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Continuing education as value creation: Towards a new orientation beyond market logic

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Abstract

The continuing education sector explicitly regards itself as serving the goals of lifelong learning. In fact, however, it is oriented towards the market and measures its success according to the sales of its products. The article analyses this market orientation from the perspectives of educational sociology and discourse theory and illustrates its consequences using examples from the Swiss continuing education market. The author develops an alternative approach whereby continuing education is measured according to the value it creates for individuals and society. Here, a connection is made with economic value creation theory, enhanced by sociological dimensions of the recognition and valorisation of education. This enhanced value creation concept shows how continuing education generates values, where these values are recognised, in what contexts they are valorised and what players and discourses are involved. The author also outlines a procedure for value creation analysis and, using two continuing education programmes as examples, illustrates the findings that value creation analysis can generate. On this basis, the author calls for a reorientation of continuing education that transcends the limitations of market logic.

Keywords: value creation of education, education markets, programme marketing, valorisation of education, education inequality, education discourse



Introduction

The starting point of this article is the general observation that adult and continuing education are oriented towards the market, to a much greater extent than is formal education. The structural adaptation to market mechanisms has already been addressed in several issues of *RELA*, under the theme of ‘marketisation’, for example. Marketisation, which is apparent both in Europe and around the world, has been linked to the neoliberal turn in economic and educational policy (see Fejes et al., 2016; Košmerl & Mikulec, 2021). This article now addresses *market orientation*: the market-oriented strategies deployed by continuing education market players and the market-oriented valuation of continuing education performance in societal reference systems.

In continuing education, a market orientation means that activities are guided by the competitive environment of the market and measured according to performance and economic efficiency. Hence, market success and commercial viability become central evaluation criteria, which are, for example, decisive in whether programmes will be offered and whether they will receive state support and/or social recognition. The market thus becomes the highest evaluation authority. It follows that providers of continuing education in general (and, in large part, also of vocational education and training) concentrate on perfecting product marketing and increasing market share. In this context, it is powerful market players who define whatever will currently constitute the ‘market’ on the supply side, i.e. the range of products, market segmentation and performance criteria. Market orientation thus not only shapes the self-image and business lens of providers but also affects course development dynamics, continuing education attainments and their evaluation. However, the ‘market success’ of continuing education programmes actually says little about the contribution they make to the learning of individuals and society and thus neglects key elements of the value these programmes create. Might there be an alternative orientation and evaluative rationale for continuing education that deploys criteria that are not subject to the rules of market logic?

Research questions and argumentation

Two research questions were derived from the issues outlined above. (1) How is a market orientation realised in continuing education, and what are the consequences for the range of courses offered, the associated attainments and how these are valorised in the economy and society? (2) How might a contrasting, alternative approach measuring continuing education and its performance by the value they create for learners, the economy and society look?

The first section of the article focuses on *research question 1*. It analyses the political and economic mechanisms and discursive explanations of market logic in continuing education. It shows how market orientation shapes the dynamics of course development, marketing practices and innovation undertakings in the sector, and how it influences the distribution of opportunities to access continuing education. It also highlights how powerful market players exploit performance outcomes in continuing education for their own ends, e.g. in the labour market, corporate policy or economic location policy. Trends in the Swiss continuing education sector are used as illustration.

The analysis clearly shows that continuing education organised on a market basis generates a very broad commercial range of qualification courses, but also that its focus on marketing causes it to neglect the long-term outcomes and value contributions of learning. A commercial course offering is partially volatile, education paths can become

unstable, and acquired certificates can decrease in value – all of which contradict the principle of lifelong learning. It is also clear that continuing education under the market regime weakens its own aspirations to offer a ‘second chance’ to all and to enable ‘free access’ to education, realising them in sub-areas at best.

This leads to *research question 2*: What alternative approaches would measure the values generated by continuing education? As a first step, the article explores how far economic value creation theory contributes to an understanding of ‘education value creation’. It extends the value creation concept by relating it to the systemic and societal contexts in which education operates. It follows that a value creation concept suitable for education processes must, in addition to the value product targeted in the education business, consider the value contributions of the relevant reference systems. It shows how continuing education yields its results, in which systems these find recognition, in what contexts they are valorised and what discourses and players are involved.

Based on the value creation approach, the article then outlines a multilevel procedure for analysing value creation in continuing education programmes. Using two authentic programmes as examples, it illuminates the insights that value creation analysis can provide regarding potentials, deficits and courses of action. These two ‘cases’ provide insights into the applicability of the value creation approach in education. The discussion section examines the findings and addresses both the value added by a multilevel value creation perspective and the challenges such a reorientation would face in a continuing education sector that is currently organised on a market basis.

Theoretical foundations and methodology

The analysis of market-oriented continuing education (*research question 1*) draws upon findings of continuing education research and observations of trends in the Swiss continuing education sector. These findings are evaluated using theoretical dimensions of the education system (see Weber, 2013; Schöni, 2017, p. 59), which include equity of needs in course provision; coherence and connectivity of education paths; and equal opportunity of access to education. These dimensions serve as a means to assess trends observed in the sector and their consequences, e.g. forced product marketing, web-based data collection, the conditioning of market demand and effects on innovation in course development. They also point up the hazards to legitimisation, which can stem from a rigid market orientation.

The programmes offered by market-oriented continuing education lead target groups to expect benefits, e.g. individual career steps, more competitive companies, better labour market structures or solutions to social problems. Empirical evidence of such outcomes is generally supplied by selective graduate surveys, programme evaluations and monitoring studies. However, there is a lack of thematically broad-based, longitudinal studies and repeat surveys of education biographies and structural characteristics on the basis of which continuing education might continually review its outcomes (Fischer & Kade, 2012; Ioannidou & Reichart, 2017). This data deficit does not seem to interfere with the success of continuing education marketing, however (Wittpoth, 2021).

If continuing education is legitimised less by empirical evidence of benefit than by its discursive staging, this calls methodologically for a *discourse analysis approach*. The analysis of education discourse (Rausch, 2012; Forneck, 2007) assumes that the effects of continuing education evident in the individual case will be embedded in narratives and generalised. Narratives unfold symbolic productivity by illustrating

outcomes, for example, in testimonials, and urge their audience to position themselves in the competition via educational effort. Narratives provide symbolic resources for deployment in marketing. They are often closely associated with power discourse, as the affinity of continuing education with neoliberal achievement morality has shown.

