an opportunity to inform them about the various ongoing challenges in the field of ALE in different parts of the world and to search for possible solutions for the problems faced by member-states; and c) by supporting certain initiatives (e.g. global literacy campaigns) through financial assistance, networking among different organisations, cooperation with non-governmental organisations, data collection and research, etc. (Németh, 2015).

As regards the conferences, the CONFINTEAs, staged for the first time in 1949 and held since then approximately every 12 years, have been relevant events in the conceptualisation of ALE and in the discussion of the main political issues faced by the field in many different parts of the world. Additionally, these conferences release declarations or other policy documents by which member-states commit to the achievement of particular goals for the oncoming 12 years (Elfert, 2015), favouring the international organisations' influence in national policy formulation and implementation. Following the decisions taken during the CONFINTEA V, held in Hamburg, Germany, in 1997, the first GRALE was prepared (UIL, 2009). The aforementioned CONFINTEA was considered a milestone in the history of these conferences as it brought a new dimension to global policy formulation and standard-setting, based on empirical and comparative data, through the development of a monitoring process coordinated by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (Elfert, 2013, 2015). Therefore, it was decided that a systematic process of gathering data was to be achieved, following a trend in international surveys strongly steered by other organisations, such as the OECD and the EU. This data would be the basis for the GRALEs³ that would encourage countries to undertake a self-assessment exercise with regard to the adult learning and education (sub)system and to consider progress in each of the several action areas identified as main policy domains in the Belém and Marrakech Framework for Action – policy, governance, financing, quality, and participation, inclusion and equity (UIL, 2010a).

³ For the data gathering of the GRALEs, UNESCO invites member-states to complete a monitoring survey consisting of a set of questions that include a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions according to different rounds.

THEORETICAL MODEL OF ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS

The discussion around the role of IGOs' surveys has been developed according to different theoretical and analytical perspectives (see Ball, 2006; Diem et al., 2014; Milana, 2017; Schemmann, Herbrechter, & Engels, 2020; Singh & Ehlers, 2020; Tsatsaroni & Evans, 2014). Notwithstanding their relevance, Lima and Guimarães (2011) present three approaches to social policies that can be understood as an analytical and interpretative tool for ALE policies, including four analytical categories: (1) political-administrative orientations, (2) organisational and administrative dimensions, (3) conceptual elements and (4) political priorities. As the latter two are the focus of our research, Lima and Guimarães' (2011) models have been selected as the most appropriate for our analysis and interpretation. These three approaches are *democratic-emancipatory* (DEM), *modernisation and state control* (MSC) and *human resources management* (HRM). Each of them has its own principles relating to the afore-mentioned four analytical categories. The *conceptual elements* address more implicit assumptions and the theoretical background of the policy and its implementation, such as conceptualisations of ALE, forms of participation and assessment, and pedagogical models, while the *political priorities* cover the main explicit messages of a policy, including ALE target groups, key policy aims, and funding.

The DEM approach perceives education as a social right, focusing on social development and equality. Following the heritage of critical pedagogies and the historical understanding of education by UNESCO (mainly in the 1970s), it emphasises social, cultural, political and economic development in connection to active democratic and cosmopolitan citizenship through the social, political and civic participation of all members of society. ALE processes are mostly connected to public provision, while policy formation is decentralised, supporting a bottom-up approach. DEM's political priorities are to establish a democratic and participatory society. For this purpose, and to contribute to social justice, solidarity, and the common good, it highlights education programmes geared towards democratic citizenship education, and different educational initiatives that promote civic sense and critical thinking. Consequently, its conceptual elements disregard the instrumental approach to education and emphasise the value of an individual's life experience, diverse cultural knowledge and local traditions, own understanding of the world, as well as the ethical and political dimensions of ALE, economic democratisation, social participation and the transformation of social power structures.

