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UNDERSTANDING ESTONIAN LIBERAL ADULT EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF NORDIC-BALTIC COOPERATION BETWEEN 1991 AND 2004

ROZUMIENIE ESTOŃSKIEJ LIBERALNEJ EDUKACJI DOROSŁYCH W KONTEKŚCIE WSPÓŁPRACY NORDYCKO-BAŁTYCKIEJ W LATACH 1991-2004

ABSTRACT: In the last decades, Estonian Liberal Adult Education (LAE) has been supported by the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education. Relying on a strong professional network, cooperation would have been impossible without inputs from practitioners of Estonian LAE. From their perspective, what is at the core of the phenomenon of Estonian LAE? This paper is based on the findings from explanatory single case study and discusses the meanings that LAE practitioners attribute to their experiences with the Nordic-Baltic cooperation. The paper shows how the meanings developed over the period of post-USSR, pre-EU independence during 1991-2004. Parsons' model of social change was used to frame the period as moving the LAE system from one state of equilibrium to another. Focusing on the change in the meanings, empirical data was collected using two retrospective focus group interviews with 14 LAE practitioners and explored a variety of sources of secondary data from the time. Thematic and ethnographic content analysis methods were applied for data analysis, and results were presented in a case story. It appeared from the findings that three periods of *apprentice*, *transformation* and *equality* were distinguished. The temporal dimension of the phenomenon was further expressed in the metaphors, such as *starter*, *sowing the seeds* and *sprouting*. The new equilibrium found by 2004 was described as time for *recognition of the main values; self-development; equal international cooperation and joint ventures; learning how to share experience*. The practitioners experienced *confidence* and *trust* as main resources Estonian LAE used for Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education.

KEYWORDS: Estonian liberal adult education, Nordic-Baltic cooperation, socio-cultural phenomenon, experiences and meanings, case study.

ABSTRAKT: W ostatnich dziesięcioleciach Estońska Liberalna Edukacja Dorosłych (LAE) otrzymywała wsparcie w ramach współpracy nordycko-bałtyckiej w obszarze edukacji dorosłych. Współpraca, oparta na przężnej sieci zawodowej, byłaby niemożliwa bez wkładu ze strony praktyków estońskiej LAE. Co z ich perspektywy leży u podstaw zjawiska, jakim jest estońska LAE? Niniejszy artykuł odnosi się do wyników studium przypadku i omawia znaczenia, jakie praktycy LAE przypisują swoim doświadczeniom współpracy nordycko-bałtyckiej. Artykuł ukazuje, w jaki sposób znaczenia te kształtowały się w okresie niepodległości po upadku ZSRR i przed członkostwem w UE, w latach 1991-2004. W celu ujęcia tego okresu jako przejścia systemu LAE z jednego stanu równowagi do drugiego wykorzystany został model zmiany społecznej Parsonsa. Koncentrując się na zmianie znaczeń, zebrano dane empiryczne za pomocą dwóch retrospektywnych zogniskowanych wywia-

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dów grupowych przeprowadzonych z 14 praktykami LAE oraz w drodze analizy danych zastanych z różnorodnych źródeł z owego okresu. W analizie danych posłużono się metodami tematycznej i etnograficznej analizy treści, a wyniki przedstawiono w ramach historii przypadku. Na podstawie wyników zostały wyróżnione trzy okresy: okres *praktykanta, transformacji i równości*. Czasowy wymiar zjawiska został dodatkowo przedstawiony w metaforach, takich jak *początkujący, zasianie ziarna i kiełkowanie*. Nowy stan równowagi, uzyskany do 2004 roku, został opisany jako czas na *rozpoznanie podstawowych wartości, samorozwój, równa współpraca międzynarodowa i wspólne przedsięwzięcia, uczenie się dzielenia się doświadczeniem*. Praktycy doświadczyli *pewności siebie i zaufania* jako głównych zasobów, wykorzystywanych przez estońską LAE w ramach współpracy nordycko-bałtyckiej w zakresie edukacji dorosłych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: estońska liberalna edukacja dorosłych, współpraca nordycko-bałtycka, zjawisko społeczno-kulturowe, doświadczenia i znaczenia, studium przypadku.

Introduction

Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education was established in 1991 and it was a developmental process that promoted the basic values of Nordic Adult Education. The aims of Nordic adult education – supporting individual growth, inspiring culture of democracy, transmitting cultural traditions and integrating these into Estonian Liberal Adult Education (LAE) activities, relying on dialogue, equality, voluntariness, responsibility, and valuing education for life – were the main values of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in early post-Soviet period (Ibrus 2005, pp. 38-39).

