Financing and institutions as key elements of the future of adult education – Disciplinary struggles about empirical observations[1]

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Abstract

The empirical basis of this chapter is an explorative attempt of the observation and analysis of the total expenditure and basic structures of participation for adult education in Austria, compared to selected countries from different welfare regimes (Finland, Sweden, Australia, Scotland/UK). The empirical results from the estimations are widely unexpected, and they are reflected in relation to disciplinary struggles at different levels, viz. the inner Austrian discourses and more broadly the wider academic and research disciplines. A big disciplinary struggle is about how the contributions of different stakeholders relate to market failure and to adult education as a public good.

Keywords: adult education, financing, institutions, comparative, policy

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ESREA conference at Maynooth, Ireland, http://www.equi.at/dateien/Esrea-fin.pdf; see also the presentation including more visualizations of the results at http://www.equi.at/dateien/esrea-dublin-16pdf.pdf.

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Introduction

This chapter reflects on the disciplinary struggles at the interface between empirical 'facts' and political interpretations and strategies. The main point is that facts do not speak for themselves; therefore, conceptual frameworks (theories, ideologies, beliefs, rhetoric) are needed to 'translate' them into the political domain. Thus, facts and conceptual frameworks are not substitutive but complementary. Not only good facts are needed, but also good frameworks – this truism might be forgotten if facts are missing altogether and expectations in facts are overemphasised. An empirical study about the levels of financing and different sources of the expenditure in states from different welfare regimes (Nordic: Sweden, Finland; liberal: UK/Scotland, Australia; Austria as a continental country) is taken as material to reflect on different kinds of disciplinary struggles – between academic disciplines (economics and political science), between meta-political interpretations (neoliberal and welfare-oriented approaches) and between different approaches to observation (qualitative and quantitative).

The empirical results were unexpected in some ways. First, the overall expenditure per capita was highest in Austria, with the highest expenditure by individuals, signifying rather a neoliberal policy approach than a corporatist one; second, there is no overall relationship between participation and expenditure in the selected countries except that higher state expenditures are related to increased participation in formal adult education (AE); third, in terms of policy strategies the results do not point towards deliberate systematic patterns: corporatist Austria shows the most 'neoliberal' pattern despite none of the actors deliberately following this strategy; fourth in the liberal countries high state expenditures are combined with low overall expenditures and high participation. How these 'anomalies' might translate into disciplinary struggles is asked in the reflection.

The chapter elaborates on the results of a comparative observation and analysis of the expenditure for AE in a set of five countries (our own country, Austria, compared to Finland and Sweden as two Nordic countries and Australia and Scotland/GBR as two liberal countries). In its empirical part, it sketches the approach of how the total financing of AE was observed in our project and relates the estimated expenditure to participation and institutional traits in the countries compared. In its conceptual and theoretical interpretation and reasoning about the – quite astonishing and unexpected – results, it reflects more systematically on how the resources and expenditure dimension in AE is related to disciplinary struggles about broader economic, political and institutional understandings.

How can expenditure be measured? Is the amount of financing systematically related to the prevailing institutional frameworks? According to which criteria can the level of expenditure be assessed or evaluated? Do the results allow us to draw political conclusions about financing and/or institutions? Questions of this kind are related to disciplinary struggles as different disciplines will give different weight to different aspects. Economics will focus on the efficiency and impact of resources, with different emphases on other aspects (e.g. distributional) depending on different approaches; political science will emphasise the institutional frameworks of delivery, their relationship to goal setting and their steering power; sociology will look at the patterns of social distribution and the conditions for access in different structures; educational science has the goals, processes and conditions of learning at its centre and might question abstract perspectives on institutions and structures based on quantitative observation. In addition to these raw differences in perspective, the various disciplines themselves are driven by competing explanatory approaches, establishing difficulties of mutual understanding. Inter-, multi- or transdisciplinarity approaches have been proposed as potential solutions to these struggles, and from psychology a hybrid discipline of Bildung-Psychology has been proposed to integrate the various dimensions of lifelong learning, with AE being a part of the overall framework (Wagner, Strohmeier & Schober, 2016).