The MSC approach regards education as a contribution to social and economic modernisation, which occurs through the interplay of democracy and the economy. Following a Fordist work pattern, the means and ends of public policies are in the hands of the state (following a top-down approach), emphasising social justice and equality and social cohesion aims. ALE programmes are mostly reduced to public formal education, focusing on literacy, vocational, and school-based programmes. State control maintains a standardisation and bureaucratisation of education while preventing the formation of private programmes. MSC's political priorities are fostering economic growth and full employment and, thus, achieving economic and social modernisation. Formal education is seen as the best way of reaching that goal, with the instrumental value of education at the forefront. Educating vulnerable groups is also important to increase social equality and literacy levels. The conceptual elements of MSC connect to the narrow view of education as mainly formal education and vocational education for the purpose of



economic growth, prioritising knowledge reproduction over critical thinking, and neglecting non-governmental organisations' ALE initiatives. Education is still an important social right which contributes to equality (often as “second-chance” education), and non-formal educational programmes are still implemented, but only if they are integrated into the public education system’s aims.

The HRM considers education as a means to produce human capital and economic growth, emphasising employability, competitiveness, deregulation, and economic modernisation. The marketisation and privatisation of education are important processes, as well as managerial reforms, where the market has a central role over the state. Public educational policies are still formed but have a smaller effect and are usually developed for shorter periods. Along with the increase of payable ALE programmes, public funding is still present but also aligns with market principles (such as competition for funding between public and private institutions) and mostly targets vocational education. Along with the aims of employability and economic growth, encouraging market forces and individual choice, raising levels of economically valuable skills, developing training programmes, and promoting recognition of prior learning are important political priorities, while vocationalism, human capital, lifelong (re)training and upskilling, useful learning outcomes, and individual choice represent key HRM conceptual elements. The responsibility for ALE is transposed from the state to the individual and civil society (including financial responsibility) and the role of non-formal and informal ALE also moves to the forefront, as it can be an important contributor to economic development.

The presented theoretical framework will be used to discuss the role of UNESCO’s surveys and GRALEs, following the methodology guidelines referred to in the next section.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES ADDRESSED

The research in this paper is based on a qualitative document analysis of secondary data. As illustrated by Bowen (2009), document analysis can provide “contextual richness” (p. 36) to understand the socio-historical and political-economic background of a specific topic. It consists of two main stages.

The first stage includes selecting the documents to be analysed. For the purposes of this paper, the GRALE reports were chosen (UIL, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2019) and the latest accompanying national reports of Nigeria, Russia and Slovenia (UIL, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). By choosing these documents, we were able to analyse how ALE was constructed in the 2009–2019 decade as a policy object at a truly global level (with UN(ESCO) including 193 member states, 159 of which participated in the GRALE 4 process), and its relation to diverse national contexts. Our aim was thus to contribute to a fairly limited scope of research on GRALEs (Németh, 2013; Walters & von Kotze, 2019; Walters & Watters, 2017) and to provide a comparative analysis of the four GRALEs on the global level, as well as a comparative analysis of the three chosen countries on the national level.

The second stage involved iteratively analysing the documents: a) skimming, b) reading, and c) interpreting, following a “systemic procedure for reviewing and evaluating” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was conducted according to the analytical categories of the conceptual elements and political priorities as per Lima and Guimarães’ framework (2011).

GRALEs are regarded as secondary data in this paper, and policy documents are taken as formal documents that express a commitment to what needs to be

accomplished and changed. Despite being secondary data sources, this paper does not focus on the aims or the structure of the surveys implemented. Therefore, GRALEs serve as guides for policy formulation and development. Following this line of reasoning, the main research task includes questioning the particular problematisations within a policy, namely how the determination of problems is settled. Accordingly, the following research questions were established to guide the writing of this paper:

- How does UNESCO construct ALE as a policy object at an international level in terms of conceptual elements and political priorities in the GRALEs?
- How does it connect to the national reports of Nigeria, Russia and Slovenia?

