

Adult Education in times of crisis - the Dutch case

Crisis in NL

The worldwide credit crisis of 2008 hit the Netherlands hard. Since the Netherlands has an open economy with a small domestic market and a large foreign market, the crisis affected the Dutch economy seriously. In 2009 and 2010, the government earmarked a total of almost €6 billion to stimulate the economy. A further €1.5 billion was provided by the provinces and municipalities. The measures were intended to promote a sustainable economy: reviving and maintaining employment, supporting business, and accelerating investment in construction, infrastructure and housing. To cushion the heaviest blows of the crisis, the government invested extra in keeping people working and businesses running. As a result, public spending grew considerably while public revenue (from taxes etc.) shrank. This is because businesses were making less profit, and people were earning less. If the government fails to take radical measures, Dutch public finances will be unsustainable. To tackle the budget deficit and reduce public spending, the government has proposed a package of measures aimed at saving €18 billion.

Adult education and crisis

Does the crisis affect adult education in the Netherlands? Yes and no. Yes, because less money is available than in other countries. No, because even before the crisis, the government policy was not focused on investments and increasing the budgets for education. In this sense, the crisis is not a breaking point. Here Netherlands differs from other countries where this is clearly the case.

The policy of the Dutch government is focused on creating a wider stakeholdership for innovation in the knowledge society and declining governmental influence and budgets. In particular the funds for non-formal education in the Netherlands is severely limited since 2000. The joint collaboration between the Ministry for Education and the Ministry for Social Affairs has been terminated, lifelong learning has been reduced to an one-way labour market oriented approach. Learning and working is changing in learning is working and working is learning.

The business sector is stimulated to contribute strongly from own resources, the social sector has been forced to be more market oriented, the central government places the responsibility more and more at local communities and citizens are obliged to take their own responsibility in terms of employability and for social participation and integration as well. The outcomes nowadays: migrants have to pay their own integration in society, students have to pay their own study and citizens have take over the reduced social-cultural provisions in the neighborhoods.

In fact the adult education sector supports this policy by its ideology of active citizenship, participation and lifelong learning. National umbrella organisations have disappeared already for a while now. Providers of non-formal education are depending strongly on a mix of local government, fundraising and orientation on the market. EU-grants are more and more complementary for investments in innovation

Adult learning as domain of professionals

Old and traditional organisations and institutes are disappearing, new alliances and partnerships are developing. However, the adult education field in the Netherlands is and will stay mainly a professional domain. Learning of adults is mainly entrusted or one could say left to professionals (rarely volunteers) in the capacity of teachers, trainers, coaches, or in some cases, counselors or therapists. These specialists organize and guide the learning of adults, often focusing on individuals in collectives and are faced with the question of who decides what, how, where, when, why and especially WHO teaches there. The majority of the system around Lifelong Learning is actually based

on what a small group of policy makers and decision makers find of value to others. And those who need skills or citizenship get deservedly rid of policymakers and political structures. Lifelong Learning is far too often still seen as "putting knowledge into empty vessels". Should we be surprised then that the results of numerous learning activities (for several billion annually) are often disappointing or even 'untraceable'? Or that people call they won't no education? This makes it very important but also very difficult to identify the professionalism of teachers, trainers, coaches, etc. Who are the (NEW?) Professionals in adult learning (3.0?) And for whom do they exist? Unfortunately, the how, what, why and when of the 'adult learning' is not crystallized adequately in any scientific theory). Therefore the question remains: what is the professionalism of adult learning?

Open space

On the other hand the retiring government creates a lot of space in which new initiatives can be developed, new plans can be made and new projects can be started. One can say adult education professionals are placed in a new and different role: they have to take the initiatives, there is no longer a government that will do it for them. Three success factors are crucial here: entrepreneurship, collaboration instead of competition and ongoing professionalization. Connection with existing initiatives is important: focusing on what is still available, not on what once was. Anticipating on new developments is important as well. For the medium long term it is good to look at the demographic structure of the Netherlands. A large part of the population will soon retire. In about five years it is likely that labor shortages will emerge in many sectors, despite the crisis. This will create new demands for cooperation between the economic sector and adult education. Adult education should primarily focus on the demands of the learner, not on the opportunities of supply. A strict separation of vocational and adult education is not necessary. For adults, this separation just does not exist. It is clear and proved that non-formal pathways may be important success factors in combination with vocational training for learners from vulnerable groups. It's all about the purpose and the best way to achieve it. Adult education 3.0 needs to be learner oriented. Simultaneously it has to create benefits for national economy and society. Adult education is not separated from other social organisations, it works only when it is embedded and integrated in other policies and measures. Adult education is no longer located in institutions, adult education 3.0 can take place everywhere. Also here it is about purpose and the best way to achieve it. That is the complexity of the current and future of adult education. In this complex field increasing cooperation between professionals and providers is crucial to survive. Therefore the field should launch initiatives together and in order to be heard as one voice.

Evidence based

As a political question the financing of adult education has to be based on reliable data and statistics on the outcomes of adult education, however the empirical evidence for costs and benefits of adult education was often hard to quantify. Nowadays more than ever, that evidence for the output of adult education is available. Adult educators are developing key indicators as well as identifying success factors instead of re-inventing the wheels. Standards are developed to change the mindset from "problems" to "potential" and there is more focus on social return on investment. Important scientific research yields have come into the limelight.

Conclusion

It is an illusion to think that adult education can ensure that nobody is left behind in the current economic crisis. Adult education can only provide alternative pathways that substantially may and can improve the conditions of many excluded people. In the field of Lifelong Learning, the responsibility for adult learning professional defending the perspective of the learner, who has in a responsible manner the right to apply theory on its own case.

Professionals need to adhere to their professional craftsmanship based on scientific findings and theory. For such professionals, it is important that there is a platform with space for exchange between professionals, academics, policy and adult learners, a place for reflection on existing practices and theories, a place where bottom-up initiatives stature can get and where professional discussions related to the art can take place. In the Netherlands Learn for Life is playing this role, in Europe EAEA should take this role: being a network of professionals rather than an umbrella organisation of national organisations.

Dennis Wacht

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