

# Research interests and methodological approaches of policy analysis in adult education research<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article deals with an evolving strand in adult education research which is focused on policy. It is concerned with the question which methods are adopted by adult education research to generate findings regarding policy and how they depend on specific theoretical perspectives. To answer this research question, exemplary studies on international policy regarding the concept of lifelong learning are analysed and compared. Thereby, it is emphasized that a diversity of methods is necessary to research the complex object of adult education policy and that 'traditional' methods have to be supplemented by newly adopted perspectives and approaches.

**Keywords:** Policy research, adult education research, qualitative and quantitative methods, theory and methodology

## 1 Introduction

The beginnings of the increasingly developing adult education research in Germany can be traced back to the start of the 20th century. At that time, research on adult education was primarily concerned with participants of adult education, but over time other research areas were added: Strands such as programme research, organisational research or research on professionalisation have become more differentiated. The scientific discipline has developed out of its field of practice. Therefore, the focus of adult education research was initially directed primarily at its practice. However, this focus has changed, so that political activities and debates are now also increasingly being taken into account. The convergence of science and policy in adult education since the 1960s/1970s has also changed the perspective of research, so that various questions and methodological approaches have become more differentiated. Thus, an independent strand of adult education research has established itself which deals specifically with policy, with a particular focus on the international level.

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<sup>1</sup> The article draws on an analytical systematisation of studies in adult education research which was carried out in the context of a dissertation on the relationship between science and policy in adult education (Breyer 2020).

Even though the discussion of policy in adult education research is becoming more and more important, there is no explicit illumination of methodologies and methods used to analyse policy in adult education research in relevant handbooks. For example, the handbook on qualitative adult education research refers to classical research topics such as profession, practice-related topics such as management or a more recent field of research in media education (see Schäffer and Dörner 2011) but not to policy. In contrast, networks such as 'Policy Studies in Adult Education' of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) (see Milana and Holford 2014) or the 'International Society for Comparative Adult Education', whose publications increasingly deal with international organisations and educational policy (see Reischmann and Bron 2008), have been established.

Since this is a relatively young field of research – in comparison to more 'traditional' research strands such as addressee and participant research – the question arises as to which methodological approaches are suitable for generating findings with regard to adult education policy. Therefore, this article is dedicated to the research question which methods are adopted by adult education research to generate findings regarding policy and how they depend on specific theoretical perspectives. The present article thus provides an overview of current studies that can be assigned to policy research in adult education. It analyses these studies to carve out benefits and limitations of methodological approaches applied in this research strand.

In the following, the increasing importance of policy for adult education research will first be discussed, which is characterised by an increasing intertwining of science and policy (2.). This is followed by an analysis of current empirical studies on the topic of adult education policy (3.). Various theoretical and methodological perspectives are discussed, which lead to the choice of different methods in policy research. Afterwards, the results of the analysis are discussed by comparing these different methods (4.). The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of multi-perspective and multi-methodological approaches for the further development of adult education research (5.).

## **2 Policy and its relevance for adult education science – an increasing interdependence**

Adult education is characterized by a field of tension between science, policy and practice (cf. von Felden et al. 2013, p. VII). This is particularly relevant for adult education: While policy can influence other areas of education such as schools and universities through legislation, this is not the case in the area of adult education. Politics is therefore more dependent on regulating the field through projects, programmes and agendas, which makes the area of tension between politics and science in adult education a special one. While at the beginning of establishing the scientific discipline, the focus of research was primarily on adult education practice, social, economic and also political issues have meanwhile moved into the focus (cf. Rosen-

berg 2013, p. 146 f.). The increasing involvement with policy as a research subject can be explained above all by the fact that since the 1960s and 1970s a rising interdependence between science and policy can be observed. During this period, scientific expertise became highly relevant in efforts to modernize the entire education system which also applied to adult education. Within the framework of scientific policy advice, scientific knowledge was used to legitimize political decisions. Overall plans for education published by national expert commissions were an expression of the optimism in planning (cf. Schrader 2011, p. 126). From the mid-1970s, however, this kind of planning was no longer pursued because the goals could not be implemented according to expectations (cf. von Recum 2006, p. 33, 107). Political dissatisfaction with educational research (cf. Weishaupt 2001, p. 221) and disinterest in the discipline of adult education (cf. Koring 1990, p. 34) led to a decrease in the interlocking between science and policy.