In 1992, the Nordic countries and the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) signed a regional cooperation agreement for the purpose of regular dialogue and cooperation in a variety of fields, including adult education. The main goals of this cooperation were to support democratic developments as well as the development of adult education in the Baltic States, including Estonia. Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education is based on a strong professional network in adult education which has not been possible without inputs from practitioners of Estonian LAE. Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the 1990s has been seen as enabling the LAE community to translate the Nordic experience into a local context (Åberg 2008).

This paper is based on findings from the research project “Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education: experiences and stories” (2014-2018). There were two stages in this research. The first stage (2014-2016) focused on research questions related to the professional identity and experience of two generations of Estonian adult educators, who were actively involved in Baltic-Nordic cooperation (Jõgi & Karu 2018). The second stage focused on the analysis of the experiences of the practitioners of LAE (2016-2018). Our aim in this paper is to analyse the changing meanings of Nordic-Baltic cooperation for Estonian LAE. We discuss three research questions from the second stage of the research: how do Estonian LAE practitioners experience Nordic-Baltic cooperation in

adult education? What did this cooperation mean for Estonian LAE practitioners and how did these meanings change over time?

Below we provide contextual and theoretical background of the research, give an overview of the methodological design of the study, and present our findings as the case story of Estonian LAE. To conclude, we then discuss the empirical findings, highlighting the changing meanings of Nordic-Baltic cooperation.

Liberal Adult Education in Estonia: contextual background

Estonia has been involved in a constant process of renewing its strategies and legal framework related to education since the late 1980s, but an analytical approach to educational policies seems not to have taken much hold¹. More specific research is available on adult education in general including studies on teaching and learning practices and the participation of adults in non-formal and formal educational settings (Roosmaa & Saar 2012; Saar et al. 2013; Saar et al. 2014a, b; Roosmaa & Aavik 2016). There were some mixed methodology research projects also on LAE carried out based on a case study approach (Jääger et al. 2011), with a focus on adult learners, their motivation and attitudes to learning in LAE (Jääger 2001; Valgmaa et al. 2002) and on participation in adult training courses in social-demographic and non-formal learning contexts (Jääger et al. 2011). The focus on LAE as a system has overall been rare.

In Estonian policy documents, the term *non-formal education* is sometimes referred to as part of the larger education system and sometimes as a system in itself (Karu et al. 2019). For example, Reet Valgmaa and Erle Nõmm (2008) explained that for Estonian society LAE, and especially its cultural aspect, carries an important function of civil society – counterbalancing the other functions of economic order, political developments and dominant social patterns. Eesmaa (2003) distinguishes between the political, social, economic and cultural aspects of LAE itself, laying out the shared basic values of the LAE community. Attempting to explain factors that have had an impact on the development of the field, Tallin (2005) suggests that Estonian LAE could be understood as a social community, owing its success to educated and enthusiastic educators, an efficient cooperation network that reaches to other European countries, and the spirit of cooperation that relies on mutual trust based on shared basic values.

LAE can be seen as an inherently Nordic cultural feature which relies on the premise of wide social support, originating in the philosophy of Frederik Grundtvig whereby

¹ As exceptions, see, for example, Aava 2009 on neo-liberalisation of discourse in school curricula; Ümarik, 2015 on reforms in vocational education; Saar and Möttus 2013; Saar and Roosalu 2017 on post-soviet developments in Estonian higher education; Aavik and Marling 2017 on neo-liberalisation in universities.

any individual is entitled to learn and participate in social decision-making processes (Gustavsson 2000; see also discussion in Maliszewski 2008). The concept of LAE refers to a variety of historically changing and transforming forms of social practice (Kantasalmi 2001, p. 7). Instead of seeing the Estonian LAE as catching-up to other countries, Kulbok-Lattik (2015) sees that initiatives of civil society activities with educating aims already contributed to the formation of a successful Estonian nation-building (1860-1918). When Estonian western modernity was replaced by Soviet modernity (1940-91), the greatest change in Estonian society was the suppression of the bottom-up initiative (Kulbok-Lattik 2015). It has even been suggested that the unique Estonian system of adult education could at least partly be responsible for the fact that Estonia was able to maintain its rapid development even during the Soviet period, and that Estonian people could retain their psychological stability, self-assurance and culture despite severe ideological pressure (Märja 2000). By the end of 1980s, Estonian adult education had been developed into an effective system, and the responsibility for educating the adult population was borne by the state but with the changes of 1990s it was left to be regulated by the market, resulting in a high inequality in regards to accessing adult learning (Märja 2000, p. 303). Some authors have gone further, claiming that not only did the inequality in access to adult education characterise the post-Soviet period of Estonian history, but that it is possible and indeed useful to discuss post-Soviet de-development of human capital (Saar et al. 2013).

