INTRODUCTION

Commitments in search of a world in which they can be delivered

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UNESCO’s *Fifth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 5; UIL 2022a)* was launched in June at the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII), in Marrakech, Morocco. The report shows that while there has been some progress since 2019 when *GRALE 4* was published, notably in the participation of women, those groups that need adult education the most – disadvantaged and vulnerable groups such as Indigenous learners, rural populations, migrants, older citizens, people with disabilities and prisoners – are still most likely to miss out on opportunities to learn (UIL 2022a). For example, around 60 per cent of countries reported no improvement in participation by people with disabilities, migrants or prisoners, while 24 per cent of countries reported that the participation of rural populations had declined. Participation of older adults also decreased in 24 per cent of the 159 surveyed countries (ibid.). The report urges Member States to increase investment in adult education and to prioritise the most marginalised and difficult to reach, noting that under-investment was hitting the socially disadvantaged the hardest.

While *GRALE* is certainly not a perfect instrument for monitoring adult education – Ellen Boeren and Kjell Rubenson discuss some of its strengths and weaknesses in a recent article of this journal (Boeren and Rubenson 2022) – it is nevertheless a unique and very useful barometer of political interest and commitment around the world, as well as an indicator of where progress in adult education is stalling. It is also an important way of periodically reminding Member States of...
their commitments and stimulating action where appropriate, drawing on data from an exceptionally wide range of countries. Notwithstanding the report survey’s reliance on self-reporting, there is value in collecting these data, and in monitoring Member States’ perceptions of progress, or otherwise. The report’s concerns about finance and participation and its calls for Member States to back up their good intentions with adequate investment and a more inclusive, learner-centred approach to adult education are therefore significant, both in adding to our understanding and in supporting advocacy efforts, even if they leave countries with considerable latitude when it comes to interpretation and implementation. With education worldwide facing a budgetary crisis (GEM MRT et al. 2022), it is critical that we continue to raise our voices to keep adult education financing high on the agenda.

GRALE 5 informed discussions at CONFINTEA VII and helped set the tone of what turned out to be a wide-ranging and quite far-sighted debate, including representatives not only of Member States but also of civil society organisations and the private sector. While there was acknowledgement of progress, there were concerns too that the pace was too slow, and that provision remained uneven and, in some cases, not well targeted. Many conference participants felt that adult education was not as holistic or embedded or well enough supported as it would need to be to be transformative in the way that the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development demand. For this reason, the Marrakech Framework for Action (MFA), the outcome document of the conference (UIL 2022b), adopted by representatives of 142 countries on 17 June 2022, was highly anticipated.

Did it live up to these expectations? The commitments made by country representatives did certainly address some of the areas highlighted by GRALE 5 as requiring attention. Countries committed “to increasing public funding and resource mobilization for adult learning and education and to preventing regression in existing budget allocations” (UIL 2022b, p. 7) – a critical undertaking given the worsening global crisis in financing education (Archer 2022). There was also an important commitment to implement “policies and strategies to upskill and further professionalize and specialize adult educators … by improving their working conditions, including their salaries, status and professional development trajectories” (UIL 2022b, p. 7). In line with the key messages and thematic focus of GRALE 5, recognition was also given in the MFA to adult learning and education as “a fundamental human right” (ibid., p. 8) and in its role in consolidating social cohesion, strengthening democracy, and promoting peace and active and global citizenship. There were welcome commitments too to strengthen adult education at local level, reinvigorate adult literacy provision, increase participation in adult learning overall, diversify learning spaces and adapt adult education to the changing world of work (though the role of trade unions, so crucial in the history and development of adult education around the world, is overlooked).

The commitment to education as a human right and the holistic framing of the role and potential contribution of adult education are welcome reassertions of UNESCO’s humanistic, rights-based understanding of adult education and lifelong learning, exemplified in the Faure and Delors reports (Faure et al. 1972; Delors et al. 1996) and, more recently, in the final report of UNESCO’s International Commission on the Futures of Education, Reimagining our futures together: A new social
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**contract for education** (UNESCO 2021). The location of the new framework (UIL 2022b) in the context of wider challenges and objectives, as expressed in the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, also offers an important acknowledgement not only that adult education supports broader change on a wide range of fronts but also, though less explicitly, that its long-term flourishing and the fulfilment of its rich potential depend on change and development in other areas that also require attention in building a sustainable future. While adult education is a key driver of such transformations, achieving its full contribution means overcoming entrenched structures of power, inequality and opposition to change, characterised, for example, by the world’s failure to act decisively on the climate emergency, even when our future on the planet is in the balance.

