Understanding Lifelong Learning and Adult Education Policy in Estonia – Tendencies and Contradictions

Larissa Jõgi

Tallinn University, Estonia

Abstract

There have been many theoretical and empirical analyses about lifelong learning policies and how to implement, develop, measure and facilitate lifelong learning and lifelong learning policy in order to cater for the needs and requirements of individuals as well as society in general.

The particular slant on lifelong learning in different countries depends on their history, traditions and on the current social, political and economic context. For the past 20 years, Estonia has been in a period of transition from a post-communist to market-based and democratic society. This has brought new challenges to education, including adult education. Estonia is a post-soviet country where the processes of liberalism, individualism, neo-modernism and post-industrialism have all taken place within a short period of time. Adult educational policy in Estonia has been influenced by the direction of social, economic and political change in the European Union; it has also been affected by the need to consider EU directives, European policies and trends in the European educational area. This paper focuses on adult education in Estonia by analysing strategic documents concerning lifelong learning and adult education policy and statistical data concerning participation in lifelong learning activities. The paper provides an overview of tendencies and contradictions in lifelong learning and adult education in Estonia in order to understand the present practices of Estonian Adult Education.

Keywords: lifelong learning policy, adult education, tendencies and contradictions

Introduction

Education as a whole has changed in Estonia during the last 20 years, and this has had a great impact on the development of adult education. Estonia is a small country. As of 1 January 2011 the Estonian population is 1,340,194 people (Statistical Yearbook of Estonia 2011: 9). In 2009, 68.6% of the population in Estonia were Estonians. During the past decade, Estonia has become a member of the European Union, NATO, the OECD, the Schengen Area and the World Trade Organization.

Due to joining the European Union in 2004, Estonia’s social, political, educational and economic objectives reflect the pursuits of the entire European Union. However, regardless of the influences
from the European Union and other countries, Estonia has been able to preserve and strengthen its national identity; we have also maintained our cultural peculiarity as a bilingual community and multicultural society and the possibility to obtain an education in both Estonian and Russian.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Estonian education system has been forced to cope with great changes in society, such as adjusting to a market-based economy and political pluralism; moreover, the entire education system has been restructured. Estonia’s transition to a market economy and the economic restructuring in the 1990s considerably increased unemployment and the risk of unemployment. Education became a measure for rising to a higher social group and entering the economic and political elite. During the period of rapid economic reforms the impact of education on employment was remarkable. At the end of the 1990s, when paid educational institutions and private universities were established, the availability of and opportunities for obtaining academic education improved noticeably. At the start of this millennium, academic education in Estonia meant better opportunities and position in the labour market, including better wages (Unt 2005). Changes in Estonian society have also contributed to the fact that education has become a means for determining social status. At the end of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century, education in Estonia played a differentiating and selective role rather than equalising and integrating role (Helemäe, Saar, Vöörmann 2000:276, Estonian Human Development Report 2001).

The stratification of society based on social and educational capital has continued to increase. Furthermore, prognoses by the Estonian Institute for Future Studies and the Estonian Human Development Reports indicate that stratification and selectiveness will continue to prevail in Estonian society in the future (Loogma, Pettai, Terk 1999; Estonian Human Development Report 2006, 2009).

Changes have occurred in all areas of the Estonian education system through 2000–2010: in educational policy, funding, the administration and management of education, in the system and network of educational institutions and curricula at all educational levels. Education policy and the education system in Estonia have been greatly influenced by societal changes; the social, economic and political situation is different, as Estonia has become a democratic society.

The period from 1991–2004 may be characterised as a period of educational expansion, and the years 2004–2010 as a period of expansion in higher education (Estonian Human Development Report 2009, 2010). Educational opportunities increased and diversified, enrolment in higher education institutions was simplified and the educational level of Estonians has improved remarkably. In comparison with the EU average, the proportion of the population with low-level qualifications in Estonia is quite small (11%). For tertiary education, the percentage of the population aged 25–64 with higher education was higher than in most of the EU member states in 2007. Most adults already
have tertiary education (35% of 15–64-year-olds in 2008 had a higher education; 31% had a vocational education). (Estonian Human Development Report 2009). The indicators of formal education obtained by the Estonian population are considerably higher than the EU average (Jõgi & Gross 2010, Broek, Buiskool, Hake 2010), but much depends on how this educational potential is used in society.