Comparative research as a specific domain poses questions and highlights struggles about legitimate political conclusions or consequences from the comparisons. Currently comparisons are frequently used as (quantitative) benchmarks, however, without clearly establishing why some configurations are better than others. The disciplinary struggles are in one way or another filtered and amalgamated in the political discourses, which transforms questions about 'facts' into questions about political or rhetorical alternatives.

This chapter attempts to demonstrate these interrelationships taking as an example research and related political struggles about financing and the provision of AE in Austria and about potential political alternatives. It is organised as follows: The next section describes the political struggles around financing AE in Austria during the 2000s related to policy evaluations of the European Social Funds (ESF), which have laid the ground for a more thorough analysis of financing and institutional structures, including a comparative analysis of different countries. The disciplinary struggles around these analyses are discussed in the following section. A section discussing AE in relation to welfare regimes, the market and institutions concludes the chapter.

Political struggles around AE in lifelong learning policy during the 2000s

The early political attempts to develop a 'lifelong learning strategy' in Austria were driven by quite fierce disputes about the positioning of adult education (AE) in this context. Three observations stood out in the beginning: First, Austria made quite early moves to include the topic of lifelong learning into the financial support programme of the ESF; second, the measures taken in this programme were primarily focused on initial school and youth education despite that the public expenditure for AE was very low in Austria; third, the goals and delivery methods of the ESF have contrasted with the traditional AE policies with a strong orientation towards project planning methods and an orientation towards employment and human capital.

A new requirement was that the policies had to be evaluated concerning the delivery and the potential impact. During the evaluation process political struggles came up about the agenda and the tasks of the policy evaluation: Where are the limits of critique by the evaluation team? Where does scientific assessment end, and where do political statements begin? A main dispute in the course of the evaluation of the ESF interventions took place about the potential impact of the European funds for lifelong learning in Austria: as the amount of the additional European funds was given beforehand, the support could clearly make much more impact in relation to the small public funds spent on AE than in relation to the huge and also comparatively high expenditure on initial education.

Further questions emerged from this dispute: How much is really spent on AE from different sources? From what rationales can the amount and proportion of public spending be evaluated? For which purposes is public money spent on AE (e.g. vocational or general AE), and to what extent can this be scientifically justified? It was clear that a rational discourse about funding policies is foreclosed if the amount of available funds for the different purposes is in fact unknown. These questions are related to the interconnected disciplinary and political struggles.

In the lifelong learning policy discourse a market-oriented economic and political perspective has gained hegemony in the 2000s, posing its main emphasis on the redefinition of costs into investments and their relationship to the returns for the different stakeholders. An even relationship of investment and returns was assumed to reflect the proper working of the market, cost-benefit discrepancies were seen as signals for 'market failure' and market failure as justification of public interventions. Political interventions should be limited to the areas of proven market failure, and the analysis of market failure and related policies became a main topic of economic research (e.g. Booth & Snower, 1996). From an economic point of view a main empirical indicator of market failure was defined by discounting the investments and returns of the different actors: in particular, if returns are lower than investments (or unevenly distributed among players), market failure exists, and investment will tend to be too low.

However, the empirical assessment of these relations turned out to be much more complicated than expected, and a generalised rule of thumb came up that has distinguished three main categories of players – individuals, enterprises and the public – and proposed normatively a rough 1:1:1 relationship between these categories in funding. Accordingly, the question came up as to how this relationship would play out empirically, and a kind of 'market equilibrium' could be derived from this rule of thumb.

The attempts to observe or estimate these proportions have led to new conceptual questions and disputes concerning the attribution of funds to the players. In Austria labour market policy contributes substantial funds to qualification measures. How shall these be attributed to the three categories of players? This question is related to the welfare model: in the conservative Bismarck-type welfare state the means for labour market policy are raised by the social insurance from employees and employers, and the spending is basically related to the entitlements according to the insurance principle. Thus an ambiguity arises about whether this empirically large amount of money should be attributed to the public funds or to the contributions of the employers and the employees. In Austria the 1:1:1 relationship as an indication for an equilibrium is largely reached if the labour market policy expenditure in AE is attributed to the public funds; however, if counted as part of the employers' and employees' contributions, the public funds are very low (according to the first analysis in 2006 the public-individual-enterprise distribution was between 15-42-43 and 11-46-42 depending on the consideration of opportunity costs – in any case far from the 1-1-1 relationship). This means that the 'fact' itself was under dispute. In the public discourse the labour market policy means were attributed to the public, thus no challenge for politics was derived from the results.

