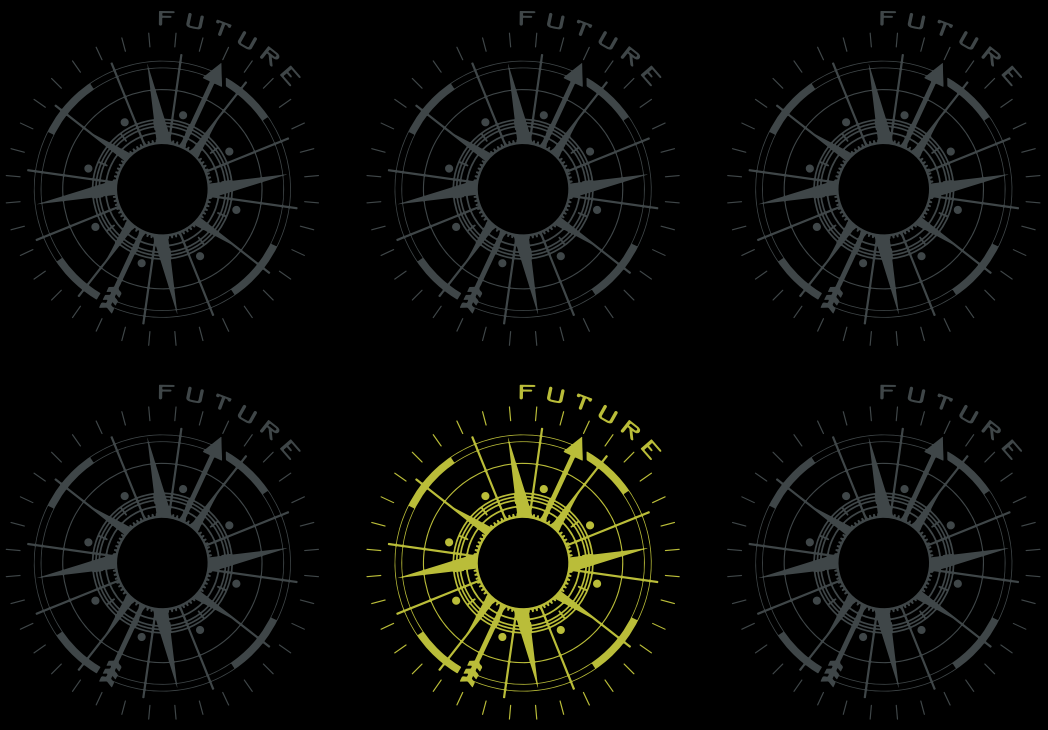

Re-thinking Adult Education Research. Beyond the Pandemic

edited by
Vanna Boffo
Regina Egetenmeyer

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Re-thinking Adult Education Research. Some Initial Notes on the INTALL Project Results

Vanna Boffo, Regina Egetenmeyer

The book we are presenting is the result of reflection stemming from the European INTALL Project, Erasmus+ KA2 – Grant Agreement No. 2018-1-DE01-KA203-004272 (2018-2021), which, over the period from the start of September 2018 to the end of August 2021, allowed us to build know-how on some specific junctures of adult education. The project – *International and Comparative Studies for Students and Practitioners in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* – was headed by Regina Egetenmeyer from the Julius-Maximilians-Universität in Würzburg. As can be read in the project outline, the INTALL Strategic Partnership is about building bridges between education and the world of work to allow students to acquire work-relevant skills and soft skills, e.g., teamwork, flexibility and creativity. A blended learning methodology that brings students and practitioners together for the first time and a portfolio method for strengthening employability in adult education and lifelong learning will focus on the career guidance and employability of students in relation to societal needs and the labour market. The composition of the partner consortium, which includes eight European universities and the two main practice associations in the field of adult education and lifelong learning in Europe, further strengthens the linkage between theory and practice. This pioneering approach will tackle the growing need for high-level qualifications in Europe (European Commission 2017) and addresses the mismatch identified between skills needed and skills available in the field of practice. The Strategic Partnership believes that the joint learning programme on offer for higher education students and practitioners in the field of adult education and lifelong learning supports the development of skills and competences that are relevant for society and the labour market. The

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project will specifically respond to the field of work through innovative teaching methods that will also evolve out of a learning community. The quality and relevance of higher education in adult education and lifelong learning will be greatly increased.

The Strategic Partnership is pursuing its aim to provide inclusive learning by developing its intellectual outputs and activities through innovative methods and appropriate digital learning materials and tools, such as Open Educational Resources and online networks.

This will promote a high quality of teaching and learning in adult education and lifelong learning and ensure inclusive and equal participation. Different modular courses within the programme ensure that the teaching and learning offer fits the level of skills and learning needs of each participant. The online learning environment that will be built up will also support students and practitioners who are not mobile due to limited resources, family commitments or work duties. The participants will be able to go through the whole study process by themselves or only choose the topics relevant to their research and interests. The students' and practitioners' learning will be recognised at different levels and ways in universities and practice.

As INTALL connects higher education and practice in the field of adult education and lifelong learning, not only will the quality of higher education improve but the quality of practice will improve too. The joint higher education and practice study programme and the digital learning environment will extend and equip adult educators from the field of practice with skills and competences that are in high demand in a more and more international society and rapidly changing labour market. As the quality of the adult learning staff is a key factor in the standard of lifelong learning at all levels, the project will consequently contribute to the professionalisation of adult education and lifelong learning, both in theory and in practice.