However, in the context of discussions on quality and evaluation there has been a rapprochement in the education sector since the 1990s (cf. Stamm 2012, p. 97) and, at the latest since the explicit demand for evidence-based policy, the interdependence between science and policy has become highly relevant again. The requirement to verify activities through empirical success control (cf. Böttcher et al. 2009, p. 8) as well as the change from input to output control (cf. Maag Merki 2012, pp. 111 ff.) have meanwhile also reached adult education. In the meantime, policy appears to be as important as practice as an at least equal, if not favoured addressee of educational research (cf. Schrader 2015, p. 28). Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s the focus was on educational planning and national expert commissions emerged as actors, international and supranational organisations are now engaged in agenda setting by focusing on comparability rather than structural issues (cf. Schrader 2015, p. 34). These organisations include, for example, the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This shift in education policy discussions from the national to the international level has to be seen in the context of globalization which is creating new challenges for the education sector: “Globalization, together with the competitive pressures and the re-scaling dynamics that are associated to it, have introduced multiple challenges and transformations in the education policy field” (cf. Verger 2017, p. 59). As a consequence, scientists now refer to a transnational educational space (cf. Ioannidou 2010, p. 35) or a “European Educational Policy Space” (cf. Lawn and Lingard 2002, p. 292). Especially “lifelong learning” is emerging at the international level as a concept that has been the focus of educational policy efforts not only by the EU but also by UNESCO and OECD since the 2000s and that affects adult education in a special way.

Globalization processes and the demand for evidence-based political decisions thus point to the current relevance of the relationship between science and policy in the field of (adult) education. The relationship is often described as difficult (cf. Stamm 2012; Böttcher et al. 2009), risky (cf. Arnold 2012) or even tense (cf. Münch 2012). On the one hand, there are positions that point to the need for basic research

(cf. Heinemann 2017, p. 178) and state that independent scientific questions that are not relevant to policy and practice should also be pursued (cf. Maag Merki 2012, p. 122). In addition, it is stated that politicians have shortened the concept of education (cf. Meilhammer 2009, pp. 33 f.) or that adult education science is reduced to a focus on application, which goes hand in hand with utilitarian expectations (cf. von Felden et al. 2013, p. VII). On the other hand, not only do critical points of view emerge, but it is also questioned whether educational research fulfils its responsibility to policy (cf. Weiler 2003, pp. 188 f.) and whether its findings are useful (cf. Droschel et al. 2014, p. 7).

Against the background of the increasing interdependence of science and policy described above, it is not surprising that policy is increasingly considered an object of adult education research. Current empirical studies reflect on their own modes of operation and positions towards policy, but also take the consequences of political activities and debates for science and the practice of adult education into focus.

### **3 An analysis of empirical studies concerning adult education policy**

After explaining the background of an intensified examination of policy in adult education research, the following section examines the question to which theoretical and methodical approaches the strand of policy research refers to and what insights can be gained from these approaches. For this purpose, selected empirical studies will be focused on, through which different methodological perspectives can be worked out: international comparative perspectives (3.1.), which primarily use the “classical” method of document analysis, discourse-analytical perspectives (3.2.), which also draw on political documents, as well as institutionalistic approaches (3.3.), which besides documents also use interviews and thus combine different methods or combine qualitative and quantitative approaches.<sup>2</sup> The following chapter thus offers an overview of the different theoretical approaches and methodical designs that provide orientation for adult education research that is devoted to the research topic of “policy”. It does not provide a complete picture of the current state of research on this topic, but rather an exemplary selection of studies from the field of adult education research. To give this overview, first, the overall design of the studies, including the theoretical perspective (if explicitly named) as well as the methodical steps, are described. Second, the findings that can be generated by this methodical design are in focus to carve out which knowledge on policy can be gained by applying these methodological perspectives. One selection criterion for the studies was their relevance in

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2 It is primarily an analytical differentiation that serves to systematize various research approaches in the form of an overview. In research practice, however, the perspectives cannot be clearly separated. The studies that are oriented on an institutionalist perspective examined in the following take a comparative approach, but rely less on the tradition of international comparative educational science than on a multi-level perspective and consequently work more multi-methodically.

the national discussion of the scientific community in adult education since the dissertation on which this contribution is based has largely focused on this. In addition, studies were selected that refer to the concept of lifelong learning since this has been a key policy concept worldwide since the 2000s, especially in adult education. Last but not least, studies were chosen that deal with international education policy and its consequences for national programmes and activities as this level is increasingly focused on by the scientific discussion of education policy.

### 3.1 International comparative perspectives

International comparative perspectives often provide a basis for studies in adult education research that focus on policy. In this context, reference is often made to the strand of international comparative studies in educational science, which can look back on a longer tradition of research approaches. Many studies draw to the method of document analysis in order to either compare educational policy debates in different countries or to put the political orientations and activities of international and supranational organizations in relation to each other. Document analysis is usually not to be understood as an independent methodology or concrete procedure but is often linked to procedures such as qualitative content analysis (cf. Hoffmann 2011, pp. 400 ff.). It is therefore rather a certain way of accessing written records (cf. Wolff 2003, p. 504).