DATA DISCUSSION

CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS AND POLITICAL PRIORITIES IN GRALES

Analysed through the GRALEs, ALE is discursively based on lifelong learning. This concept is present in all the reports and GRALE 1⁴ (UIL, 2009) states that it is

understood here as an overarching framework that genuinely integrates the specific purposes and scope of adult education within a global frame of reference encompassing the full continuum between basic education and professional continuing education while valuing personal and social development as well as vocational training and human resources development. (p. 40)

According to this understanding, ALE includes a wide range of aims, provisions, contexts of education and learning, participants, etc., reflecting a DEM approach, as it fosters a) democracy, b) personal and social development and c) economic development (UIL, 2009, pp. 21, 25). Other underlined conceptual elements are equality and participation, following the MSC approach as “the importance of respecting, protecting and fulfilling the right of all to quality basic education” (UIL, 2009, p. 17) is mentioned. Also, the participation of all social sectors is emphasised (particularly when those less educated and poorer are falling behind) as well as equality, while stressing that governments play an important role in fighting barriers to participation (p. 77).

As far as political priorities are concerned, GRALE 1 mentions that ALE provision draws on the responsibility of every stakeholder (state, civil society and market providers), as “[e]ducational governance in principle must be based on universal participation” (UIL, 2009, p. 35) and decentralisation. Therefore, “partnerships between the state, civil society and the private sector in developing and sustaining adult learning and education” (p. 24) are highlighted. Additionally, provision aims are related to fostering “democracy and sustainable educational governance” (p. 41); hence, “participatory and locally-adapted programmes and activities” are important (p. 94). It is

⁴ This report includes data from 154 countries.



also stated that “adult education can empower individuals and communities alike to break out of the cycle of exclusion and disadvantage towards a more sustainable future” (p. 117), reflecting the DEM approach. Complementarily, the MSC approach is also referred to, especially in relation to the quality of provision and funding. Lifelong learning, including ALE and literacy (as a “cornerstone”), is a “public responsibility for adult education provision, funding and quality” (p. 24). Additionally, it is stated that “[u]nderfunding”, “underinvestment” and “chronic lack of investment” are serious threats to the quality of ALE all over the world (pp. 94, 115).

While GRALE 1 establishes lifelong learning as a global framework of understanding in which DEM and MSC approaches are preferred, GRALE 2⁵ (UIL, 2013), subtitled *Rethinking Literacy*, emphasises the value of literacy, even if this issue presents a more relevant concern in countries of the global South (Grotlüschen & Buddeberg, 2020). As was the case in the previous report, the conceptual elements and political priorities reflect the DEM⁶ approach, complemented by the MSC approach (e. g., literacy and ALE as key components of education as a human right; education as an instrument for equality; appreciation of vocational education as a catalyst for literacy education; economic and vocational development among ALE aims). The main conceptual elements of the report highlight different socio-cultural contexts for ALE, collective knowledge, civic education and participation, and the importance of including marginalised groups. As part of the recommendations on ALE quality, diversity of governance is also emphasised, stating that society’s potential “can best flourish in rich and open environments” and that “[d]ecentralised, mixed governance models are an effective way to ensure the sustainable development of these kinds of social and educational environments” (p. 160).

On the subject of political priorities, DEM and MSC approaches are more likely to be found again. NGOs are stated as important actors on the one hand; on the other, adult literacy and education are established as part of basic human rights, while empowerment is determined as one of the goals of literacy education. Illustrating the mix of approaches, this report specifies that “[i]t is necessary to re-think how to find a balanced approach, locating adult education within a lifelong learning perspective, shifting the focus from an almost exclusive interest in economic competitiveness to broader human capability enhancement and empowerment” (UIL, 2013, p. 57).

GRALE 3,⁷ subtitled *The Impact of Adult Learning and Education on Health and Well-Being; Employment and the Labour Market; and Social, Civic and Community Life* (UIL, 2016) argues that “adult learning and education help individuals become and stay healthier, improve their economic prospects, and be more informed and active citizens, no matter where in the world they live” (p. 8). Therefore, it continues to follow the DEM approach. Civic education programmes are also highlighted since they can “build political competencies that help adults hold institutions and political actors to account” (p. 111). Additionally, it stresses the importance of basic education and literacy as a vehicle for social cohesion, integration, and inclusion. As in GRALEs 1 and 2, elements of the MSC are also clearly visible: ALE is stressed as an instrument for providing equal opportunities (especially for women), member-states are urged to provide pathways between non-formal and formal education, and high-quality ALE is linked with higher levels of socio-economic development.