The project, which involved numerous partners – from Dublin City University (Ireland), University of Florence (Italy), Helmut Schmidt Universität der Bundeswehr (Hamburg, Germany), University of Lisbon (Portugal), University of Padua (Italy), University of Pécs (Hungary), Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband (Germany), European Association for the Education of Adults (AEAE) (Brussels, Belgium) and University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) – developed around the junctures of teaching and learning in adult education, graduate and doctoral graduate employability, digitalisation and e-learning in adult education, and professionalisation in adult education and lifelong learning. Beyond the actual project, by definition consisting of creating empirical products during the project duration, INTALL provided an opportunity for field research. This sort of action research led to the setting up of an Adult Education Academy that is one of a kind in Europe, as well as various online courses for the professionalisation of adult educators and on emerging professions in the digital field. The particular focus of the INTALL project was to build an authentic relationship between education and professionalisation, creating a didactic dialogue through professionals' storytelling and autobiographical storytelling methods.

We thought that, after such an intense effort to give a new face to European adult education, it was necessary to reflect on the pandemic, which hit right in the middle of the project. What impact did Covid-19 have on our project actions and how did we tackle topics emerging in a totally new way or in what had simply become a *new normality*?

Hence, the idea for the conference from which the book takes its name, in order to *take stock of the situation* and get going again, linking educational action and training with reflection. The results are illustrated on the pages that follow. The on-line conference, organised by the Florence University on 7-8 June 2021, represented two intensive working days.

The book we are presenting sets out to provide a reflection on the educational issues that arose as the project progressed. The junctures around which the book revolves are the same that the project came to revolve around: methodology; the space for employability and digitalisation; learning and teaching; embracing the international dimension; and building master's and PhD courses with a highly international vocation. The topics deal with a new frontier in adult education from indisputably innovative research perspectives. A condensation of reflections on adult education in Europe after the pandemic, the volume seeks to provide a standpoint from which to disseminate the innovative potential of the INTALL project for researchers of adult and higher education.

The book begins with essays in the wider context of the now fifty-year research of Paolo Federighi which together provide an in-depth picture extending beyond the project outline. The essay "Institutional Learning in Higher Education and Graduate Transitions" deals with the issue of the 'learning exclusion equilibrium' strategy in Italy. Over the last 15 years there has been little engagement with the problem of the labour market entry of Italian graduates, with few active labour policies having a real impact on the production system, characterised by a host of small, at times flourishing family businesses. While a university education is a great discriminant for getting into better-paid work quickly, the universities continue to play too weak a role. Katarina Popovic's essay "The Role of Adult Learning and Education in (Post-)Covid Times" illustrates the problem of digitalisation after the Covid-19 crisis: «Adult learning and education should not only 'equip' people with the knowledge and competencies needed for a crisis, but also take a both analytical and active role in conceptualising the 'new normal', challenge some of the mainstream ideas and offer critical views on the proposed solutions and constructive alternatives». The third essay, by Lisa Breitschwerdt and Regina Egetenmeyer, deals with "The International Adult Education Academy and Its Contribution to Professionalisation in Adult Education". Professionals well-educated in adult and continuing education are required in order to plan and design lifelong teaching and learning processes. Professionalism in adult education needs to be developed in terms of: 1) interdependencies within the multi-level system of adult education, 2) inference between academic knowledge and adult educational practice, and 3) mediation processes between differ-

ent social action logics. The essay draws from the example of the International Adult Education Academy to discuss ways in which the three perspectives of professionalism present in the academic professionalisation of adult education can be referenced. These essays paint the contextual picture which gave rise to the reflection in the following essays.

Part one of the book consists of three essays: "Quality Culture and Innovation in Higher Education" by Fabio Togni, "Internationalisation in Higher Education: A Virtual Adult Education Academy in Times of Covid-19" by Jennifer Danquah, Vanessa Beu and Regina Egetenmeyer, and "Narrative Approach in the Portfolio Method for Adult Education. Guidance for the Recognition of Competences in the Perspective of Lifelong Learning" by Paolo Di Rienzo. The essay by Fabio Togni seeks to underline the importance of the quality standards being introduced in all Italian and European universities, with a consequent improvement in the quality of the education offered at the micro, meso and macro levels. The text by Danquah, Beu and Egetenmeyer conceptualises the didactics and methodology of a virtual setting to overcome these challenges. The concept involves facilitating exchanges between moderators, providing technical support, implementing (a-)synchronous sessions and establishing a virtual space in which learning materials are created. Part one is rounded off by Paolo Di Rienzo's essay which gives experience, and reflective and transformative learning, a central role in removing the barriers that hinder adult participation. The outcome of his experimentation was a tutoring procedure to promote reflexive and self-analysis activities to aid the construction of a competency portfolio. As we can see, this section touches on higher education training systems and their explicit potential to form minds and a vision of adult worlds.

Part two of the book consists of four essays: the essay by Vanna Boffo and Dino Mancarella, "The Link Between Universities and the Labour Market: Perceiving the Building of Employability Processes in Higher Education", the second by Paula Guimarães, "Adult Educators and Recognition of Prior Learning in Portugal: Guidance and Validation Tasks and Activities", the third by Borut Mikulec and Mateja Kovšca entitled "Professionalisation of Adult Education in Slovenia from a Multi-Level Perspective", and lastly the fourth, by Thomas Lichtenberg, "Curriculum InstitutionALE – Professionalisation of Adult Education Institutions". This part analyses the professionalisation and training of professionals from the viewpoint of what is most important in the various countries. The essay by Boffo and Mancarella highlights the central importance of building the category of employability starting at university: unless we come together to make this effort, we cannot claim to form capable, attentive and motivated professionals. University studies take on a different weight if they provide highly work-oriented on-the-job training in contexts such as work experience, workshops and simulation. The text by Guimarães goes in the same direction, setting out the crucial importance of career guidance in higher education for students to acquire the certainty/security to learn and therefore the consciousness to discover their own personal and professional path. Lastly, Thomas Lichtenberg

takes us to a global level, using education to raise awareness among populations of the power of reading and writing to fight educational poverty.

