

What's new in a new competence regime?

Olesen, Henning Salling; Nicoll, Katherine

Published in:
European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults

DOI:
[10.3384/rela.2000-7426.relae7](https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.relae7)

Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Olesen, H. S., & Nicoll, K. (2013). What's new in a new competence regime? *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 4(2), 103-109. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.relae7>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact rucforsk@ruc.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Editorial: What's new in a new competence regime?

Katherine Nicoll

University of Stirling, Scotland, UK (katherine.nicoll@stir.ac.uk)

Henning Salling Olesen

Roskilde University, Denmark (hso@ruc.dk)

The contemporary notion of competence emerged in political, educational and academic discussions of adult education and learning from the middle of the 1990s. This was connected with a shift in thinking about learning and education in the policy and public domain in which lifelong learning and learning outside education had become increasingly emphasized. In spite of its origin in a field of strong political interests and conflict, the notion of competence has now become formally integrated in administrative language use and a dominant framework of thinking on education and learning. It has become a new governing regime at a European level as well as to some extent at the level of the nation state.

This editorial will pursue this notion of competence as a governing regime in discussion of what's new by highlighting some distinctive material circumstances which have supported its dominance. We trace the wider emergence of lifelong learning in the European policies of the 1990s from discourses from outside education. We argue that this reflected and fueled scepticism over whether education could fulfill societal needs. Education, before and after the Second World War had been seen as a force for social change. But after Reagan and Thatcher in the 1990s, and now coming from groups who gained influence in the development of neo-liberal policy agendas, this scepticism supported a turn to the market. Education was understood to need to become more flexible and functional in support of the labour market. Knowledge and skills became the 'objects' of value and disappointed expectations of the potential of education to transform societies paved the way for a new discursive constellation. The velocity of wider social and economic change, an older relative shift towards post-Fordist work production mechanisms and the new European Union agenda of monitoring and comparing skills and competencies combined to support a new governing regime.

The emergence of a lifelong learning policy agenda

An agenda for lifelong learning emerged from earlier notions of lifelong education or recurrent education. Lifelong education can be traced in European policies of the 1960s and 1970s in the language of intergovernmental agencies such as UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Field 2000). Lifelong education appeared again in 1993 in the Jacques Delors' White Paper on competitiveness and economic growth (European Commission 1993). Recurrent

education, as a vision of the access of all to education throughout the life course, had been an idealistic engagement in popular education and literacy campaigns in the 3rd world. Lifelong learning was then the emphasis in 1996, after the European Commission declared that year as the European Year of Lifelong Learning.

Policy ideas of flexibility have been part of a discourse of the marketization of the economy, labour market and education in Europe since the end of the 1980s. But during the 1990s the notion of lifelong learning became widely dominant and launched into public discussion in many countries and with the need for flexibility as part of this discourse. The means to a 'learning society' was considered by the European Commission (1996: 3) in 1996, with its aim 'to plot out the route to this new society by identifying the options available to the EU in education and training'. Its report called for greater flexibility in education and training systems and practices, so as to meet diverse economic demands.

Lifelong learning was launched into public discussion in part through the international political and economic jet-set; those business managers, politicians and experts who participated in the annual alternative summit meetings of the 'World Economic Forum' in Davos. Lifelong learning brought with it an emphasis for learning *outside* education, not only workplace learning but also in everyday life activities. This emphasis became a means to promote learning. What was originally positioned as an opportunity for the individual to learn was to become a necessity and duty - this was new. There was to be no safe place anymore!

Scepticism over education fulfilling societal needs

This shift involved scepticism over whether the education system was fulfilling societal needs. Such scepticism was new, at least in Northern European countries. It came from outside – in a dual sense. It was not raised by the agents in education, but by business managers and those involved in international economic and financial institutions. These were groups who gained increasing influence in the development of policy agendas with the neo-liberal wave following Reaganomics and Thatcherism. Thus education was increasingly viewed skeptically and for its use for business and employment. In this view existing education systems were inflexible and overly independent. They were positioned as needing to become more functional and flexible if they were to be able to supply the labor required of them – more or less in response to direct market conditions. Tony Blair, when he took office in 1997, announced that three things were important: "Education, Education and Education". But the name of his Ministry of Education, "Education and Employment" was branded by neo-liberalism.

