

Conference of the ESREA Network on Policy Studies in Adult Education

Adult Learning and Education: Widening the scope for action

13-15 May 2026

University of Hamburg, Germany

Extended Call for papers

Adult Learning and Education (ALE) is embedded in national, international and supra-national policies. Accordingly, policy studies in Adult Education reflect and address the movements, developments and discourses of the formal policies and the more subtle narratives and ideologies applied in the field. Scholars find new kinds of pressure, but they also note strategies to widen the scope for action for adult learners, providers of ALE, and researchers. This includes research about the impact of several years of crises, e.g. the financial and climate crises, the pandemic, and the outbreaks of wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. As a political reaction to these mega-level crises, many countries face a right-wing turn and rising populism (Grotlüschen, Belzer, Ertner & Yasukawa, 2023).

ALE research as part of the social sciences faces increasing pressure: Its opportunities and spaces are constantly narrowed by austerity measures, by conservative or far-right governments' policy and political initiatives that tend to depict ALE as an enemy, and by anticipatory obedience in authorities or training providers. On the other hand, local, national and international advocacy groups

and networks form and develop counterstrategies to widen the scope for action. This includes the Marrakech Framework for Action, the GRALE, influencing the EU HORIZON funding as well as several national and local initiatives and networks.

As a science and practice that stems from Social Movements and searches for Social Justice, ALE stands in the way of conservative or right-wing policymakers. Right-wing ideology does not only hit civic education programs (e.g. in Germany), but also adult literacy policies (e.g. in Brazil and India), educational policies on diversity, equity and inclusion (e.g. in Texas since early 2024) and all the different policies on migrant language provision and integration. On the other hand, ALE practitioners and policymakers develop counterstrategies on all levels:

On supranational or *mega levels*, institutions like OECD and UNESCO advocate for educational policies that support social cohesion, e.g. with the OECD webinar series after the launch of the PIAAC 2024. On the *macro level*, governments and the EU fund research to support democracies and European Integration. Labour ministries fund programs

to support access, diversity, equity and democracy within companies. However, policy studies on ALE also show that ALE remains the stepchild of funding and always ranges behind school and early childhood policies. On the *meso level*, umbrella organisations and NGOs advocate for academic freedom, freedom of speech, equity and social justice, as well as the political independence of community education centres and training providers. Trade Unions and their training institutions develop programs and strategies to engage in dialogue with populists and right-wing parties while developing strategies to counteract their societal views and political initiatives. Universities and networks against the far right start or continue initiatives for diversity and long nights for democracy; they initiate petitions and signature lists against non-democratic pressure in educational institutions, and their research clusters often focus on education for democracy, sustainability, climate justice and social justice. Historical approaches aim at processing injustice, e.g. in the former Soviet Union, or post-war and post-revolutionary societies. On the *micro level*, in the learning and teaching interaction, training staff often argue for democracy and freedom of speech, support diversity and offer ALE to encourage adult's emancipation.

These manifold counterstrategies often prove effective and make adult education, higher education, community education and professional education safer spaces for democratic and diverse populations. Counterstrategies can be creative and build on grassroots movements like feminist or queer movements, literacy and immigration movements or freedom fights. They can be formal and publicly funded, like immigrant language provision. They can be non-formal, like equity, inclusion and diversity programs in companies. Several longitudinal studies from Sweden, the UK and Germany show that ALE supports social cohesion, lowers economic inequities and thus stabilizes democracies.

This shows that widening the scope for action for ALE builds on many initiatives. Many of these activities are confirmed in small-scale research, in practitioner groups or theoretical discussions, and sometimes the invaluable contribution of these studies for widening the scope for action remains overheard, if not invisible. This conference aims at reinforcing the relevance of ALE research for and within challenging times.

