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# Fostering Internationalization in Adult Education Graduate Programs in the United States: Opportunities for Growth

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# **Fostering Internationalization in Adult Education Graduate Programs in the United States: Opportunities for Growth**

*Susan M. Yelich Biniecki and Maja Stojanović*

## **Abstract**

Internationalization is a key element of higher education missions to prepare learners for the global dimensions of their lives and work, which are increasingly integrated. In the United States, adult education graduate programs play a vital role in the wider educational landscape, particularly because of their interconnectedness with diverse disciplines and a working learner student population. Although student and scholar mobility remain important to fostering connections, adult education graduate programs can broaden the scope of internationalization aims. This paper proposes three main opportunities for internationalization growth within adult education graduate programs: incorporating intercultural literacy in formal curricula, emphasizing a continuing professional education approach, and integrating the formal – nonformal – informal education continuum in programs. Conceptualizing efforts within these opportunity sectors can spur innovation central to internationalization initiatives.

Key words: internationalization, adult education, higher education, graduate programs.

## **Introduction**

Adult education graduate programs in the United States are situated predominantly within colleges of education under such titles as adult learning and leadership, human resource development, or adult and continuing higher education. Within these programs, the majority of students are working adult learners, or those who are earning a master's or doctoral degree as working professionals. As such, adult education graduate programs are of significant importance for students' professional as well as personal lives. Internationalization of these formal graduate programs of study is important to support learners' navigation of daily life, work, and academic research, which happens in increasingly diverse, multicultural environments. Therefore, the field of adult education needs to find ways to foster internationalization efforts more strategically (Alfred & Guo, 2012). In doing so, the field can serve as a strategic partner for supporting internationalization in different areas of adult learners' lives.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight opportunities for growth in internationalization within adult education graduate programs. To situate our argument, we first explore a definition of adult education and the adult learner followed by operationalizing internationalization. Then, we focus on three main opportunities for growth within adult education graduate programs: incorporating intercultural literacy in formal curricula, emphasizing a continuing professional education approach, and integrating the formal – nonformal – informal education continuum in programs.

## **Adult Education Graduate Programs and the Adult Learner**

Adult education as a field of theory and practice has a unique and somewhat hazy history, perhaps because adult education as an activity has existed since ancient times (Ross-Gordon et al., 2016). In fact, although it was conceptualized much later—in the United States, adult

education emerged as a field of study in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Knowles, 1977)—adult education and andragogical thinking predate pedagogical ideas (Henschke, 1998; Savicevic, 2008). While pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade (PK-12) education may dominate the educational narrative due to its mandatory nature, the breadth and scope of adult education, as well as its relevance to different areas of the adult learner’s life, make it a necessary building block of education research and practice.

Adult education graduate programs refer specifically to those programs of study offered in formal, university settings. Such programs typically aim to support individuals “who work with adults as educators, trainers, facilitators, advisors, managers, or leaders [to] further enhance their knowledge and skills” (Kansas State University, n.d., para. 1). Based on recent data, there are 45 U.S.-based institutions that offer adult education/learning programs, mostly at the graduate level (Robinson & Stojanović, 2022). While there has been a decrease in the number of adult education programs over the years, these programs are important because of the role of adult education in the wider educational landscape, as well as its interconnectedness with multiple other disciplines, as well as the workforce in general. Work-related adult education is a significant area of research and practice relevant to adult and continuing education, including concepts such as human resource development and continuing professional education.

As is the case with numerous disciplines and concepts, adult education is not universally defined (Ross-Gordon et al., 2016). Scholars and practitioners in the field place emphasis on different elements; however, there are common characteristics upon which many agree. The central one pertains to the adult learner and their characteristics; and, as such, defining adult education starts with defining who an adult learner is.

While adulthood is defined differently in different countries and cultures, an adult is traditionally distinguished from a child based on age (adults are typically defined as being 18 or older), and thereby, expected maturity and related behaviors and societal expectations (Merriam & Brockett, 2011; Paterson, 1979). Based on the Andragogy in Practice model (Knowles et al., 2020), an adult learner is characteristically different from a child based on their learning autonomy, rich prior experience, life-related readiness to learn, problem-centered orientation to learning, intrinsic motivation, and the expectation to know why and how something will be learned. Therefore, planning adult education programs and curricula requires an understanding of the uniqueness of the adult learner. Given the intricate connection between adult learning and the environment in which the adult learner lives and works, adult educators need to consider and understand the internationalized environment in which the adult learner lives and works as they tailor the curricula to these learners’ needs and goals.