In terms of political priorities, the DEM approach is clear. The report states that ALE “has a strong impact on active citizenship, political voice, social cohesion, diversity and

⁵ This report includes data from 141 countries.

⁶ GRALE 2 echoes many DEM conceptual elements, however, the conceptualisation of literacy as an instrument of critical reflection and action for social change is absent.

⁷ This report includes data from 139 countries.

tolerance, and therefore benefits social and community life” (UIL, 2016, p. 14). According to the MSC approach, literacy is also viewed as “essential for developing further skills” and for “enabling workers to function effectively and safely in their workplace” (p. 13), while literacy programmes help develop “democratic values, peaceful co-existence and community solidarity” (p. 13). However, one can argue that it is possible to find a trace of HRM in the report, as it refers to ALE as having a “moderate to strong effect on employability” (p. 14). ALE is also helpful in the constant updating of skills and knowledge process. Therefore, the report recognises the need for multiple actors and “calls for cross-sectoral partnerships between government departments, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders, with each playing a defined role on a long-term rather than case-by-case basis” (p. 80).

With the subtitle *Leaving no one behind: Participation, Equity and Inclusion*, GRALE 4⁸ (UIL, 2019) monitors the extent to which UNESCO member-states put their international commitments regarding ALE into practice (Walters & Watters, 2017). The main message of this report is that, while the potential of ALE is widely recognised, it remains low on the agenda of most member-states: “participation is patchy, progress inadequate and investment insufficient” (UIL, 2019, p. 14). Consequently, the report calls for a major change in investment to ensure that it is accessible to all and appeals for its contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to be fully realised⁹ (UIL, 2019). It enjoins the member-states to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, and stresses the interconnected nature of the goals, in line with the lifelong learning understanding stated in GRALE 1.

Following a similar path to the previous reports, the conceptual elements of the DEM approach are mostly represented. It references the new *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education* of 2015, which succeeded the 1976 recommendation (UNESCO & UIL, 2016), in order to emphasise that

[t]he aim of adult learning and education is to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realize their rights and take control of their destinies. It promotes personal and professional development, thereby supporting more active engagement by adults with their societies, communities and environments. (p. 8)

In terms of political priorities, stressing the MSC approach, the role of the state is emphasised, stating that “[g]overnments, workers and employers, as well as educational institutions, have complementary responsibilities in building an effective and appropriately financed lifelong learning ecosystem” (p. 165). Thus, the report also points towards HRM while additionally advocating for decent working conditions and highlighting sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

⁸ This report includes data submitted by 159 countries.

⁹ In fact, “Leaving no one behind” was the resounding message of the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs. ALE is argued to play a crucial role in supporting the achievement of not only SDG 4 but also of all other goals, including those on climate change, poverty, health and wellbeing, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, and sustainable cities and communities.



THE NATIONAL REPORTS OF NIGERIA, RUSSIA AND SLOVENIA: CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS AND POLITICAL PRIORITIES¹⁰

In the Nigerian national report (UIL, 2015a), the conceptual elements and political priorities are embedded in DEM principles. ALE is viewed as a diverse field of different forms (formal, non-formal, informal) and types of education (from basic to vocational). The governance of ALE in Nigeria, as stated in the report, shows that it has increased stakeholder participation and developed more effective monitoring and evaluation systems, which has led to better coordination arrangements and made ALE more decentralised. Additionally, following MSC elements, it is reported that youth education and ALE are seen as part of the integral whole with literacy and basic skills as top priorities for ALE programmes. The report also states that ALE in Nigeria is tailored to the empowerment of skills particularly at the grassroots level for every individual seeking recognition for prior learning (especially non-formally and informally acquired), for adults with low-level literacy and basic skills, and workers in low-skill, low wage and precarious employment.