Changing this means galvanising people to act and to generate political will and commitment, whether through the ballot box or, more likely, through protest, civil disobedience and disruption. For this reason, more explicit mention of adult education that fosters critical thinking and empowerment would have been welcome in the MFA. Although critical thinking skills are referenced in the context of countering misinformation and disinformation in navigating online environments, and adults’ role as change agents in the context of climate change is acknowledged (UIL 2022b), the lack of any more detailed consideration of the role of critical thinking and empowerment in effecting social change, opposing inequalities, and ending humanity’s dependence on fossil fuels seems like an omission, especially given the conference’s ambitions to be “transformative”. We need more conversations about how adult learning can help create more civic spaces and support the expansion of the public sphere. More focus on Indigenous knowledge systems would also have been welcome in this context. We can no longer afford to be neglectful of non-Western values and ways of being and thinking. Just, peaceful and sustainable futures may depend on the sincerity of efforts to decolonise education and on our being open to and willing to start conversations with this sort of difference (Benavot et al. 2022).

Another aspect that might have been given greater prominence in the MFA is the impact of war, climate disaster, pandemic, food and energy shortages on education, and the role of education in fostering resilience, adaptability and cooperation, as well as citizenship, foresight and solidarity, in the face of such threats (education in emergencies, for example, remains “chronically underfunded”, according to the Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies [GGHEiE 2022]). There is welcome acknowledgement in the MFA of the challenges humanity faces, from the climate crisis to demographic and technological change, and these challenges are dealt with in a constructive, considered way (UIL 2022b). However, what the document perhaps lacks, compared, for example, to Reimagining our futures together, the report of the Futures of Education commission (UNESCO 2021), is a clear sense of the urgent need to change course, to resist and subvert business as usual, and to foster through education “the intellectual, social and moral capacities of students to work together and transform the world with empathy and compassion” (ibid., p. 4). The MFA references the report’s ambition to create “a new social contract for education” (UIL 2022b, p. 2) based on “a shared vision of the public purposes of education” (UNESCO 2021, p. 11) in which everyone can participate, but it does
not engage with the ideas behind it beyond an expression of support for the general principle. As a result, the report’s proposals to strengthen education as “a public endeavour and a common good” (UIL 2022b, p. 3) and to organise pedagogy around “the principles of cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity” (UNESCO 2021, p. 4) remain largely implicit in the framework.

Nevertheless, for these few limitations – which are perhaps unsurprising in a document that had to be agreed by more than 140 nation state representatives – the MFA is undoubtedly an ambitious document with a vision for the future and a road-map for getting there, stressing key areas such as governance, system design, devolution, quality, learning pathways and, probably most important of all, funding. It shares with recent UNESCO and other foresight reports a willingness to propose change and development to meet the pressing challenges and multiple crises we need to tackle now. It also shares the common problem these reports face of how to bridge the gap between vision and reality, in a world where education policy tends not to be made with the common good or societal transformation in mind. While the MFA has the support of UNESCO Member States, it is not a binding document and is intended only to guide and motivate Member States. As UNESCO’s Assistant Director-General for Education, Stefania Giannini, observed, it is “a statement of intent” that “requires enactment” (Giannini, quoted in Nikolitsa-Winter 2022).

Robust collective effort, renewed political will and effective partnerships will be required to turn the MFA’s promise into reality. Many of the basic elements of the framework were also present in the predecessor document, the Belém Framework for Action (BFA; UIL 2010), agreed by Member States at CONFINTEA VI in 2009 – indeed, the new framework stresses this continuity with the old one. Yet, as the GRALE series of reports demonstrate, progress against these recommendations has for the most part been insufficient and certainly below the level it would need to reach in order to realise the full contribution of adult education to the 2030 Agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine and growing concerns about food and energy security make this a still more challenging environment in which to create a culture of lifelong learning and deliver against the MFA’s other recommendations.

The new framework has been described as a “beacon”3 but it is a distant one, difficult to discern, and the obstacles to reaching its goals are immense. There is a need for transformation, and this is increasingly widely recognised, but achieving it will mean overcoming entrenched structures of power and inequality and the reversal of many trends in global politics, from austerity (for the poor) to populism and the sub-version of democracy and democratic values. Only mass collective effort across all fronts will make this happen. As the Futures of Education report notes, “no trend is destiny” (UNESCO 2021, p. 3). We should not wait for a perfect world to do what we can to make our part of it better. But we should also be clear about the challenges we face in effecting transformation and the degree to which this represents

3 H. E. Mr Samir Addahre, Permanent Delegate of the Kingdom of Morocco to UNESCO, speaking at the United Nations Transforming Education Pre-Summit side event, “Adult learning and education as a lever for transformation”; organised by UIL on 29 June 2022.
a profound change in direction in many, many areas of policy and in global politics more generally.