## **Internationalization**

The idea of internationalization has gained popularity within the context of education, which is commonly included in the definition of the term. Namely, internationalization refers to “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Due to its perceived benefits, internationalization has become a key element of institutional missions within higher education in the United States, as well as globally.

The American Council on Education and the Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement define comprehensive internationalization as “a strategic, coordinated process that seeks to align and integrate international policies, programs, and initiatives, and positions colleges and universities as more globally oriented and internationally connected institutions” (Helmst et al., 2017, p. 1). Among the five priorities for comprehensive internationalization, the authors of this report highlight international partnerships, as well as the internationalization of the curriculum, noting that the goal of the internationalization of higher education is to prepare students to participate in a global society (Helmst et al., 2017). These definitions and goals all emphasize worldwide interconnectedness.

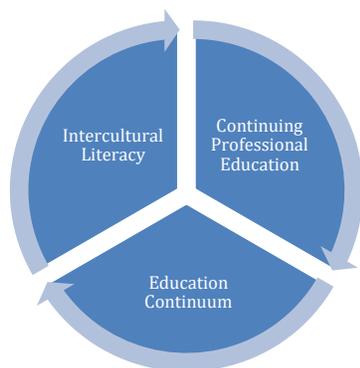
Yet, while the Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement (2012) advises educational institutions to incorporate “global perspectives into teaching, learning, and research,” develop “international and intercultural competence among students, faculty, and staff,” and grow “relationships and collaborations with people and institutions abroad” (p. 3), and although 72% of U.S. higher education institutions reportedly believe that their levels of internationalization are either high or very high (Helmst et al., 2017), in practice, internationalization is often focused on, or stops at, recruitment of international students and scholars or student and scholar mobility (Coryell, 2011). This narrow emphasis signals the need to better address and implement the recommendations of the Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement and capitalize on opportunities for growth within programs and their curricula.

### Opportunities for Growth

Considering their unique role at the intersection of educational, personal, and professional aspects of one’s life, adult education programs are uniquely positioned to support international connections and set the foundation for internationalization across different areas of life. Organizations, faculty, staff, and students bring substantial expertise to adult education graduate programs, and all have potential to contribute to growth in terms of internationalization and supporting international connections. Figure 1 depicts the opportunities for growth within adult education graduate programs, which could serve as underpinnings for the actions, processes, and practices related to internationalization.

Figure 1

*Opportunities for Growth in Adult Education Graduate Programs*



Conceptualizing efforts within these three opportunity sectors, independently, as well as in conjunction, can spur innovation central to internationalization initiatives.

### **Incorporating Intercultural Literacy in Formal Curricula**

At the outset, adult education was highly focused on basic education and literacy in linguistic terms, as the ability to read and write, embodied in the process of “Americanization” of immigrants (Carlson, 1970). However, critical and new literacy scholarship presents the argument that, in today’s internationalized global environment, literacy should also be understood as a social practice (Gee, 2020). Phipps and St. Clair (2008) suggest, “Literacies may, like social capital, have both bonding (intracultural) and bridging (intercultural) aspects” (p. 69). Bearing this in mind, we argue that adult education graduate programs would benefit from supporting internationalization by bridging existent divides and cultivating international connections. These connections should start by incorporating intercultural literacies into formal adult education programs, given the practical benefits of developing intercultural literacy for the working learner.

Intercultural literacy is defined as “the competencies, understandings, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation, and identities necessary for effective cross-cultural engagement” (Heyward, 2002, p. 9). Notably, given that cross-cultural encounters have become a daily occurrence in today’s internationalized work and education environments, developing the competencies, attitudes, and understandings to support cross-cultural encounters should be a priority. This emphasis is especially true for organizations such as higher education institutions, which list internationalization as a key goal. Because of its unique position as a bridge between the worlds of learning and work, adult education can play a strategic role in the development of intercultural literacy by incorporating it into the curriculum.