In the Russian national report, MSC principles are clearly prevalent both in the conceptual elements and in the political priorities (UIL, 2015b). The report places increasing importance on the training of the key competencies of adults and increasing their functional literacy. Developing infrastructure and technologies for personal growth and fulfilment is also presented as an important objective. Among the important target groups for ALE in Russia, the report cites individuals seeking to update work-relevant knowledge and skills, females and males in mid-life transitions, long-term unemployed people, senior citizens/retired people (third-age education), and migrants and refugees from other countries – the main focus here being on the successful (re)integration of the different groups into the labour market. The report also mentions human capital as requiring development with the support of ALE, indicating elements of HRM principles.

In the Slovenian national report (UIL, 2015c), DEM conceptual elements are the most evident. The national report specifically states the substantial importance of non-economic learning outcomes and civil society benefits, while emphasising diverse priorities and fields of ALE, with literacy, basic education, and popular education at the forefront. It also affirms that the main policy objective of the literacy and basic skills programmes is social and cultural development, following the MSC approach. However, it additionally states that economic benefits such as employability, upskilling and labour market evolution are highly important ALE policy objectives (clear HRM conceptual elements). On the matter of political priorities, some MSC and HRM priorities are evident. However, the tension between the MSC political priority of making literacy and basic skills the main policy aim and the HRM priority of increasing the recognition and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is particularly evident.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the comparison of reports was encumbered by the fact that responsible agencies within the countries adopted different styles of compiling the reports. While the national report from Slovenia has comprehensive answers to all the questions, the Russian report tends to mostly mention other relevant sources, where information can be found, and in the Nigerian report, some answers were not provided due to a lack of information and valid data on the questions posed. Even in the example of only three countries selected for our research it was possible to verify that some blocks of questions can remain unanswered for various reasons, or the local authorities responsible for completion of the questionnaires may choose to give as little information as possible, and it may be assumed that the information they give is probably skewed towards a more favourable picture of ALE.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN GRALES AND NATIONAL REPORTS: DATA INTERPRETATION

In terms of the three policy approaches and the two chosen analytical categories (conceptual elements and political priorities), the four GRALEs have far more similarities than differences. Their most noticeable similarity is the centrality given to lifelong learning as a basic concept for understanding ALE as well as the prevalence of the DEM and MSC approaches, while HRM has limited (but progressive) representation. This is in line with UNESCO's traditionally humanistic approach to policy advocacy, emphasising empowerment and social justice rather than (strictly) the economic aims of ALE (Elfert, 2015) as well as following the shift from (lifelong) education to (lifelong) learning, as noted by Field (2018).

Therefore, in line with the DEM conceptual elements, all four GRALEs (UIL, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2019) present ALE as a diverse field of different forms (formal, non-formal, informal) and types of education (stretching from basic to vocational), characterised by humanistic, emancipatory, and democratic values. They all additionally highlight the importance of making ALE accessible to everyone and valuing socio-cultural contexts. Similarly, the same MSC conceptual elements are continually at the forefront throughout all four GRALEs: creating opportunities for marginalised social groups, literacy as a key component of education as a human right, and education as an instrument for equality as well as modernisation and economic development. Hence, it is important to note that the conceptual elements that are closer to social aims and those that are linked to economic aims may be a source of tension between the different policy approaches (Lima & Guimarães, 2011).

In the political priorities DEM aims are consistent throughout the four reports, emphasising inclusive development and the implementation of policies, drawing on the responsibility of a variety of stakeholders, as well as wide participation in ALE in order to empower individuals and enable political voices, cohesion, diversity and tolerance in communities. The construction of a democratic and participatory society is of utmost importance. Another similarity is the interplay between different policy approaches, between DEM and MSC (e. g., literacy as a key component of education as a human right, contributing to empowerment and social participation as two of the main goals of literacy programmes) and MSC and HRM (e. g., connecting non-formal education to national qualifications to increase employability and achieve wider participation in ALE, promoting literacy education to boost upskilling and vice versa).

