Continuity or Change in the Provision of Adult Learning Services?  
A comparative study of implementation environments in the Nordic countries (work in progress¹).

Søren Ehlers, University of Aarhus, ehlers@dpu.dk

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1.0. Introduction

Adult learning is a policy area of its own right. The argument behind this statement is that public policy studies are only relating education policies to the activities in schools and universities (e.g. Marton 2006). The formulation as well as the implementation of policies for adult learning in EU member states has since the European Employment Strategy (1997) been linked to a new public policy area (Heyes & Rainbird 2009). However, the social partners in the Nordic countries have for decades been involved in the formulation as well as the implementation of policies for adult learning.

The point of departure is that most governments define education, health and similar activities as services - due to the World Trade Organization (WTO) established in 1995. It seems reasonable to categorize adult learning as a service as well. The study describes the provision of adult learning services through three decades and searches for change in five implementation environments. This concept is defined as the final result of the policy design process (May 2003).

¹ Parts of the paper have in 2011 been included in presentations at University of Duisburg- Essen in Germany (March 28th) and The Norwegian University for Technology and Science in Trondheim (April 13th).
The Nordic countries are relevant study objects because adults in this region of the world are highly involved in learning activities. It has for more than a decade been possible to document the difference between the Nordic region and other European countries because Eurostat produces a survey measuring the share of the adult population between 25-64 year participating in education and training (over four weeks prior to the survey). The Nordic region is probably having the highest score in the world. The figures for 2009 are striking:

The share for EU as such was 9.3% while Denmark had 31.6%, Finland 22.1%, Iceland 25.1%, Norway 18.1%, and Sweden 22.2%. The differences measured inside the Nordic region are noteworthy as well and leads to questions as: Which tracks were Nordic governments following in their design of public policies for the provision of adult learning services? What were the differences and the similarities between the implementation environments?

The paper is organized as comparisons between:


2) Five countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden)

The policy formulation in the Nordic region have been examined by Rubenson & Desjardin (2009) who identified systematic efforts for the removal of individual and structural barriers. This study of policy implementation can be regarded as a follow up.
All five Nordic countries interact with Nordic Council of Ministers. This institution established in 1971 was originally designed with the Council of Ministers in the European Economic Community (EEC) as model (Sonne 2007). Denmark joined the EEC in 1973 and Finland and Sweden became EU member states in 1996. Iceland and Norway have been associated the EEC/ EU since 1973. The EEC had no power in this policy area but the EU obtained from 1993 supranational legitimacy in educational policy making due to the passing of the Maastricht Treaty.

Nordic cooperation within the education of adults is older than the Nordic Council of Ministers and was a century ago based on transnational cooperation in the third sector (NGOs). This kind of non-public cooperation was often subsidized by the Nordic governments who understood it as policy formulation in relation to Culture. The first public Nordic culture project within the Nordic Council of Minister ran 1976 to 1978 (Wendt 1978).

However, the Nordic countries were having a close relation to UNESCO. This world organization had on a general assembly in 1965 published a definition of adult education which immediately influenced policy making in the Nordic region. The UNESCO recommendations from 1972 formulated at a world conference on adult education (held in Tokyo) affected the governments in the Nordic countries (Ehlers 2009).

1.1. Three organizational principles.

This study uses a political science approach because it is assumed that implementation theory (Winther 2006) may make comparative studies of Nordic adult learning services fruitful for other regions in the world. Political scientists are operating with two processes: 1) the formulation and 2) the implementation and they agree to say that stakeholders usually interact with government in both processes.
A government will usually before a reform is passed by the Parliament develop a policy design which includes the selection of organizational principles and instruments (May 2006). These are often called a package when they are presented to the Parliament. The main organizational principles are according to e.g. Thompson (2003): 1) Hierarchy, 2) Market, and 3) Network.

1) Hierarchy as organizational principle:

A public authority (national, regional, or local level) may organize itself in relation to two tasks:

- The production of adult learning services (the 19 counties and the 430 municipalities in Norway are providers themselves)

- The regulation of adult learning services (the Norwegian government makes guidelines for counties and municipalities)

2) Market as organizational principle:

A public authority (national, regional, or local level) may pay providers subsidies for their production of adult learning services. These providers (not acting as public authorities) may be non-profit or profit organizations (the 284 Swedish municipalities have since 1992 been able to make contracts with providers working for profit).