The *theory of economic value creation* (e.g. Stauss & Bruhn, 2007) offers help in elaborating a new approach that measures continuing education according to the value it creates (*research question 2*). This theory is applied to personal services, where providers and their clients together generate values of various types according to a service concept. The methodology of value creation analysis has been implemented in case studies in various sectors (e.g. Woratschek, Roth & Schafmeister, 2007), although these have only rarely included education. Educational services present a particular challenge to a value creation concept because the client is directly involved in service provision as a learner (see Schlutz, 2006, p. 19), and the results require external recognition. The concept of value creation in education must therefore be extended with *educational sociology perspectives*, which take into account the normative basis of teaching and learning, its embedding in social interactions and its validation in societal reference systems as determinants of value (for the social valorisation of learning outcomes, see Becker & Hadjar, 2011, p. 44).

The market orientation of continuing education – and its consequences

According to the current self-presentation of continuing education, it is the requirements of lifelong learning that steer the development of the continuing education sector and its offering. The sector looks ahead and makes available learning opportunities and courses that enable adults to satisfy their learning needs and update their qualifications in a time of structural change to the economy. In this discursively constructed ‘order of things’ (Reckwitz, 2011, p. 302), continuing education traditionally sees itself as a generator of benefits (Rosenberg, 2015, p. 134) and as a ‘formula’ for social consensus (Klingovsky et al., 2020): it offers everyone a ‘second’ chance at education, facilitates cumulative further learning, supplies the labour market with qualified workers and strengthens the competitive ability of the economy. In this way, it serves as an instrument for combatting social division and economic stagnation. Continuing education *research* has examined just how far these discursive claims are actually realised, and, in addition to the actual functional accomplishments of continuing education, has noted incoherencies and dysfunction (see summaries in Becker & Hecken, 2011, p. 382; Tippelt & von Hippel, 2011; Tippelt, 2020, p. 68). Be that as it may, considerably less research attention has been paid to the fact that, in reality, the continuing education sector is driven less by the requirements of learning and the findings of qualification evolution research than by the market and its ‘principles’.

This article’s analysis of market orientation and its consequences (*research question 1*) references, inter alia, the *Swiss continuing education sector*. Here, continuing education, understood as non-formal education, covers programmes of general and professionally oriented continuing education and programmes (not certifications) of higher vocational education and parts of university continuing education (Fischer, 2014, p. 24). Features of the continuing education sector include the dominance of private providers and corporate players (see Geiss, 2020, p. 228; Schläfli & Sgier, 2014, p. 38); a strongly segmented supply market with socially unequal opportunities of access (see Weber, 2007, p. 307; Weber, 2013, p. 29); significant financial burdens for clients, i.e. participants and employers (see Messer & Wolter,

2009; Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung, 2014, p. 274); and relatively little financial engagement on the part of public authorities. The federal government regulates competition in general, but controls the qualification system only by sector (e.g. in higher vocational education with qualifications at tertiary level B). Otherwise, it leaves the regulation of education to the federal units (cantons, municipalities) and the associations. It acts as a subsidiary and practises restraint with regard to education policy (see Fischer, 2014, p. 15). This regime, established over decades, is formally anchored in the new national federal act on continuing education of 2014. The Swiss continuing education sector thus exhibits characteristics of ‘marketisation’ at all levels (Käpplinger, 2019, p. 4).

Market logic determines what continuing education offers

The market orientation of continuing education was strengthened towards the end of the twentieth century by an international economic policy influenced by neoliberalism, which propagated the advantages of vocational education and training based upon market principles and market operation. This doctrine and its basic concepts were implemented all over Europe and worldwide in country-specific continuing education policies, systems and practices (see Košmerl & Mikulec, 2021, p. 48; Käpplinger, 2019). Other fields of activity, and particularly other programmatic objectives of continuing education (associated with unions, social reform, churches or democracy, for example), receded into the background. Today, the development of continuing education programmes in general, and largely also that of vocational education and training programmes, is determined by trends observed in the market, gaps in qualification systems and competitive sales strategies (Gillen et al., 2010, p. 21).

However, ‘market orientation’ does not mean that supply reacts to the infinitely varying demand on the open market; it responds far more to the product portfolios, market segmentation and performance goals defined by powerful market players and adheres to the specifications of the market regime. In Switzerland, it is corporate providers of education, educational institutions, important client groups and professional and labour market rules that regulate continuing education segment markets and render market access conditional (Geiss, 2020). In practice, market orientation means that continuing education providers take preservation of competitive position, conformity with market-defined rules and exploitation of market share in their segments as their maxims in deciding what to offer. They justify claims for recognition and (if applicable) for state funding by citing their own performance. Weber (2009, p. 68) speaks of a ‘providers’ logic’ that has proliferated in continuing education at the cost of ‘loyalty to the educationally willing subject’ and the coherence of the educational process. For providers, the positioning and marketing of the educational offer take precedence, while the needs of the target group, opportunities of access and continuing education outcomes take second place – with far-reaching consequences for practice. The latter consequences have as yet received little research attention (Fejes & Salling Olesen, 2016), but are eminently visible, as illustrated below.

a) Market analyses replace the clarification of needs and objectives.

In principle, the adult education profession knows how learning needs are identified and how learning content and curricula may be derived from them. Practice, however, is increasingly diverging from the associated standards. Providers now organise their programmes into marketable product categories, frequently by alluding to ‘megatrends’, labour market expectations or competence catalogues (created ad hoc). They assign to

products the bundled learning needs of stereotyped clients: the unskilled require catch-up training, mobile staff need intercultural skills, younger management personnel want coaching and sparring partners, digital natives prefer mobile course units, etc. (see Schenkel, 2019a; Schöni, 2017, p. 61, p. 250). This practice is stimulated by web-based data collection, which has potentiated the possibilities of market observation over the last few decades (Schenkel, 2019b). Mass data on user behaviour compiled from the internet is condensed into user profiles ('online profiling') upon which market segmentation and targeted customer contact are founded (see Bernecker, 2020). Market analyses identify client groups, address them and test their product 'preferences' in order to estimate demand. Supply and distribution are planned accordingly. Learning needs are thus *constructed* with marketing tools rather than identified in cooperation with target groups according to the standards of the profession.

b) Education marketing steers demand towards supply.

Education marketing follows the example of product and service marketing in other sectors. It approaches learners as consumers and urges them to select from a range of attractive products and services in order to improve their career and income prospects (Forneck & Franz, 2006, p. 227). The fact that learners must contrive every benefit and positive outcome is hardly mentioned in the marketing message. The tools of education marketing, i.e. profiling, a personalised client approach and the distribution of programmes via digital channels, are also drivers in the continuing education business. Here, the leaders are no longer large institutions of continuing education, but enterprises from outside the sector, namely companies of the digital economy, which deploy their technical networking and data analysis edge to full advantage (particularly at a time of economic slump and lockdowns). Effective product and service marketing in digital media and networks is therefore also becoming a core competence in the education sector (Grotlüschen, 2018). Such marketing stimulates and conditions demand, but it does nothing to make continuing education itself more needs-appropriate or effective. Rather, it tempts providers to make sweeping promises about the skills their programmes supply and to pay even less attention to the particular needs, learning paths and learning outcomes of their programme participants (Schöni, 2020). Participants must in fact assume responsibility for identifying the programmes or courses that suit their needs and for evaluating the impact in their field of practice.

c) Programme innovation targets strategic differentiation and not coherence.