These questions about the amount of expenditure were supplemented by further dispute over reasonable funding mechanisms and the creation of supportive institutional structures in AE. Since the 1960s a longstanding debate concerns the basic regulation and the political responsibility for AE; this was later amended by the dispute over the support of institutions vs. the strengthening of market forces. Finally, another debate came up with the new project-related European governance mechanisms, which replaced the traditional unconditional lump-sum support by the more goal- and results-oriented and heavily monitored practices in the ESF policies. These topics were strongly structuring the political and professional discourse, with important institutional issues in their background.

The basic political structure is determined by the decision in the early 1970s not to establish a clear political responsibility under the leadership of the central government and only to amend a law (Erwachsenenbildungsförderungsgesetz, 1973)[2] about providing government support for a list of purposes to a set of stakeholders (KEBÖ Conference of Austrian Adult Education)[3] and otherwise to leave the scattered and strongly voluntarist structures of responsibility among the regional and local authorities in the complex Austrian state. A mechanism of support from the central budget to KEBÖ providers was set up that distributed a yearly updated amount of money to them. In addition, the providers have their relations to their owners as well as to the various government authorities at

2 https://erwachsenenbildung.at/themen/eb_in_oesterreich/gesetze/foerderungs gesetz.php.

3 https://erwachsenenbildung.at/themen/eb_in_oesterreich/organisation/keboe.php.

regional and local levels, where they also (can) receive various kinds of additional support (the resulting structure is called the 'cooperative system'). One purpose of this solution was the intention on the side of the players to remain independent from the state, however, at the cost of an overall weak institutional structure and of the perpetuation of conflicts and competition among them; because new providers came up, insiders and outsiders emerged among the providers, which further weakens the overall structure. Formally, the various purposes of AE are covered by the regulation, in principle combining non-vocational and vocational purposes and stakeholders.

With the rise of human capital purposes and the increase of labour market policy support for qualification, the vocational providers gained more strength and influence in policy, and the Public Employment Service (AMS), governed by the social partners, became an important player in AE outside the formal political structure. Despite that a formal distinction between the different kinds and sectors of AE does not prevail, de facto a structure of different sectors has emerged comprising three main camps: the providers of vocational AE led by the big institution of the employers' chamber (WIFI), the labour market policy measures (AMS), also related to some providers, and the AE section of the education authorities mainly related to traditional non-vocational AE with a strong emphasis on the support of disadvantaged groups. AE researchers have always criticised this basic structure and called for a clear public responsibility for AE (Lenz, 1994); however, with the increasing neoliberal discourse of New Public Management, this position appeared increasingly more outdated.

More recently the political discourse about the funding of AE in Austria has been dominated by a market rhetoric. As the market was and still is commonly attributed as being the main governance mechanism in Austrian AE, questions about political alternatives to marketisation are hardly asked. However, as there are mainly institutional and non-profit players acting in this 'market', the practices of the actors are in fact not profit-driven but heavily determined by institutional structures and interventions (which in turn are not transparent and also covered by the market rhetoric; Lassnigg, 2011). In the AE discourse since the 1990s, we can thus find a paradoxical structure: the positive struggle of the providers to make them marketed and commodified pushed critical questions about the purpose of this struggle and its alternatives to the margin (Lenz, 1994; Lassnigg, 2015).