3) Network as organizational principle:

A number of public authorities (national, regional, or local level) may interact with stakeholders (corporatism):
- On national level (The Council for Lifelong Learning in Finland consists of stakeholders and includes the national organizations for providers and learners)

- On regional level (the Norwegian counties implement Validation of Prior Learning in cooperation with regional stakeholders)

- On local level (some of the Swedish municipalities are establishing Public Private Partnerships)

1.2. Three Instruments.

Political scientists disagree about the number of available instruments. Salamon (2002, referred in: Winther & Lehmann Nielsen 2010) involves 14 different instruments. However, this study operates for the sake of simplicity with three instruments. The following definition is provided by Bemelmans-Videc, Rist & Vedung (1998):

*Policy instruments are the set of techniques by which government authorities wield their power in attempting to ensure support and effect or prevent social change.*

These authors are dividing the available instruments into: 1) Regulations, 2) Economic Means, and 3) Information.

1) Regulations as instrument:

Regulations may have effect upon implementation if the country has developed a professional staff of civil servants (The Norwegian bureaucrats on national level is working within three organizations: The Ministry (*Department* is the name), the Directorate and the Agency (*Vox* is the name).
2) Economic Means as instrument:

Subsidies (national, regional and local level) may be distributed in ways which support implementation (Denmark prefers the taximeter system where public funding is calculated on the basis of credits accumulated by the individual learner. The general credit tool in EU member states is ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System).

3) Information as instrument:

Barriers in implementation may be ignorance or lack of commitment among street level bureaucrats (However, information may also be needed by the potential adult learners. The Finnish system for Guidance and Counseling is much appreciated).

1.1. Research question 1:

*Which organizational principle dominated the national provision of adult learning services?*

1.2. Research question 2:

*Which instrument was selected for the national implementation environment?*


A specific Nordic budget line for joint projects related to the education of adults was established in 1982 and a Nordic committee consisting of government officials was appointed in 1984. The committee for *folkbildning och vuxenundervisning* (FOVU) formulated Nordic action plans for the development of the policy area (Ehlers 2006). The FOVU action plans were (compared with the national action plans) long term oriented:
The core aim changed twice in the 1980s. Policies for *Culture* had the highest priority in the 1970s and the core aim in 1982 was policies for *Equality* (Nordisk Ministerråd 1982). However, a Nordic action plan announced in 1988 that: 1) *lifelong learning* should be the common Nordic perspective for all education policies and it stated that 2) *competence development* was one of the most important tasks for the Nordic countries (Nordic Council of Ministers 1988). In other words: Policies for *Economy* had from 1988 the highest priority. This political message was in line with the message coming from OECD (OECD 1989).

2.1. Denmark

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Network. The argument is that the Parliament passing in 1984 was in line with a tradition for decentralized educational governance which was developed more than a century ago. This Danish tradition differed from the centralized Norwegian and the Swedish traditions (Telhaug et al. 2004).

The Danish government had in December 1972 (after the UNESCO world conference) promised the Parliament to formulate a national strategy for the education of adults and a national committee worked for more than a decade with this task. Finally, the Parliament passed in May 1984 a catalogue of guidelines for a national infrastructure consisting of three strands:

1) *folkeoplysning* (non-formal adult education delivered by the third sector (NGOs))

2) *general education* (formal adult education delivered by providers under the Ministry of Education)

3) *vocational education/training* (formal and non-formal adult education delivered by providers under the Ministry of Labour)
The first strand consisted of a network of independent providers coordinated by umbrella organization (Dansk Folkeoplysnings Samråd established 1942). The two other strands were public and established back in the 1960s.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Economic Means. The Parliament passed two follow up actions: 1) on the funding of a national development programme (in force 1986-88) and 2) on the establishment of a national development center for folkeoplysning and the education of adults.

2.2. Finland

The estimate of the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Hierarchy. The argument is that Finnish provision of adult learning services was based on centralized governance as in Norway (Rubenson & Desjardins 2009).

The formulation of policies for adult learning was based on the tradition for tripartite negotiations. Finnish governments were until 1991 led by a Social Democrat and the national provision of adult learning services was in this decade regarded as a public responsibility. Actually, a governmental proposal for Paid Educational Leave was passed by the Parliament in 1980 but it had no effect because Economic Means were not available (Mørch Jacobsen 1982).

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Regulations.