The main difference in the conceptual elements among the GRALEs is the role of active citizenship that has progressively moved to the forefront over the period of the four reports. Active citizenship and increased political activity are frequently presented as a consequence of quality formal education, which is another example of the interrelation between DEM and MSC conceptual elements. This is most likely due to greater awareness on the part of UNESCO as to the role of very different organisations (such as NGOs as well as social movements) and the need for civic participation in order to achieve social changes for a more sustainable future, as sustainability and sustainable development¹¹ rose to the top of the political priorities following the 2015 adoption of *Agenda 2030*, SDGs and the *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education* (UNESCO & UIL, 2016). However, it may also be argued that the stress on citizenship masks the

¹¹ The role of ALE in regard to sustainable development is another important difference between the earlier and more recent GRALEs. A strong influence of SDGs on the GRALEs is clearly evident, as GRALE 1 and 2, published prior to 2015, barely mention sustainable development, whereas GRALE 3 and 4, published after 2015, devote a great deal of attention to it. Quantitatively, sustainable development only appears three times in GRALE 1 and four times in GRALE 2 - despite the fact that both were published in the period of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), while it appears 106 times in GRALE 3 and 186 times in GRALE 4.



emphasis on the adult learner and the individualisation of ALE, following the HRM approach, denying the importance of collective processes that education can involve as stated in the DEM approach (Torres, 2011).

The main difference in terms of political priorities is the gradual increase over the four reports in the importance of ALE's value for the labour market, suggesting that HRM has also been gaining recognition with each new report. This issue is related to the critique of UNESCO for shifting the policy focus more towards the economic benefits of education, in contrast to its traditionally humanistic ALE orientation (Elfert, 2015; Field, 2018; Németh, 2016). A slight trend is also observable towards HRM with the gradual increase of skills' importance. Greater emphasis on economic aims appears to be more prevalent in many national contexts, as vocational skills and professional development are the ALE areas with the greatest progress in member-state policies (UIL, 2019, p. 39), alongside fields that are traditionally (and constantly) at the centre of UNESCO and GRALEs' efforts – literacy and basic skills.

The comparison of the national reports from Nigeria, Russia, and Slovenia highlights the different approaches adopted by the selected countries towards ALE from the point of view of conceptual elements and political priorities. The three countries form a kind of continuum, with Nigeria at one end, whose national report suggests reliance on the DEM approach, with significant MSC elements. Slovenia, positioned in the middle, is, according to its national report, almost in equal part reliant on the DEM and MSC approach. Russia sits at the opposite end of the continuum and, according to its national report, mostly relies on MSC and HRM approaches. It is also worth noting that elements of the HRM approach can be found in all of the reports, but they appear mostly as a continuation of the MSC approach and so far cannot be seen as an essential part of either the political priorities or conceptual elements of any country. This fact is in line with Elfert's (2015) remarks that many member-states are following the dominant economic orientation more closely than UNESCO. When considering that UNESCO has been criticised for "over-emphasising the voice of the member-states and suppressing non-governmental views" (Németh, 2016, p. 128), this alerts to the possibility of UNESCO leaning closer to their trajectory.

As far as the conceptual elements are concerned, all three national reports align with DEM and present ALE as a diverse field of different forms (formal, non-formal, informal) and types of education (from basic to vocational). Additionally, all the reports to various degrees contain the same MSC conceptual elements: creating opportunities for marginalised social groups, literacy as a key component of education as a human right, and education as an instrument for equality as well as modernisation and economic development. The Nigerian national report is somewhat notable in this regard as it underlines the importance of ALE for the economic development of the country and at the same time mentions its importance for the empowerment of people, combining DEM and MSC elements. Both the Slovenian and Russian reports clearly state that in their countries ALE does not greatly contribute to cultural diversity, active citizenship, community participation, democratic values, or peaceful coexistence. Non-economic and economic ALE policy objectives are all emphasised as very important conceptual elements, although it is difficult to determine which are more at the forefront solely on the basis of the reports. In the case of Slovenia, the picture becomes clearer when considering some of the previous research on this topic (Košmerl & Mikulec, 2021; Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016), pointing to the predominance of HRM and economic objectives in the governance of the Slovenian ALE system.