The idea that the education system could fulfill societal needs had informed the preceding years. The expansion of education had been through this time assigned a magic force - through education, economic prosperity and welfare, social inequity would wither away. Societal change was understood to be supported through formal education. This was not to suggest that family or the class dominance of particular occupations, or the trajectories of favored people in in-company careers, had ceased through the expansion of this idea. But the main trend was understood to be towards meritocracy - obtaining social positions and status through education. Career-making was to be based on certified knowledge and formal education instead of family and social relations.

Qualifications became foundational to the employment of an increasing proportion of the labor market. During the prosperous decades after World War II, there was, at least

in the milieu of social democrat parties, an optimistic expectation that education would also provide leverage for the individual. But during the 1970s and 1980s it was realized that education does not restructure the basic social order in itself. And, the political disappointment in some cases nourished a reverse thinking that the dominance of scholastic education was causing inequality.

New thinking: from curriculum to outcomes

In a meritocracy based on traditional academic or scholastic education, it was assumed that there was a strong alignment between school teaching, learning outcome and societal requirements. The political adoption of the notion of competence is an indication that this assumption was shaken. The new thinking about education and learning, however, was promoted by an alliance of otherwise contradictory forces. On the one hand there was a very traditional, utilitarian thinking, which tended to see education as costly and superfluous, and, on the other, a neoliberal governance strategy within new public management. This was an alliance that gave way to market mechanisms, exactly because it assigned a decisive role of education and learning in the global competition and therefore was not to be governed by social criteria.

In spite of the contradictions, these forces could unite in a new way of education thinking which instead of focusing on goals and content (curriculum) focused on measurable learning outcomes. Knowledge and skills became valued as activated in practices and recognized and exploited as learning potentials in everyday life, particularly work life. This relativizing of the value of education and increasing interest in everyday and work practices have become aligned through the notion of competence. This political alliance embraces educational conservatism; back to basics vocationalism on the one hand, whilst from human resource and organization theory, personal resources are regarded as perhaps the most important factor in the development and competitiveness of a corporation.

Human resource thinking has its background in a predominantly humanist psychology brought to bear in efforts to optimize individuals' contribution to organizational goals and function. The point of departure for this thinking is that human beings develop and unfold their potentials in practice, and that there is a high level of alignment between individual thriving and a surplus of potential in task-solving and improvement of work practice. In this way interest in individual competence development is aligned with company interests. The development of the competence of the individual is supported by organizational forms and management tools that create a beneficial environment for the company itself. These forms and tools are at the same time positioned as the goals and means for human development in its own right.

A progressive notion of human resource

The notion of competence has been a tool of a progressive but relatively weak human resource dimension in management and leadership, particularly in big knowledge intensive private businesses. But by the 1990s the notion was picked up by politicians and business lobbyists and in a very short time converted into a tool of policy for competitiveness that brought together domains of education, research and development, labour market and management. In Europe this was accomplished in two ways. First in

the form of the Lisbon Declaration (European Commission, 2001) there was installed, at least until the financial and economic crisis broke out in 2008-09, a much stronger political attention on actions to develop human resources, including the development of adult and continuing education policy. Second, there was a mainstreaming of governance mechanisms and a bureaucracy of descriptions of the work force and education and training available (for instance in the description of education at regulatory level in terms of learning outcomes). This focus on human resources within adult and continuing education policy and bureaucracy of descriptions of learning outcomes as governmental mechanism, were combined as a tool for competitiveness.

Qualification and skills analysis

The focus on aspects which are deemed important for the economy, competitiveness and employability for the individual had been self evident in the 1970s in vocational education and training. At this time, qualification and skills analyses became part of education and training policy development and linked to a rather narrow work-process and functional perspective. The interest in analyzing qualifications or skills might be considered a reaction to the volatility of the labour market, in part through technological change, and as an attempt to counteract increasing uncertainty about the requirements of the work force. However, this perspective was always and is still, to assimilate the skills of the work force to the technical and organizational development of work processes, or in other words, to secure the supply of sufficient relevant work qualifications.