This discourse was supported by the strong emphasis placed upon vocational AE and labour market policy, which is to some extent familiar to the market logic and, moreover, receives strong support in the corporatist institutional structures of the Austrian Social Partnership (with employers and employees organisations owning their own big training institutes and being involved as key players in the governance structures of AE, labour market policy and social insurance). The institutions of non-vocational AE did not stand against the tide but rather tried to get into this market and to some extent to vocationalise themselves. In sum, a discourse about economisation, commodification and marketisation in AE has been widely lacking in Austria (with some exceptions in higher education) (Heissenberger, Mark, Schramm, Sniesko & Süss, 2010).

The governance topic and the stance of the AE sector towards the EU policy was somehow trapped in the conflict between the existing institutional structures and practices of support of AE, on one hand, and the potential of reaping additional funding from the European programmes, on the other. The EU programmes were originally situated under the control of the social and labour market policy authorities, with the education authorities somehow 'invading' these policies under the rhetoric of lifelong learning in the 2000s. The players in AE had to choose between defending their independence in the traditional support structures and applying for additional funds by subordinating themselves to the new European support regime. They took different stances, and no common policy towards reaping funds for the sector has been developed. In particular vocational- and labour market-oriented programmes developed, including several new providers that were/are not part of the established provider system. In parallel the support structure of the central government changed towards new governance instruments (mainly achievement contracts), and some comprehensive support instruments have been set up (Adult Education Initiative, https://www.initiative-erwachsenenbildung.at/). However, the institutional structure remained fragmented and divided along several lines. This is visible in the Austrian Lifelong Strategy (Republik Österreich, 2011), in which the various activities towards AE have not gained momentum so far, and the related benchmarks about participation in AE are increasingly falling apart.

With respect to the disciplinary struggles, we can hardly find marked disciplinary contributors from the different camps of economics, political science or sociology to these topics and questions in Austria (this kind of scientific discourse is mainly 'imported'). The distinguished academic Bildung-Psychology approach has not focused on AE so far; rather the earlier preconditions of lifelong learning in the school career are emphasised. Largely two lines of research-related discourse emerged: (1) a disciplinary hybrid line of work positively related to political consultation processes trying to support the development and implementation of a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy, however, with only weak consideration of AE and largely driven by the Human Capital and New Public Management rhetoric; great importance was attached (at least rhetorically) to the support of disadvantaged groups and to the transition of young adults into employment and working life; (2) mainly in the field of AE research an intellectual camp of radical critique of the neoliberal directions emerged, that in the sense of Adorno's Negative Dialectic tries to formulate much broader educational purposes in the deliberate resistance against the economisation and commercialisation of AE (Holzer, 2017 works this out thoroughly; see also http://kritische-eb.at/wordpress/?page_id=335). So far, communication between these far distant lines of research seems difficult, and the differences are situated in the interpretation of basic conceptual issues rather than in empirical questions.

A more empirically grounded middle way approach that combines critical economic (market failure), political science (democratic governance, policy learning) and sociological (Matthew principle) reasoning research was developed first about how the status of AE in Austria can be evaluated and second how it can be politically supported and sustainably established as a fair part of lifelong learning (policy). At this point the comparative dimension came into play. It has become familiar to use country comparisons as a source of assessment and evaluation of the situation in a particular country and furthermore also to look for good practices abroad to learn from in policymaking at home. Both practices, however, are rightly heavily disputed. Comparisons are mostly highly superficial and selective and utilised in biased ways; and learning from good practice requires a deep understanding of context that is mostly lacking; thus the use of comparisons is more rhetorical and propagandistic than substantial. We wanted to overcome these shortcomings at least to some extent by our approach and methodology entailing a comparison of the financing of and participation in AE between Austria and selected other countries (Lassnigg, Vogtenhuber & Osterhaus, 2012).

A comparative analysis as a contribution to disciplinary struggles about the financing and institutions of AE

Based on our previous studies about Austrian structures we wanted to look at how these structures play out in other countries.

First, in contrast to the abstract quantitative ranking procedures, we wanted to make controlled comparisons with countries selected on purposive grounds, so we selected countries according to contrasting welfare regimes to the Austrian conservative-corporatist continental type: on one hand, Nordic countries which are – theoretically supported – judged as good practice cases (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013) and, on the other hand, countries of the liberal type that rather confirm the current neoliberal mainstream regime of economisation (Rees, 2013).