Part three of the book is devoted to reflections on teaching in adult and higher education contexts. The essay by Balázs Németh, "Balancing Between Smart and Inclusive: Learning Cities for Sustainable Urban Communities", together with the essay by Roberta Piazza, "Learning in Cities to Create Sustainable Societies" deal with what is now a central theme in adult education. In her contribution, Roberta Piazza states: «Cities play a leading role in addressing many of the global challenges of the 21st century. They are an important part of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, which assigns them multiple tasks. Cities should be committed to reducing the ecological footprint and to creating solutions that respond in a differentiated way to the challenges and opportunities in different areas of the world. The sustainable development strategies of cities have determined the definition of different urban models, focused on the need to offer citizens well-being and innovation». This is echoed by Balázs Németh who states: «Since 2012, the Global Learning Cities network has become a successful UNESCO movement, demonstrating not only the linkages, but also the dependencies amongst community development, adult learning and active citizenship […] In the evolution of learning cities, we have arrived at an era of uncertainties, therefore, we have to demonstrate that learning cities depend on better participation, performance and partnerships in learning, surrounded by collective actions for a better future of education». The topic of learning is also investigated by Maria Luisa Iavarone and Francesco Vincenzo Ferraro in the text "Rethinking Learning Practices in the Covid-Era: Indications for Teachers and Educators" which highlights the need to study and understand the new digital ecosystem, above all owing to its outfall on teenagers.

Part four, the last part of the book, deals with this new, highly important condition for adult education. Sabine Schmidt-Lauff states that we need to reflect on the tools, techniques and methods that have accelerated the rapid, far-reaching change in the use of digital tools following Covid. Daniela Frison analyses the digital transformation in work-related learning programmes in her text entitled "Higher Education in Post-Covid19: The Digital Transformation of Work-Integrated Learning Programmes". Sabine Schmidt-Lauff observes that: «Learning and teaching in higher education can help to face the rapidly changing demands and transformations in social, professional, and individual life. […] Digital practices in higher education forced by the Covid-19 disruption are challenging educational processes at every level. Digitalisation is no longer just about the technical dimension, but about the structural interweaving and relational co-constitution of the digital with the social, the cultural, and the individual».

In the INTALL project discussed at length in this book, well before Covid, digitalisation was already thought of as a necessary passage for adult education. The project partners had come up with and organised some online learning models for the Adult Education Academy, which is the training experience at the centre of the INTALL project. Part four of the book is rounded off by Concetta Tino's essay which well sums up the conclusions of the project: "The Digital

Transformation of Higher Education: From INTALL Project Results to Practical Implications for the *New Normal*". We have to think that the situation we are in is a new normality. This context which we have ended up living in has given a strong innovative push to teaching and learning practices.

The INTALL project was devised before the pandemic hit. We found ourselves dealing with Covid-19 just as the project was taking off. We had to alter the way in which the academy training experience was provided while the world was living in lockdown. We consider the situation a great trial in communication, human relations, flexibility and creativity as well as resilience. Regina Egetenmeyer created a group based on past work that cast its nets throughout Europe, guided by the forty or so years of research by some important names in international adult education. In the event, the whole team came on board, with all their resources. With roots stretching such a long way back, the research project is the result of how far adult education in Europe has come and evolved.

If it is possible to speak of results, it is thanks to the fact that we really were able to implement, adapt, flex, bring together, communicate, honour, I would even say *love* a new way of building learning and teaching practices, by listening to each other, being given respect by the academic community that we represented, and placing emphasis on less visible actions for very diverse students, with an immense desire for understanding. All of this can be felt in the essays in the volume. If this alone can be considered a point of arrival, then it can be a real way for research to contribute to the valorisation of educational and social practices.

Florence, 1 June 2023

Vanna Boffo
Regina Egetenmeyer

PREFACE

The Role of Adult Education Research. Beyond the Pandemic

Institutional Learning in Higher Education and Graduate Transitions

Paolo Federighi

Abstract:

The 'learning exclusion equilibrium' strategy in Italy also governs young adults' possibilities of accessing higher education institutions (HEIs) and entering and being successful on the labour market. The upshot of this strategy has been to weaken the social role of universities and open the field to new players promoting new solutions based on stronger teaching and research partnerships. After graduation, young university leavers face a period in which they follow non-linear paths as they try to fit their skills to the labour market demand. For many professions, there has been an immense change in this demand. Now, unlike the past, life skills are considered basic competences for technical professions too. If those lacking these skills enter the labour market later, the problem arises of how to create these competences both during the period of university education and in the following years. Universities have to practise institutional learning and study with those who need knowledge in order to come up with a new strategy so that their graduates can directly manages their relations with the labour market. Knowledge of the situation and development of graduates' professional lives is needed in order to give academic programmes a new direction and allow students to make an informed choice of which university to enrol in. The European Graduate Tracking Initiative can lead the way towards this goal.