Óhidy (2009), for example, compares the adaptation of the EU concept of lifelong learning in two EU member states. The study is based on the assumption that the concept of lifelong learning disseminated by the EU as a European guiding principle is implemented differently in individual EU member states in accordance with national interests (cf. Óhidy 2009, p. 15). There is no explicit theoretical orientation mentioned but the international-comparative perspective serves as an overall orientation for the methodical procedure. Methodically, the study makes use of document analysis, whereby both EU documents and national policy documents are in focus. The period considered here is 1996 to 2005. The international-comparative orientation of the study means that the selection of the member states under investigation is of great importance: The two countries are selected as contrasting as possible, whereby the geographical location, the length of time they have been members of the EU, the economic and political orientation and the education system are used for selection (cf. Óhidy 2009, p. 43). Finally, Germany and Hungary are used as cases to examine the question. The findings point to a very strong harmonisation of the goals and visions of German and Hungarian education policy (cf. Óhidy 2009, p. 259). According to the study, differences between the countries arise, among other things, with regard to emphasizing the different forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning, as well as to the focus on the economic perspective and the adoption of the arguments of the EU documents (cf. Óhidy 2009, p. 259 et seq.). But overall, a uniform understanding of the concept of lifelong learning at the level of education policy in Germany and Hungary can be assumed, which can be attributed to the impact of the EU (cf. Óhidy 2009, p. 278). So although the two countries were selected on the

principle of the greatest difference, there are great similarities. This shows the importance of selecting countries for international comparative studies: if similar countries were compared, for example in terms of economic orientation or the nature of the education system, a similar orientation with regard to lifelong learning could not easily be attributed to the influence of the EU.

In a supplementary study, Óhidy (2011) examines the reception of the EU concept of lifelong learning by the academic debate. To this end, while in the other study political documents are used as research material, journals from educational science and adult education from 1996 to 2005 are analysed. By referring to journals, the author hopes to be able to trace the discussion even years later (cf. Óhidy 2011, p. 89). Criteria of political reference area, continuity of publishment as well as disciplinary orientation were applied to select the journals for the analysis. Again, a comparison of Germany and Hungary is chosen for the methodical design. Similarities between the countries can be identified with regard to a consensus on the importance of lifelong learning and also with regard to a standardisation of the definition of the concept (cf. Óhidy 2011, p. 187). As well as in the other study, differences can also be observed in the scientific discussion, for example, with regard to setting priorities for formal or informal learning (cf. Óhidy 2011, p. 191). Although an orientation towards national topics can be observed in the journal articles, a harmonising effect of the EU concept of lifelong learning and an adoption of arguments and terms in the academic debate can be observed (cf. Óhidy 2011, p. 208). Thus, it is assumed that EU policy has a strong influence on the national level both in terms of national policy and the academic debate. Due to the nature and focus of the two studies to examine the reception of the EU concept, a one-sided view is taken by explicitly examining the influence of the EU on the national political and scientific level. With the document analysis, a non-reactive approach is chosen that does not break up this one-sided perspective.

While the two studies mentioned above focus on comparisons between different countries, there are other studies that compare inter- and supranational organisations. A study by Schemmann (2007) examines the orientations in educational policy of various organisations, which clearly show a convergence of ideas in a global perspective. To this end, the method of document analysis is used to examine the programs and activities of the EU, OECD, UNESCO and World Bank, drawing to discourse analytical perspectives but factoring out the issue of power. For the theoretical framework, globalization theories are used. The basis are relevant documents of the organisations since 1990, which fulfil a representative function (cf. Schemmann 2007, pp. 16 f.). No concrete methodical steps are defined in advance but the documents are examined openly in order to identify dominant topics (cf. Schemmann 2007, pp. 16 f.). Especially with such an open approach to documents, it becomes clear that there is still a need for certain categories by which the organisations can be compared. Thus, the focus in this study is on the structure of the organisations, their positions with regard to further training and activities. Particular justification must be given for the selection of those documents that are selected as relevant and repre-

sentative for the analysis. The findings of the study show that education and especially adult education have developed into priorities for all organisations, with a focus on lifelong learning (cf. Schemmann 2007, pp. 224f.). Both economic and social goals appear to be common to all organisations (cf. Schemmann 2007, p. 226). Even though the orientations of the organisations in educational policy show subtle differences in comparison, overall it can be stated that convergences are more dominant than differences between organisations (cf. Schemmann 2007, p. 228). With regard to the design of the study, the author concludes that the effects that result from the activities of the organisations in particular should also be investigated and suitable empirical instruments should be developed for this purpose (cf. Schemmann 2007, p. 247). It becomes clear that a document analysis can only examine political activities on certain levels – the actual effects that political programmatics unfold in practice cannot be worked out by drawing to documents as material for an analysis.

Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner (2007), too, select relevant documents from international and supranational organisations for an analysis of lifelong learning. Despite the worldwide dissemination of the concept, they also refer to the specific priorities of international and supranational organisations: They work out different motives and objectives of organisations on the basis of their key concepts for lifelong learning and proceed from the basic assumption that it is not a uniform concept but that the idea is adapted to the specific social and educational interests of organisations (cf. Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner 2007, p. 687). The authors do not draw on a specific method to analyse the documents but refer to different theoretical perspectives to compare the orientations of inter- and supranational organisations. First, they work out a horizontal differentiation of theoretical concept variants by examining the documents: A distinction can be made between an *education theory concept* that focuses on democracy, an *economical concept* that is based on globalization and the knowledge society and aims at functionality, and an *emancipatory concept* (cf. Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner 2007, p. 690). In addition to this horizontal classification, the authors also differentiate the *concepts of lifelong learning* on a vertical level, which can be divided into generations: While the *emancipatory concept* is more likely to be represented by scientific actors, the first generation (1970s) is predominantly represented by concepts of the organisations UNESCO, OECD and Council of Europe. While UNESCO pursues an *education theory concept*, the OECD concept is characterized as *economical* (cf. Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner 2007, pp. 691f.). The approach of the Council of Europe, on the other hand, represents a *pragmatic concept* as a middle course between the two aforementioned, in which the focus is on the action and experience of the individual (cf. Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner 2007, p. 692). UNESCO and the OECD are continuing their orientation in the second generation (1990s), while the *pragmatic concept* is now being advocated by the European Commission (cf. Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner 2007, p. 693). For a third generation since the year 2000, only one key document can be noted, the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, which can also be classified as *pragmatic* (cf. Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner 2007, p. 693). Since the European Commission, a new actor in the 1990s, had only

presented one key concept in the period up to the publication of the study, the follow-up question arises as to whether the inter- and supranational organisations have meanwhile abandoned the primacy of key concepts in education programmes in favour of a focus on national practice and global standards, indicators and benchmarks (cf. Schreiber-Barsch and Zeuner 2007, p. 699). The possible shift away from focusing on key concepts, which are primarily transported via political documents, points to the need to develop methodological instruments that can capture international political activities at levels other than written documents.

Finally, the study of Kraus (2001) is taken into account to analyse international comparative approaches in adult education policy research. The study deals with the integration of the debate on education policy and especially lifelong learning into the German scientific discourse. To this end, it analyses both scientific and education policy documents, but does not pursue a direct comparison. As representative documents for the scientific discussion, articles from three different journals from the field of educational science and adult education in the period 1970 to 1998 were chosen. The author does not draw to a specific theoretical perspective or method, but combines quantitative and qualitative perspectives: First, the quantity of articles that draw to lifelong learning is in focus. Second, the way that lifelong learning is discussed is analysed. Three perspectives of the scientific debate on lifelong learning can be identified by drawing to the quantitative and qualitative analysis: On the one hand, an *external perspective* that does not deal with the content of the concepts but critically refers to the argumentation structure of the concepts (cf. Kraus 2001, p. 54). In addition, a *single-thematic perspective* that uses lifelong learning as a plug but primarily deals with topics such as certification, which also play a role in the context of international concepts (cf. Kraus 2001, pp. 54f.). Finally, the *reconstruction perspective* should be mentioned, in which the nature of the education policy framework is reconstructed by taking into account contributions from international organisations (cf. Kraus 2001, pp. 55f.). In a second step of the study, Kraus analyses educational policy documents of the Council of Europe, the EU, UNESCO and OECD from the 1970s and 1990s. For the analysis, a guideline of questions was developed which on the one hand aims at pedagogical criteria and on the other hand at argumentation contexts in the examined documents. By drawing to this guideline, similarities become apparent: The self-organisation of the learner is an important element in all concepts and the ability to learn represents the central learning content, which should be acquired in childhood and youth in order to be continued in adulthood (cf. Kraus 2001, p. 107). The idea of opening up educational institutions represents a further consensus (cf. Kraus 2001, p. 107). Thus there are fundamental similarities in the policy documents with regard to pedagogical aspects, but there are strong differences in the arguments of the inter- and supranational organisations and the only common ground at this level is that the reference point for justifying the need for lifelong learning is the acknowledgement of change (cf. Kraus 2001, p. 108).

Most of the studies referred to do not clearly state a certain theoretical perspective as basis for the analysis. But the aim of comparison serves as an underlying



orientation in these kinds of studies. The overview of selected comparative studies on adult education policy shows that the „classical“ approach of document analysis is often used to relate both countries and various international organizations. A look at the studies shows that the analysis of the documents often takes place without a concrete methodical approach with a certain sequence of steps. Thus, the investigation is not carried out according to pre-defined categories and evaluated strictly applying these, but rather certain focal points are set which serve as a rough orientation. Political documents as analytical material are particularly suitable because they represent the “official” focal points of the respective countries or organisations as well as current debates and are structured in a similar way, which facilitates comparison. Journals can serve to trace current debates and publicly discussed topics, as well. The advantage of the inductive approach is that it is open to find aspects that were maybe not in focus at the start of the analysis. But document analysis still is a non-reactive procedure (in comparison with interviews, for example) that cannot completely break with previously defined perspectives. A limitation of this kind of analysis becomes clear since only the textual level can be considered. Thus, especially programmatics become accessible. To investigate the actual practical implementation of educational policy ideas and thus the effects of political programmatics requires that document analysis is supplemented by further methods. Overall, it becomes clear that even though the methodical approach is open, the selection criteria of countries serving as cases for the studies and of the documents chosen for analysis should be strictly defined. While this is of course applying to all kinds of document analyses, also from other research strands, it is particularly important in policy research since often the aim is not only to trace specific discussions but to affiliate certain procedures to specific actors and agendas.