In relation to the political priorities, the national reports reveal a mixture of all three approaches, again with a strong influence of MSC. All of the countries stress the process

of upskilling and employability, which are strong indicators of the HRM principles. However, basic literacy and basic skills tend to be among the priorities for all three countries, as they are apparently viewed as a basic element of ALE that should be ever-present. There are also important differences in the approaches of the countries. While Nigeria expresses plainly in its report that literacy and basic skills are the top priority for its ALE, Slovenia at the same time underlines the importance of non-economic learning outcomes and civil society benefits that stem from basic literacy and skills, such as social and cultural development, whereas the Russian report describes these notions following the MSC principles, denoting them as key competencies and functional literacy, although still mentioning that non-economic outcomes and benefits for collective and civil society are important for the Russian ALE policy.

CONCLUSION

International surveys and reports are seen by many as global agenda and discourse shapers (Johansson, 2016; Milana 2017; Tsatsaroni & Evans, 2014). As argued in this paper, through the GRALEs, UNESCO is reinforcing its role in policy, namely in ALE conceptualisation and in setting political priorities. Within this line of reasoning, lifelong learning represents an umbrella term for the description and analysis of national (adult) education (sub)systems in GRALE. It should be noted, however, that not all the countries responding to the national surveys confirmed having an ALE policy or even ALE being a (sub)system of public education. This circumstance is somehow shadowed by the GRALE as a diffusing instrument of lifelong learning policy. The stress upon lifelong learning (namely upon informal learning) may mask the lack of political commitment to ALE in several countries, only highlighted in the last GRALE when referring to (low rates of) participation in the public provision of many member-states.

Even while not clearly considering the national, historical and contextual policy differences of each member-state as departure points for description and analysis, the GRALEs need to be considered as significant documents including competing worldviews (Elfert, 2015). The reports analysed point to differences, for instance, between the main understandings of ALE in the global South and the global North (Grotlüschen & Buddeberg, 2020). These differences are evident in some reports in the emphasis on literacy – more significant for some regions of the global South – as well as on the emphasis on vocational education and training – more relevant in regions of the global North. Therefore, these reports are relevant in raising awareness of ALE as a global issue, in which lifelong learning is a central policy topic, as well as in stressing specific issues that are significant in certain member-states (Torres, 2011), but where there are also tensions resulting from different understandings of ALE that are not made evident in the GRALEs.

International surveys, such as those leading to the GRALE, can influence the standardisation of policies, educational practices and curricula at all levels (Jakobi, 2009). UNESCO's influence is most visible at the level of conceptual elements following the DEM approach, by which several countries claim that they agree with the ideals promoted by these IGOs. However, our research suggests that at least in the case of UNESCO's GRALEs and national reports, this influence is far from dominant and straightforward. This finding is in line with Milana's conclusions (2017, p. 88), who argues that countries may preserve differentiated characteristics in their education policies, despite the adoption of some global norms. GRALEs tend to emphasise the DEM approach while national reports tend



to stress more MSC principles. This circumstance may be justified by the fact that national reports are answered by government officials. These documents present a national political discourse on ALE to be presented in international settings and indicate the varied importance of ALE in several countries (more or less important as a public policy). In member-states in which ALE is not a relevant political topic, by answering these national reports, ALE may gradually become a significant political issue. Hence, these regular surveys may allow decision-makers to reflect on (national and global) ALE and its importance, especially when given the opportunity to compare themselves with others.

Therefore, it should be noted that these international surveys, such as the one under analysis, follow aims set by UNESCO, while answers given by national officials may be geared towards other aims, namely the importance given to reflect a certain idea of national ALE policy in an international setting. In this context, some ideas, facts and circumstances may be highlighted; many others might be shadowed in GRALEs, namely those that do not fit the way national policy makers want each country to be seen and considered in international settings. Thus, critical discussion on international surveys should shed light on what is clear and opaque in policy documents, as well as in shifts that can be identified in the analysis and interpretation of discourses included in these documents. The meaning of such changes, such as those included in global and national ALE policies and the challenges involved, can benefit from holistic and complex theoretical frameworks (such as that of Lima & Guimarães, 2011). In parallel, the use of theoretical frameworks may foster critical thinking on the preparation and writing of future national and global reports such as GRALE 5, as well as the subsequent ALE policy documents beyond the CONFINTEA VII.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

The four authors of this article were co-authors of the different sections it includes, such as the conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis of data, as well as writing – reviewing & editing.

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