The continuing education market produces a varied, dynamic range of programmes. No central planning body would be capable of this. However, the sector partly demonstrates erratic innovation behaviour, which is driven less by new educational objectives than by competition for solvent customers, public contracts and subsidies. Providers read 'market signals', seek 'market niches' and translate their findings as rapidly as possible into marketable programmes – all the while trying to rise above the competition by deploying (basically arbitrary) devices, such as marketing or distribution innovations, minimal development times or strategic selection of topics. Their goals are market segment leadership, short-term sales advantage and economic viability. Coherence in the education sphere is not their primary concern, and conformity with existing education regulations is simply the price they pay to gain access to the market. Thus arises a continually rarefying, partially volatile range of continuing education options and education paths that frequently compete with one another (Weber, 2013, p. 28; Schöni, 2019). The consequences for continuing education participants are sometimes a

lack of connectivity in the education system, unstable educational qualifications or opaque pricing and service concepts.

d) The supply structure exacerbates social disparities in education.

If providers position themselves according to user profiles identified by market analysis, the selective demands of institutional clients (companies, administrative bodies) and the variable needs of the labour market, this will have an effect on the distribution of educational opportunity. For example, companies will anticipate higher net benefits by investing in already well-qualified staff (Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung, 2014, p. 276; Borkowsky et al., 1997, p. 29), and the supply structure supports this selective behaviour. Products are differentiated according to the target groups' ability to pay and the assumed return on earnings from the educational investment. This is evident in strong vertical and horizontal segmentation, where programmes are categorised by qualification level, progression options, convenience factors and price, making it more difficult for persons from certain occupational and income groups to access them. Unequal continuing education opportunities contingent on educational level, gender, age, nationality and branch of industry are the result (Offerhaus et al., 2016, p. 388, p. 417; Becker & Hecken, 2011, p. 400). Inequality might also increase in non-vocational continuing education in the next few years, as economic slumps (e.g. as a result of the pandemic) hit worse-off strata of the population harder and deprive them of funds to participate in continuing education, reducing their lifelong educational aspirations (Käpplinger, 2020, p. 161). Intrinsic divisions in the education system are thus propagating themselves, and a hierarchy of formal educational degrees is functioning as 'usher' (Levy, 2018), even into careers in continuing education. Thus, as Martin Baethge noted as early as the 1990s (1992, p. 317), professional and social mobility encounters significant new structural obstacles, despite the expansion of continuing education. These obstacles become part of social reality as those interested in continuing education accept the place in the supply structure they are 'entitled' to on the basis of their educational capital.

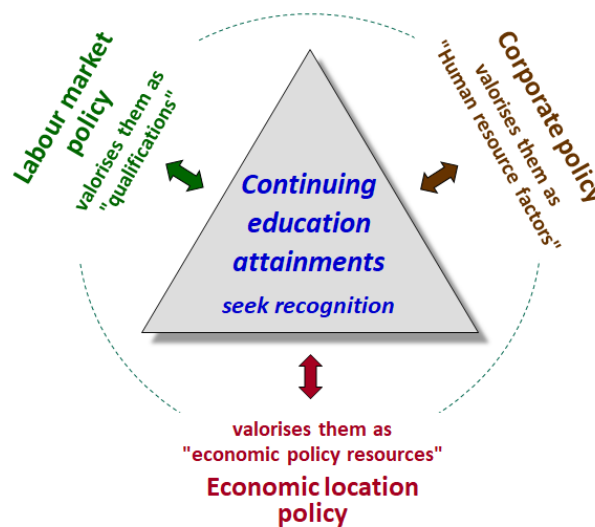
Market logic determines how continuing education is valorised

Market logic influences not only the development and implementation of continuing education programmes but also how the degrees and certificates they generate are valorised. Completion certificates, for example, require the recognition of labour markets and the support of important market players (regulators and clients) for valorisation. With such support, as the industry studies of Schüepp and Sgier (2019) show, even non-formal certificates can achieve industry-wide recognition. On the one hand, this may increase the chances of holders of these certificates. On the other hand, it can mean that continuing education without market-based support will receive no recognition and not be considered a basis for advancement, meaning that the corresponding educational efforts turn out to be a dead end. Implicit expectations of profitability and, frequently, stereotypes having nothing to do with education determine the (market) value of educational attainments. Such stereotypes also influence what learners expect from their educational careers and labour market opportunities.

In addition, the necessity for market recognition and valorisation carries the risk that the continuing education system and its attainments will be instrumentalised for non-educational goals. Education claims an independent standpoint beyond all attributions of function and efficiency requirements. Its task is emancipatory: to strengthen individual resources in order to shape individuals' lives (Biesta 2020, p.

1024). However, external attributions of function cannot be completely excluded. This applies to professionally oriented continuing education in particular: continuing education must seek recognition from political and market players, and it is regularly included in these players' discourses and strategies (Schöni, 2017, p. 149). As seen in the Swiss labour market, corporate and economic location policy over the last few decades, players valorise continuing education attainments for their own ends (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Market players and policies determine the rules for valorising continuing education (author's own figure)



a) *Labour market policy* valorises continuing education qualifications as labour market resources. It accords specific types of economic potential to certificate holders and channels them into different market segments; in the process of attribution, it resorts to stereotypes of educational level, gender or nationality. In the debates on 'skills shortage' that flare up periodically in the Swiss labour market, it is clear how little continuing education influences categorisation and valorisation of the attainments it supplies.

b) *Corporate human resources policy* valorises continuing education qualifications as human resource factors. In recruitment, firms target 'high-potential' staff and staff with mere 'operative' potential and deploy them differently in the operational work organisation. On this basis, and without having to legitimise the practice even rudimentarily in terms of education policy, they give employees only selective access to continuing education and personnel development or deny it altogether to less-qualified groups.

c) *Economic location policy* valorises continuing education qualifications as economic policy resources. It invokes indicators which have been selected arbitrarily by international rating agencies (e.g. rates of participation in continuing education, proportion of academics). From these, it derives requirements which reflect the location policy standpoint, for example, making selective investments in certain levels of education to improve international ranking. The 'educational indicators' and ranking policy pursue goals of their own.