2.3. Iceland
The estimate of the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Market. The argument is that the numbers of public initiatives were few. The Government expected adults to take initiatives themselves.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Information.

2.4. Norway

The estimate of the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Hierarchy. The argument is that Norwegian provision of adult learning services was based on centralized governance as in Finland.

The formulation of policies was based on the tradition for tripartite negotiations. Norwegian corporatism has been impressive for more than a century (Maitland 2008) and the current unemployment caused that the main part of the funding was distributed to public vocational training (the AMO system). This policy was based on the OECD concept recurrent education and part of a long term strategy developed by Social Democrats. However, a governmental report sent to the Parliament in 1981 regarded working life as an arena for learning (Tøsse 2005).

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Regulations.

2.5. Sweden

The estimate of the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Hierarchy. The argument is that Sweden regarded education policy as a prerogative for the Government (Dahl 2003a). However, the Government involved researchers in policy formulation and Sweden was known for its effectiveness in implementation (Waldow 2009).
The Swedish infrastructure for adult learning services was based on a policy design with three strands:

1) liberal education (folkbildning) provided by the third sector (NGOs)

2) general education (the municipal KOMVUX system)

3) vocational training (the public AMU system)

This was a result of a reform passed by Parliament in 1967. The Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) was in 1970s and the 1980s deeply involved in this policy area and regarded the efforts as a move towards Equality (Rubenson 1994). The design of the Danish infrastructure was influenced by Swedish experiences.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Regulation.

2.6. Summary

The dominant organizational principle in Finland, Norway and Sweden was Hierarchy. However, Denmark used the principle Network and Iceland the principle Market.

The selected instrument in Finland, Norway and Sweden was Regulations. Denmark selected Economic Means and Iceland Information.

The formulation of public policies was in the beginning of this decade influenced by the many changes in Europe caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The European Commission prepared itself for a long term competition with the US economy and initiated the development of an active employment policy. The governments in Finland, Norway and Sweden wanted their countries to become EU member states. However, the Norwegian government were not able to gain majority in the referendum of 1992.

The formulation of education policies in the Nordic countries had since the 1960s relied upon OECD recommendations (recurrent education was originally a Swedish policy) and the acceptance of guidelines formulated by OECD is apparent in the 1990s as well. Nordic Council of Ministers established in 1992 a think tank manned with Nordic experts recruited from universities and social partner organizations and this political action led to the publication of a policy paper called *Golden Riches in the Grass. Lifelong Learning for all* (Nordic Council of Minister 1995). It has to be noted that this policy paper became known before two transnational policy actions: 1) the publication of the report *Lifelong Learning for all* (OECD 1996) and the EU *Year of Lifelong Learning*.

3.1. Denmark

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Network. The argument is that the Danish tradition for decentralized provision was consolidated because a new funding model (VUS) initiated cooperation between local providers (Ehlers 1993).
Unemployment was a problem in the early 1990s and a coalition government (Socialdemocratic/Social-Liberal) transformed in 1993 the Danish labour market policy into active employment policy which caused an increased production of adult learning services. A government strategy announced in 1995 that adult learning should become a priority for providers within vocational education and higher education. The Parliament passed in 2000 a reform called The System for Further Education for Adults which was the base for the design of a framework for the provision of formal adult learning services (all levels) which functions as a parallel to the ordinary system organized for young learners (under 25 years). The public funding of non-formal adult learning organized by the third sector was cut down.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Economic Means.

3.2. Finland

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle became Market. That is a change from Hierarchy. The argument is that the Finnish providers of liberal education (folkbildning) went bankrupt if the customers from the labour market selected other providers. The education of adults had become a market place (Tuomisto 1998).

Finland was deeply hit by recession when the Russian market disappeared and the unemployment percent went up. The crisis led to the establishment of a broad coalition government and to a long term pact between the social partners on the labour market (Elvander 2002). The Finnish providers organized as NGOs competed with public and private providers and offered vocational training (Rinne & Vantaja 2000).

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Regulations.
3.3. Iceland

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Market. The argument is that the Government (Liberal) was pleased with the participation figures and saw no reason for political action.

The Icelandic policy formulation followed the general Nordic pattern from the 1980s and the Parliament passed in 1992 laws for general adult education and for vocational adult education. However, the Government did never implement the two reforms. Iceland had in this decade no unemployment at all and young people left the educational system because of the many available jobs.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Information.