The concept of lifelong learning (LLL) came into active use in Estonian educational policy after 1996, which was designated by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament as the European Year of Lifelong Learning. Its use continued after discussion of the memorandum on lifelong learning – Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality – drafted and adopted by the European Council and Lisbon European Union Conclusions, in which it is pointed out that lifelong learning is an important precondition for a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society.

EU lifelong learning policies have had a major influence in understanding the concept and terminology of lifelong learning. Since Estonia became a member of the European Union in 2004, the development of adult learning and education has become one of the main priorities of educational policy. Its importance is defined in documents and laws regulating the national education systems, as well as in Strategies for Lifelong Learning in Estonia 2005–2008 and the Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009–2013, which devote considerable attention to the development of adult education in the context of lifelong learning (Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008; Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009–2013).

Education – the supreme social function – is ‘caught’ between ‘two fires’, two kinds of society, in the turn of the millennia. Evermore placed in the thin borderline between stability and change, between preservation and innovation, education is experiencing unprecedented tensions. Indeed, educational systems are a mirror of all the contradictions that confront our modern societies (Carneiro 2007:3).

The paper is based on the international research project “Impact of ongoing reforms in education and training on the adult learning sector”, which has been carried out by Research voor Beleid in partnership with the University of Leiden through 2009–2010, and financed by the European Commission (DG EAC/EAC/15/2009). The aim of this international study was to provide a thorough analysis of ongoing developments, reforms and modernisation in the adult learning sector in the 32 countries participating in the Education and Training 2010 process (Broek, Buiskool, Hake 2010: 3).

In this paper I use also results from a national case-study (Jõgi & Gross 2010) and selected qualitative data from 14 educational expert interviews¹ collected in 2008 in the context of a Finnish-Estonian research project, Education in Estonia and Finland and Changes in the Educational Policy of the European Union, 2006–2008. (Jõgi, Jääger, Rinne, Leppänen, Korppas, Klemelä 2008). The aim of
this research was to analyze the effects of the supranational policy of education on the educational policy systems of Finland and Estonia. Educational experts were selected on the basis of their professional experience (more than 10 years experience in adult education policy), position in the field and their influence on strategic decision making. Empirical data was analysed by using inductive analyses. The results from studies are interpretatively synthesized in this article.

The aim of this paper to provide an overview of current tendencies and contradictions in lifelong learning and adult education policy in Estonia in order to understand the present practices of Estonian Adult Education. There is also theoretical and practical need to understand how these policies implemented.

In this paper I discuss tendencies and general contradictions in adult education in Estonia. First, the historical background to the development of adult education in Estonia will be briefly described. Secondly, general tendencies in adult education for 1991–2010 will be presented. Thirdly, the aims and priorities of lifelong learning strategies and adult education policy will be discussed. The paper concludes by identifying some contradictions in lifelong learning policy and adult education practice in Estonia.

**Adult Education in Estonia: tendencies 1991–2010**

Adult education and training in Estonia have strong traditions based on difficult periods in the history of Estonian society. During the soviet period the education system was primarily centralised. All educational programs for adults were supervised and accredited by the central government in Moscow. In the 70s, several methodological and training centres for adults were established in Estonia. From the mid-80s (soviet era of “perestroika”) and from 1991, wider reforms in the education system in Estonia influenced adult education. Special attention was paid to in-service training and continuing education for civil servants, teachers and those with good and low levels of education.