The continuing education sector may have little influence on these forms of valorisation, but it is still the deliverer of symbolic capital and the addressee of political demands. The continuing education business is not uninvolved in this, however. It abets the various forms of valorisation described by classifying its offering according to customer needs and by directly addressing (for example) companies' personnel policy requirement categories. In this way, it will offer a management course that enables participants to undertake leadership tasks in a highly profitable business area, or a course for healthcare assistants in intensive but badly paid care work. With this, the continuing education business also speaks to learners who orient themselves by such structures and accept the associated hierarchy of values.

The upshot is that customer-oriented marketing brings recognition to continuing education but subjects it to discourses and serves valorisation goals over which it has no say. This has paradoxical effects. For example, a continually rarefied course offering produces new types of qualification that set off conflicts of competition in the education system, or which may be neutralised at the valorisation stage (Weber, 2013).

Results of the analysis

An analysis of market-oriented continuing education produces ambiguous results. With its offering, the sector facilitates the acquisition of a large range of qualifications. It stimulates learning processes and promises professional competence and economic competitiveness. However, it sets its priorities as marketing, turnover and the consumption of its products. It takes little interest in the long-term outcomes of learning or the impact of its business on social structures. In terms of education policy, it demonstrates no clear profile of its own: its entire development is the result of the heterogeneous profiling and sales strategies of the players dominating market segments. The coordinated efforts of adult education associations cannot do much to change this. Continuing education realises its traditional objectives of offering 'second chances' at education, creating educational progression options and correcting social class inequities only in some areas at best. This seems to do it no harm, however, for in the neoliberal economic order, education legitimises itself more by motivating individuals to perform on their own responsibility and less by empirical verification of its own systematic effects and benefits.

An alternative approach: continuing education as value creation

The aim is to measure continuing education and its achievements according to social value creation potential rather than market performance (*see research question 2*). To achieve this, theoretical approaches and criteria are required that are not derived from the doctrine of economic liberalism and its market models. Indicators such as sales, market share and marketing efficiency lose centre stage in the evaluation of value creation potential. This does not mean that economic performance will be neglected. What is needed first, however, are guiding principles regarding the social benefits of continuing education and a value creation concept that, in addition to the monetary values generated by programmes, takes into account non-monetary values, i.e. value contributions for learners and society (Timmermann, 2013).

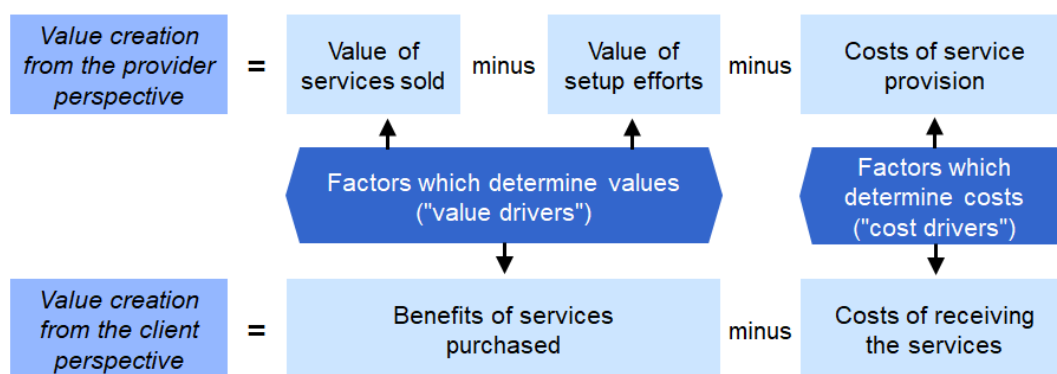
In developing an alternative approach, conceptual help is found in the economic value creation theory. The latter asks how economic activities, such as personal services, create value for providers and clients. An education sociology perspective is

important in understanding the social determinants of value creation in the education sector. It steers attention away from business and towards the reference systems of education and asks how educational values find recognition, how they are distributed socially and what positional claims arise from them. The legitimisation of education is the subject of discourse analysis approaches that reconstruct how educational attainments are construed and identify the dimensions – e.g. market-related, performance-related, opportunity-related – via which the pertinent discourses are organised.

Economic value creation model

In the following, we focus on *economic value creation theory*, while also including educational sociology and discourse analysis aspects. What can economic value creation theory contribute to the understanding of value creation in education? In the general economic model (Fig. 2), total value creation from services equals (a) the value of services sold minus the value of setup efforts and costs of service provision and (b) the benefit to clients minus the costs of receiving the services. According to the assumptions of the economic model, value creation is always regarded from the perspective of both provider *and* client (Stauss & Bruhn, 2007, p. 9). The client cooperates in service provision, and the cost–benefit ratio must therefore work for both parties.

Figure 2. Economic value creation model in the service sector (based on Stauss & Bruhn, 2007)

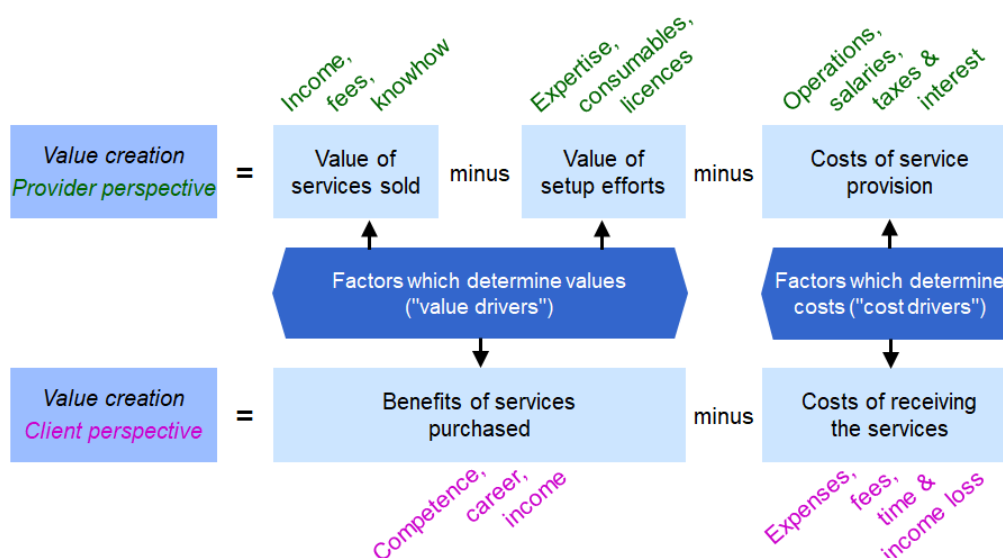


The model's assumptions apply to personal services in general, i.e. (for example) to healthcare, legal or catering services as well as education services. It should be noted that client benefits from services are extremely fuzzy and that marketing exploits this fact for its own ends: services that are not foreseeable for the client in advance or whose details are not measurable or comparable can be 'trued up' when advertised. For example, tailor-made benefits may be promised, which makes the individual cost–benefit ratio look more favourable to clients.