Keywords: Cooperation and Ecosystem; Graduate Tracking; Higher Education; Institutional Learning; Life Skills

1. A Dual Higher Education Strategy Driven by the Learning Exclusion Equilibrium

Italy provides a particularly interesting case to seek to understand the processes that influence youth and adults' access to higher education (HE) owing to the existence of two apparently contrasting phenomena in a situation of nevertheless low HE participation:

a. The general strategy behind public policy in Italy is to strengthen areas of ongoing delays in the formation of human capital, productivity and infrastructures, by supporting them with appropriate macroeconomic stimuli. This is accompanied by a discriminating dual adult learning strategy. On the one hand, vulnerable groups' achievement of learning objectives is postponed until the resumption of economic growth (the negative effects that

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Paolo Federighi, *Institutional Learning in Higher Education and Graduate Transitions*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0151-3.04, in Vanna Boffo, Regina Egetenmeyer (edited by), *Re-thinking Adult Education Research. Beyond the Pandemic*, pp. 17-32, 2023, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0151-3, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0151-3

ensue are mitigated by boosting social policies). On the other hand, the state sponsors the development of competences in potential high-skilled workers both through tax incentives and public interventions to support learning, research and innovation.

b. Despite the priority given to high-skilled professionals, this opportunity is reserved for a small number of young people and adults. Some of those who access HE are also affected by the discriminating dual adult learning strategy. In 2020 the gap in university education levels between Italy and the rest of the European Union (EU) continued to grow, with only 20.1% of the population (aged 25 to 64) having a degree against 32.8% in the EU. The number of adults accessing public universities has been falling constantly for over 20 years. The relative stagnation of the rate of «participation in education» that emerges from the reports can be explained by the hypothesis that it is a variable that depends on the «learning exclusion equilibrium» existing in Italy, namely the situation in which a (largely manufacturing) economy becomes trapped in a vicious circle of low value added, low skills and low wages. Italy is in a condition where businesses' scarce demand for skills is accompanied by scarce attention to this problem by public policies. This means that both businesses and the state contribute to the poor supply of skills among citizens and the low propensity of young people and adults to invest in education and training.
   The «big quit» of young people and adults from learning opportunities may be due to the «great resignation» felt owing to the perceived impossibility of finding learning opportunities that are relevant to them. This is also likely to be affected by the quality of the learning offer and in particular by the problem highlighted by the hips by the CSRs (European Commission 2020) in underlining the important challenge to Italy posed by the shortage of teachers. This element has a negative impact on the quality of the offer – in particular in the technical and professional training field – and the participants' learning outcomes.

The tensions deriving from these strategic options are probably the accelerators behind the growing obsolescence of classic university models, their weakened relationship with society and the scarce function of their academic programmes. Going from what Ryan Craig wrote about the USA in 2018, the problem does not only seem to concern Italy:

> College students may well be getting soft skills and digital skills – and most do in their extracurricular activities – but there's little guarantee it's happening in their program of study. And there's no reason why not besides the absurd durability of programs that fall short. Planned obsolescence in designing academic programs – or at least a systematic review of whether programs are doing an adequate job of producing all the skills graduates require – would be helpful in this regard (Craig 2018).

The obsolescence of academic programmes does not only call into question the universities' teaching offer (Fitzpatrick 2011). The phenomenon also concerns the functions of HE in society, in that it can undermine the value of HE qualifications and graduates. The functions of the single universities change regardless of the knowledge and intentions of the strategies adopted at the different levels in the university system (ministries, universities, departments, researchers). A method to help tackle the risks of universities and their staff becoming superfluous to requirements can be to plan actions to predict and deal with the inevitable obsolescence of old models and make the progressive transition to new ones.

2. Obsolescence Risks: Alternative HE Models

The creation of alternative HE opportunities to the classic, centuries-old university model tells of the existence of a demand that is not met, which other actors propose to interpret, displaying its risk of obsolescence.

The phenomenon of online universities in Italy is well known and it is no exaggeration to state that they fit into a logic of pure 'credentialism'. Apart from the first experiences from the start of this century, these online projects have evolved in a very different direction to the Open University in the United Kingdom or the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. However, it must be recognised that online universities respond to demand from 'unconventional' students to obtain one or more degrees in relatively short time spans. It is the only place to offer an answer to this demand.

Corporate academies and corporate universities (about 40 of which were identified in Italy in 2015) represent a more significant phenomenon because they bring about an effective change of paradigm with necessarily more attention to learning outcomes than issuing diplomas (Assoknowledge and Università La Sapienza 2015).

The function of corporate academies is substantially limited to sharing and circulating competences already present in a company and helping them to take root. They mainly operate by setting value by their own employees' competences while making use of external figures through cooperation with other companies, research institutes and universities. These HEIs stand out in that they are essentially aimed at company employees, suppliers or customers.

On the other hand, corporate universities are HEIs that are open to the general public. In some cases, they are set up as consortia, with the direct involvement of companies from the same cluster and universities. In other cases, they are institutions created by companies from a particular production sector operating within a business district which come together in a consortium. Looking at the Italian context, an example of the first type can be MUNER, the Motorvehicle University of Emilia-Romagna where several automotive companies have put their know-how and the most innovative technologies at the service of students and trainers who want to become the new professionals in the automotive field, designing road and racing vehicles, more sustainable propulsion systems and subsystems for intelligent Industry 4.0 functions and production facilities. An

example of the second type is the Politecnico Calzaturiero del Brenta. This HEI is the training, technology transfer and services facility for the Riviera del Brenta shoe district, where luxury shoes are produced. There are over 500 companies in the district and more than 10,000 employees. The polytechnic works closely with the companies in the district, experts and teachers from leading companies worldwide and the international network of schools and research centres. The polytechnic has trained 95% of the workers in the district.

Both of these examples bear witness to the presence in Italy of a similar model of non-traditional HEI to the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg, DHBW)[1] in Germany.