The period of 1991-2004 brought a number of changes in the social and political arena of the EU, including in the field of lifelong learning and adult education (Saar et al. 2013b). Amid the neo-liberal context in post-socialist Estonia, lifelong learning became first and foremost construed as contributing to national human capital and thus to economic growth (Aava 2009, Karu et al. 2019). Access to adult education was unequal and favoured those with greater cultural and economic resources (Ginter & Stevick 2007; Saar et al. 2013; Saar et al. 2014a, b). Still, the Estonian LAE was in a unique situation: there was a specific tradition of work-related formal adult education, in parallel with the long heritage of cultural LAE reinventing itself in the new context. Attempts at the periodisation of Estonian adult education (Jõgi 2012) distinguish 1991-2003, 2004-2010 and 2011 onwards, suggesting that the role of international cooperation was most important during 1991-2004, when the field of Estonian adult education was in the process of institutionalisation. By 2004, diverse adult learning opportunities had been established, and thus during the next period 2004-2010 only the refinement of national strategies and policies was carried out. As Estonia was now a member of the EU, most international cooperation was channelled into this framework, so the role of bilateral or regional cooperation decreased. The focus of this paper is on the period of 1991-2004, even though some analyses of post-Soviet developments in

Estonian education set the start of the processes to earlier times (Tomusk 2004, Saar & Roosalu 2017), and developments in LAE started before 1991. Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education during these years (see discussion in Jõgi et al. 2018) was part of international cooperation in the field of adult education that has remained an important tool for Estonia and across Europe². At the start of the 1990s, Estonia was a classical transition society characterised by a mimetical attitude to western examples (Lauristin 2012, p. 13). It has been claimed earlier (Jüriado 2002) that as a result of Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education during the period 1991-2004, significant structural and social changes took place, as well as, changes in understanding of what LAE means. Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education gave numerous opportunities for cooperation and learning, helped to understand the meanings of liberal education, gave experience, wisdom and changed the way of thinking (Jüriado 2002, p. 15). The mid-90s saw the evolution of the understanding of liberal adult education as a general cultural education and phenomenon. Historical events also played an important role as it was clear that liberal adult education was not a new phenomenon for Estonia, and all this had already happened in 1920s-30s. In the mid-2000s, the notion and meaning of liberal education became more instrumental and was defined as an open and flexible system of life-long learning which offered the widest range of training possible in order to support the individual's self-development, coping and being a citizen, as well as, to help preserve the culturally independent existence of a community (Valgmaa et al. 2002).

Nordic-baltic cooperation in the context of liberal adult education

Understanding the changing meanings of Nordic-Baltic cooperation has to take in to account the historical periodisation of Estonian LAE (see Jõgi 2012), where 1991-2003 was the period when the field was in the process of institutionalisation.

We will look at LAE as a system in itself, and we turn to the structural functionalist AGIL model by sociologist Talcott Parsons (1970) to explore the change in LAE: we assume that in 1991, the previous equilibrium was lost, and by 2004, a new equilibrium had been found. Talcott Parsons explains that all social systems tend to search for some state of equilibrium, or else they would not be able to maintain themselves. The state of equilibrium depends on the balance of the four core functions (AGIL-functions), that are prerequisites for any social system. Although culture, or meaning and value systems, is just one of these four and thus would not solely determine the social system,

² An up-to-date list with a variety of cooperation tools, including an overview of bilateral agreements in the field, is collected and presented in the Eurydice database, see https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/other-dimensions-internationalisation-adult-education-and-training-20_en.

it would necessarily define it. We are thus interested in the way that culture manifested itself through meaning systems in the case of LAE during the transformative times. We maintain here that during the times of turbulent social transformations a new equilibrium has to be sought. We claim that this applies to LAE in Estonia during the years 1991-2004, when LAE shifted from the pre-independence state of equilibrium, through the turbulent social transformations to new equilibrium in 2004, when social stability was assumed by and in EU-membership.