Value creation in education

The value creation model does the same when applied to the education business. In a particular setting, providers supply learning services in collaboration with the participants (Fig. 3). For the provider, total value creation results from the value of services rendered (income, fees, etc.) minus the value of setup efforts (expertise, licences, consumables, etc.) and the costs of service provision. For participants/clients, value creation results from the benefits of services purchased (competences, outcomes) minus the costs of receiving the service (expenses, fees, any associated loss of time and income). Cost and benefit aspects are therefore transposable to the education business, for even here, the following applies: values are only generated if both parties see benefits and consider costs supportable. This is particularly true for education services because every learning progress step depends on the individual efforts of learners.

Figure 3. Model of value creation in the education sector (based on Schöni, 2017, p. 109)



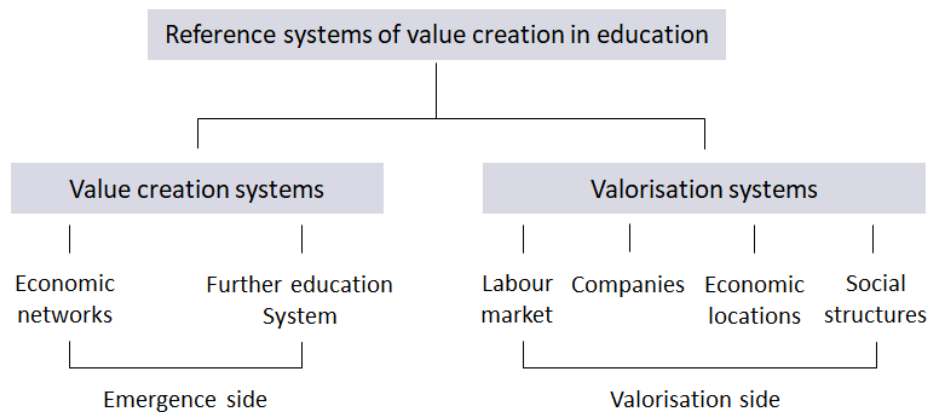
However, applying the model to education has its limitations. Benefits such as competences and certificates cannot readily be interpreted in *monetary* terms, nor can outcomes, which only become visible over time. This limitation also applies to non-material outcomes in other service sectors. From the educational sociology standpoint, however, it is important to note that the economic model is not fully capable of describing the value creation of education because it is focused on the business relationship. Education is more than business. It is necessarily founded on consensus and social interaction and is entwined in social contexts and discourse, as follows:

1. The starting point for all value creation in education is *consensual agreement* regarding targeted educational values, based on the teaching and learning relationship, learning settings and application cases, as described in the course announcement; the distribution of burdens and benefits must correspond to social norms, e.g. the principle of equivalence.
2. Value creation in education is realised via *social interactions* that are structured in curricula, social forms of learning and implementation steps and continue in

learners' fields of practice. As educational values, favourably viewed competences, certificates, progress options and outcomes are developed and realised.

3. Educational values require recognition in the societal *reference systems* of emergence and valorisation (Fig. 4). Accordingly, they must slot into a hierarchical classification system as qualifying aspects, they must be in demand in economic networks, and they must be classed as a resource that can be valorised in the labour market, in business and in social relationships.

Figure 4. Reference systems of the emergence and valorisation of educational value (author's own figure)



Reference systems are significant because they safeguard educational values and make additional value contributions. For example, they can augment the worth of qualifications by broadening their recognition, or they may lower it by declining to recognise them. Valuations are nourished by various sources, ranging from actual, measurable economic usability, e.g. in the labour market, to social practices, discourses and ascriptions that rely on stereotypes. The dependence of continuing education on value-enhancing recognition of its products harbours – as shown in the previous section – the risk of discursive appropriation, for example, where educational values are deployed as instruments of non-educational strategy (see also Lassnigg, 2015).

These considerations lead us to the *definition of education value creation*. The concept addresses both the process and the product of value creation. On the one hand, it identifies the interactive development or creation of educational values and their recognition in the relevant reference systems; on the other hand, it indicates the valorisable result of these processes, i.e. the whole of the values created in education programmes and learning environments, including the value contributions generated in the respective reference systems.

In this way, we gain access to an alternative orientation framework and conceptual foundations that allow us to analyse continuing education accomplishments in terms of value. This approach takes into account the continuing education's current market environment without uncritically adopting its valuation criteria, such as market performance. Value creation here means that learning progress ensues in appropriate settings and is recognised and valorised in reference contexts. According to this conception, marketing and sales success are merely enablers of value creation and not meaningful value creation indicators. They create conditions for contractually regulated, cooperative development of educational values, but generate no values themselves.

They reference values (outcomes) that may or may not be realised, and such realisation is rarely verified under the primacy of market freedom and freedom of contract.

The proposal to apply the value creation approach to the field of continuing education is not without its risks. It may conceptually advance the already strong dynamic of ‘economisation’ in educational activities. And political economy approaches tend to trigger the existing defensive reflexes of the continuing education sector. However, the influence of the neoliberal turn on education should be a cue for continuing education research to address economic concepts so as to demonstrate the particular productivity of education and, in so doing, to develop arguments against destructive economisation (Käpplinger, 2019, p. 5).

Analysing the value creation of continuing education

How is the value creation potential of continuing education determined? According to the concept, the value creation of a programme comprises (1) *values* (certificates, competences, progression options, outcomes) interactively developed and realised by learners and teachers in a contractually regulated, socially standardised setting and (2) *value contributions* generated by the recognition and valorisation of educational attainments in educational, economic and social reference systems. Values and value contributions together form the overall potential of a programme.