The corporate university phenomenon highlights a strategy that can be credited with reducing or eliminating the risks of misalignment between training programmes and work transition and shortening the time taken by students to transition to the labour market. The academic programmes in this university model are designed on a 'planned obsolescence' basis, thanks to a constant dialogue with the skills demand and students' job prospects.

3. The Mismatch between the Skills Supply and Labour Market Demand

The mismatch between the skills supply and demand is a marker of HEIs' risk of obsolescence and delegitimation. Academic qualifications are losing their 'signalling' function, while the importance of real acquired skills is growing. As is known, signalling theory asserts that HE enables employers to pinpoint potentially productive graduate employees. However, the mismatch between skills supply and demand makes qualifications less relevant while highlighting HE's function of «increas[ing] students' propensity to learn in employment and signal[ling] to employers that graduates are people with a high propensity to learn in employment» (Rospigliosi et al. 2014, 420). The focus shifts from the piece of paper to the propensity to learn in employment[2].

Research on transitions from HE to employment has been documenting the problem of the mismatch between formal education programmes and students' and labour market expectations for years.

The high number of university dropouts, the number of students behind with their exams and the average number of years that a student takes to graduate reveal the existence of far-reaching and stubbornly resistant shortcomings in the HE system.

In terms of the labour market demand mismatch, it is at least since the beginning of the 1970s that research has been devoting energy to what in 1986

[1] The DHBW is a HE institution with several campuses throughout the state of Baden-Württemberg, Germany. It offers cooperative education bachelor's degree programmes in partnership with industry and non-profit institutions in the areas of business administration, engineering and social services.

[2] In this connection, see the career service proposed in Boffo 2020.

was defined as the «contemporary phenomenon of overeducation and underemployment among college graduates» (Smith 1986, 85).

Fifty years on, the problem has definitely not diminished. Graduates' employment rates have not fully recovered since the 2008 crisis and skills mismatches between the available educational offer and fast-changing labour market demand are requiring increasing attention (Cascioli 2021). A recent study by Salas-Velasco (2021), based on the analysis of data «from the first nationally representative survey of labor insertion of recent university graduates in Spain» provides useful food for thought. By estimating a multinomial logistic regression, the study uses self-assessment to identify match status four years after graduation and helps to investigate four aspects of the mismatch phenomenon.

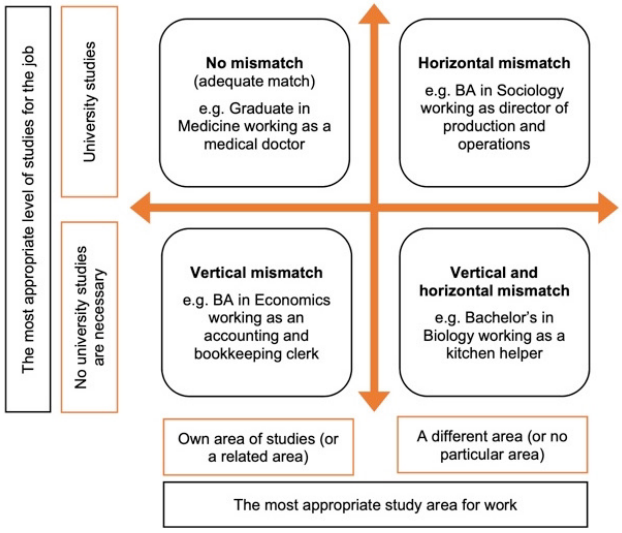

Figure 1 – HE graduates' degrees and their jobs: the education-job mismatch. Source: Salas-Velasco 2021.

The study distinguishes between HE degrees:

- having an adequate match with the graduates' working positions;
- suffering from a horizontal mismatch, which occurs when university graduates who are trained in a particular field work in another field to their formal qualification level;
- suffering from a vertical mismatch (over-education), which occurs when graduates work in non-graduate positions and study in areas unrelated to their studies;
- suffering from a vertical and horizontal mismatch, which occurs when graduates are over-educated for the position occupied and the correspondent working area is not appropriate for their area of study.

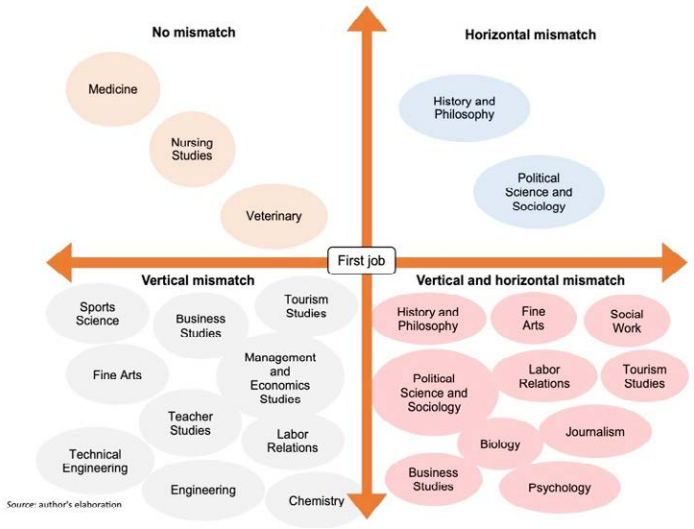

Figure 2 – Mapping the university degree mismatch of HE graduates in Spain. Source: Salas-Velasco 2021.