Keynotes

Global Adult Education Policies under pressure: Widening the scope of action from the Perspective of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (confirmed)

Dr. Isabell Kempf, Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

Adult education finds itself squeezed between the demands of national governments, which see it as a valuable producer of human capital, and its visionary articulation in international reports as an emancipatory force, supporting empowerment and critical thinking. As demands on adult education

to support other agendas, from climate transition to the technological revolution, grow, there is a danger that this more expansive vision of adult education will be squeezed further. This presentation explores the range of possibilities for adult education in the twenty-first century, and the forces likely to curb our ambition, highlighting the critical areas in which it might be possible to widen the scope of our actions.

Dr. Isabell Kempf, Ph.D., is the current Director of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Hamburg, Germany. She has 30 years of experience working with the United Nations, bringing her expertise in the areas of capacity-building and policy advice, as well as the application of a human rights- and gender-based approach to education, development and peace-building, to the Organization. Prior to joining UIL, Ms Kempf held positions including Head of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Bonn Office, where she co-created a global research and action network comprising researchers, decision-makers and social activists to advance a just and green transformation of society, and Co-director of the Poverty-Environment Initiative (PEI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi, where she led a global programme on integrated policies in over 28 countries. She has held further roles at UNESCO, UNEP, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). Ms Kempf has published widely on the right to education and development, and social and environmental justice. She holds a B.A. and Master of honours in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from the University of Oxford and a PhD in International Economics and Development from Complutense University of Madrid.

Adult Education Policies in the USA: Counterstrategies and resilience for democracy (confirmed)

Dr. Elisabeth Roumell, Associate Professor, Texas A&M University

The confluence of a number of political and social movements recently culminated in the second term of the current federal administration in the US. Similar movements have also been prominent at the state level across the country. This continues to result in legislation, presidential and governor orders, and educational policies that have set back inclusion efforts and directly impacted public education at all levels. From the dissolution of the federal Department of Education, the disappearance of the Institute of Educational Statistics, the stop work orders and deletion of National Science Foundation and other educational grants and programs, and withholding of federal funding from higher education and school districts who refuse to comply with various mandates, current political attachés aim to systematically dismantle and disappear as many public education services as possible. Regarding ALE, where programs like PIAAC and English language learning and literacy programs have been deleted, ALE researchers, educators, and advocates in particular, have begun mobilizing through a variety of networks in response. The talk will present some of the impacts on ALE, including defunding and the political scrubbing of public education systems, as well as how researchers and educators are responding and mobilizing resources.

Dr. Elisabeth A. Roumell, Ph.D., is a Professor in the department of Educational Administration and Human Resources (EAHR) at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. Dr. Roumell teaches graduate courses for the Workforce, Adult, and Lifelong Education master's and doctoral emphasis, as well as graduate qualitative research courses. Her primary research interests include adult learning and identity development, adult and workforce education policy analysis, veteran career transitions, integrated experiential learning in adult education and training programs, and community capacity building. She is currently working on two research projects in collaboration with the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) and with the Center for Translational Research in Aging and Longevity (CTRAL) at TAMU. Dr. Roumell serves as the Principle Investigator and Executive Director for the Texas Center for Advancing Literacy and Learning (TCALL), a professional development resource center for adult and workforce educators funded through the Texas Workforce Commission. Dr. Roumell has garnered approximately \$18 million in extramural funding for adult education research and programming to date. She has published over 50 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, a co-edited book, and has given over 50

conference presentations. Dr. Roumell received the 2020 national *Imogene Oaks Award for Outstanding Research in Adult Education*, a 2019 College of Education and Human Development *Early Career Research Excellence Award*, and two national Early Career Awards in the field of Adult Education.