**Table 1**
Growing international cooperation in the field of adult education, an increased role for non-government organisations in adult education, enhanced learning and educational opportunities at both formal, non-formal and informal levels of adult education, growth in the number of adult continuing education and training centres in Estonian counties and larger cites, increased learning opportunities in university adult education, academic programmes at Open Universities attracted well-paid people, growth in adult participation in educational courses and continuing training. The Adult Education Act was approved in 1993 and updated in 1998, 1999 and 2002. The Adult Education Act establishes legal guarantees and stipulates the right of every person to lifelong learning throughout his or her life cycle, the obligations of both central and local government and of employers in the coordination and implementation of adult education, and the financing of adult education from the national budget. The Act confirmed the principles of the legislative framework for adult education and learning in Estonia. The state only finances the implementation of the national priorities in adult education that have been approved by the Government of the Republic of Estonia. Training is generally paid for by the people themselves, rarely by local governments or employers (Jõgi et al 2008).

The Adult Educator as a profession has been recognised and regulated by the Professional Qualification Standard in Estonia since 2004. The Adult Educator/Andragogue’s professional standard can be applied at four levels (levels II, III, IV, V). Since 2007, the professional standard is competence based, and this has significantly influenced the preparation of applicants for a qualification standard.

Participants in training and lifelong learning activities are usually people with better education and higher educational levels. Educational stratification is increasing and opportunities for obtaining an education have mainly deteriorated for those who lack the necessary resources: a good education, status, labour market position, money, time, motivation (Estonian Human Development Report 2001); thus, the risk of unemployment in certain population groups keeps rising. The number of participants in lifelong learning is consistently low: in 1997 – 4.3%, in 2000 – 6.3%, in 2004 – 6.5% (Statistics Estonia 2009), which is nearly twice as low as the European Union average (Europe in Figures 2007: 94). At the same time, education is highly valued by the Estonian society and people.

The training market offers a large number of different courses for adults: with the support of the Estonian Government and European Structural Funds (since 2007), diverse opportunities have been created for obtaining free training, including retraining and additional training for the unemployed, people with lower positions and people with special needs. Until 2007, the participation rate in lifelong learning remained 6–7%, but in 2007 the indicator increased to 9.8%. In 2009, participation in lifelong learning rose to 10.9% (Statistics Estonia, 2009). This change can be
explained by the fact that in 2008 the Estonian Government approved a model for funding adult professional training, which proceeds from responsibility-based distribution. Pursuant to this model the Ministry of Social Affairs funds the training of the unemployed and the risk groups of the labour market; the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications supports companies that wish to train their employees and the Ministry of Education and Research coordinates continuing training and retraining through training and educational institutions (Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005-2008). The implementation of the responsibility-based distribution model and extensive opportunities created with the help of EU structural aid through 2007–2010, as well as free training for risk groups and the unemployed boosted the number of participants in lifelong learning (The Development Plan 2009-2013:11, Jõgi & Gross 2010).

**Participation in adult education**

Participation should be considered an important indicator of the quality of lifelong learning in society and of the quality of individual motivation. However, participation also deals with the processes that cause people to participate in organised training situations. The country’s financing models for adult education have favoured certain occupational categories, such as teachers and public officials. Despite the fact that provisions for training the unemployed has also been prioritised, the demand for training remains many times greater than the supply of training opportunities in the case of the unemployed (Estonian Human Development Report 2009). However, the funding model does not encompass all the target groups for adult education or non-formal adult education; for instance, compared to Finland, the funding of non-formal education is scarce (Jõgi et al 2008).

Adults who have difficulty participating in learning are the elderly, men, people with lower levels of education, adults who are working in low-skilled positions, unemployed, adults living in rural areas and foreigners who do not speak Estonian (Statistics Estonia 2009). During the economic crisis (2009–2010), the inequality between the participation rates of different groups presumably increased, resulting in a situation where training was not available to those who would benefit from it the most in these adverse economic conditions – less qualified workers, unemployed as well as people who have given up looking for a job (Statistics Estonia 2011). The reasons for non-participation are complex. The most frequent reasons for low participation in lifelong learning activities are:

- unwillingness to return to school
- cost of studies
- believing that one is too old to learn
The study carried out by Nurmela (Nurmela 2009, cited at Estonian Human Development report 2009) shows that institutional barriers dominate. Such reasons as training opportunities are too expensive (30.8% of people who have not participated in learning in the past year); there were no training opportunities near the place of residence (22.2%); 8.3% mentioned access criteria having been too high or difficult. Situational barriers such as being too old (38.1%) or health problems (19.2%) were mentioned as reasons for not participating. The most common reasons for not participating were that people did not feel the need to learn for their job (47.7%) nor for personal life (49.5%) as well as they did not want to return to education (47%), which is a dispositional barrier and indicates that learning and studying does not make sense. A great number of reasons could be seen as personal barriers, such as: people have no interest (25.7%) or they cannot find a training course that interests them (10%), 6% thought learning to have no benefit (Nurmela 2009, cited at Estonian Human Development report 2009).