Qualifications analyses are still conducted regularly within business areas, trades, regions or segments of the labour market. But it was soon realized on many levels that new approaches were needed to create a sufficiently dynamic knowledge based economy. In vocational education, notions like key qualification and generic skills were launched to explore the extent to which it was possible to identify basic qualifications foundational for changing specific requirements within many individual work-processes.

Several concurrent circumstances contributed to this desire to identify key qualifications. On the one hand, there was the very velocity of change, undermining the possibility of individuals acquiring lasting vocational qualifications, once for a lifetime. The response was to require flexibility, de-specializing and retraining. On the other hand, there has been a relative shift in workplace structure from industrial manufacturing to several more complex jobs (information handling and service production; welfare services). The response to which has been a new type of professional knowledge and new work identities.

Both these circumstances point to qualification requirements of a more general and unspecific nature than those which have generally been attended to, and they have increased requirements for cultural techniques (reading, writing, computing) and social skills (communication, group collaboration). Deliberately, in the interest of a good cause we must assume, all these elements were mixed in a political conceptual salad, which could turn the short term pressure for qualification analysis into an optimistic outlook for more qualified work with richer opportunities for workers. In the education policy domain, these analyses provided a new and material argument for the classical humanist educational idea of all-round education based on cultural skills and personal development; even in vocational education this has been the case. In management thinking, it provided the argument for assigning greater significance to working people as employees. A new horizon of understanding workers and their ability to meet new

requirements as a source of wealth and competitiveness was opening. The EU Commission, particularly in the period while Jacques Delors was the chair, took these arguments for an “anthropocentric” work organisation and new qualifications seriously (Hingel, 1994). A shift from qualification (modeling people by means of the job requirements) to competence (enabling people to reshape the jobs and handle unknown future requirements) was lurking, but was not really transformed into specific policies.

Economists take over the agenda

Simultaneously the significance of human resources was incorporated within an economic competition strategy. The idea fostered by the OECD of measuring and comparing competencies between countries and across time by establishing competence accounts, rendered discourses of competence a political lift, but it also implied a particular twist. At first it led to the launch of a project for Defining and Selecting Key Competences (DESECO), with the ambition to create an interdisciplinary analytical conceptual framework which could identify competences of significance in a range of different life situations and life phases – so called key competences (Rychen & Sagalnik 2001; OECD 2003). This ambition has not in any way been achieved, but with the development of the European framework of qualifications and corresponding national frameworks the endeavor has been to establish a description system independent of national institutions and structures. A competence discourse has been a main tool in this work. In Denmark, for example, all new education programs must be described by the knowledge, skills and competences that should be acquired. This latter is a mix or confusion of the new discourse and a more traditional language for education regulation. It causes a great deal of problems and triggers a lot of annoyance and substantial critique in educational institutions. The competence discourse, born in a field of major political interests and tensions, has established itself as a new dominant framework for thinking about education and learning.

The articles of this issue

In the call for papers for this journal issue a question was raised about the novelty of this discourse. This was a request for analyses of the content of the notion of competence in relation to former ways of conceptualizing the consequences or outcomes of education. The Call for Papers invited critical discussion of concepts of competence, as well as its analysis as a new way of thinking and communicating. A question was raised over the implications of discourses based on the notion of competence.

The issue that results from this Call for Papers includes a range of contributions which not least reveal substantial differences in the use of concepts of competence and interpretations of their significance across countries and language communities. The questions raised gave rise to quite different reactions. Although generally agreeing on the emergence of a competence discourse and adopting a critical view of the way it is implemented in policy discourses and management procedures, there are quite different approaches offered in thinking of its consequences.

The articles of the Issue then explore the emergence of this regime of lifelong learning and competence and its political and practical implications for adult and continuing

education. Divergences are to some extent related to different focuses in analysis – whether focusing on the material background and context for development of new concepts, or on the use of the concepts and the way these work out in social practices.

Pierre Hebrard's first paper of this Issue, called *Ambiguities and Paradoxes in a Competence-Based Approach to Vocational Education and Training in France*, explores effects of the competence regime in the design of programmes in vocational education and training in France. Tracing the origin of the meaning of the concept of competence and its evolution, he argues two different paradigms; a behaviourist and socio-constructivist version. Tracing also their ambiguity and paradoxes of effect when such understandings are mobilized in the design of programmes in the healthcare professions and social work in France, Pierre Hebrard suggests more detailed exploration in other contexts and locations.