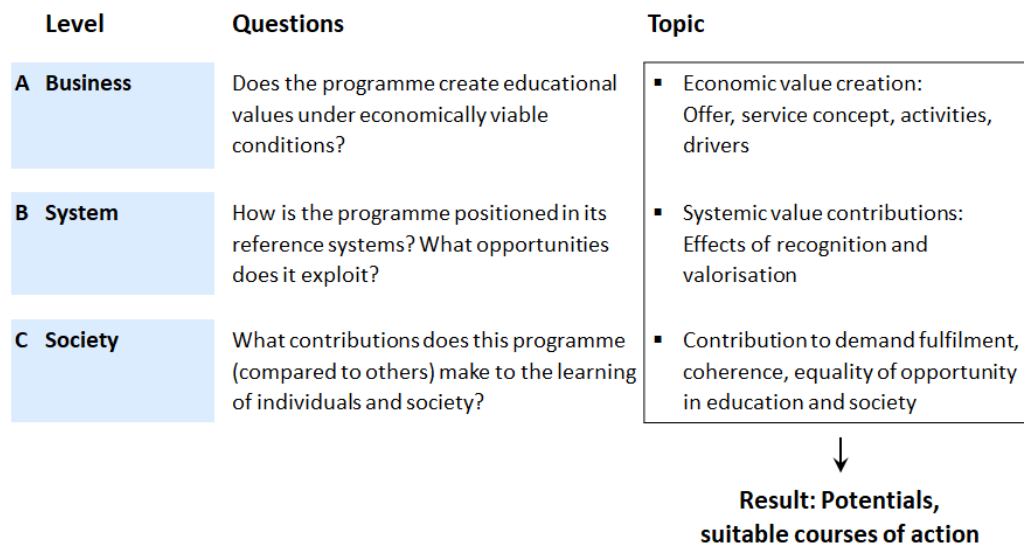
To identify the value creation potential of a concrete continuing education programme, we may conduct a *value creation analysis*. This analysis provides information on the programme’s service concept, its positioning in the relevant environment and the values and value contributions that actually emerge from it. It generates differentiated, systematically based statements about the programme’s potential.

Before the steps in this analysis are described, an *example* illustrates the findings that the analysis can supply. The context is a modular continuing education programme for professionals in the cabinet-making and furniture industries investigated by Schüepf and Sgier in a study of the sector (2019, p. 19). The sponsor is the trade association; its member companies recognise the programme certificate. The educational concept is built on the original vocational training foundation and aims to instil competence in assembly, which is in demand in the sector, and provides an associated qualification; thus, it responds to a gap in the qualification system. The certificate is accorded solid value in the sector. In the higher vocational education and training system, it is not recognised, however, and thus no value is added within this reference system. Lifelong learning is seen butting up against system boundaries. Apart from that, the programme’s potential can be regarded as intact because of the demand for and recognition of it in the sector.

Analytical steps

A value creation analysis is suitable for programmes run by any private, corporate or state provider. Prompts for conducting an analysis might be a current programme evaluation, requests from interest groups or educational policy debates. The analysis investigates ‘potentials’, i.e. the ability of a programme to generate value(s) in its respective environment. The analysis does so at three levels (Fig. 5):

Figure 5. Analysis of the value creation potential of educational programmes on three levels (author's own figure)



a) *Business level*: According to what business concept and contractual basis, and in what interactive settings, does the programme provide its services? What client and provider values are created, and what costs are incurred? Are these accepted by both sides? How is the offer positioned in the sector and the markets, and among competitors?

b) *System level*: How is the programme positioned in the pertinent education and qualification systems, and in the networks and value creation processes of the economy? Are the qualifications it produces recognised in the labour market, in companies and in social relationship structures? What players determine the rules of valorisation, and in what discourses are the rules justified? What systemic potential results?

c) *Societal level*: Compared to similar programmes, what contributions does the programme make to continuous, structured learning in the education and occupation sectors, equalisation of educational opportunity, alignment of educational paths and the addressing of economic and social change? How are the programme's contributions positioned in the dominant discourses on education and economic policy, and how are they rated?

The analytical steps roughly outlined above essentially follow the economic analysis of value creation configurations (e.g. Woratschek et al., 2007) but broaden its view to include the reference systems of education and the value they contribute. The analysis provides information on how educational services are supplied and how educational values are created, recognised and valorised. The question on economic values is followed by a question about systemic and discursive value contributions and any opposing value-destructive constellations. We may call all of this *enhanced value creation analysis*. Detailed guidelines for the analysis have been developed (Schöni, 2017, p. 165) and comprise nine methodological steps.

The potentials identified in the value creation analysis are compared. What are their relative weights? What are their contributions to overall value creation? According to

our conceptual assumptions, the better the contributions are aligned and the more widely the educational values they engender are recognised, the greater will be the coherence and thus the overall value creation potential of the programme across the three analytically different levels.

The criterion of *coherence* is significant for learning and for education value creation: only by means of continuous learning steps and education paths capable of progression can experience be accumulated and skills be integrated, whether by the individual learner, in organisational contexts or in social learning processes. Coherence is a guiding principle that must always be aspired to because the structures and framework conditions of education are everchanging.

An overview involves the entire continuing education *segment* to which the programme belongs. How does the value creation potential of one programme compare to that of similar programmes? Are the intended educational values complemented and/or enhanced by other programmes and education paths, or are they challenged or even neutralised by them? What synergies can be accessed by coordinating programme offer, common recognition standards and horizontal or vertical value creation networks? The answers to these questions have consequences for supply policy in the segment, for example, inspiring better alignment of education paths and qualifications or adjustment of qualification regulations.

Value creation analysis of two selected programmes

The concept and methodology of value creation analysis underpin the alternative approach to evaluating the dynamics of the continuing education sector. This approach must now prove its relevance to and suitability for continuing education in practice. In the following, the procedure and findings of the value creation analysis are illustrated using the examples of two programmes familiar to the author through his own consulting practice:

1. ‘Development of management staff’ programme for public administration personnel
2. ‘German in the work team’ programme for migrants

The above comprise two non-formal, profession-oriented continuing education programme ‘cases’. They provide empirical evidence that the value creation analysis approach is in fact applicable in the education context (*see research question 2*). However, they are not part of an empirical examination of hypotheses using standardised data. Both cases involve small, specialised providers (with ca. 15 employees) who are able to align their training courses with operational requirements and processes. For the analysis in both cases, project teams comprising area managers, trainers and clients were brought together and schooled in the method by the author. Their working steps followed the guidelines. Procedures and findings were critically reflected upon and documented.

The case presentation shows the steps in the analysis, which cover not only business relationships but also structural characteristics of the environment, players’ perspectives and discursive assessments. In this way, the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and its service concept can be identified, value creation potentials compared, and possible courses of action in programme policy determined. The analysis produced quite different results, as shown in the following.

'Development of management staff' programme for public administration personnel

On behalf of regional public administration bodies, a provider specialising in management training courses organises multi-day programmes for junior staff (for comprehensive details, see Schöni, 2017, p. 172). According to its announcement, the above programme offers management staff who are seen as having the potential the opportunity to sound out their chances and perspectives with regard to a higher management career. Trainers are familiar with the management culture and succession planning of public administration. Participation in the programme does not guarantee promotion but is intended to identify higher management talent. After repeating the programme for several individual administrative units, the provider decided to conduct an in-depth analysis of the value creation potential. The project group estimated the potential of the programme at all levels.

