It happened in December 2009. People engaged in adult learning came together in Belém in Brazil. Policymakers, deciders and learners met and shared knowledge, information, opinions, and discussions.

All adult learners have the right to access and participate in adult learning opportunities relevant to their needs and aspirations (International Adult Learners’ Charter, article 2)

Let’s plan the future together
The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education, Confintea VI

The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (Confintea VI) provided an important platform for policy dialogue and advocacy on adult learning and non-formal education at global level. UNESCO Member States, United Nations agencies, multi- and bi-lateral cooperation agencies, organizations from civil society, the private sector and learners from all world regions were involved. CONFINTEA VI was hosted by the Government of Brazil in Belém from 1 to 4 December 2009. The Objectives of Confintea VI were:

--to push forward the recognition of adult learning and education as an important element of and factor conducive to lifelong learning, of which literacy is the foundation;

-to highlight the crucial role of adult learning and education for the realization of current international education and development agendas (EFA, MDGs, UNLD, LIFE, and DESD); and

-to renew political momentum and commitment and to develop the tools for implementation order to move from rhetoric to action. http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/confintea/
The learners voice – the story
For the first time, learners were an important part of the UNESCO conference Confintea. And no doubt, the learners were all happy to get this great opportunity to be there and underline the importance of adult learning.

The Idea that the Learners’ Network should go Global emerged during an International Adult Learners Week conference in Oslo, Norway, October 2005

During a presentation Ms. Margaret Kamanyire, Women Welfare Foundation, Uganda, said that the learners in Africa needed help from learners in the developed world. Another International Adult Learners Week conference organised by NIACE and UNESCO was held in Manchester during September 2007. This time forty learners were invited from around the world.

We felt that we were strong enough to act on some of the outcomes of the Confintea V conference, that was held in Hamburg in 1997. Some of the outcomes from that conference highlighted:

-The need to develop the Learners’ Voice
-The role of learners in the governance of learning
-The adoption of International Adult Learners’ Week and Learning Festivals.
With help from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), NIACE and Scotland’s Learning Partnership we secured a place at Confintea VI and an opportunity to put our case from the main platform.

Christopher Fairgrieve, Bettina Bochynek, UNESCO and John Gates (right) together at Confintea

In March 2009, fifty learners and fifty providers met in Edinburgh Scotland at a conference called “A Time for Learning: Paving the Way to Confintea VI: the Adult Learners’ Voice”. During the conference all participants worked on a Charter for Learning which was presented at the Confintea VI conference:

**International Adult Learners’ Charter**

**Policy Development**
*Article 1*: All adult learners have a right to participate in the policy development for adult and lifelong learning systems

**Access and Participation**
*Article 2*: All adult learners have the right to access and participate in adult learning opportunities relevant to their needs and aspirations

**Advice Guidance and Support**
*Article 3*: Adult learners will have the right to receive high quality comprehensive, impartial, current information, advice and support to enable them to make informed choices about their learning at all stages

**Resources**
*Article 4*: The resourcing of adult learning is essential to the development of sustainable adult and lifelong learning systems
Quality
*Article 5:* All adult learners have a right to expect high quality adult learning programmes designed to meet their needs

Innovation
*Article 6:* Research and innovation are indispensable components of high quality adult learning systems

National
*Article 7:* National organisations play a major role in supporting adult learners’ democratic representation at local and national level

International Co-operation
*Article 8:* International co-operation is a prerequisite for the universal and well-balanced promotion of adult learning and ensuring that the rights of adult learners are protected


Dancing ladies at CONFINTAEVI in Belem

Foto: Jan Helge Svendsen
Learning Ambassador – NVL in Belém

NVL, the Nordic network for adult learning, has as one of its goals to motivate for learning. Within NVL there is a Nordic network for learning ambassadors. They use their voice to motivate and encourage people to learn by telling their personal stories about learning challenges and how knowledge and learning empower them.

The ambassadors participate in conferences, meetings and as stakeholders in different reference groups.