Contributions on the following – or related - topics would be appreciated:

- How are recent political shifts connected to policies in adult learning and education?
- What are the consequences of a liberal master-trend that seems to come to an end – e.g. for adult learners of different ages and prerequisites, for institutions and their Leitmotifs, for legal frameworks and funding schemes?
- In which ways is adult learning and education put under pressure because of neoliberal or anti-democratic narratives, ideologies, terminologies, propaganda or disinformation, and how are counternarratives and counteractivities established, e.g. networks and initiatives?
- What strategies are applied, e.g. by policy-makers, practitioners and researchers in Adult Learning and Education, to widen the scope for action in their field?
- who is affected by right-wing populist strategies, who benefits from activities to widen the scope for action, e.g. for diversity, equity and inclusion?

Contributors need not confine themselves to the above topics. Proposals that develop themes and issues from the prior conferences of the ESREA Network Policy Studies on Adult Education are particularly welcome. Scholars from all countries are invited to submit proposals, and papers may relate to any part of the world.

Guidelines for Submission of Proposals: Anonymized proposals should be submitted to the conference management system. They should be typed, single spaced, in A4, include title and 5 keywords. <https://www.conferences.uni-hamburg.de/event/606/overview>

Paper proposals should not exceed 600 words including the title; 3-5 keywords; aims/objectives; main perspective or theoretical/conceptual framework; methods, research design, mode of inquiry; data sources or evidence; results and/or conclusions; significance to the field of policy studies in adult education.

Symposium proposals should not exceed 1200 words including title; 3-5 keywords; aims/objectives, significance for the field of policy studies in adult education, and short abstracts (approx. 200 words each) of all papers. They should also nominate a Chairperson and Discussant.

Important Dates:

NEW: Abstract submission deadline: 9 November 2025

Notification of acceptance: by 20 December 2025

Conference: 13-15 May, 2026

All proposals will be blind reviewed by the scientific committee. Final versions of papers (no more than 5000 words including references) must be submitted by **1st of May 2026**. Please use the APA (American Psychological Association) reference system.

Presentations: 20 minutes maximum; at least 20 minutes will be allowed for discussion.

Language: The conference language is English.

Conference venue: The conference will be held on the premises of the University of Hamburg, Germany.

Conference Fees

	Early registration Payment received 28 th February 2026	Payments received after 28 th February but before 25 th April 2026
Full fee	260 EUR	300 EUR
Fee to ESREA members	210 EUR	260 EUR
Fee to doctoral students	110 EUR	130 EUR

The conference fees *include* lunch and refreshments; they *exclude* the conference dinner (see below), any airport/hotel transfers and hotel accommodation.

Registration for the ESREA Conference will only be taken with full payment. Details of payment procedure will be made available at the conference website. Final date for registration: 25th April 2026.

Conference Dinner (own cost): More information will be made available via the conference website.

Hotels and Accommodation: You must book your own hotel accommodation. Information about hotels and rates will be made available via the conference website.

Scientific Committee (in alphabetical order)

- Associate Professor **Rosanna Barros**, University of Algarve, Portugal
- Associate Researcher **Margherita Bussi**, European Trade Union Institute, Brussels, Belgium
- Professor **Ellen Boeren**, University of Glasgow
- Professor **Pepka Boyadijeva**, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria
- Professor **Richard Desjardins**, University of California, U.S.A.
- Professor **John Holford**, University of Nottingham, England
- Associate Professor **Petya Ilieva-Trichkova**, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria
- Dr **Alexandra Ioannidou**, German Institute for Adult Education, Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning

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- Professor **Marcella Milana**, Università di Verona, Italy
- Associate Professor **Johanna Mufic**, Stockholm University, Sweden
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- Professor **Palle Rasmussen**, Aalborg Universitet, Denmark
- Professor **Silke Schreiber-Barsch**, Universität Duisburg-Essen, Germany
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Conference mail and website

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For all information and updates check regularly the conference website:
<https://www.conferences.uni-hamburg.de/event/606/overview>

Organizers and sponsors

The Conference is organised by the [ESREA Network Policy Studies in Adult Education](#) in collaboration with the Department for Lifelong Learning of the Faculty of Education, University of Hamburg.