A Business potential: The programme creates values for *clients*: participants clarify their development chances, and administrative bodies identify internal management talent. Costs and time expenditures are supportable from the clients' point of view. *Provider-related* values include stable income prospects and efficient cost steering thanks to well-rehearsed provider–client cooperation. The monopoly position of the programme in the local market segment of public administration and the cost–benefit ratio accepted by both sides make for solid economic potential in a limited-volume buyers' market.

B System potential: As an 'external personnel developer', the provider is vertically integrated into the *value creation and valorisation system* of the administration. The provider supports the personnel processes of individual administrative bodies and strengthens local management cultures. However, the programme is not anchored (horizontally) in the *management training system* of the public sector: there is almost no cooperation with institutions of vocational education and training or university continuing education, meaning that the certificate is not widely recognised and progression options are lacking. System-related opportunities are thus exploited only partially, and the potential is therefore restricted.

C Societal potential: The administrative bodies select participants themselves and steer access to management positions. The programme management accepts this, the result being that a culture imbued with patriarchal norms of behaviour is perpetuated. Women and migrants remain underrepresented in the management development programme and thus in public administration management positions, a fact that reduces the programme's impact. Current civic issues, such as citizens' rights, gender equality, data privacy and climate change, are only hesitantly taken up and addressed in the programme. Learning for the future requirements that public administration will face is given too little priority.

Results: (1) The value creation potential on the business side is regarded as intact at the time of the analysis. An important driver of value is its close link with the value creation processes of public administration. (2) The system potential shows deficits: good vertical integration into public administration processes contrasts with a lack of horizontal integration into management training in the public sector. (3) The programme's patriarchal selection procedure and selective thematic orientation seem not to be critically addressed in public administration narratives. This restricts the programme's societal value contribution.

If value creation analysis had been limited to the current business relationship and market performance, the programme's overall potential would have been *overestimated*.

Only the three-level analysis includes the education-specific deficits: the facts that the programme seeks no connection with the continuing education system; that programme management fails to apply professional standards in programme admission; and that institutional clients are determined to reflect the established public administration culture in the design of programme content. Such deficits would have remained hidden if they had been viewed from a mere market perspective. However, it is entirely possible that they will negatively impact business prospects and reduce overall potential.

Discussion of courses of action required: The project team members agree that an investigation should be conducted into how far better integration into the continuing education system would help to extend the programme's client base and market and stabilise its value creation. Having a wider foothold would also spur professionalisation of the selection procedure and extend the circle of potential management talent beyond the sphere of *regional* public administration. This is not enough, however. A fundamental reflection on self-image and the patriarchal patterns of public administration culture would also help to make the programme receptive to civic concerns and future community issues. This would undoubtedly present advantages for potential clients.

Care would have to be taken here to ensure that the already existing advantages of vertical integration into public administration would remain in place. Even a programme with broad institutional recognition creates client value only if it remains closely connected with client processes and the provider takes responsibility for quality.

'German in the work team' programme for migrants

A non-profit course provider conducts language courses for foreign-language employees of firms in the building and cleaning businesses (for comprehensive details, see Schöni, 2017, p. 224). The programme originated from a training initiative for migrants and was soon in demand. Programme participants learn how to make themselves better understood in their teams and among clients, circumventing difficulties in the order process. Before starting the programme in a new company, the company's language requirements are investigated and suitable courses are developed, which address topics of operational working practice and learning needs. A foundation sponsors the programme. It finances the prior clarification study and the development of particularly elaborate training concepts, and it covers any deficits.

Recently, the programme manager has observed that companies invest less in the basic skills of their employees. Competing providers complain that the funding available from the foundation distorts market prices. The foundation called for information on costs and potential. A project team was tasked with conducting a value creation analysis on the three levels, which produced differentiated results.

A Business potential: On the *client side*, the programme successfully strengthens employees' individual language proficiency inside and outside the company. Client companies receive customised training courses at moderate prices. For the *provider*, the service generates stable client relationships and continually increases know-how in the organisation of company training programmes. However, demand fluctuates, and the courses are not self-supporting economically: the prior clarification study and the development of the course are partly funded by a foundation.

B System potential: Vertically, the training concept is aligned with the commercial value creation chain of clients and is well integrated. Horizontally, the course is anchored in the 'German as a foreign language' continuing education segment, where it

finds advantages, such as common standards of an European framework of reference for languages and access to public funding. In this segment, however, there is much provider competition. The programme is not recognised in formal vocational education and training.

C Societal potential: Programmes for persons at risk in the labour market contribute to social integration. They increase the work qualifications of these persons as employees and reduce social costs by fostering learning and problem-solving in the workplace. These (indirect) effects are obvious in many individual cases but have not been sufficiently verified by empirical data. Migration policy debates also periodically question the impact potential and economy of these programmes.

Results: (1) Business potential is currently not intact. The value drivers ‘company-specific clarification and course concept development’, which speeded up the market launch, now threaten to become (negative) cost drivers, which may sink the business if foundation funding is withdrawn in the future. (2) The system potential is not fully exploited. Resources from the continuing education language-teaching segment are utilised, but recognition in vocational education and training is lacking (the latter problem is systemic and not addressable within the continuing education segment, however). (3) The societal value contribution is evident, but not quantitatively verified, and it is disputed politically. This fact indicates the existing tensions between the interpretive models of migration and economic policy.

A narrow view focused on business relationships and economic performance would also be insufficient for this programme; it would clearly *underestimate* its overall potential. The market environment rates the lack of commercial viability of the programme very negatively, reducing its sales potential. Only the enhanced value creation analysis reveals the system-related and societal potentials of the programme. If the provider made the interplay of integration, social and labour market policy visible in its programme marketing, it might succeed in achieving broader recognition despite criticisms of commercial ‘unviability’.

Discussion of courses of action required: From the perspective of those involved in the programme, the most urgent course of action would be to re-establish the economic acceptance and viability of the programme. The benefits of the company-specific prior clarification study and programme concept development should be better communicated. These advance efforts should be rendered visible in the price calculation and should also be offered separately (at a cost). They should be presented as an added value for which companies are ready to pay because they are not available elsewhere.