Secondly, we tried to get a complete picture about the financing of AE by the different actors' categories and used available comparative statistical sources in combination with qualitative explorations in the countries (examples of comprehensive studies of expenditure are available from Germany by Hummelsheim, 2010 and the UK by Williams, McNair, & Aldridge, 2010; however, these studies are based on national sources only and thus not so easily comparable). A shortcoming of our approach is that only a cross-sectional analysis of funding is possible with these data (no time series are available), which is additionally problematic because of sometime inconsistencies.

Third, we tried to get beyond the simple participation benchmarks as measures for performance by trying to use more detailed indicators and also looking at their patterning in relation to each other; here, unfortunately, not much comparative information is available that would consistently include our cases (Kilpi-Jakonen, Vono de Vilhena & Blossfeld, 2015).

Finally, we also looked to some extent at qualitative information about the policies and institutional structures in the countries compared to get an overview about the relationship between the financing and structures of AE; this was clearly constrained by the overall background condition that the study had to be as simple as possible and as cheap as possible.

The comparative empirical analysis was pragmatically inspired by questions about the impact and methods of public expenditure for adult education (AE) in Austria and how it could and should be improved through the alternative strategies of supporting individuals in the market vs. supporting the providers and strengthening the institutions. The conceptual approach behind the empirical analysis was based on two main strands of reasoning.

One was derived from the reasoning about public interventions because of underinvestment based on market failure, which has inspired the proposition of a shared financing by the three actor categories of individuals, enterprises and the state to roughly equal proportions. From this argument the empirical question about the distribution of the contributions of these actors' categories arises. In relation to the disciplinary struggles we settled on using the basic ideas of market failure for an assessment of financing amounts and structures.

The other conceptual strand was the reasoning about the consequences for the financing and participation structures of the institutional embeddedness of AE in different welfare regimes as brought forward by the 'bounded agency' approach (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). From this reasoning resulted the selection of the countries for comparison from the Nordic and the liberal regimes, which should also bring some illumination about the consequences of a more institutional- (Nordic) vs. a more market-oriented (liberal) financing strategy on the participation in and structures of AE. A simple interpretation of the welfare regime approach would suggest that the Austrian results should rank in between the Nordic and the liberal regime; policy directions towards improvement should possibly be inspired by the Nordic regime, and – less clearly expected – policy directions towards decline might be inspired by the liberal regime and more market-based policies.

The empirical expectations derived from this reasoning and the available knowledge from the literature based on international indicators and databases were quite simple and straightforward: The Nordic countries should allocate comparatively high resources, spent to a high degree from public sources, with comparatively high and equal participation; on the other extreme, the liberal countries should reap their (eventually rather scarce) resources to a high extent from the individual contributions in the market, eventually with less participation and probably more inequalities; Austria, as a corporatist country, was expected to spend at least less than the Nordic countries, with a high proportion of contributions from the enterprise sector, and with medium participation and rather high inequality, both dimensions ranking eventually better than the liberal countries because of the corporatist coordination.

It must be kept in mind that comparative information about total financing by the different actors' categories was not available at the time of writing. The main outcome to be produced by the project was to collect this information and to compare it with the indicators about participation available in the comparative databases. The study must be seen as a pilot in this respect, and still this kind of information about expenditure for AE is not available in international databases.

Research design and methodology

The empirical research was based on estimations from comparative databases (e.g. CVTS, AES), supported by direct inquiries in the selected countries. A main aim was to acquire comparative and comprehensive information about the levels of financing of AE in states from different welfare regimes and to observe the different sources of the expenditure by broad categories (individuals, the state and enterprises). This distribution of financing should show broad policy patterns: a high proportion of individuals signifying liberal policies, a high proportion of enterprises signifying corporatist policies and a high proportion of the state signifying high public responsibility for AE. The relationship of these financing patterns to variables about participation in AE should give some basic information about the impact of the financing structures in the different welfare regimes. The main purpose of the study was situated on the national level to better understand the Austrian structures by mirroring them through the comparison; however, the study also contributes information about the other countries selected.