During this process of finding a new state of equilibrium for Estonian LAE, Nordic-Baltic cooperation was one of the social responses to the state of normlessness (Merton 1938). On the one hand, the transformations in socialist Estonia started largely on the background of civil activism and established alternative democratic civil society more widely, which all had happened before 1991 (Nørgaard 1992). On the other hand, there was of course a fear that post-socialist countries would lack the trust necessary for developing well-functioning institutions for market democracies (Kornai et al. 2004). It has been suggested that the main aim of the bilateral Nordic-Baltic cooperation might have even been to prepare the Baltic countries for their EU membership (Bergman 2006). Bergman (2006), discussing the Nordic states' long-time commitment to a distinctly social-democratic set of internationalist values and the fact that demise of communism in their adjacent region provided an excellent opportunity to seek new forms of cooperation with their Baltic neighbours, coined the term 'adjacent internationalisation' to mark the visible Baltic dimension in the Nordic internationalism. She explains that while Nordic states joined their efforts to prepare the Baltic states for EU membership, the adjacent internationalism also gave rise to an emergent Nordic-Baltic sphere of community, contributing to the re-invigoration of the normative dimensions of inter-Nordic cooperation as well as Nordic internationalism more generally. However, it is this clear assumption of one-directional learning – analysing the specific field of adult education one author even dubs it (Åberg 2008, p. 12) as *dissemination* or *spread* – enables suggestions that the main mechanisms that explain such spread of ideas can be understood as *diffusion*, *socialisation*, and *translation*. This witnesses the tendency of mistakenly construing what they call *cooperation* to be in fact a one-directional power relationship – even if 'some degree of reciprocity can exist', as in 'an open-minded donor or transmitter can gain valuable knowledge and experience from the cooperation' (Åberg 2008, p. 16). Even if interests of the Nordic partners are secured with the spread of their values, there is also a different aspect in their gains. Not entirely irrelevant in the whole process was the fact that Nordic governments did dedicate funds for the civil society organisations from their countries to carry out projects in the Baltic states in the field of LAE – relatively large sums for Estonian dimensions at the time – that at least in some occasions are known not to have reached the targeted

beneficiaries (Märja 2000) but always secured that the costs of the entities involved were fully covered. Thus, the investment of time, knowhow and efforts did not mean massive material investments for the individual donor communities but promised at least identity gains from the meaningful roles within the international cooperation project –for the ones that were not that *open-minded* (see Åberg 2008, p. 16).

Our current paper attempts to pay closer attention to the way Nordic-Baltic cooperation experiences within the field of adult education were understood and conceptualised by the Estonian LAE community. There is some recent conceptualisation on this cooperation based on adult educators' experiences (Jõgi & Karu 2018), showing how the individual experiences influenced Estonian adult educators' professional identity, which maintains the social values associated with the Nordic educational paradigm, such as trust, freedom, equality, but also seeing adult educators as the agents of culture. In the case of Lithuania, researchers show (Tereseviciene et al. 2018) that cooperation was never a direct transfer of a Nordic model, but served as inspiration with its success related to the civic responsibility and active participation growing out of the bottom-up approaches of group work, cooperation, discussions and learning circles inherent in the Nordic tradition of adult education. Latvian adult educators developed their system of adult education as a result of the cooperation with its Nordic partners, and it has been claimed that while the cooperation started as 'donorship' from the Nordic side, it grew into 'partnership' between equals (Carlsen & Maslo 2018). We are unaware of similar analyses of the role of cooperation for Estonian LAE. In-depth research of the cooperation between Swedish and Estonian liberal adult education organisations (Åberg 2008) serves both as a good description of the Estonian LAE community as well as an analysis of the cooperation. It shows how the emergence of Estonian LAE resulted in a process of internal learning and socialisation, at the same time being a process of continuous translation, in which actors discussed, re-thought, reorganised and changed the organisational forms, activities and approaches, creating new aims for this new context (Åberg 2008). This indeed does lend itself to assume similarities with the Lithuanian experience (Tereseviciene et al. 2018), whereby the Nordic model was an inspiration, on the basis of which new features were included in the local context. The discussion of the role the experience of such a cooperation played for Estonian adult educators (Jõgi & Karu 2018) shows how the Nordic value of equality appears in the professional identity of adult educators. However, whether the association to equality is indeed a result of the cooperation, as discussed in the case of Latvia, remains unclear. Thus, we set out to explore the meanings that Estonian LAE practitioners attributed to the Nordic-Baltic cooperation experience, focusing on the change over time to understand the process of reaching a new equilibrium of the meaning.

Research design, data collection and sample

Our study is based on a social-constructivist approach, emphasising the following:

- the importance of interactions between agents, contexts and contextual factors;
- meaningful reality is socially constructed (Crotty 1998, as cited in Patton 2002, p. 97);
- phenomena can be understood within a concrete context and cannot be generalised into another (Patton 2002, p. 98).

Explanatory single case study design (Yin 2003) is used in order to construct the case story of LAE which can be understood as a social-cultural phenomenon in its specific context. This allows the researcher to gain insights into the causes of the phenomenon under investigation, including the relationship between causes and outcomes (Baxter & Jack 2008). The case research is always a complicated and demanding process consisting of several steps (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000, p. 281) – collection of case data, exploring conceptual and contextual frames and the complexity of the secondary data from multiple sources, analysing and reducing data in the case studied. This study was conducted in three stages: 1) gathering empirical data; 2) data analysis; 3) constructing the case of LAE in the context of Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education.