This issue of the *International Review of Education – Journal of Lifelong Learning* (*IRE*) engages with a few of the themes highlighted in *GRALE 5* and the MFA and some of those explored above. The first article, “Experimenting with a global panacea: UNESCO’s Fundamental Education programme in China, 1945–1950”, by *Yarong Chen*, considers the impact of UNESCO’s first flagship post-war education initiative, the Fundamental Education programme, in China. As quoted by Aaron Benavot et al. (2022) in the previous issue of *IRE*, the programme, which was established in May 1946, proposed “an attack upon ignorance by helping all Member States who desire such help to establish a minimum Fundamental Education for all their citizens” (ibid., p. 168). The idea of “fundamental education” encapsulated UNESCO’s holistic, humanistic approach to education, aiming not merely to promote functional literacy (critical though this is) but also to support people in living “fuller and happier lives” (UNESCO 1949, p. 9), regardless of their age or situation. It would do this through instruction in a range of areas, including health education, domestic and vocational skills, knowledge and understanding of human society – including economic and social organisation, law and government – and what it termed “the development of qualities to fit men [sic] to live in the modern world, such as personal judgment and initiative, freedom from fear and superstition, sympathy and understanding for different points of view” (UNESCO 1949, p. 11). Chen describes how the programme was rolled out in China (one of 62 Member States in which the programme was active), mapping the concepts, ideas, persons, institutions, funds, and so on, that shaped the project. Although the programme aimed to implement long-term, comprehensive programmes in areas such as literacy, public health and civic education, the involvement of multiple interest groups and the realities of local, national and international politics in the end limited the programme to a “snapshot” pilot project on a specific theme (“the healthy village”). Although UNESCO eventually abandoned the term “fundamental education” (it was formally dropped at the 1958 General Conference), its underpinning values continue to inspire and frame the organisation’s work in education, and it can be seen as a forerunner of the concept of lifelong learning (Elfert 2018), as well as an indicator of how the realities of local implementation and political conflict can thwart the most clear-sighted and well-grounded ambition for education.

The second article in this issue focuses on another of UNESCO’s abiding priorities, adult literacy. “The imagined learner in adult literacy education policy research: An international comparison”, by *Alisa Belzer* and *Anke Grotlüschen*, offers a comparative analysis of the ways in which learners are portrayed in researchers’ descriptions of adult literacy education policy. The authors’ close analysis of relevant research literature – drawing on an earlier meta-analysis (prepared by Belzer and Amy Pickard) of adult learner portrayals in qualitative research which identified a typology of “learner characters” that were predictably employed in descriptions across a large variety of texts – uncovered a range of assumptions about adult learners. Belzer and Grotlüschen identified five types of imagined learners: *the Problem, the Pawn, the Afterthought, the Competitor and the Competent Citizen*. These learner types reveal a great deal about who a policy is really for, what is valued, and
who benefits, and often “drive the action” in terms of further research, policy and practice, sometimes in unintended ways. The authors make a case that deepening our understanding of these sorts of framings of learners “has the potential to constructively help broaden policies so that they frame learners in ways that recognise the deep complexity of their identities, lives, interactions, experiences and the layers that contribute to and can address low literacy”. Rather than portraying adult learners as “abstract shadow[s] … on Plato’s wall” or “Godot-like character[s], talked about but never seen”, the authors argue that “policies should be animated by the actual lives, needs, interests, resources and challenges of adult learners’ lives”. Such policies, they argue, “are much more likely to successfully meet the learners’ needs, increase learning outcomes, and reap substantive individual and social rewards”.

Another area of policy where assumptions about learner type can be unhelpful is provision for older learners. The next article in this issue, “The use of technology for online learning among older adults in Hong Kong”, written by Ben Y. F. Fong, Hilary H. L. Yee, Tommy K. C. Ng and Vincent T. S. Law, considers older adults’ views of using technology in online learning environments. The authors note that while more and more older adults are using technology and participating in online learning, and there is ample scholarship examining the factors affecting older adults’ behavioural intention to use technology more generally, there is little research on the perspective of the learners themselves. Applying a model for the adoption of technology by older adults developed by Kenneth Hsiche Wang et al. (2017), the authors investigated the attitudes of older adults towards technology adoption for online learning. They interviewed 20 adults aged 52–73 who had enrolled in a diploma course in a higher education institution in Hong Kong. The results show that participants held favourable attitudes towards online learning after several practice sessions. While they had confidence in their future use of technology, they stated that the availability of technical and social support affected their intention of continuous learning using technology in online settings.