The methodological approach relied mainly on quantitative data, however, it also included elements of case studies through direct contacts with representatives of the countries. Different sources of information were matched, and for the purpose of comparison the data were standardised to a common year (2009) by purchasing power and per capita. Detailed information about the sources and procedures is documented separately: see http://www.equi.at/material/financing-AE-comp.pdf. The main sources for information about financing are from national public households and from public employment agencies, the European Continuing

Vocational Training Survey (CVTS 2 & 3, 2005–07) and the European Adult Education Survey (AES, 2007), and for Australia complementary comparable sources were available and utilised (TEPS: Employer Training Expenditure and Practices 2001/20, and HHES: Household Expenditure Survey 2003/04).

Overall, because of much conceptual work, and several procedures of making the data comparable, the data used in the end must be classified to a high degree as estimations rather than observations. The definition of AE had to rely on the data sources. For the financial estimations we basically used the definition of non-formal vocational and general adult education from the AES (EC 2005 and STATA 2009) and generally applied an age criterion of participants at 25 years or older; for the analysis of participation, the distinction between vocational and general AE and the category of formal AE were also used (it must be noted that all these definitions are affected by definitional problems). Participation was mainly analysed on the basis of the European sources (AES and CVTS; therefore, Australia had to be left out, and Great Britain had to be compared instead of Scotland). Only crude variables were available for these purposes: sex/gender, marital status, citizenship, country of birth, language, education credentials, employment status and criteria including position, occupation and size of enterprise.

The research design included two steps: first, the comparative estimation of the expenditure by the actors' categories (individuals, enterprises, the state, labour market policy) per capita of the population, and second, the correlation of financing results to the available indicators of participation to identify rough patterns across the selected countries from the different welfare regimes and to confront the expectations.

Results

The results did not match the expectations in more than one key aspect, thus the methodology as well as the conceptual framework must be questioned and further developed, taking into account the more recent theorising and analyses. First, the comparison of expenditure by actors' categories in the selected countries showed that against the expectations the overall expenditure was highest in Austria (index 1.16 against the average), and there was no communality of Nordic vs. liberal countries (Australia and Sweden ranging at average and Finland and Scotland/GBR slightly below). The comparatively high expenditure in Austria results from substantially higher individual contributions (index 2.39); moreover, the individual contributions are substantially higher in Nordic countries (index around 0.8) than in liberal countries (index around 0.5) – the individual market contributions to non-formal AE are thus lower in liberal than in Nordic countries.

The contribution of the enterprises, which is underestimated overall in the data, is comparatively similar across the selected countries (34% to 44%). If we count the sum of individual and enterprise contributions as private contributions, this proportion is highest in Austria (55%, index 1.34) and Sweden (54%, index 1.11), and there is no common pattern according to the welfare regimes, as in Scotland/GBR and in Finland the private contributions are lowest.

The combined state and labour market training expenditure (sum public) is quite similar and does not show a consistent pattern across the welfare regimes. The two components of public expenditure, state funds and labour market training, are distributed very differently and against expectations. The state expenditure is highest in the liberal countries, followed by Sweden, whereas in Austria and Finland the dominant part of the public expenditure is spent via labour market policy.[4]

In sum, unexpectedly, individuals in Austria spend comparatively much for non-formal AE. The enterprises' contributions differ less between the selected countries, showing no consistent pattern across welfare regimes. State financing is highest in the liberal countries, whereas private sources – in particular individuals – contribute comparatively little to non-formal AE in this regime.

The measurement of participation is a key element in European and international research and policymaking and has been quite extensively theorised and analysed in recent decades. In contrast to financing, comparative indicators are available on this aspect from the OECD and EU, and they are also used in the political discourses. However, these indicators are still very crude, and the measurement is impaired by much lack of clarity.[5]

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[4] Sweden has substantially reduced labour market policy expenditure shortly before the point of estimation: in 2009 this part of financing was only about one fifth of 2006.