Empirical data was collected in two ways: collecting and selecting secondary data from multiple documentary sources about Estonian LAE to contextualise the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education; and conducting two focus-group interviews with LAE practitioners with the experience of this cooperation. The combination of data was chosen given the lack of published information about the cooperation; a similar strategy was used when Latvian experiences of Nordic-Baltic cooperation was explored (Carlsen & Maslo 2018).

The selection of documentary sources with the secondary data included published and unpublished materials from the dedicated thematic library from the Estonian Non-Formal Adult Education Association (ENAEA), representing the years 1991 to 2004. The final sample consists of 16 sources of secondary data (SD1-SD16). By type of publication these ranged from the ENAEA annual reports from 1992-2011 (unpublished), summary reports of the cooperation projects (unpublished), a collection of papers by practitioners (published), monographs on the history of ENAEA and its cultural cooperation projects (published), annual activity reports by Open Education Council (Avatud Hariduse Liit) (published) from 1991, 1994 and 1996, and review reports from the period 1984-2004 (unpublished).

The available documents were not able to provide a full picture, nor offer analytical insight into the events of the times, and to understand these in their context, it was

decided to collect additional insight from the LAE practitioners. Thus, focus group interviews were conducted with a purposefully selected sample (Teddlie & Yu 2007, p. 77), using a criterion-based selection sampling strategy (Merriam 2009, p. 78). A criterion-based sample allows the possibility to collect empirical components from different perspectives (Patton 2002, p. 238). For the purpose of our research, the sample group was formed by inviting Estonian LAE practitioners. The final sample group consisted of 14 practitioners and educators of LAE, who 1) had participated in different courses, study trips and projects for practitioners and adult educators in Nordic countries between 1991-2004; 2) at the time of the interview were working in the field of LAE as course or project leaders; 3) had been the long-term members of ENAEA; 4) at the time of the interview were NGO leaders in the field of LAE. We conducted two focus groups: focus group 1 – eight participants, all women, born between 1950-1960 and focus group 2 – six participants, four women and two men, born between 1955-1968.

For the focus group we applied the less-structured approach, which is useful for exploratory research (Morgan 1997, p. 12), and a social-constructivist perspective whereby a focus group interview is seen as a dynamic social process where it is important to create an open and confidential situation for communication (Farnsworth & Boon 2010). The main themes for focus group interviews were *Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education, its impact on development of Estonian LAE and experiences of practitioners relating to this cooperation*.

The research questions guided the construction of *schedule* for the focus group (Krueger & Casey 2009) and targeted open-ended questions (Wilkinson 2004, p. 177). During the analysis phase of the first focus group interview, further questions arose and therefore the second focus group interview was organised, dedicated more closely to the discussion of the meanings of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation on Estonian LAE. The focus groups with LAE practitioners were designed to gather their retrospective experience in the past while the interviews aimed to reflect the meanings that they give to the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in LAE in hindsight, from the awareness of all the developments since. The time difference between the events in question, 1991-2004, and the data collection carried out in 2016 was a necessary and sufficient distance to look back from.

All participants were informed about the purpose and content of the research and the aim of the focus group interview. Both focus group interviews, with the session duration ranging from 1.5 to 2 hours, took place in a venue familiar to participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed after the sessions and then analysed by two researchers.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out in three stages using ethnographic content analysis (ECA) for secondary data, and thematic content analysis (TCA) for empirical material from focus group interviews. Due to the complexity of the secondary data sources ECA was used in the first stage of the analysis process for the selection and reduction of gathered empirical material (Wilkinson 2004). The aim of using ECA was to discover, define and understand the context of LAE and present contextual illustrations of research phenomena (Wilkinson 2004, p. 183). The analytical process of ECA included the following steps: 1) selection and collection of secondary data from 16 sources, identification of the data for the analysis; 2) data preparation for inductive analysis; 3) selection of thematic issues on research phenomena; 3) open coding and categorisation; 4) preparation of structured protocols and memos for writing the case (Wilkinson 2004). As the result of the analysis memos were written and relevant questions for the focus group interviews formulated.

Empirical data analysis based on focus group interview transcriptions was carried out using thematic content analysis (TCA) (Wilkinson 2004). TCA was used to identify themes from both focus group interviews. The analysis included five steps (Saldana 2009, p. 13; Wilkinson 2004, p. 183): 1) the data from transcriptions was prepared for inductive and holistic analysis and read carefully; 2) the units of analysis were explored as segments for open coding; 3) the units provided the basis for a coding system and axial coding was used; 4) initial codes were generated; 5) thematic codes were applied and analysed horizontally across all empirical materials and interview questions from the focus groups. The coding process was based on coding strategy, suggested for focus group data by Morgan (1997, as cited in Wilkinson 2004, p. 183): noting whether each group discussion contains a given code; noting whether each participant mentions a given code; noting all mentions of a given code across two groups and participants. With the results from TCA, a comprehensive overview with illustrative quotations was produced (Wilkinson 2004, p. 182).