Participation in lifelong learning has increased in all groups of society, but older people and people with a lower level of education still participate in learning less than younger people and those with higher levels of education; the participation rate for non-Estonians is lower than that of Estonians (Jõgi and Gross 2010).

In addition, factors affecting particular groups – low-skilled, partly-qualified, unemployed, people with low motivation and non-Estonians. On an personal level, barriers for participation and for learning are related to the inner motivation to learn, to work environment and job, which will not motivate people to learn. Restoring the aptitude to participate and learn and increasing the inner motivation to learn will often take a long time and requires macro-level and long-term strategies with strong focus on personal barriers.

**Development strategic goals of the adult education policy**

The significance of lifelong learning has not been questioned, but the direction that society is taking in support of learning opportunities is important (Jarvis 2006:210). During the 90s, the policy of adult education and adult learning in Estonia focused on the readiness for change and lifelong learning. The education policy of the 1990s prioritised higher and general education, but was unaware of the role of adult and vocational education in influencing social processes and as active labour market measures. Attention and resources for vocational education have been gradually increased since 1998, and vocational education reform was initiated, focusing on the diversification, rearrangement and improvement of the vocational education system, on counselling students and developing flexible financing mechanisms, and on decentralised management that would include social partners.
Estonian education policy – the formulation and approval of the relevant Education Act and development plans – is based on the cooperation of various interest groups and social partners, and remains in the competence of the Government of the Republic of Estonia. The development of education policy is coordinated by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. The main directions and goals of adult education policy are determined in several strategic documents and are primarily aimed at the professional training of adults, as well as their access to educational opportunities (Jõgi et al 2008).

National Priorities in Adult Education for 2004–2006

National Priorities in Adult Education for 2004–2006 focused on opportunities for adults to enter into lifelong learning, also in the field of formal education, by creating opportunities for education system dropouts to return to the system. Other priorities focused on ensuring the quality of adult training, including vocational training and developing an adult education financing model, which included motivating companies to invest in training their employees (National report, 2007, 2009).


Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008 describes the principles and need for lifelong learning on a wider scale, but its goals, measures and activity plans focus on adult education (Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008). The general goal of the strategy is to increase the opportunities and motivation of the Estonian people to participate in both formal and informal studies in order to improve their knowledge and skills in line with their own needs. One of the most significant objectives of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategies 2005–2008, and one which will ensure lifelong learning, is the creation of adequate conditions both to increase the number of adults learning and to improve the quality of the activities taking place in educational establishments (Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategies 2005–2008). The goal set by the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008 was partly fulfilled in 2008; statistics show that opportunities for participating or the readiness to participate in lifelong learning vary greatly according to different background indicators of the population (Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009–2013).

Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009–2013

The Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009–2013 is a continuation of the Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008 and mainly focuses on better access to education and learning activities. General goal of the Development Plan is: to provide adults better access to formal education and non-formal education in order to improve the knowledge of people and
the level of education of the population and to increase the percentage of people aged 25–64 participating in lifelong learning to 13.5% by 2013 (Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009–2013). The activities planned within the framework of the Development Plan are in accordance with the priorities of the Estonian Action Plan for Growth and Jobs 2008–2011 for the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, the National Strategy for the Use of Structural Funds 2007–2013 and the Operational Programme for Human Resource Development 2007–2013, as well as the Ministry of Education and Research development plan, Smart and Active People, approved by the Government of the Republic of Estonia (Jõgi & Gross 2010).