### **3.2 Discourse and governmentality analyses**

Just as with international comparative studies, discourse analyses also rely to a large extent on documents as research material. However, they do not consider these documents to be representative of anything else, but, in relation to the basic assumptions of Foucault (2013), assume that the discourse itself produces knowledge and meaning. The methodical approach is also very open in discourse analyses, whereby they are oriented towards certain focal points, for example by taking into account the change of concepts and the examination of certain objects over time. The question of power plays a major role here, especially in the so-called governmentality studies, which also refer to Foucault.

Rausch (2015) examines the EU’s educational policy discourse on lifelong learning between 1999 and 2011 by theoretically referring to Foucault’s concept of discourse. The study is based on publications of the various EU institutions. The selection of cases is of particular importance: First, all documents displayed in the registers of the institutions via the search term “lifelong learning” are taken into account. Relevant documents are then selected by choosing certain types of documents and by setting a focus on the European Commission (cf. Rausch 2015, pp. 93 ff.). To

reconstruct the EU documents, the author draws on *content analysis* and *document analysis* (cf. Rausch 2015, pp. 102 f.). As concrete methodical steps he mentions the formation of categories as well as the formulating and reflective interpretation of the individual selected texts (cf. Rausch 2015, pp. 103 f.). The explorative approach is also made clear by the methodical steps of paraphrasing and open coding (cf. Rausch 2015, p. 105). The results of the study show that the dominant content of the documents on lifelong learning has changed little compared to previously published education policy documents (cf. Rausch 2015, pp. 171 f.). However, a new development is that since 2004 there has been an action-oriented period in the discourse in which competence concepts and qualification frameworks have become more concrete (cf. Rausch 2015, p. 172). The link between educational policy and academic discourse is presented as a diffusion from the field of educational policy into the field of adult education science (cf. Rausch 2015, p. 182). Although the political concept of *lifelong learning* works with pedagogical vocabulary, it hardly offers science any points of contact for discussion (cf. Rausch 2015, p. 183). The author therefore regards the concept as unsuitable for legitimising research on adult education since questions of new forms of learning or institutionalisation can also be dealt with without reference to education policy (cf. Rausch 2015, p. 183). Since the study empirically focuses only on the political discourse, the conclusions regarding the influence on the scientific discourse are to be seen as indications, but a direct effect cannot be proven by the methodological design of the study.

Rothe (2011) also places the concept of *lifelong learning* in the focus of her discourse analysis. She analyses policy documents of institutions that represent the levels of national and international education policy in the period between 1996 and 2004 (cf. Rothe 2011, p. 199). Theoretically the study also refers to Foucault's basic assumptions. This study, too, emphasizes the importance of the construction of the data corpus, whereby its relation to the topic of *lifelong learning* as well as the affiliation to national and international institutions is of importance (cf. Rothe 2011, pp. 199 f.). A methodical orientation is provided by grounded theory, the author names several successive steps from a roughly conducted first review of the documents to the writing of memos and the answering of certain questions by the text on the basis of which the selected documents are analysed (cf. Rothe 2011, pp. 209 ff.). With this procedure, three phases of the discursive formation of *lifelong learning* are identified: First, the focus is on the initiation of a learning movement, then on *lifelong learning* as a programme, and in a final phase a preliminary ending point of the discursive formation in German education policy is described (cf. Rothe 2011, p. 216). Social change, learning, and access to education can be identified as central objects of the discursive formation (cf. Rothe 2011, p. 270). For the national discourse on education policy it can be stated that it is centrally influenced by international and especially European education policy as their argumentation patterns are taken up (cf. Rothe 2011, p. 395). While the boundaries between adult education research and education policy have become blurred in some cases, an increasing empirical preoccupation with lifelong learning has again made a clearer distinction between discipline

and policy (cf. Rothe 2011, p. 393). Overall, Rothe assumes a precarious autonomy of the discipline of adult education towards the field of education policy but notes that the education policy discourse also refers to the disciplinary discourse by granting speaker positions to academics (cf. Rothe 2011, pp. 406 ff.). Accordingly, this study points to a one-sided diffusion of education policy argumentation in the academic discussion and to a strong influence in this direction. However, it should also be noted that only the education policy discourse was analysed empirically.

While the two studies mentioned before are defined as discourse analyses, also an example of a governmentality analysis referring to Foucault should be mentioned: The study of Fejes (2006) deals with the construction of the adult learner by educational policy. As already mentioned, theoretically it draws to the concept of *governmentality*, which is interested in the relation of power and knowledge. With regard to the methodical approach, the author argues that a strict procedure is problematic when referring to Foucault's perspective (cf. Fejes 2006, p. 32). Instead, he focuses on questions that he answers by reading selected documents several times (cf. Fejes 2006, p. 33). However, concrete methodological steps are not mentioned here. The results of the study show that a properly educated citizen is seen as the basis of a competing society (cf. Fejes 2006, p. 72). This citizen is constructed as "an autonomous, self-choosing and self-regulating self who should take responsibility for his/her own life by becoming a lifelong learner" (Fejes 2006, p. 73) and who should always desire to learn something (cf. Fejes 2006, p. 75).