In the next stage, the findings of the TCA were systematised as a list of meanings that were attributed to the Nordic-Baltic cooperation for LAE. In the final stage of data analysis, the main findings from TCA were integrated with the findings from ECA. The results were then presented as a case story that combines the two, with empirical illustration from the focus groups (FG1, FG2) and from the secondary data sources (SD1 – SD16) highlighting the meaningful illustrations emerging from the findings. Based on the analysis, the story contains elements of narrative: time and social context, time and events, people, time and experience (Baxter & Jack 2008). Flyvbjerg suggests avoiding linking the case with theories and advises to relate the case to broader

philosophical positions (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 238). We focused in this study on the emic perspective (Harris 1976): on the experience, meanings, perceptions and values of the people involved in our research. Due to the limited volume of the paper, we recount the shortened version of the case story without personal experiences and stories of the research participants. The complexity of analysing and presenting such data is reported by many researchers (Withnall 2006, p. 36; Wilkinson 2006, p. 182; McAlpine 2016). Below we present the case story in four parts: pre-history of LAE; apprentice period (1991-1995); transformation period (1996-2000); period of equality 2001-2004, and then discuss the main results.

Estonian liberal adult education and nordic-baltic cooperation: the case story

The main characteristic traits of Estonian LAE include: long historical processes with periods of socio-cultural interruptions; maintaining local cultural identity, traditions and sustainability; using elements of folk culture in education by LAE practitioners; holistic understanding of individual development and learning; and integrating Nordic educational traditions and values into LAE activities (SD9; SD2; SD5).

Pre-history of LAE in Estonia demonstrates that during the first period of Estonia's independence (1918-1940) liberal adult education was one of the most significant phenomena of popular culture, aimed at developing adult education and people's spirits, as well as, at rearing morality. In 1918-1940, Estonian liberal education supported and inspired national self-awareness and the quest for independence and identity (SD6) and relied on historic experience, definite national identity (SD6). Education and culture associations played a major part in the development of liberal education. There was cooperation with and support from the Nordic countries with liberal educators from Denmark, Sweden and Finland sharing their experience. The 1990s were years of learning and adapting to social, political and economic changes in Estonian society, so decision makers and educators dealing with liberal education had to learn and adapt as well.

The apprentice period (1991-1995) is characterised by learning from Nordic traditions of liberal education on the level of *'giving and taking'* (SD3), the best metaphor to describe the period would be *'sprouting the seeds'* (FG 2). This period can be considered the start of the *'re-awakening'* of liberal education when Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education began, influencing significant developments, values and activities of Estonia's adult education, including liberal adult education in particular, at the same time affecting the formation of the network of liberal education training centres.

The first years of Estonian-Nordic cooperation in liberal education were characterised by the wish to follow Nordic adult education models, a readiness to accept Nordic

educational values with the focus on personality development. The documents on educational policy used the phrase ‘Nordic model’ (SD1). In 1993 the Association of Liberal Education Teachers was founded and in 1994 the Estonian Liberal Education Association was restored, as an outcome of the cooperation with Nordic countries.

The most significant part of Nordic adult education is *folkeoplysning* (popular education) with the education activity targeted at the independent, responsible person, ready for dialogue. This idea is the basis for Nordic adult education and the origin of the example taken by Estonian liberal education (SD8).

Nordic – Baltic cooperation and relations with people showed how we developed, they did not teach anything, but, despite that, we were learning. We learned, made choices, putting them into our cultural context (FG2).

During the apprentice period, an institutional basis for adult education was created in Estonia with the support of Nordic countries.

We created a network for democratic participation and took over the Nordic ideas of popular education – free, voluntary and inclusive. And we are grateful to Nordic countries for the cooperation, they helped effectively, giving us “a hook”, not a fish (FG1).

The transformation period (1996-2000) was a time of fundamental changes and processes in Estonian society: the decentralisation of life and the transition to a liberal market economy. Changes on all educational levels – all of which caused an even greater need for cooperation with and learning from Nordic traditions, creating preconditions for co-learning and cooperation. Common cooperation projects and activities were initiated as the result of the integration of values and traditions of Nordic liberal education. The period witnessed a growth in the number of Estonian Non-Formal Adult Education Association members.

In the mid-90s the whole ‘intuitive wisdom’ influenced us so much that we felt that we had had all this before. All developments were based on the activities of NGOs, societies, folk houses, libraries, and their cooperation brought the opportunities of liberal education closer to people (FG2).