Until 2011, Estonia lacked a coherent education strategy and consensus regarding the goals and vision of education; thus, developments in adult education are linked to strategies and development and action plans that involve various areas. The Estonian Education Strategy was compiled in 2011.

The Five Challenges of Estonian Education – Estonian Education Strategy 2012–2020, is based on a three-way agreement concluded by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly, Estonian Education Forum and the Ministry of Education and Research. In light of the broad-based consensus education is defined broadly as:

‘the precondition for a happy life and the basis for cultural sustainability and societal interaction, which also helps the country’s economic progress and develops our common human assets’ (The Five Challenges of Estonian Education – Estonian Education Strategy 2012: 3).

The prevalence of professional training as an important goal in Estonian adult education policy is simultaneously a strength and a weakness, enforcing the idea that lifelong learning and study is only related to adjusting to and staying in the labour market. Most of the 14 educational experts who were interviewed for the joint survey of Finland and Estonia, Education in Estonia and Finland and Changes in the Educational Policy of the European Union, 2006–2008 (Jõgi et al 2008) considered professional training an important measure for alleviating unemployment, but pointed out that the adult educational policy in Estonia has no clear philosophical or conceptual basis, the coordination of the policy is weak, it lacks coherence, and cooperation between social partners is insufficient (Jõgi et al 2008, Roodla & Jääger 2008: 4). Education experts in Estonia understood that adult education is marginal, peripheral among educational problems (“something that should be dealt with”), hinting that among decision-makers and officials there is a lack of a deep understanding of lifelong learning and education, and it is mainly considered due to EU pressure.
My personal viewpoint is that there is no adult educational policy. It is something that everyone talks about exactly as they see fit. And as this policy has not been formulated clearly, we do not know how to feel a part of it. There is no comprehensive system and I believe that we, and our partners, would be ready to discuss what role we could fulfil in this policy if specific goals were established. Negotiations would then be held with the partners who could contribute to this system. However, as no such framework exists today, we do not feel included in it. (Expert A)

But actually, in everyday situations, higher education, general education and vocational education are more important ... But when I look at how the state budget is discussed, then there is an attitude of “let adults pay for themselves”. But at the same time, due to European Commission pressure, we have received a lot of money for the next period of adult education. This is so and so. It is something that should be dealt with. (Expert B)

The experts are in favour of humanist adult education, but in the current context of a liberal adult education policy this is impossible because adult education is primarily oriented towards labour market needs.

The role [of adult education] is like it is, but it is foremost a bridge between the person and the labour market in my opinion. It is seen mainly like this: what might enable a person to achieve relevance in the changing labour market, in the changing situation. Certainly career success is stressed in Estonia more than being a citizen or just being active, having a broader mind, social networks or things like that. It is mostly seen as a way for those who were trained long ago to be successful and have the right skills nowadays, and especially from the labour market aspect. Simply put, with the human-centred approach in adult education and policy you are not successful. This slogan is very successful in higher education... where politicians and also officials will hit the table with their fist, that students must have the freedom to choose what they study. But when we start to talk about vocational education and adult education, then it must be according to labour market needs. (Expert D)

It is frequently believed that the educational policies developed and implemented in various EU countries mainly prioritise national values and goals, and that supranational objectives are taken into account only as secondary. This is also considered obvious when comparing education country by country. The Estonian survey results indicate that Estonian national educational models and goals have been influenced by supranational institutions for quite a while, and that since the 1990s their influence has clearly grown (Jõgi et al 2008, Aava 2010).

Comparing developments and tendencies in adult education policy in the context of lifelong learning, it can be said that education policy in Estonia has changed and strengthened, and the European
aspect has become more important and dominant during 2005-2008 years. For instance, the goals established in Estonian documents on educational policy are influenced by the educational policy of the European Union: the terms globalisation, information society, quality management and assurance, quality areas, market, clients, results, auditing and efficiency all originate from OECD sources (Aava 2010, Jõgi et al 2008). But little attention in education policy has been paid to personal barriers and supportive activities for participation.