At Confintea VI, Jan Helge Svendsen, the Nordic learning ambassador, told his story together with learners with different experiences, representing different countries. For Jan Helge it was not easy to learn, the writing and reading was too difficult. And that’s also why he could not pass the final exams and get his curriculum. But as Jan Helge told, he found his own way. He is a fighter; he got his education through participation in NGOs, courses and in his engagement in people. Sport activities and challenging new and difficult situation is his basic life attitude. That’s also probably why he is so good at motivating others to learn and to face new and difficult situations.

His special task is to motivate and lead blind people to try activities no one thought they could manage. But together with Jan Helge they do – either it is to climb the mountain or to dive deep under the water surface. On the wall we can see a blind girl enjoying herself on the top of a mountain. Jan Helge was interviewed by Ellen Stavlund, NVL.
Report of the workshop on Learners’ Voice: Confintea VI

The moderator (Lord Tony Young, UK) introduced the workshop by stating the purpose, which was to examine the importance of ensuring that learners are encouraged and enabled to have democratic representation within the system. There already exists a range of mechanisms across member countries that involve and encourage learner representation, but what impact do they have on policy development and how do they influence the quality and range of teaching and learning? How can learners take an active role in how their education is managed and delivered?

The workshop attempted to:

- consider strategies to involve learners
- look to exchange good practice in involving learners
- aim to celebrate achievements in learner involvement
- identify issues and recommendations for Confintea VI.

The four areas to be covered were:

- policy influence: national and regional learner forums and how they influence policy
- learning festivals and campaigns: involvement of learners to secure change and greater participation
- quality improvement: involving learners in improving teaching and learning
- governance and management: involving learners in managing educational institutions and services.

The moderator’s questions for discussion were:

- in what ways can learners influence public policy?
- how can learners help other learners to get involved?
- how can learners be properly involved in managing educational institutions, learning centres, learning programmes, community learning, etc.?
- what do we want Confintea VI to do for adult learners?
The inputs

Over 100 participants heard six sets of inputs:

Sue Neilson
Ellen Stavland and Jan Helge Svendsen
Alemezyu Hailu Gebre
Anne Vinerier and Nadia Baragiola and learners
Magdalena Motsi
John Gates
Chris Fairgrieve
Winifred Hignell

Canada
Nordic Countries/NVL
Ethiopia
Belgium/France
Kenya
Wales/UK
Scotland
England

Outcomes

1 Policy influence

Learners’ voice is a critical means of influencing public policy. Participants made the following key points:

Policy must come first: good public policies demonstrate commitment and strategic direction. Good policies can lead to good outcomes and practices.

As the International Adult Learners’ Charter (SALP, 2009) states, ‘1.2 All adult learners have the right to be treated as equals in determining their own educational and learning needs and learners will have the right to demand a central role in the process of producing the policy.’ (Link: www.globallearnersnetwork.com). The conference also produced a Learners’ Intervention. The goal is international consensus (see conference statement: www…)

Adult learning should be a feast. Learners are major stakeholders in the educational process, and tax payers. They should be at the table. Learners are customers who deserve full respect and partnership.

We heard about the Canada-Kenya letter-writing link between learners; a publication called Rags to Riches; and the possibility of making a quilt of learners’ views.

There are key policy benefits to involving learners more: they feel more respected, learn greater skills, can see changes for other learners, and take greater control of their own learning and its provision. There are key personal benefits to active involvement in adult learning too: learning brings confidence, stronger citizenship involvement, better intergenerational learning, and more confidence in communicating and being with people.

Confintea VI has made sure that learners’ voices are heard strongly through the Charter; through plenary session; and in this workshop. Learners’ voice has been secured as a recognised part of Confintea: at Confintea VII we can expect learners and their voice to be built in to all systems from the lowest to the highest level. Learners and learner organisations are needed on platforms and there could be an exchange between politicians and learners which UNESCO could facilitate.

Advocacy bodies have a key role to play in enabling learners to contribute. Policy cannot be made without partnership with civil society and advocacy bodies have brought us learners’ voices: it is time for them to be embedded in all education and training systems. The role of trade unions is also key to valuing learners’ views.