Roy Canning, in his paper called *Rethinking Generic Skills*, turns to explore understandings of generic or transversal skills promoted through European Union policy discourses. He draws on linguistic, geosemiotics and socio-cultural theories to argue that generic skills are not universal, transferable or autonomous. He argues against adopting such notions, suggesting that the skills and knowledge of generic skills should be contextualised in cultural contexts and understandings more collective than individualistic.

Christine Zeuner, considers in her article *From workers education to societal competencies: Approaches to a critical, emancipatory education for democracy*, two understandings of critical political education for workers developed in the 1960s and 1990s in Germany; first, philosopher and sociologist Oskar Negt's notion of 'Sociological Imagination and exemplary learning' and, second, 'societal competencies' (Negt, 1963, 2001). These two understandings are purposefully distinct from more instrumentalist notions of key qualifications or key competencies that are related to aims of the maintenance of employability for individuals or the economic competitiveness of the market. Societal competencies aim for emancipation and the development of participation in democratization processes. The notion of social competencies is based on the idea that political learning processes are only possible by working on experiences of everyday life and clearly point to class-based cultural and historical experience as a framework.

Henning Salling Olesen, in his article *A Political Economy of Competence Development?*, explores the material background for the contemporary focus on learning and competence development in changing work processes. The competence notion, in this context, indicates the dependency of employers and capital on the potentials and participation of working people, and hence makes an opening for autonomy and more democratic power relations. This article sees the prevailing competence discourse as a result of an economic reduction, reflecting the political economy of capital. As an alternative, competence requirements might be developed in a new politicization of work on the basis of workers' learning and competence. Professions already have opportunities to develop autonomy on the basis of competence, but may do this in a narrow and rigid way. The article proposes a "Political Economy of Working People" as a conceptual framework for a new relation between work life and societal democracy.

Staffan Nilsson & Sofia Nyström, in *Adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime*, draw on the research and scholarly literature to explore changing discourses and perspectives of adult learning, education, and the labour market within the employability regime. Their analysis is of the Nordic context. Current demands of educational design for a labour market, they argue, require the

acquisition of specialist and generalist competence and personal characteristics. The shift is one from employment to employability and lifelong employment to lifelong learning. Ideas of liberal education and 'bildung' have for these authors been reinserted into the political agenda, and thus offer potential for new engagement in these terms.

The last article falls outside the main theme of competence for the issue but is aligned strongly to it in its discussion of the transfer of qualifications. In her paper *The disjuncture of learning and recognition: Credential assessment from the standpoint of Chinese immigrant engineers in Canada*, Shan Hongxia explores the problems of the transfer of qualifications for migrant engineers to Canada. This is a problem of the accreditation of prior learning and processes of qualification for professional engineers entering the Canadian work environment from other countries and cultures. She argues that the recognition of foreign qualifications, such as is promoted in many OECD countries, promotes a liberal notion of 'fairness' through ideas of universal standards. Shan then examines the credential recognition practices of the engineering profession in Canada through a qualitative study. As a fairer alternative, she argues a notion of 'recognitive justice' as starting place or 'standpoint' for recognition of the everyday experiences of immigrants in such processes.

References

- European Commission, (1993). *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- European Commission, (1996). *Teaching and Learning: Towards a Learning Society*, Luxembourg: Official Publications of the European Communities.
- European Commission, (2001). *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*. Communication, 678. Retrieved from:
<http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2001:0678:FIN:EN:PDF>
- Field, J. (2000). Governing the ungovernable: why lifelong learning policies promise so much yet deliver so little. In *Education Management and Administration*, 28(3), 249-61.
- Hingel, A. (1994): *Science, technology and social and economic cohesion in the community : overall synthesis report and published articles*. Bruxelles: European Commission.
- Negt, O. (1963). *Soziologische Phantasie und Exemplarisches Lernen*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlagsanstalt EVA
- Negt, O. (2001). *Arbeit und menschliche Würde*. Göttingen: Steidl
- OECD, (2003). *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations*. Paris: OECD.
- Rychen, D., & Salganik, L. (Eds.). (2001). *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*. Seattle/Toronto/Bern/Göttingen: Hogrefe & Huber