Namely, intercultural literacy development within adult education can target multiple areas, inclusive of intercultural understanding, intercultural communication, and cross-cultural connections, all relevant in the global workplace. Intercultural understanding is an important first step in acquiring the knowledge of the similarities and differences between cultures, as well as developing positive attitudes toward other cultures (Hill, 2006). Given that this knowledge base is commonly among the initial steps in developing intercultural literacy, curricula could focus on exposure to the elements of different cultures and the increase in knowledge related to other cultures. Further, individuals who develop intercultural communication skills will be better equipped to challenge the monolingual narrative in increasingly multilingual and multicultural workplaces (Ghosh, 2019; Stojanovic, 2021). Both intercultural understanding and intercultural communication, as parts of intercultural literacy, can support the development and maintenance of international connections, which can be fostered within the formal education setting, as well as outside it, such as through professional partnerships. As such, the development of intercultural literacy is a vital internationalization strategy. From the perspective of adult education, intercultural literacy development should target life-related issues in the adult learner’s life, making it a highly relevant content area that should be incorporated into adult education curricula.

## **Emphasizing a Continuing Professional Education Approach**

An additional reason why adult education programs are perfectly positioned to address internationalization is their focus on the development across the lifespan. While diverse experiences and goals make adult learners distinctly different, adults commonly participate in adult education due to similar, mostly vocational reasons, including career development, enhancement, and even change. In terms of career and employment, cross-national, longitudinal data show that upgrading education, especially while employed, may have positive career outcomes for the learner/employee (Kilpi-Jakonen et al., 2012), making further education in adulthood highly desirable. Given that work and learning spaces are increasingly internationalized and multicultural, successfully developing and supporting international connections within the context of adult education is vital.

Continuing professional education (CPE) is the mandatory or voluntary education necessary for learners to maintain expertise in a specific vocation, such as that for lawyers, teachers, and physicians (Cervero & Daley, 2016; Yelich Biniecki, 2022). However, more broadly, CPE can be envisioned as the goal of adult learners engaging in formal higher education graduate programs. The mindset of adult learners is to create connections to their profession or advance their career goals. Approaching internationalization through a CPE lens can create important internationalization connections for learners, specifically in terms of applicability of what they learn in different areas of life. Adults want to see an immediate return on investment; therefore, internationalization within formal adult education graduate programs needs to provide specific application to the real world of working adults (Yelich Biniecki, 2022).

Scholars suggest that a shift in the way we live and work has resulted in a change in how learning is perceived, making learning and work even more interconnected than in the past (Clark et al., 2019). As Blanchard Kyte (2017) argues, “Education and work are no longer separate and sequential activities; instead, a majority of workers now see gaining new skills as important to their career success and wellbeing” (p. 1). This interconnectedness has been further supported by technological advancements and the changes that have allowed for distance education, helping individuals balance the worlds of work and learning, in addition to offering more opportunities for CPE.

For adults who work in adult education and related fields, inclusive of human resource development, corporate training, consulting, organization development, curriculum development, and higher education administration, expectations related to CPE within adult education graduate programs are twofold. Not only are these students spearheading the learning and development of adults in different and diverse contexts, but these individuals also need to make sure they have the skills and knowledge needed to perform their roles and effectively support the learning and development of the individuals with whom they work. It follows that adult educators who participate in formal adult education graduate programs can strongly benefit from increased opportunities for growth in terms of internationalization, given that their work and education are interconnected. Similarly, continuous lifelong learning within a formal - nonformal - informal learning continuum is woven through their daily lives, making it another key area of growth in terms of internationalization.

## **Integrating the Formal – Nonformal – Informal Education Continuum in Programs**

Although adult education graduate programs exist in a formal education setting, purposefully integrating the entire formal – nonformal – informal education continuum within these programs can further internationalization efforts and do so more effectively. Learners in adult education graduate programs have varying levels of intercultural literacy and international experiences, and these international experiences may be significant starting points for increasing intercultural understanding, and thereby, literacy. For example, these individuals may have deployed abroad as active-duty military service members, attended international conferences as researchers, or managed international, virtual, and remote teams in their work. Others may self-identify as international within their local communities, as recent immigrants, and/or dual language speakers. And, some learners may not have much contact with international content at all. All, including instructors, have room for development, as adults never arrive at the end of a learning journey within and about international issues. This context further highlights the need for considering the connection between internationalization and continuous professional development in different settings.