The results of the study show how, after four years, only medical graduates have a high probability of doing a job corresponding to their study course. Further investigation of what leads to this match is needed, taking into account the medical professions' professionalization processes and the protective organisation of their profession. The panorama shown by the results gives a glimpse of the extent of the phenomenon, confirming the fact that the skills mismatch is triggered by the 'learning exclusion equilibrium' which then generates an increase in inequalities between graduates. The graduates who fall into the vertical mismatch category are condemned to the prospect of income verging on or under the poverty threshold[3].

[3] Anelli 2018. *University To Work Transition. Policy Brief 08, Employment Skills and Productivity in Italy*. A research project coordinated by IGIER-Bocconi, in partnership with the JPMorgan Chase Foundation. This policy brief is part of the Bocconi University 'New Skills at Work' project, financed by the JPM Foundation. A special thanks to INPS and to the staff of the visit INPS scholar programme for making the data available and their exceptional technical support.

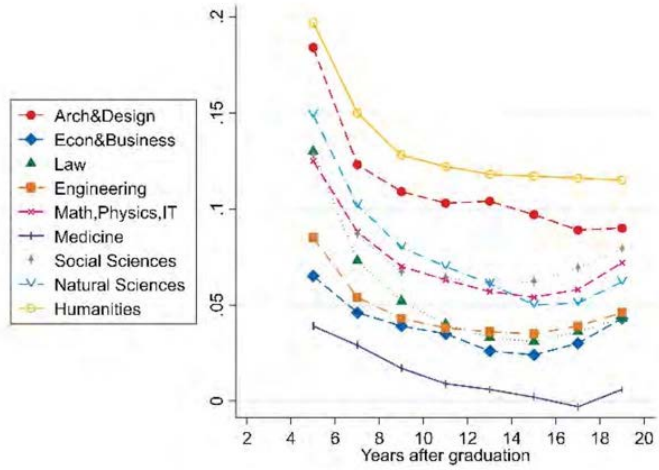

Figure 3 – Probability of income below the poverty line – Trajectories. Source: Anelli 2018 and INPS.

The main reply of governments to this phenomenon has been employment policies and measures such as: training/apprenticeship programmes; active labour market programmes; policies concerning temporary or fixed-term contracts and measures to lower labour costs (Pastore 2017). While the measures have been useful, they have not gone far enough to have a great effect on graduate employment rates or skills mismatches between available educational offers and labour market demands. While they have acted on the effects of the mismatch to a certain degree, they have not tackled the causes stemming from the university system cultural model.

One of the possible causes of the mismatch can be identified as students' not fully informed choice of course upon enrolment. Therefore, the question arises as to why information on job prospects which can help in making these choices is not regularly made available to the young people and their families. In the much more complex US HE context, since the beginning of the century, the Federal Department of Education has released yearly updates of the College Scorecard which is useful for students and families when weighing up college options. The tool also includes updated information that may be beneficial to school counsellors, college access providers, researchers and other critical stakeholders. The department has made improvements to the College Scorecard interactive web tool in addition to restoring several metrics that help students gauge how their prospective institution compares to other colleges in terms of costs, graduation rates, post-college earnings and other metrics. The changes reflect the depart-

ment's priority aim to support and encourage inclusive, affordable postsecondary programmes that provide strong career outcomes for students[4].

4. The Non-linear Paths of Young People's Transition to the Labour Market

Horizontal and vertical mismatches appear in all but a few professional families and some HE models (which are not easy to transfer).

Universities are limited in their ability to offer programmes that match the skills demand owing to the difficulty to predict the trends leading to changes in the skills demand expressed by the labour market. In addition to macroeconomic factors, this demand depends on product, market and organisational innovation processes affecting the economic actors. The dearth of studies that look beyond the duration of the academic programmes and make longer-term predictions prevents us from even imagining a device enabling this type of alignment for all professional families.

The world of professions changes as a result of job destruction and job creation processes taking place in a context of technological, economic and social transformation. These dynamics are driven by innovation in production processes, transformation in production structures and social transformation (Nübler 2016). The current university model is not sufficiently flexible to adapt to and align with these job destruction and creation trends.

Young graduates' lives follow non-linear paths stemming from the misalignment and extended duration of their transition into work. A model countering these effects is the Early Careers Talent Pipeline Conceptual Framework (Donald 2021). However, it only works in the case of organisations competing in a war for talent, when students are drawn towards a professional position in the penultimate year of their education, before rapidly passing to selection and then micro-placement (with assessment of the 'organisation-person' fit, offering and acceptance of the graduate employment opportunity in a very short time frame). The micro-placement phase is followed by a retention plan and then the graduates are actually hired.

For most young people, graduation marks the start of a non-linear path which only concludes after several years when they enter a job position that somehow fits their aspirations, educational pathway and expected wage premium.

During this period, those young people who do not get discouraged fill the wait with activities in view of developing their professionality and learning. The Emp&Co research project (Boffo and Fedeli 2018) – a two-year longitudinal research project on graduates in Adult Education at Florence University – observed the following four types of learning activities in the graduates' professional growth paths:

[4] <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/search/?search=University&page=0&sort=threshold_earnings:desc&toggle=institutions> (2023-03-15).