Many participants spoke of the workshop being the most moving, useful and concrete panel of the conference. Learners take risks: it is time for governments to take the risk and put learners and learning at the heart of what we do. Policies have been strong on reducing the cycle of dependency and deprivation and now we want to see a cycle of involvement, with learners as co-designers and co-developers to lead to active citizenship. This would help progression of human rights. Learners are allies for adult educators: mobilising money and new learners, promoting and celebrating what providers do. Without the support of learners’ voices education policies will be poorer.

2 Learning festivals and campaigns: involving learners secures change and greater participation

Across many Member States Adult Learners’ Weeks and Learning Festivals have been proving successful in reaching people who have not traditionally taken part in lifelong learning opportunities. UNESCO adopted the concept of Adult Learners’ Weeks as a mechanism to reach new learners, celebrate learning and influence policy at CONFINTEA V. The presentations within the workshop were from those countries with some experience of actively developing the role of learners.
**Participants made the following points:**

Involving the media in Adult Learners’ Week and the Learning Festivals is essential to help reach out to the public who might not otherwise hear about adult learning.

Using human-interest stories to inspire and encourage new learners and to motivate people is critical to local and national success.

Learner ambassadors or heroes are vital to reaching out to communities as they provide realistic role models.

From Norway we heard about the important role that Adult Learners’ Week plays in supporting the creation of learning ambassadors.

In Kenya, KALA uses the Week to encourage and support the advocacy role that learners play in mobilising others to participate in adult learning.

From the UK we heard that by developing the skills of the award winners of adult Learners’ Week to become ambassadors and promoters helps secure the participation of new learners.

Creating opportunities for learners to meet in a forum helps develop a share ownership and development of their role in Adult Learners’ Week.

We also heard that in addition to the support of the media, word of mouth from those who’d been successful has had a tremendous effect on reaching out to communities.

3 **Quality improvement: involving learners in improving teaching and learning**

Education opportunities for adults must be of good quality and systems for improving the quality of teaching, learning, governance and management are crucial. This is particularly important for new learners and learners’ voice is an essential component. Participants made the following points:

1 **Quality improvement requires good measurement which should be designed from the point of view of learners. ‘Needs assessment’ is not enough: we need measurement that includes learners’ views.**

2 **Learners should be in the ‘driving seat’ in designs for learning and included as advisers of educational content and the way in which the curriculum is made accessible.**

3 **There is no such thing as a ‘non-learner’: we learn all the time. It is through learning that we can solve our problems and the quality of that learning is important for all. Adult learning is most effective when it is negotiated. Negotiated learning has a better chance of being of good quality in that it is more likely to be fit for purpose.**

4 **We heard of examples where the production of materials was of better quality as a direct result of learners working with governments or with those funding teaching materials.**

5 **Feedback by learners to learning providers and to funders of adult learning is critical for improving the quality of adult education provision.**
Learners’ voices provide lessons for teachers. Learners’ stories enable teachers to make a difference. Learners can help teachers to improve what they are doing if they are given a chance to offer constructive feedback in a consistent way. In many ways the best trainers of teachers are learners: they make the best ‘teacher for teachers’.

Governance and management: involving learners in managing educational institutions and services

This area is a developing one and will continue to develop as time progresses. Participants reported the following:

In Kenya, KALA has been working with learners to support them to develop the different roles that adult learners can make in supporting the development of adult learning.

In Africa the pan African network recognised that there was a lack of representative bodies to help facilitate the learners’ voice and represent it appropriately so they’ve begun working with like-minded organisations across the region.

We heard about the importance of ensuring learner representation on all lifelong learning bodies and received a call to all major institutions to ensure that they extend an invitation to learners to have representation.

From the UK we heard that in England legislation ensures learner representation on all college and university governing bodies and the existence of the government-funded National Learners’ Panel.

We also received calls for training for new learner representatives on governing bodies to ensure support for appropriate representation.

Finally we were reminded that we were at this CONFINTEA VI conference because of learners and encouraged to develop equality in the roles that learners play in governance and management.

December 2009
Peter Lavender Fiona Boucher

The message for the future was let’s plan together.

January 2010, Ellen Stavlund
(es@vofo.no)