In summary, the examples of discourse analytical studies point to a strong impact of the international discourse on adult education policy on the national scientific debate. However, the studies are designed in such a way that they do not take the scientific discourse into account in the empirical analysis, so they do not make a systematic comparison and thus the focus remains one-sided. The two exemplary studies illustrate that discourse analysis is particularly suitable for identifying changes in political priorities over time. However, the example of a *governmentality* study points to the construction of the subject by adult education policy. In principle, discourse and *governmentality* analyses entail the difficulty of conciliating the focus on power, which is predetermined in accordance with the basic theoretical assumptions, with the claim of an open-ended analysis. This shows the necessity of a comprehensive reflection. As with document analysis, the total amount of data to be considered in this kind of methodical procedure is very large. For a reduction to a few documents that are seen as representative for a discourse, a systematic approach is necessary in which documents are excluded by means of certain criteria. When looking at discourse analyses and governmentality studies, it becomes clear that – as a consequence of the open approach – there are not always clear sequences of steps or a concrete method that serves as orientation. Even though discourse analysis understands itself more as a methodology than a theory, it does not provide concrete instructions considering the methodical design, so that often further approaches such as content analysis or grounded theory are added. Theory and methodical procedure are partic-

ularly closely linked in this type of study, so that the theoretical perspective serves as an argument for not being too fixed as regards the method.

### 3.3 Institutionalistic approaches

In addition to approaches of international-comparative educational science and discourse and *governmentality* studies, institutionalistic approaches are also frequently used to investigate policy in adult education. Such studies are discussed below. Although they also take a comparative approach, in theoretical terms they focus not only on comparison at the international level but also on various levels of action that are interlinked. Perspectives such as *world polity* (cf. Meyer 2005), *actor-centred institutionalism* (cf. Mayntz and Scharpf 1995) or the *governance perspective* (cf. Altrichter et al. 2007) are referred to. Not only the relation international – national, but also the linkage of the macro and meso levels are relevant in these studies. The inclusion of a multi-level perspective in consequence often leads to the choice of mixed-method designs, which link methods such as text analysis and interviews but also explicitly qualitative and quantitative approaches.

A study by Breyer and Schemmann (2018) addresses the question of how membership of an international organisation influences national policy. Theoretically, reference is made to the perspective of *world polity*, which assumes that global norms diffuse and that individuals, organisations and also nation states play a role in this diffusion (cf. Breyer and Schemmann 2018, p. 3). Methodically, the study makes use of lexicometric analysis, a method from the field of linguistics: This allows for the investigation of large text corpora and uncovers frequencies of words as well as quantitative relationships between words and word groups (cf. Breyer and Schemmann 2018, p. 5). The study compares national reports of different UNESCO member states, which were published in preparation for the CONFINTEA VI conference, and asks the question of whether there are differences between states that are also EU members and states that do not belong to the EU (cf. Breyer and Schemmann 2018, p. 1). Since the lexicometric analysis is a method from linguistics, it has not been applied often in adult education research yet (cf. Breyer and Schemmann, p. 5). This brings with it the particularity of being able to orient oneself less to other studies and their procedures but more to develop one's own procedures. The results show that – even though UNESCO organised the conference and requested the national reports – a high influence of the EU can be assumed since certain topics that the EU focuses on are also focused in the national reports of the EU members (cf. Breyer and Schemmann 2018, p. 11). This is particularly evident in the focus on formal qualifications, employability and higher levels of education (cf. Breyer and Schemmann 2018, p. 11). However, it should be pointed out that although certain patterns can be identified, it is not possible to draw a causal conclusion regarding the links between national policy and the policy of international and supranational organisations (cf. Breyer and Schemmann 2018, p. 12). Thus, this study makes clear that although conclusions can be drawn at the discursive level, further methods must be used to prove direct influence. Even though the discursive level is focused, the quantitative

approach can generate an overview of the topics across several documents and can break away from investigating single documents.

