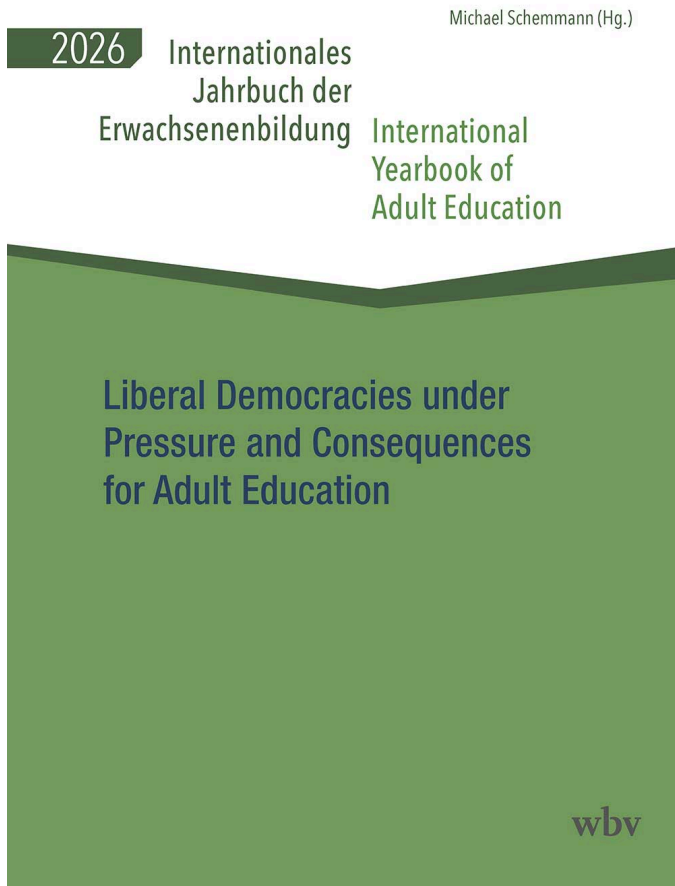


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# Review: A Modern Guide to Adult Learning Systems

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**Richard Desjardins & Jan Kalenda (Eds.) (2025). *A Modern Guide to Adult Learning Systems*. Cheltenham & Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 409 Pages.**

In *A Modern Guide to Adult Learning Systems*, Richard Desjardins and Jan Kalenda present a comprehensive anthology that defines adult learning systems (ALS) as an independent analytical framework for comparative continuing education research. They begin with the observation that comparative studies of the historical development, institutional design and transformation of ALS in the 2010s and early 2020s have so far been limited in scope. In order to address this, the editors combine a historical-institutionalist perspective with an international comparative approach. Understanding ALS as historically evolved institutional arrangements that encompass organised learning opportunities for adults, their governance structures, relevant constellations of actors, and the mechanisms of their coordination is particularly relevant for continuing education research. By explicitly including actors on both the demand and supply sides, as well as governance structures and coordination mechanisms, the editors broaden the scope beyond narrower understandings that focus primarily on participation or programme structures. Of particular note is the conception of ALS as historically conditioned and continuously evolving institutional arrangements, rather than static entities. In this understanding, well-developed, open and flexible ALS appear to be a central prerequisite for the broadest possible participation of adults in organised educational settings, as equitably as possible.

The anthology is divided into three parts: The first part, *Adult Learning Systems through the Lens of Historical Institutionalism*, presents the theoretical and methodological foundations in three chapters. The focus lies on the conceptual definition of ALS and their prospective roles (see Chapter 1), the potential of historical institutionalism for researching ALS (see Chapter 2), and the analysis of the institutional elements and dynamics that shape ALS (see Chapter 3). Chapter 2, in particular, offers a concise yet nuanced introduction to key historical institutionalist concepts such as path dependence, critical junctures, gradual institutional change, intercompetition and institutional plasticity. Unlike the synchronous system descriptions often found in comparative adult education research, this approach enables a diachronic understanding of the emergence, stabilisation and transformation of ALS. It also provides explanatory frameworks for why, despite facing similar demographic, economic and technological challenges, countries produce different institutional arrangements for organised adult education. The first part is not intended to be a comprehensive theory of adult educa-

tion; rather, it is a repertoire of theoretical concepts and analytical tools that can be flexibly applied to the study of governance and delivery structures in adult education.

The second part, *Country Studies*, brings together fifteen case studies on ALS in advanced post-industrial democracies: Sweden (Nylander and Rubenson), the Netherlands (Hake), Hungary (Kalenda, Karger and Vaculíková), Germany (Ioannidou and Kohl), Norway (Bæck), Austria (Walder), Denmark (Rasmussen), South Korea (Jang), the United Kingdom (Boeren), the Czech Republic (Kalenda, Karger and Vaculíková), Portugal (Barros), Belgium (Boeren), Italy (Milana and Bussi), Bulgaria (Boyadijeva and Ilieva-Trichkova) and Greece (Ioannidou and Zarifis). These studies reconstruct the historical development paths and institutional configurations of the respective national ALS. Notably, despite sharing a common temporal framework, the case studies avoid a standardised analytical model, instead highlighting various theoretical and empirical approaches to historical-comparative analysis of ALS. While this opens up a wide range of possibilities for future research, it also makes direct comparison of the findings difficult.

In the final section, *Conclusion*, the editors summarise the findings of the country studies to provide a “panoramic view” (p. 382) and identify key trends and patterns of development through an international comparison. Central to this is the insight that the transition from modern to late-modern ALS is closely linked to the emergence of knowledge-based economies, as well as new societal challenges such as migration and demographic change. At the same time, the editors demonstrate that despite global convergence trends, significant differences between national ALS persist.

Overall, *A Modern Guide to Adult Learning Systems* is an important contribution to comparative adult education research. The volume is compelling in its combination of a coherent conceptual framework with well-founded empirical analyses of national ALS, thereby providing a solid foundation for future international comparative research. Adopting a historical-institutional perspective, the editors expand the scope of previous examinations of ALS, which were predominantly synchronous, to include a diachronic dimension. This opens up new perspectives on continuity and change in organised adult education. At the same time, the volume highlights gaps in the research. For example, the concept of ALS, which has thus far been developed primarily for advanced post-industrial democracies, could be extended to other social and political contexts in order to test its scope and explanatory power. Furthermore, it remains unclear how the analysed institutional arrangements manifest themselves in concrete pedagogical practices and organisational negotiation processes. Future research could therefore supplement the macro-level perspective that has dominated thus far with perspectives from actors at meso- and micro-levels, such as institutions, instructors and participants, as well as addressing questions of power and inequality. Despite these open questions, this anthology has the potential to become a key reference point for future international comparative research on continuing education.

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