However, critical reflection indicates that economic success in the market is absolutely not the only way the value creation potential of this programme can be realised. The societal value of the language proficiency of migrants is not decided in the continuing education market, but in debates on migration and integration policy. Convincing facts regarding efficacy, and thorough communication, are required to boost the programme. The programme provider therefore intends to (1) cooperate more closely with other non-profit providers so as to lend more public weight to the objectives of language integration and (2) commission a study that supplies empirical evidence of the economic and societal value contribution of language integration measures and underpins the arguments deployed in the relevant political debates.

Discussion: Key issues of a reorientation that goes beyond market logic

The starting point of this article was the observation that the adult or continuing education sector is thoroughly oriented towards market success. The author's deliberations on *research question 1* show how a market orientation shapes continuing education practice – from programme development, marketing and distribution to innovation behaviour in the sector. Programme ranges are partially arbitrary, and educational attainments may turn out to be unstable and education paths incoherent. The commercial segmentation of programme offerings influences opportunities to access continuing education. Even the way continuing education attainments – final qualifications, certificates – are valorised in the economy and society is determined by market logic, as shown by a glance at the Swiss continuing education sector.

While providers of continuing education focus on the marketing of products and certificates, they often have little certain information about the longer-term outcomes of learning. Indeed, in their narratives and marketing messages, the continuing education sector decisively declares itself to be in the service of lifelong learning, with its programmes promising career opportunities, competitiveness, improved labour market structures and solutions to social problems. So far, however, no adequate, thematically broad and continuously applied measuring infrastructure exists that might systematically examine such effects. Nor does the Swiss continuing education sector itself display a resolute interest in the empirical and reliable compilation of learning outcome data at the level of individuals and structures.

From a discourse analysis perspective, it is remarkable that neither the marketing focus nor insufficient data regarding outcomes seem to diminish the power of the continuing education narrative. The positive thing about this is that participation in continuing education – at least on statistical average – remains stable at a high level and that the target groups of continuing education continue to be aware of their learning needs. The participation rate among 25- to 74-year-olds between 2010 and 2019 remained stable at 25–27 percent and only sank to 22 percent at the beginning of the pandemic (Federal Statistical Office, 2021). Negative, however, are the consequences of a market orientation for the development path of the sector. The designation of continuing education programmes and regimes as economically relevant has less to do with empirically verified benefits than with how they are positioned in markets and discourses. This positioning depends on what marketing instruments and channels providers master; how much recognition and legitimation they can mobilise thereby; and how far they are able to convince adults to pursue continuing education and work towards individual career goals. It is this stabilising of the *motivation to achieve* that places continuing education thematically at the core of liberal economic discourse, which is not concerned with enabling self-determined participation in social learning and change processes. Market-oriented continuing education does not necessarily pursue the goal of strengthening the professional capacities of individuals in the long term so that they remain capable of acting independently of the employer and even in times of crisis. This may be because neither the sector nor continuing education policy has clear visions of qualification development or, more precisely, that it leaves the latter to 'the market'.

What are the drivers that provide impetus for market orientation in the sector and cause continuing education to be increasingly organised according to market principles? In this context, the concept of 'marketisation' (see Käpplinger, 2019; Košmerl & Mikulec, 2021) identifies *preconditions*, on three levels, which are present in many

countries in a specific form: first, political concepts and discourses that tie continuing education activities to markets and denigrate state activities; second, steering instruments such as product marketing, output steering and controlling whose performance objectives put educational measures under competitive pressure; and third, funding mechanisms that deprive education of financial stability or make it conditional upon more onerous accountability. As illustrated, these general conditions also apply in the Swiss continuing education sector.

Developing the approach of education value creation (*research question 2*) offers an opportunity to question the market-oriented self-conception of continuing education and measure its performance via alternative means. The approach broadens the valuation horizon and categorises the value-creating achievements of continuing education. Its foundation is a value creation concept that makes it possible to gather information on the productive potential of learning at several levels. Value creation analysis enhanced in this way does not neglect the *business level*, e.g. the demand volume and the economic viability of programmes. However, it relativises the dominance of a view fixed on sales and customer relationships.

Value creation analysis at the *system level* focuses on entities that are relevant for the recognition and valorisation of educational attainments. It brings a ‘suprabusiness’ perspective into play. However, this perspective cannot guarantee that continuing education’s value creation potential will only be judged according to standards capable of generalisation. For on the one hand, systemic recognition is, as shown, organised through discourses and particular valorisation strategies such as those of the labour market or economic location policy; and on the other hand, in striving towards coherence, an educational subsystem will frequently set itself against competing systems in order to push through its own standards and safeguard market share. The possible consequence is that the educational values created by one subsystem, e.g. completion certificates and progression options, may be neutralised by the competitive actions of other systems. These frictions may show up within the market segment, as seen in the case of the ‘Development of management staff’ programme, whose certificates are not recognised in public sector management training and are not likely to survive in the long term. Frictions also build up in the competition between subsystems of vocational education and training, for example, between higher vocational education and university continuing education; this is observed periodically in Switzerland.

For these reasons, it is important not to confine value creation analysis to the logic peculiar to one subsystem, but also to take into account competing systems and programmes. This superordinate lens is what directs the analysis to value contributions at the *societal level*. That analysis evaluates what a particular portfolio of providers and programmes – e.g. those targeting migrants who speak foreign languages – contributes to overall progressive learning, social integration and problem-solving. Programmes are thus not treated in isolation but always in connection with other programmes in the segment and at the level of qualification. The better the players in the segment and beyond collaborate and the better the objectives and paths are anchored in the education system, the greater (it is assumed) the overall potential for value creation in the programme segment will be.

Conclusion

Ideally, what would be derived from the findings of this article is a continuing education practice that is not determined by sales strategies alone but by the endeavour to facilitate value creation in learning via aligned education offerings and education paths; and to

safeguard educational values within the relevant reference systems. This presupposes an advanced level of knowledge and research capacity, e.g. research into qualifications that explores occupational requirement trends, identifies target group learning needs and measures educational effects in terms of fulfilling learning needs. Research is also needed on continuing education subsystems and on learning paths that do not end at the boundaries of subsystems (Weber, 2009, p. 75).

In conceiving, implementing and reviewing the latter paths and in improving connectivity in the education system, both continuing education research and adult education associations have important roles to play. The complexity of the task lies in reining in the commercialisation of learning and strengthening coordinative functions while simultaneously cultivating spaces where competition over better learning concepts and sustainable learning outcomes can play out. At the level of education policy, efforts are required to dismantle the mechanisms that have up to now underpinned a socially selective and instability-conducive education regime.

The value creation approach and methodology of value creation analysis may provide an impulse for a reorientation in the further education sector, which has so far been driven by the tenets of market logic. The approach helps to evaluate alternative ways of creating educational values and assess their place in the reference systems. Naturally, the approach needs further development in research and investigation in practice.

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