3.4. Norway

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Hierarchy. The argument is that Gudmund Hernes (Norwegian minister for education 1990-95) refused to follow the deregulation track which was introduced by Sweden in 1991. Norway was not changing its course (Telhaug et al. 2004).

However, the national curriculum for the education of adults was abolished in 1994. The national regulations were afterwards based on competences and identical with the regulations for the schooling of children (municipality provision) and young people (county provision).
The Norwegian union of employees (LO) wanted from 1993 to promote adult learning and was in 1994 supported by the association of employers. This joint action led in 1999 to a decision in Parliament which forced the Government to establish a national development project called the *Competence Reform* (Payne 2006).

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Regulations.

### 3.5. Sweden

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle became Market. That is a *change* from Hierarchy. The argument is that Sweden decentralized and deregulated the national provision of adult learning services (Lumsden Wass 2004).

The national education system as such was decentralized after 1991 and the Swedish government was now funding educational services through *block grants* given to the municipalities. One consequence of this change was a deregulation of the adult learning services: The national curriculum for the education of adults (established in 1982) was abolished in 1994. All providers of adult learning services (profit or non-profit) were competing with each other for contracts with the local municipality. Another consequence was that the public labour market education (the AMU system) was reorganized in 1993 as a joint stock-holder company (Lumsden Wass 2004).

An important factor in this decade was the unemployment crisis. This problem caused the establishment of a costly development project called the *Knowledge Lift* (1997-2002) which gave special benefits to adult learners with limited educational luggage.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Economic Means.
3.6. Summary

The dominant organizational principle in Finland, Iceland and Sweden were Market. There were change from Hierarchy to Market in Finland and Sweden and continuity in Denmark (Network), in Iceland (Market) and in Norway (Hierarchy).

One Nordic country had change in the selection of national instrument: Sweden moved from Regulations to Economic Means. There was continuity in Denmark (Economic Means), in Finland (Regulation), in Iceland (Information) and in Norway (Regulation).

4.0. The decade 2001-2010

The EU had announced the Lisbon strategy in 2000 but the aim to become the most competitive knowledge economy in the world by 2010 was not reached for several reasons. One of them was that the EU suddenly expanded into 27 member states – another the financial crisis (Pepin 2011 and Kleibrink 2011). However, the social partners on EU level supported by the European Commission established from 2002 a dialogue about the implementation of actions for adult learning which continued in the following years and has been evaluated by the partners themselves (Heyes & Rainbird 2009).

The FOVU Committee under Nordic Council of Ministers was restructured in 2004 which caused that the double policy concept folkeopplysning (folkbildning) and vuxenutdanning (voksenundervisning) was replaced by a single policy concept: voksnes læring (adult learning). The Nordic committee was renamed Styregruppen for voksnes læring (SVL).
OECD staff visited all Nordic countries and published reviews about the national provision of adult learning services. A critical analysis of the OECD reviews found it evident that the “targeted Nordic policy strategy” was defined by “the equity goal” (Rubenson & Desjardins 2009:199). Economy had the highest priority in the Nordic region but Equality was second in line as in the previous decade.

4.1. Denmark

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle became Market. The argument for noting change is the introduction of tuition fees in the public general education owned by the counties. The 14 counties themselves began to merge their providers and the public provision as such was reduced (Klinkby 2004). The Parliament abolished the counties in 2007 and the public providers were reorganized as “self-owning” bodies influenced by local stakeholders.

A coalition government (Liberal/Conservative) appointed in 2001 changed the national coordination of adult learning services which meant that the AMU-system was moved from the Ministry of Employment (new name) to the Ministry of Education. The Directorate for adult learning in the Ministry of Education (established in 1982) disappeared.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Economic Means. The national participation in adult learning was in 2009 according to Eurostat: 31,6% (18,4% in 2001).

4.2. Finland

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Market. The argument is that Finland followed the OECD guidelines for the provision of adult learning services (OECD 2001).
The governance of the policy area was centralized and based on tripartite negotiations (as in Norway) and the national council for adult learning was in 2009 replaced by a council for lifelong learning where the chair is a social partner representative and the vice-chair a research representative. The governmental office for adult learning was abolished in 2010. Finland followed the EU guidelines closely.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Economic Means. That is change from Regulation. The national participation in adult learning was in 2009 according to Eurostat: 22.1% (17.2% in 2001).