Students in adult education graduate programs naturally move through a continuum of learning spaces within their daily life (Ross-Gordon et al., 2016). Therefore, intentional, international connections in those spaces can enhance internationalization efforts. We argue that deliberately integrating the formal – nonformal – informal education continuum in programs can meaningfully build on international learner experiences as well as support learners in constructing new knowledge.

**Formal.** Physical mobility for students and scholars is often emphasized in internationalization efforts within formal education. However, cross-border mobility within most adult education graduate programs is very difficult (Harvey et al., 2017) due to the stress on a family through separation and work obligations. This person-to-person exchange (Green, 2019) can, alternatively, happen virtually in many structured formal education settings, similar to the success of digital learning in K-12 environments (Larson & Goodson, 2019). Learning objects, such as videos and podcasts with international content, and asynchronous virtual components, such as structured dialogue among learners within the same class and those abroad, can create access points for all learners engaged in internationalization.

**Nonformal.** Although often categorized as informal within PK-12 education, adult education recognizes nonformal education as a category that has more structure and intention than an informal education setting; therefore, nonformal education is on the continuum of lifelong learning (Yelich Biniecki, 2015). Nonformal education involves structured educational programs within the community that are outside of for-credit higher education (Taylor, 2006). For example, programs on current events and world affairs regularly take place in community centers. Alternatively, an experiential art workshop with diverse communities may be coordinated by a local Department of Parks and Recreation. Learners may already be involved in such programs, or they may seek nonformal educational opportunities as a continuation of formal education internationalization efforts. Within a graduate curriculum on program planning for adult learners, for example, students may be asked to seek out additional programs in their communities, or they may already be engaged in a program in order to make international

connections. In addition, real time participation can take place within a brick-and-mortar structure or virtually. Integrating nonformal education opportunities for applied experiential work and analysis can create further connections for internationalization.

**Informal.** Informal education is that which is self-directed or involves free-choice learning (Falk & Dierking, 2002; Yelich Biniecki & Donley, 2016). Informal education in public spaces is an integral part of the continuum of education (Ciardelli & Wasserman, 2011). Therefore, encouraging learners to connect to informal education can be another building block for the internationalization of adult education graduate programs. For example, exhibits about international issues held in major cities offer unstructured learning and development opportunities for those engaged in the process of internationalization. Alternatively, especially emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual museum visits became part of many online learning platforms. When examining self-directed learning concepts in adult education graduate programs, learners can virtually visit a museum in, for example, New Delhi or Warsaw, and connect to international communities at a distance.

These are just a few examples indicating that examining existing programs and leveraging community resources and technological tools may be effective starting points for increasing internationalization opportunities within adult education, be it formal, nonformal, or informal. In addition, asking students to trouble the literature of adult education best practices can help bring an international worldview to public pedagogy and learner takeaways within and beyond their communities, contributing to online or face-to-face classroom dialogue.

## **Conclusion**

As current events and conditions for formal education evolve, internationalization strategies will continue to be a part of the continuing conversation among all educational disciplines about how to adapt and grow to meet adult learner needs in diverse learning settings. Strategic internationalization efforts need to innovate and be deliberate within formal graduate education environments, including adult education. Specifically, these efforts need to take into consideration the impact of adult education programs on different areas of adult learners' lives, as well as adult learners' characteristics and their positionality. We view the three main emphases of intercultural literacies, continuing professional education, and the education continuum as vital for internationalization within the formal adult education context and propose a conceptual framework for internationalization of formal adult education programs that is focused on these three areas. This conceptual framework for the internationalization of adult education graduate programs may also inform the development of graduate programs with similar learner populations, be they formal, non-formal, or informal. Additionally, the framework may further be used to support the development of specific teaching and learning strategies related to internationalization, as well as to guide internationalization efforts within educational institutions.

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