Jakobi (2009, 2006) also chooses the perspective of world polity in order to look at international organisations in a global perspective: She focuses on the question of how the worldwide diffusion of an educational policy concept can be explained and understands *lifelong learning* as a worldwide norm. The thesis that international organisations are the cause of the diffusion process is the guiding principle (cf. Jakobi 2009, p. 172). In methodical terms, the study triangulates content and document analysis with interviews and regression analyses, so that several different methods are applied by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thereby, it is investigated what kind of global activities concerning *lifelong learning* can be identified, which positions different states have on these activities and which national policies are driven by international organisations (cf. Jakobi 2009, p. xiii). The findings show that *lifelong learning* diffuses from organisation to organisation and that four patterns of inter-organisational connections can be differentiated: First, the initiation of discussions in one organisation through the activities of another, second, the division of labour between organisations, third, jointly organised conferences, and fourth, the legitimisation of one organisation by another (cf. Jakobi 2006, p. 69). Furthermore, it can be noted that the number of countries that refer to *lifelong learning* has grown since the 1990s (cf. Jakobi 2006, p. 97). However, a difference between the idea and the consequences becomes clear here: The reference to *lifelong learning* is not always necessarily followed by implementation in reforms (cf. Jakobi 2006, p. 98). Different waves of reference to the concept can be differentiated: In the 1970s, international organisations had less influence and there was no acute problem that policymakers addressed, whereas in the 1980s there was a softening of the international political environment (cf. Jakobi 2006, pp. 122 f.). The situation changed fundamentally in the 1990s: Organisations had a growing influence, the knowledge society was discussed as a political problem and there was a shift in the goals of *lifelong learning* away from personal development towards economic prosperity (cf. Jakobi 2006, p. 123). In a neo-institutionalist perspective, *lifelong learning* can be understood as part of a world culture that is disseminated by international organisations engaged in agenda setting – however, this study also shows that national framework conditions play a major role in the implementation of reforms (cf. Jakobi 2009, p. 186). The design of the study makes clear that the concrete implementation of reforms can be worked out by adding quantitative methods. By combining several methods, different levels can be included in the analysis.

Ioannidou (2010, 2009) combines several methods to investigate policy in the field of adult education, as well. In a study on governance, she picks out two organisations from the international structure: In a comparative empirical analysis, she examines the potential, forms and instruments of EU and OECD governance and their influence on the national level, using Germany, Finland and Greece as examples. Monitoring and reporting on education are drawn on as new instruments of governance. Questions concerning the national reception of the international idea of *lifelong*

*learning* are leading the way (cf. Ioannidou 2010, p. 51). The study is also understood as an international-comparative analysis, so that the contrastive selection of the states serving as cases for the study is emphasized. But furthermore it explicitly refers to institutionalistic approaches: The *governance perspective*, *actor-centred institutionalism* and the *theorem of path dependency* serve as theoretical framework. The focus is on the interaction between actors acting for a specific purpose (cf. Ioannidou 2010, p. 58). In addition to a document analysis and a meta-analysis of monitoring instruments, interviews were examined. The author emphasizes that their status as experts is explicitly important when researching policy: The area is characterised by a high degree of topicality making changes difficult to track from outside and furthermore, the knowledge concerning educational policy is often implicit (cf. Ioannidou 2010, p. 104). Experts were chosen from educational policy as well as educational research on the national and the international level (cf. Ioannidou 2010, pp. 107 f.). The results show that all of these experts refer to phenomena such as globalisation or the diagnosis of an information and knowledge society in order to justify the necessity of empirically reviewing *lifelong learning* (cf. Ioannidou 2009, p. 44). A superficial consensus can also be seen at the conceptual level: Both in the international and national context, there is agreement between the education policy actors with regard to the time dimension (learning throughout the entire life span) and the context dimension (formal, non-formal and informal learning), so that an effect of the efforts by EU and OECD with regard to the conceptual design of *lifelong learning* can be assumed (cf. Ioannidou 2010, p. 137). However, a look at the implementation level reveals differences: These can be traced back to cultural and historical traditions (cf. Ioannidou 2010, p. 138). While Germany focuses on continuing vocational training in terms of employability, Finland focuses on social cohesion and personal development, Greece on institutionalised adult education (cf. Ioannidou 2010, p. 193). Country-specific differences can also be observed with regard to the influence of inter- and supranational organisations: For example, while the EU is ascribed a clear steering function from the perspective of Greece, the OECD receives the greatest recognition in Finland (cf. Ioannidou 2010, pp. 197 f.). By combining various methods that go beyond the textual level, this study shows that concrete influence can be given greater consideration.

In summary, the selected studies show that the choice of institutionalistic perspectives often results in multi-methodological approaches. This is mainly due to the fact that the focus is not only on linking international and national policy but that organisations are also explicitly understood as purposeful actors and therefore macro and meso level are connected. By linking several methods, the view can be broadened beyond the discursive level and fulfil the claim of being able to work out actual influence to a greater extent. A combination of different qualitative methods such as text analysis and interviews is useful as well as the use of quantitative approaches, which are more focused on the macro perspective. The kind of studies analysed here do not only apply “classical” methods that are used in adult education research, such as document analysis or interviews, but also borrow methods from other disciplines

that are not always part of the traditional repertoire of methods such as regression analysis or lexicometric analysis.