Liberal education of the time was mainly headed by NGOs. *It was a time of learning and developing’ (FG1).* The essence of the period may be expressed as *cooperation and learning, the metaphor being ‘sowing the seeds’ (FG1).*

Participation in Nordic cooperation projects was a great opportunity and a great experience. At the same time I discovered and got to know the roots of liberal education. In what way we are similar to Nordic countries and in what aspects we differ (FG2).

The period of equality 2001-2004 is connected with Estonia’s integration into the European Union.

This time had a fundamental meaning for the development of adult education as it laid the foundation for the training of educators working in the area of adult and liberal education (FG1).

Similar preconditions had evolved for cooperation, so this period was characterised by *equal cooperation and cooperation between evenly matched partners*. The metaphor for this period might be *sprouting* (FG2). During this period the Estonian Non-Formal Adult Education Association, having achieved the position of an equal partner in relations with the public sector, participated in educational policy creation. There was active cooperation with Baltic countries' umbrella organisations: the Latvian Adult Education Association and the Lithuanian Adult Education Association. The Estonian Non-Formal Adult Education Association became a member of EAEA and continued cooperation within the Nordic network for adult learners. In this period, the training of managers and educators of liberal education centres actively dealt with *developing the foundation for the training of educators working in the field of adult and liberal education* (FG 1).

We consider it important that a teacher in liberal education is the carrier of culture who sets the example by their style of being and living. Cultural continuity is significant for a culture-carrier (SD7).

By the 2000s, liberal education in Estonia had evolved in accordance with the Nordic liberal education model. However, its manifestations are peculiar, most closely following Swedish liberal education. Though liberal education is dominated by the instrumental function, it manifests the distinctive features of Nordic liberal education, including attitudes, which value the social and cultural function of liberal education i.e. social dialogue.

One has to employ resources to help people discover and understand on their own that they are the value, that they can speak themselves and do a lot of cooperation. Positiveness and care, dialogue and listening, these are important (FG1).

Yet social and cultural functions largely remain unintegrated, the cooperation between liberal education training centres and local governments is still not determined and little coordinated. Liberal education activities do not expand any more, mainly because of insufficiency of financial resources and state support (SD8; SD4). However, the main features of the 'values' model of liberal education training remain.

Discussion of main findings

As we aimed to explore how the meaning of Nordic-Baltic cooperation for Estonian LAE changed over time, as seen by the LAE community, it is important to grasp the chronology of Estonian LAE in the context of meanings and periods of Nordic-Baltic cooperation. When analysing the results the thematic codes were structured as meanings of experiences of practitioners under the three periods, with the following main and specific meanings given to Nordic-Baltic cooperation in LAE: 1) apprentice period

Table 1. Meanings attributed to the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the field of Estonian Liberal Adult Education across three periods during 1991-2004

Period	Main meanings and related metaphors	Specific meaning: empirical illustrations
Apprentice period 1991-1995	Time of new beginning, new knowledge and experiences: 'new door', 'starter'	<i>New beginning for Estonian LAE; an optimistic, interesting and positive time; the time of new knowledge. Time for a new experience in learning and education.</i>
Transformation period 1996-2000	Time for changes, discovering, learning and cooperation and new identity: 'new roof', 'sowing the seeds'	<i>Time with and for many changes, opportunities and actions; time with right people; time of great learning and discovering; self-recognition and self-realisation time; learning how to learn and how to cooperate; good network and knowledge. Time of recognising that the Nordic cooperation impacts on the identity of Estonian Liberal Adult Education.</i>
Period of equality 2001-2004	Time of common ideas, exchange of experience and equal cooperation: 'another world', 'sprouting', 'wisdom'	<i>Time of recognition of the main values; time for self-development; time for equal international cooperation and joint ventures; time to learn how to share experience. Time of confidence and trust as main resources for cooperation.</i>

Source: authors' own elaboration.

1991-1995; 2) transformation period 1996-2000; 3) period of equality 2001-2004 (Table 1).

The apprentice period (1991-1995) was experienced by practitioners as a time of new beginning, new knowledge and experiences. It was explained with metaphors such as 'a trigger', 'a new door', illustrating *the time with the new experience and learning*. Transformation period (1996-2000) was experienced as a time for changes, discovering, learning and cooperation. It was the *time of recognising the Nordic cooperation impact on the identity of Estonian LAE*, best explained with metaphors of 'sowing the seeds' and 'new roof'. The period of equality (2001-2004) was a time of common ideas, an exchange of experience and equal cooperation, metaphorically best expressed with 'sprouting' and 'another world'. In the experiences of practitioners, it was time of wisdom, with *confidence and trust* as the main resources for cooperation, and time for equal international cooperation and joint venture.