The importance of the lifelong learning policy context

Social progress is a part of change processes. Social developments in a society must bring about changes, improvement, innovation, the diversification of relationships and the satisfaction of people’s needs. Processes in the education system also display features of development and innovation: the irreversibility that guarantees the changes, the directedness that points to development tendencies, the pattern that is required in this particular process, the innovation that starts from an idea to change something or do something differently, and the result as a change (Bauman & May 1997, May 2001). How can we create the preconditions for social processes and change in the educational context? Which social structures and preconditions together guarantee the availability of lifelong learning for everybody and the efficiency of society? Which goals do we need to establish to make the development processes successful? Should we concentrate on individuals’ opportunities for life-wide and life-long learning, or should we increase human capital in society or support the readiness to learn and help people to identify their learning needs or should we continue to support participation in lifelong learning activities?

Some issues are resolved in the various strategies immediately or after a delay, while some are never dealt with and some remain topical. The European Union’s lifelong learning policy is based on the introduction and implementation of lifelong learning and the ideas of a knowledge-based society. The initial concept, which has been used to describe learning across ages, as a life course context, has lost its meaning or is used only in rhetorical discourse (Niemi 2004:12). Researchers point out that the vision for lifelong learning became a dominant idea in the 1990s and continues to mean a prerequisite that influences economic developments and guarantees a qualified labour force and employment (Nicoll & Fejes 2008). The term ‘lifelong learning’ is suffering from linguistic “hyperinflation” (Field 2004) and has become “planet-speak” (Fejes 2006). The concept of lifelong learning can be compared to a chameleon whose colours change according to its environment. The economic imperative is dominant in political and public discourse with the call for lifelong learning (Schutze & Casey 2006:282).
Such rhetoric and discourse as the development of a neo-liberal ideology is also discernible in the key goals and pursuits of the Estonian strategic documents on lifelong learning and the associated public discussion (Aava 2010: 46-48).

*Economic competition is most important in Estonia and this is where the values of adult education are developing. The greatest expectations in society are currently economic development, people value success and their own life more... Hopefully, people will soon realise that success goes hand in hand with education and education becomes equal to the economic aspect of learning (Expert L.)*

Analysis of the most important documents related to lifelong learning (Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005-2008, Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009-2013) reveals that the economic imperative is also manifest in the goals, priorities and planned activities. There are more than 70 strategies and strategic documents from various areas where the term 'lifelong learning' is used in the economic context, but their content is not associated with development processes, innovation or problems in the social sphere, economy and education (Aava 2010, Kattel & Kalvet 2005:11).

Barthes (2004) recommended that we observe how we speak about phenomena that help differentiate between the importance, effect and reality of the content both during the analysis and decision-making process and in the results. Are goals, priorities and concepts real, logical objectives or dream-like and unrealistic illusions, utopian beliefs or typical or even contradictory phrases that only include the agendas of certain interest groups? Which features of a concept or model are manifest in strategic documents about lifelong learning? What content do the strategic goals and priorities convey?

The theoretical viewpoints behind this paper are based on those of Schutze and Casey (2006). Schutze and Casey described and distinguished four models of lifelong learning (2006:282-283).

A. *Lifelong Learning for all.* An emancipatory of social justice model which pushes the notion of equality of opportunity and life chances through education.

B. *Lifelong for self-fulfilment.* Cultural model where lifelong learning is a process of individual’s life itself, aiming at the fulfilment of life and self-realisation.

C. *Lifelong Learning for all, who want, and are able to participate.* An open society model in which lifelong learning is seen as an adequate learning system for developed, multicultural and democratic countries.
D. *Lifelong Learning for employment*. A human capital model where lifelong learning connotes continuous work related training and skill development to meet the needs of the economy and employers for a qualified, flexible and adaptable workforce.

It seems that the goals of the *Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005–2008* and the *Development Plan for Estonian Adult Education 2009–2013* do not unconditionally follow these models, but they include features of the first (A), third (C) and fourth (D) models. The goals do not include the pursuits of the second model.

One must agree with the viewpoint of Schutze and Casey that none of these models or ideal types exist in their pure form in any country, nor are any of them pursued as such. Rather there are hybrid forms in various countries with different emphases on one or several of these principal directions that are grafted on to existing systems of education and training, sometimes with little real change (Schutze & Casey, 2006: 284).