4.3. Iceland

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Market. That is continuity. However, the Government decided after tripartite negotiations to increase the public funding and to leave the distribution to a non-public body (FA).

FA was established by the social partners in 2003 and is owned by them. It distributes the public funding based on a contract with the Government. Icelandic providers of adult learning services compete with each other for contracts with FA. The task to develop an Icelandic model for Guidance and Counseling became a FA task as well. The Parliament passed in the beginning of 2010 an act which legitimized the non-public governance of public funding.

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Economic Means. The argument is the increase of public funding. That is change from Information. The national participation in adult learning in 2009 was according to Eurostat: 25.1% (23.5% in 2001).

4.4. Norway
The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Hierarchy. The argument is that the Ministry analyzed the current situation carefully and proposed regulations (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2009).

However, the Norwegian government had decided to establish a national development project (the Competence Reform) and combined in 2001 the state bureaucracy with a public agency (Vox). Vox coordinated the national efforts with the Competence Reform. The Government increased the funding of adult learning services. This reform was a result of centralized tripartite negotiations (corporatism as in Finland).

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Economic Means. The argument for noting change in Norway is that increased and targeted public funding was part of the Competence Reform. The national participation in adult learning was in 2009 according to Eurostat: 18,1% (14,2% in 2001).

4.5. Sweden

The estimate for the decade as such is that the dominant organizational principle was Market. The argument is that the Swedish municipalities were having the economic freedom to select providers who compete against each other (Jakobson 2007).

The Government was reluctant towards EU guidelines (Dahl 2003b). A Swedish research project on education policy was not mentioning the EU influence (Marton 2006).

The instrument selected for the national implementation environment seems to have been Economic Means. The national participation in adult learning was in 2009 according to Eurostat: 22,2% (17,5% in 2001).
4.6. Summary

The dominant organizational principle in Denmark, in Iceland, in Finland and in Sweden was Market. Norway kept Hierarchy. There was change in Denmark from Network to Market and continuity in Finland (Market), Iceland (Market), Norway (Hierarchy) and Sweden (Market).

All Nordic countries selected the same instrument: Economic Means. There was change in Iceland (from Information) and in Norway (from Regulation).

4.0. Discussion

What caused the changes? The best explanation is probably the influence of economic movements in the world around the Nordic region. The countries are small open economies and the globalization process makes the number of policy options limited. The global competition influenced the national provision of adult learning services.

The Nordic countries increased the production of adult learning services because Economy was the core aim. However, Equality was the second core aim in line. Which organizational principle or instrument was effective in the move towards the core aims?

5.0 Conclusion

The mapping of organizational principles and instruments applied by the Nordic countries between 1981 and 2010 has demonstrated change in the second and the third decade. The remarkable successes in relation to participation in the decade 2001-2010 may be explained as a result of an increased public funding and careful monitoring (Rubenson & Desjardins 2009) combined with a revision of the national implementation environment.
Market became the dominant organizational principle in four implementation environments while the fifth implementation environment stood by Hierarchy. The Norwegian *continuity* may contribute to an explanation of the lower participation level compared with the other Nordic countries. Norway had in 2001: 14,2% and in 2009: 18,1%. The Danish *change* from Network to Market may contribute to an explanation of the higher participation level. Denmark had in 2001: 18,4% and in 2009: 31,6%.

The study of changes in five implementation environments demonstrates first of all a will to revision. The majority of Nordic government regarded Market as the most effective administrative principle. The Lisbon Strategy in combination with a targeted strategy in favour of adults with limited educational luggage as noted by Rubenson & Desjardins (2009) are probably the main reasons why all five Nordic countries selected the instrument Economic Means.

### 5.1. Perspectives

One hypothesis for the decade 2011-2020 is that some Nordic countries will change their dominant organizational principle because Nordic governments want to make sure that everybody on the labour market everywhere in the country has access to adult learning services.

Market as dominant organizational principle makes the production of adult learning services flexible but the provision on regional and local level may become unstable. More coordination may be needed and there seems to be a trend towards decentralization. New models for regional coordination are under development and stakeholders will probably be invited to participate more on the regional level. A *change* from Market to Network will probably happen in some Nordic countries.
Another hypothesis for the Nordic region is *continuity* in the selection of Economic Means. The five countries are investing in the production of adult learning services and public subsidies may be used strategically in the governance of the provision on regional and local level.

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