[5] E.g., the data gathering has been refined in Europe at some points in time, so the European time series reflect a mixture of real and definitional changes, which are difficult to distinguish;

Basically, in our results the rough indicators of participation are not related to the indicators of financing. However, there is one exception: the state expenditure is positively related to formal AE. Because we have been particularly interested in the impacts of individual market-related expenditure and of state expenditure, we have looked at the pattern among the selected countries and welfare regimes according to the comparative level of three stylised attributes that combine funding and participation: (i) total funding and total participation, (ii) private individual funding and total participation and (iii) state funding and formal participation. Using these stylised attributes, a certain pattern among welfare regimes appears that is to some extent in line with the expectations and in other respect contradicts them.

The Nordic countries show by and large a comparatively medium to high position with respect to participation but a rather comparatively medium to low position with respect to expenditure; in addition, the three indicators are comparatively homogenously positioned, and state expenditure is not particularly high. Overall, these countries rank relatively favourable if the total expenditure and total participation positioning is taken as a main quality attribute.

The liberal countries show by trend a polarised picture, with comparatively low to medium participation and low to medium expenditure for the broader indicators, on one hand, however medium to high formal participation and high state expenditure on the other; the individual contributions on the market are low in this regime. In terms of quality the broad indicators show consistently lower participation with lower expenditure in this regime, and at the same time the public support of formal AE appears comparatively high.

Austria, with its conservative-corporatist welfare regime, shows the least favourable pattern, with high expenditure and medium to low participation, a reverse polarisation between consistently low state funding with low formal participation and high individual market contributions leading to comparatively low participation. More detailed information about the costs and the selectivity

moreover, different indicators are used (participation during four weeks before survey, or during one year), and different observations in different surveys give quite different results (e.g. Labour Force survey, Adult Education Survey and Continuing Vocational Training Survey). Consequently, caution is necessary with interpretations, nevertheless, exploration and use of the data can gradually contribute to clarification.

of the different kinds of participation in Austria compared to the other European countries indicates that the high individual and enterprise contributions on the market are related to the comparatively high costs of participation, a pattern that cannot easily be interpreted as sign for efficiency – the mainly state-funded formal participation in the other regimes bears markedly fewer costs. The selectivity indicators show in particular a higher selectivity in terms of the educational background of the participants in Austria (group-specific selectivity also exists in the countries selected for comparison but clearly to a much smaller degree than in Austria).

Summing up the empirical results, we see first that the overall expenditure per capita was highest in Austria, in line with the highest expenditure by individuals, signifying a neoliberal policy approach rather than a corporatist one; second, there is basically no overall relationship between participation and expenditure in the selected countries, with the exception that higher state expenditure is related to increased participation in formal AE; third, in terms of policy strategies, the results do no point towards deliberate systematic patterns according to welfare regimes. Austria shows the most 'neoliberal' pattern empirically despite that none of the main political actors has stood in for this position in the period observed (the new 2017 right-wing government might make more deliberate moves in this direction); and in the liberal countries, high state expenditure is combined with low to medium overall expenditure and low to medium overall participation. The corporatist regime is also related to high inequality of participation in terms of educational background, which is consistent with the stratified character of this regime; moreover, the market does not seem to work very efficiently in this regime as the costs of (low) participation are high.

If we relate these results to the disciplinary struggles, several puzzles and open questions arise for the Austrian context and on wider international levels. First, in contrast to other analyses about governance of AE in Austria, and in line with the popular political rhetoric mentioned above, the market might play a much larger role than expected; however, in contrast to standard economic reasoning, the strong role of the market does not seem to improve efficiency. Second, the role of financing appears much more complicated than devised in simple economic reasoning, where more input should mechanically provide more and better results; the only indication for such a simple positive relationship arises with state expenditure and formal AE, to a high extent driven by the liberal countries, and without an impact on overall participation. Finally, against widespread expectations, the welfare regimes do not seem to create consistent AE politics and institutions.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of the estimation of the financing of adult education (AE) in a comparative perspective were highly unexpected for us as researchers and for the Austrian stakeholders also, as the Austrian expenditure turned out not to be comparatively low (as expected) but on the contrary comparatively high, in particular with respect to the contributions of individual citizens. At the same time the indicators about participation and policies confirmed a rather unfavourable pattern in comparison with the other countries. How can these results be related to the disciplinary struggles?