## 4 Discussion: Comparison of approaches in researching adult education policy

In order to structure the overview of studies in the field of adult education research that deal with educational policy, theoretical and methodological approaches that are frequently referred to were first identified. Institutionalistic frameworks can be described as explicitly theoretical while international comparative perspectives are to be understood more as methodological, thus providing orientation for certain methods that are applied. *Discourse* and *governmentality* studies combine theory and methodology: These are theoretical concepts that explain the view of reality and society but also methodologically prescribe what the focus of an analysis should be. At the same time, the analyses are understood as very open enabling deviation from the concrete steps of specific methods, such as qualitative content analysis. Since the choice of the perspectives offering orientation depends on the research interest, these can be assigned as follows: If the focus is on similarities and differences of national politics or inter- and supranational organisations, international-comparative perspectives and institutionalistic frameworks are used. Furthermore, institutionalistic perspectives are chosen if the interdependence of different actors on the macro, meso and micro level is in focus. If power and influence or change and developments over time are emphasized, the concepts of *discourse* and *governmentality* can provide orientation.

Methodically, international comparative studies often work with document analysis and apply this method through certain questions on the documents. In *discourse* and *governmentality* studies, documents also serve as analytical material, but are used less to draw conclusions about the underlying reality via the documents, but are themselves understood as a construction of reality. The qualitative analysis of documents has the advantage that current debates can be included and thus topics can be identified that allow conclusions to be drawn about political goals and discussions. Political documents are suitable as material for the analysis, since they are often comparable due to a similar structure. They are also particularly suitable for longitudinal analyses: Changes in focus over time can be easily traced and access to documents can sometimes be easier than, for example, access to experts from the field. At the same time, by including documents, one always remains on the textual level. Causal conclusions cannot be drawn and direct influence is not visible.

In comparison, institutionalistic studies tend to take a multi-methodical approach, so that e. g. interviews are included in the analysis in addition to texts. Access to the field may be difficult, for example, if decision-makers from politics are to be won as interview partners. At the same time, it has been shown that the first methodical step in the selection of material for the analysis can also require a great deal of effort and circumspection: For example, such a large selection of public policy

documents is available in digital form that reducing them to the really relevant and representative documents is no simple matter. The mixed-method approach of the institutionalistically framed studies shows that, in addition to the difference between national and international, several levels can be included that play a role in the interweaving of political processes: Thus, not only the final result of a decision-making process in the form of an officially published document can be taken into account but also, for example through interviews, the events in the background that led to this publication and the aspects that are not officially announced and said but are nevertheless significant.

Overall, it becomes clear that methods such as document analysis and interviews are used often in policy research in adult education. Reference to other methods from qualitative empirical social research, for example participatory observation, however is not common.

This may be due to the fact that policy as an object is not as obviously observable as, for example, an educational teaching-learning situation. While policy that results in laws is more objectively observable, this does not apply in the same way to the area of adult education, which is little regulated by law, as here the setting of agendas is more important regarding governance. Furthermore, the circles in which policy is created remain difficult to access from outside. Despite these general conditions, it is necessary to integrate methods of qualitative social research such as participatory observation into policy research in adult education but also to be open to methods such as regression analysis or lexicometric analysis.

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the topics as well as theoretical and methodological approaches of policy research in the field of adult education as it is a relatively young field compared to other research strands. Examining the subject of policy in adult education brings with it a number of specifics. While other research topics in adult education, such as professionalisation or addressees and participants, can be approached via practice and thus concrete courses of action, political action is more difficult to access. On the one hand because processes that take place in the background often cannot be easily seen from the outside, and on the other hand because many different levels that are strongly interwoven have to be considered.

Theoretical and methodological perspectives can be identified that are often used to analyse educational policy: Internationally comparative perspectives, institutionalist approaches as well as discourse and governmentality analyses. Since these approaches also offer orientation in methodical terms, it is evident that studies based on internationally comparative and discourse-analytical basic assumptions often use political documents as material for an analysis, whereas institutionalist studies combine document analyses with interviews or include quantitative analyses. Policy research in adult education by now offers a broad range of research on thematic priori-



ties and the reconstruction of changes, especially in international education policy programmes. With regard to the elaboration of the effects of political programmes, studies already have been conducted but there are still desiderata to be identified and elaborated.

The studies analysed in this paper point to the influence of international policy on the national level, both in terms of policy and science. How science and its actors position themselves towards policy is a subsequent question, as is how a concept such as lifelong learning is implemented in practice. Furthermore, it is evident that the concept declared to be decisive is primarily negotiated discursively at the international level, which raises the question why, for example, only a few documents and agendas on this topic are published at the national level. These and further questions can be emphasized in further research on policy in adult education science. Especially in the field of adult education, many levels interact since international policy also has a decisive influence on national policy-making, whereas this is not similarly the case in the school sector, for example. Therefore, it makes sense to capture and overlook the consequences of political action. In order to make the actual influence of political intentions on practice visible, multimethodic approaches are necessary since only in this way the diverse levels – beyond the differentiation between international and national levels – can be included. As a relatively new field of research, policy research in particular can advance the further development of the methodical approaches of adult education research by finding new ways of grasping various levels of political action. To be open to “new” methods respectively methods from other disciplines (e. g. lexicometric analysis) therefore is essential.

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