**Conclusion**

Since the 1990s, the role of adult education and lifelong learning has been growing. From 1991–2000, Estonia has undergone fundamental changes that have significantly influenced the structure, essence, goals and priorities of the education system. Considering the demographic changes in Estonia, adult education continues to be an important strategic area in terms of the country’s development. Globalisation and development trends in the European Union have affected the distribution of international educational ideas and created the need for the harmonisation of the education systems of Member States. Estonian adult education policy is strongly influenced by the EU educational policy and supranational organisations whose goals are greatly associated with economic developments. The dependence of the decision-making process in educational policy on supranational organisations and international trends is particularly clearly manifest in the smaller Member States of the European Union and in the periphery of the OECD. For instance, in Estonia (and also Latvia and Lithuania) the developments are similar to those in Finland (Jõgi & Gross 2010, Jõgi *et al* 2008). It seems that in the implementation of recommendations from supranational organisations, it is important to keep in mind that an over-enthusiastic or hasty implementation of the “best” models or indicators on a national scale might not always be the most suitable solution. In the coordination of national education, implementing solutions that do not agree with the country’s history, values or traditions or the people’s actual needs may entail the surrendering of the educational policy to the supranational level.
Recent years have been characterized by increased learning opportunities. In the context of EU lifelong learning policy, adult participation in adult education is stated as an effective tool for achieving economic growth (Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2005-2008), but the participation rates in adult education in Estonia do not look very promising yet.

The greatest contradiction in adult education is that the people who are the least motivated to participate in adult education are those with lower levels of education, older and from non-Estonian speaking nationalities. Regionally, training opportunities vary greatly; adult education is centred in larger cities and a significant share of adult training opportunities are not free; thus, adult training is often available only for highly educated people with good incomes. The second contradiction in Estonian adult education is connected with educational inequality. Adults have unequal learning opportunities due to regional, social and economic factors. There is also inequality between various vocational and professional groups. The inequality in terms of participation and access in adult education could mirror broader structural inequalities in Estonian society as well as institutional differences (Saar 2010). The third contradiction is manifest among national priorities, goals and the motives for participating in adult education. Strategic goals establish the need to guarantee the availability of formal and non-formal education for adults to secure the improvement of the population’s level of education and increase participation in education (Development Plan for Lifelong Learning 2009-2013: 8). Results regarding participation surveys indicate that the motives of adults are not related to the improvement of their educational level. The motives for participation do not overlap with the national priorities and strategic pursuits. The strongest motives for participating in adult education are factors related to self-development: the wish to expand one’s horizons (a very strong reason for 89% of the 966 respondents), the wish to improve self-confidence and be more satisfied with oneself and obtain new knowledge and skills utilised outside the place of employment (strong reason for 67% from among 966 respondents) (Eikla 2010:11).

The fact that the strategic goals of adult education mostly focus on quantitative indicators that take no account personal barriers and do not reflect changes in the qualification, knowledge and motivation of people is another contradiction. The Development Plan for Lifelong Learning 2009–2013 and its implementation plan for 2009–2011 bring together the goals of adult education, but common priorities that all institutions, interest groups and social partners developing adult education could adhere to are non-existent. Analysis of factors affecting adult participation and learning need a long-term quantitative and qualitative studies with different target groups.

Every country has certain characteristics that influence the opportunities for lifelong learning and adult education. The ongoing analysis of the development of the educational process and the effects
of educational policy enables us to discover the innovation opportunities in adult education and understand adult education in the more broader context.

Acknowledgements

Notes

References


'Eesti kutseharidussüsteemi kirjeldus: temaatiline ülevaade 2006',


'Estonian Human Development Report 2001',


'Estonian Human Development Report 2009',


'Europe in Figures 2007. Eurostat Yearbook',


Nurmela, K. (2009). 'Täiskasvanuhariduses mitteosalemise põhjused'. Riigikogu Toimetised (20),


The five Challenges of Estonian Education. Estonian education Strategy 2012-2020',