A first point concerns the qualitative vs. quantitative struggles in comparative research. Indeed, we have to consider the explorative nature of the observation and analysis as a caveat; critiques can simply point to the necessary constructions and transformations of the data. The combination of the different sources of information has entailed much recalculation and standardisation (e.g. by transforming information about different years into 2009) and might be a source of error. Moreover, the estimation of the resources only covers one point in time (2009), which might be more or less representative for the situation in the selected countries. Thus, a deeper institutional analysis would be necessary to validate the observed patterns. Another question would be how much the Nordic regime has already been in fact liberalised. However, the attempt can also demonstrate first how much important and necessary information is lacking and second how many difficulties exist in solving the challenges in this area of comparative research.

A basic question behind the project was whether the politically deliberate state financing of educational institutions according to educational purposes and the public good would be more appropriate for the development of AE than the push towards the political support of incentives and market mechanisms according to the individual preferences of the (potential) participants, leading to the commercialisation of learning and education. This question is clearly related to the disciplinary struggles in the social sciences. Traditional mainstream economic views and the influential economic theory of politics would support the second alternative. According to the socio-economic approach regarding welfare regimes, the Nordic regime would represent the first alternative and the liberal regime the second, with the corporatist Austrian regime lying somehow in between the two, with some potential in either direction. The findings do not support these expectations and, if the estimations are valid, point to more complex patterns.

A critical topic that further distinguishes between the two alternatives is whether adults still need education (or just learning), and if this difference exists, who should be the educators. This topic is closely related to core questions of educational research. The learning-centred market approach assumes that adults are already educated. They know what they need to learn and in principle will also be able to find ways to do this – the purposes of learning are in this approach assumed to be quite instrumental, with learning for work and professions as the main purpose. The educational approach assumes alternatively that educational purposes still exist in AE that go beyond the instrumental ones and concern learning for (the wider aspects and dimensions of) life, represented by the social, political and cultural fields, including moral and ethical deliberation and the wider fields of human knowledge production.

These alternatives cannot really be explored with the rough information about welfare regimes, financing and participation. A main component related to these aspects is the contextual understanding of the AE institutions and policies and of their traditions, which is only very indirectly represented by the quantitative measurement. With respect to research and theory, a main path of reasoning over recent decades was to underpin the abstract macro-level theorising and research by analyses at the micro and meso levels, in particular by studying the barriers and motivations at the individual micro level and by including this dimension into multi-level models (Boeren, Nicaise, & Baert, 2010). Compared to the above-mentioned bounded agency approach, this research has guided the attention towards the rational choice ideology and towards the strengthening of market behaviour at the 'cost' of moral and ethical behaviour. Moreover, this model has focused on the interaction between the individuals (micro) and the institutions (meso), and, despite to some extent being integrated, the macro level was to some degree pushed aside. A better understanding of the interplay between the macro level and the others still seems to be an unresolved challenge.

Neoliberalism is a key concept in the disciplinary struggles on comparative research and needs to be used in a clarified way (Mudge, 2008). In this vein the question might be asked to what extent the market itself is conceived as an alternative educational institution that replaces moral and ethical reasoning through a rational cost-benefit calculation among alternative preferences. The decisions about participation and also more general policy decisions are modelled according to human capitalist cost-benefit calculations, with the inclination to transform the various and multidimensional potential effects of AE into a form of 'wider benefits' to accommodate to the cost-benefit rationality. The human capital approach with its basic logic of discounting costs and benefits has much suggestive power, such that it has invaded most thinking about AE by imposing the basic framework of supply and demand to the roots of reasoning, and furthermore pointing to the importance of incentives (or sanctions) in order to influence the actors' assumed rational behaviour.

Rees (2013) tries to escape this logic and proposes much more detailed analyses, starting with a combination of the welfare regime approach with the varieties of capitalism approach, which has distinguished the liberal market economy from the coordinated market economy. Austria would fall together with the Nordic countries in the coordinated regime. However, this extended approach would not really help to explain the unexpected results.

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