- **Formal education**
  Both during studies and after graduation, the tendency to return to further professional training. This may be in order to strengthen skill areas not covered by the university learning offer or to acquire knowledge of new professions.
- **Networking relationships and dynamic learning networks**
  Built in all professional growth paths, with a positive outcome. The access to and strengthening of networking seems to be related to graduates' family backgrounds and a capacity for autonomous initiative in the creation of new social and professional networks (in associations and business). As well as being a hub of opportunity, networking is a context permitting mutual learning and the exchange of knowledge.
- **Access and use of educational and cultural infrastructure and services**
  Appearing to be a further component present in the growth paths of numerous graduates, it is a factor that has been investigated only marginally. In the cases found (e.g., Youth Guarantee Programmes), access to the services and programmes provided by youth policies proved to be useful. What remains to be investigated further is the recurrence and importance of the use of digital as well as generic cultural infrastructures (from libraries, to museums, music, etc.), because they give direct access to information on the labour market, and mediate skills development and the creation of networking opportunities.
- Lastly, **work** proves to be part of the opportunities that work culture had already generated before university studies ended. Work is at once the expected result and the means through which graduates develop their ability to learn and produce new knowledge. The opportunity to move from one job to another better one could be interpreted as the fruit of prior learning accumulated through different past learning activities and workplace learning from previous occupations.

The conclusion of university studies is just one stage in young people's formation. Their general education process continues in an intense (albeit not structured) way for several years after graduation, following non-linear paths. It is supposed that the learning quality of non-linear paths (quality of workplace learning from frequent job changes, alternating with continuous training, unemployment or reskilling processes) is the origin of any lasting mismatch.

This statement has two significant implications:

a. the new research question should no longer focus only on 'what skills companies need today and tomorrow', but rather on 'what young people will learn after leaving initial training', and how the different occupations in the life of young adults contribute to forming the skills required for the jobs of the future.
b. the general education process continues after graduation, until a young person finds a place within a possibly fitting occupation and a 'decent' job. The general education offer does not end with the last qualification obtained –

whether it is a diploma or a degree – but with the possession of skills that enable the young person to do a decent and fitting job. This does not happen by extending schooling or through particular services or helpdesks.

5. The Competences that Create Alignment

The itinerary in which graduates build their professionality can be described as a non-linear path. During this period, they go through a series of micro-transitions to reach a professional position that is hopefully in line with their aspirations and know-how. The quality of the work experience in this period does not only seem to depend on the graduates' technical and professional skills. 'Skills for the labour market' are no longer necessarily associated with this type of competence. Now others seem fundamental for the labour market and the graduates' professional success, namely skills for life or life skills.

In the Italian political and technical debate, there is widespread use of terms like 'soft skills', 'managerial skills' and 'transversal skills', respectively used within different communicative and linguistic contexts (the first and the second term are used in training within public and private organisations, the third term is in use in educational and training institutions and public policies). The act on lower and upper secondary schools dated January 2022 and approved by the Chamber of Deputies refers to «non-cognitive skills», that is, skills such as «flexibility, creativity, aptitude for problem solving, the ability to judge, the ability to argue and the ability to interact» (art. 2)[5].

Typically, these types of skill are considered complementary to the disciplinary or technical vocational skills that are connected to specific professions. Their function is to ensure that the individual is able to put the acquired knowledge into practice.

In the field of public policies concerning labour market skills education and training, the prevailing approach is to define the skills – including transversal skills – according to the goals of the academy programme or the specific tasks assigned to the future worker[6].

However, this is not the only approach. A recent study on the skills needed to ensure employability in the current decade overturns this culture (EY, Pearson and ManpowerGroup 2021). «Skills for life» are referred to as «core competences», while technical and vocational skills are considered «additional skills». Skills for life form the foundation of private and professional life, while the additional skills have a contingent function, connected to the workplaces where individuals spend their professional time and the job done at a given moment in individuals' lives. This terminological premise serves to highlight how,

[5] Draft bill: Lupi et al. "Disposizioni per la prevenzione della dispersione scolastica mediante l'introduzione sperimentale delle competenze non cognitive nel metodo didattico" (2372). <https://www.camera.it/leg18/126?leg=18&idDocumento=2372> (2023-03-15).

[6] Regione Lombardia. 2020. *Quadro regionale degli standard professionali. Sezione competenze trasversali*. <https://qrsp.servizirl.it/qrsp/#/home> (2023-03-15).

in Italy, the problem of the role of «skills for life» is conditioned by the slow and uncertain process of removing a disciplinary learning culture dominated by the idea that the skills required by the labour market and distinct to the current individual professions are fundamental. This belief is particularly rooted in the formal education of young people and adults.

The approach that is taking shape in the most advanced business world is different. Over the last few years, in the Italian business world particular attention has been paid to the skills that are necessary for the future and the 'life skills' needed to improve the current performance of Italian companies. The discussion focuses on the new skills that will be required for future jobs in the coming years, as well as the efficient management of human resources. Large Italian financial groups (such as Mediobanca) annually promote studies monitoring the positive correlation between operational profitability and the weight assigned to 'life skills' with respect to technical skills. This information from companies urges investment in human resources, not only *vis-à-vis* specialised technical skills, but also advanced life skills (critical thinking, adaptive flexibility, ideation skills, originality, adaptability, understanding others and the ability to assess situations and work autonomously), considered a critical success factor.

This new skills demand expressed by the labour market makes the contrast between professional skills and life skills obsolete. These life skills are the most functional components to build the solid professionality requested by the world of work. Corporate culture has also adopted this type of skill and it has become a fundamental part in the development of its 'human capital'.

Given that the teachability of skills for life is strongly connected to the informal education processes at work in daily life and work, their possession appears directly connected to an individual's set of study, life and work experiences.

This means that universities take part in developing life skills but that they do so – in a positive or negative way – together with the other social actors present in the life of young adults.

Given that HE is and should be closely connected to research, that is, to the real processes of building new knowledge (not only the transmission of already acquired knowledge), this means that universities can carry out their role in forming young adults' basic skills (that is, life skills) on condition that they also work alongside other social actors in research and the dissemination not of a magical, but tendentially scientific approach to all problems concerning life and work (obviously, I am not referring to the discourse on "STEM" subjects).