The fourth article in this issue, ‘Family involvement and English learners’ outcomes: A synthetic analysis” by Bizhu He and Christopher Thompson, examines the impact of family involvement on English learners’ academic, behavioural and socioemotional outcomes. The authors draw on a synthetic analysis of 28 empirical studies conducted between 1991 and 2019 with participants from kindergarten, elementary (primary), middle and high schools. These studies considered family involvement under spontaneous (non-interventional) and interventional conditions. The two types of studies (observational and experimental) were analysed to understand the relationships between one or more kinds of parental involvement and children’s outcomes. Overall, the findings suggest that family involvement is associated with improved outcomes for English learners in the three domains. This points to the importance of enhancing family involvement in English learners’ education. Although the effect sizes from the observational studies were smaller compared to previous studies, it is nevertheless clear that “the greater the level of family involvement, the better [a] child’s performance can be”.

The next article considers the reconstruction of education in two areas scarred by recent conflict. “Post-conflict recovery and reconstruction of education in the Gedeo and West Guji Zones of southern Ethiopia”, by Adane Hailu Herut and
Engida Esayas Dube, draws on case study research conducted at six schools and surrounding communities in the Gedeo and West Guji zones of Ethiopia following the conflict of 2018. The authors explore community perceptions of post-conflict reconstruction of education, focusing on early activities, such as prioritising education, restoring safety and security, and supplying resources. They use primary data gathered from parents, teachers, administrators and humanitarian agencies through qualitative interviews and focus group discussion to examine the reconstruction of education in the study area. Their study concludes that, despite the efforts of numerous stakeholders to provide humanitarian aid, efforts in post-conflict reconstruction of education are poor and based on short-term normalisation rather than long-term sustainable safe learning environments for children and youth in the study areas. As a result, the authors stress the importance of providing children and youth with a long-term, sustainable and healthy learning environment using targeted strategies and policy options.

Finally, our sixth article, “Curriculum theory and expansion of geographical and epistemological spaces of curriculum studies” by Fereydoon Sharifian, aims to explain and analyse Itinerant Curriculum Theory (ICT). This approach, developed by João M. Paraskeva, aims to free curriculum from prevailing Western discourses and practices and make room for diverse international epistemologies. The article details and analyses the basic components of the theory before considering the advantages of ICT, setting out the case for a “detrerritorialised” curriculum that makes opportunities for difference and facilitates the “search for new ways of thinking and looking at education”, particularly non-European ones. The author sees Paraskeva’s theory as a step towards decentralisation and a valuable attempt to promote the international discourse of curriculum studies. Nevertheless, it could be further strengthened, he argues, for example by clarifying the basic components of the theory and by addressing practical concerns such as “What is ICT’s priority in the dilemma of trying to overcome language domination while trying to disseminate different countries’ curriculum knowledge at the international level, even in English?”

This final article reminds us not only of the urgent need to create opportunities for difference, in the interests of both sustainability and social justice, but also of the doggedness of prevailing ideologies and the ways in which they hold us still captive in our thinking, even when the challenges we face demand we look elsewhere and everywhere for our guiding ideas. It also returns us to some of the themes discussed at the outset in considering the new Marrakech Framework for Action (UIL 2022b). How can we bridge the gap between our visionary ambitions and a reality that shows no sign of being ready to receive them? How do we enact transformative change in a context in many respects deeply inimical to it? How can we establish a dialogue between different cultures and knowledge systems and ensure it is not one-sided?

If the future really is up for grabs, how can we make sure that it is remade according to humanistic, democratic values (remembering that while UNESCO is explicit in its values, others may not be, and some may even espouse similar or identical values while pursuing a quite different agenda)? And how can we move some of these ambitious ideas closer to the classroom, learning centre and workplace? It is important that we have big ambitions for the future and recognise our shared responsibility to realise them. To fail to be ambitious is, in our current context, to fail altogether. However, we
need to be aware of how challenging it will be and the extent to which such change will constitute a fundamental transformation in perspective and direction. And we should be under no illusions about what it will mean to transform education. It will mean transforming everything else too. It will mean turning the world upside down.

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