

Prošireni sažetak s plenarnog izlaganja

MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE: EXPLORING GLOBAL TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN ADULT EDUCATION

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The global landscape of adult education is undergoing profound changes shaped by broader sociopolitical, economic, and technological shifts. This presentation highlights key global trends and challenges, offering a critical perspective on their implications for the future of adult education.

Changes in Global Governance

The framework of global governance is undergoing a profound transformation, marked by a shift from multilateralism, where states collaborate on equal footing, to multistakeholderism, where private and corporate actors play an increasingly dominant role in shaping agendas, including the education agenda. This change has amplified the influence of the corporate sector within international bodies such as the UN and UNESCO, where decisions are now more reflective of economic power structures than are inclusive, rights-based approaches.

In education, these governance shifts have profound implications. The focus on adult education is increasingly being replaced by lifelong learning, yet even lifelong learning is being narrowly defined through the lens of skill measurement. This shift is heavily influenced by the agendas of global actors such as the World Bank and OECD, which prioritise economic outcomes over holistic education. Furthermore, a worrying trend of 'knowledge colonialism' has emerged, where Western models and values overshadow local and indigenous educational approaches, reducing diversity in educational frameworks and approaches. Additionally, funding priorities have shifted toward children, youth, and formal education, side-lining the unique and urgent needs of adult and older learners.

The declining role and shrinking spaces for civil society, once a cornerstone of democratic accountability, represent a significant threat to inclusive and participatory governance. On the other hand, privately funded initiatives have co-opted parts of civil society, further exacerbating these challenges. The independence and advocacy role of civil society are compromised, limiting its ability to hold governments and corporations accountable.

At the same time, the erosion of meaningful partnerships further compounds these issues. Civil society organisations, academia, and researchers are increasingly side-lined in decision-making processes, leaving critical voices and expertise excluded from shaping education policies and strategies.

Globalisation

Globalisation continues to shape our world in many ways, creating opportunities while also exacerbating inequalities. Economically, globalisation manifests as a 'global supermarket', where commodities and money move freely, but the mobility of people faces significant restrictions. The global labour market treats workers as interchangeable resources, contributing to a system designed for maximizing profit rather than promoting equity. The rise of gig economies further exacerbates this trend, fostering precarious employment conditions that prioritize flexibility and profit over job security and workers' rights. This global 'money-making' system prioritises profit over equity, quality, and broader social goals, redirecting resources and attention away from initiatives that promote social cohesion, sustainability, and inclusivity.

Environmental issues, especially climate change, dominate the global agenda, yet responses frequently fail to address systemic inequities, structural problems, and deeper roots of environmental problems. While health is becoming an increasingly prominent global concern, education's role in addressing health crises and fostering resilience is underutilised.

Decline in Democracy and the Rise of Authoritarianism

Democratic values are eroding globally, marked by the loss of civic rights and the rise of authoritarian governance and populism. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated this trend, with governments using emergency powers and heightened surveillance measures that often outlasted the crisis itself, further curtailing freedoms and exacerbating inequalities. Increased militarisation and surveillance capitalism reflect how technology and governance are being used to monitor and control populations, including those within education systems, which risk becoming tools for control rather than empowerment.

Additionally, militarisation has diverted vast financial resources to military expenditures, defence, and control mechanisms, leading to a substantial reduction in funding for education, culture, and social welfare. This shift undermines long-term societal resilience and development, as resources are funnelled away from initiatives that promote equity, critical thinking, and global citizenship and reduce the potential for civic engagement.

The rise of social media, fake news, and disinformation further complicates this landscape, undermining public trust and critical thinking. These developments pose significant challenges for education seeking to foster informed, critically minded citizens. Peace and intercultural education, which once served as vital tools for promoting understanding, are increasingly marginalised. In such a climate, a renewed focus on critical thinking and civic engagement is essential.

Economic Factors

Economic trends are profoundly reshaping education. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on marketisation and privatisation, treats education as a commodity rather than a human right. This shift prioritizes profitability and employability over empowerment and holistic development,

framing education as a tool for workforce preparation rather than as a pathway to critical thinking, self-realization, and societal transformation.

Deregulation and privatisation have further weakened public education systems, enabling corporate interests to dominate and profit from education. These trends are evident not only in the commodification of educational content but also in the proliferation of for-profit institutions, which often cater more to market demands than to learners' needs or broader societal goals.

For educators themselves, the impacts of these economic trends are profound. The rise of precarious employment conditions has left many education workers in unstable and underpaid roles, reflecting broader shifts in the global labour market. This precarity not only undermines the quality of teaching but also erodes the status of adult education professionals, reducing their ability to advocate for transformative education.

Together, these forces represent a significant departure from education's historical role as a public good. The increasing alignment of education with economic imperatives risks limiting its capacity to foster equity, inclusion, and critical citizenship, instead of reinforcing existing social and economic inequalities.

Digitalisation, ICT, and AI

Digitalisation, often hailed as a panacea for modern challenges, presents both opportunities and significant risks. ICT is promoted as a universal solution to educational challenges, yet this overreliance overlooks critical gaps. The digital divide continues to exclude large portions of the population, particularly in under-resourced regions, creating inequitable access to education.

The integration of AI in education raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding data privacy, control, and ownership. Corporate giants increasingly dominate digital learning platforms, shifting educational priorities from human development to profitability. Furthermore, the reliance on AI shifts responsibility from human educators to algorithms, threatening the relational and contextual aspects of learning. Here, the tool has replaced the goal, with AI and digital platforms treated as ends in themselves rather than as the means to enhance meaningful education. This shift distracts from addressing deeper, more critical issues, namely, the values, content, and purposes underpinning education (both 'classical' and digital). By prioritising technology over substance, we risk losing sight of the fundamental questions about what we teach, why we teach, and whose interests adult education ultimately serves.

Social-emotional and embodied learning, which are central to holistic education, are often sidelined in favour of data-driven approaches. Learner-cantered education is at risk of being lost entirely, as digital systems prioritise metrics over meaningful engagement. This trend threatens to reduce education to a transactional process, undermining its transformative potential.