Over the three periods, the specific features of development of LAE emerged (Figure 1): *new beginning, new knowledge and experiences; changes, discovering, learning and cooperation; common ideas, exchange of experience and equal cooperation* are the main meanings of the phenomenon of LAE in the context of Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education over the period 1991-2004.

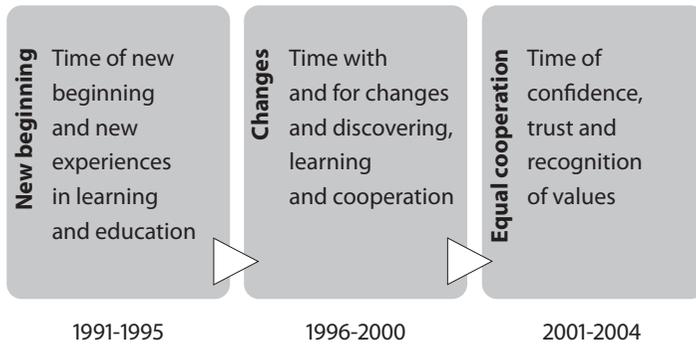


Figure 1. Changing meanings of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education for LAE
Source: authors' own elaboration.

LAE had indeed found its new equilibrium (Parsons 1970) by 2004 that could be described as having found *common ideas* and reached the phase of *exchange of experience and equal cooperation*, the process involved moving through the experiences of *new beginnings* and *times of changes*.

Conclusion

As is shown in this paper the meanings retrospectively attributed to the Nordic-Baltic cooperation for LAE changed across the period under consideration.

Our analysis focused on the lateral function of LAE that manifests itself in values and norms, beliefs and ideologies. These were explored through the meanings that participants attributed to Nordic-Baltic cooperation which form the phenomenon. We claim that any attempts to understand the phenomenon of LAE needs to pay more attention to the experience of the people involved in LAE. Their individual experience is reflected in the meanings that they attribute to this, which becomes the core feature of the phenomenon.

Our analysis revealed that the main components of the phenomenon were expressed in temporal concepts, changing over the three distinct periods within the span of 1991-2004: time of new beginnings; time for changes; time of common ideas and equal exchange.

The most influential period of the Estonian LAE was the apprentice period (1991-1995), when the members of Estonian LAE community were first exposed to the new ideas and became open to the possibility that something like Nordic LAE could be developed and maintained in Estonia. The cooperation worked as '*a trigger*', creating a community and joining members into pursuing the common quest of establishing, developing and protecting the values and principles of LAE. The transformation

period (1996-2000) allowed the strengthening of the LAE community and continued development, improvement and enlarging of what had been started earlier. Also, both the individual and institutional learning processes that had started during the first period of the cooperation needed time for the learning to happen, therefore, some of the effects were only actualised later. Thus, the metaphor of '*sowing the seeds*', resulted in '*sprouting*' only in the next period i.e. the period of equality (2001-2004), the time of established cooperation and international networks.

The periodisation is in line with the socioeconomic development periods in Estonia over this period, and the research results are generalised (only) in this particular social, cultural and historical context. During this process, it was realised that LAE could provide the alternative to those dominating ideas, both during the Soviet period as well as early post-Soviet period of Estonian society. It is possible that without the external legitimation and support that was experienced through Nordic-Baltic cooperation the LAE culture would have changed, likely diminished, at the expense of the strengthening of adult education's economic or political role, in the wake of changing times that turned the society to a neoliberal market economy.

Of course, case research is always a complicated and demanding process consisting of several steps (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2000), and in this case, time should be understood as an actor in its own rights. The time required to understand the phenomenon spans first over 15 years of the events in question (1991-2004), and additional temporal distance was necessary for retrospective reflection, as the study participants took the position of first-hand witness. The importance of time is also reflected in the temporal concepts set in the core of the phenomenon. Thus, the case research we presented here is our testimony to slow science.

We would also like to emphasise that the case study approach that includes the triangulation of primary data from participants and secondary data from different sources is the only way to approach the events from a distance. Inevitably, this has several limitations such as the requirement to reduce the available data to reveal its meaning and answer the research questions, but also the need to attempt to distinguish subjectivity in secondary sources. Thus, beyond the interpretation we have provided, based on these purposeful reductions of the data we carried out, we suggest the collected case data would, in fact, enable further exploration and this might provide grounds for additional interpretations.

The case story and contextual background of the study support the understanding of the phenomenon itself, even if we are fully aware of the limitations of our study, such as the narrowing effect of the shortened case story which can influence the integrity and contextual coherence of the case and the phenomenon of LAE in Estonia. We thus welcome any future studies that would consider the rich material for the analytical

scrutiny it deserves. The study on LAE in its historical context, combining retrospective data with the analysis of sources originating from that time, is an important step in understanding how the changes take place to balance LAE, from one state of equilibrium to another, and in between.

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