6. Universities as the Privileged Partners for the Dissemination of a Scientific Approach: Learning with Those in Need of Knowledge

Improving the institutional education, research and relationship management processes with the Italian and European labour market is an area in which the European Strategy (European Commission 2022) has given an important contribution. Everywhere, the national agencies that work to up the quality of the university system have played a propelling role in this field and since the end of

the last century, the European Commission has made many tools and fields of action available: mobility, joint qualifications, European University Alliances, European universities, international research programmes, micro-credentials, etc.

Thus far, none of this has had a great impact on some fundamental indicators, such as: the number of graduates, average duration of degree courses and access of adults to universities. The reason can be found in the same 'European Strategy for Universities' which considers these types of action and measure in connection with their concrete, direct and non-mediated role concerning «the societal context of democratic decline, inequality and diversity, as well as the green and digital transitions and geopolitical changes». It adds

> Excellent education, research and innovation environments are an enabler for developing high-level skills, creating breakthrough knowledge and translating it into practical applications. Cooperation among universities and with the industrial ecosystems is mutually beneficial in this respect, with the higher education sector supporting skills development for industry and the business sector, in addition to personal development purposes. Learners should have more opportunities to benefit from traineeships, be exposed to start-ups, and be engaged as actors of change in their community to positively impact the society around them (European Commission 2022, 8).

The European Strategy seeks a university capable of practising institutional learning (Torlone 2018) and dealing with the demand to develop competences and skills in all brackets of the population and all fields. It works to develop new knowledge not only in traditional students, but all those requiring knowledge (and not necessarily qualifications: entrepreneurs, professionals, politicians, associations, social movements, etc.). It is normal that a university operating in this way makes a greater contribution to the development of basic skills for all – researchers included. When a university operates this way, it sees:

- The immediate social utility of its activities as it can respond to the short-, medium- and long-term educational demand for knowledge of all brackets of the population;
- A more general demand for teaching a scientific approach and method, in connection to research rather than its dissemination. Only universities, some education and research centres and some workplaces can guarantee citizens such an opportunity (again I am not only referring to the STEM issues);
- The phenomenon of cultural reproduction that restricts access to its resources to limited brackets of the population. Cultural reproduction, the exclusion of whole swathes of young people owing to their families of origin, hinders the extension of the role of universities and limits the tendency to enrol. Hence, everyone potentially needs to be addressed, including those who will never enrol, owing the mediated benefits generated with respect to the role of university research and teaching.

7. Job Placement, Alumni, Actors of Change in their Community. Knowing what Happens to University Leavers after Graduation

In addition to career guidance services, a certain number of universities have started to provide structured job placement services to all their graduates. A still extremely small number have come up with an 'alumni' strategy through which they not only try to find out the real impact of their learning programmes on their students' educational investment and professional well-being but at the same time reinforce their bonds with the economic and social system employing their graduates.

These initiatives strengthen universities' institutional role and ability to collect and use information for the purpose of their organisational improvement. However, they do not give an answer to a problem highlighted by the research: the existence of a period in young people's lives when they are alone or can only rely on measures such as special projects, helpdesks and on-demand services. This archipelago of opportunities, mainly provided by the for-profit sector, enables the most fortunate young people to look for the support and accompaniment needed to manage the paths to build their professionality. There is no 'after-sales' service provided by either the institutions that guaranteed the achievement of certain learning outcomes, or other social actors. There is a missing piece between the end of university education and the moment when graduates are able to access workplace learning and continuous learning measures as professionals. It is not necessary to imagine comparable measures to those existing to defend the consumers of different products to academic programmes. It would be simpler to imagine a highly individualised device, based on the Individual Learning Account model, which gives young people a supervisor and mentors who accompany them in their workplace learning experiences, use of cultural resources and construction of social networks. But this is just an example in order to identify a field of research that could provide graduates with support in their non-linear paths (Slowey 2016). For students and graduates to become actors of change in their community and positively impact the society around them, universities, along with other actors, must assume new responsibilities towards their former graduates, for the broadest possible period of their professional lives. It is hard to say if the university system is ready and capable of performing this role for all the professional families that it fosters.

In the meantime, it must be noted that there is little research on the future of graduates. As yet there are no systematic studies or Regulation on European Statistics that gives directions as to how to collect and compare this type of information. There is a dearth of data and the few that there are, are put to little use in the evaluation of academic programmes.

Nevertheless, in addition to working to imagine systemic, stable and sustainable answers, there will probably be the opportunity to gain better knowledge of the non-linear paths at European level and to compare the experiences of graduates in the different countries of the EU. Educational research can also help to build and better the capacity of EU and European Economic Area (EEA) coun-

tries to track HE graduates, and support the European Commission in its effort to go from the European Graduate Tracking Initiative (EGTI) to a Regulation on European Statistics which can involve member states in surveying the individual paths of graduates even when they become expatriates either due to the brain drain or brain mobility. This would provide a picture comparing the actual learning outcomes of each academic programme and their impact on graduates' personal and professional well-being. The Council of Ministers' recommendation for a graduate tracking initiative dates from 2017, prompting the European Commission to launch a pilot European graduate tracking survey and provide member states with capacity-building support for the harmonisation of country-level ability to collect comparable and relevant data (Council of the European Union 2017). During the 2020s, Europe-wide graduate tracking will guarantee the production of comparable evidence on how HEIs prepare students for their professional lives and European citizenship. This systematic and timely collection of data about European graduates is expected to improve the understanding of the relevance of HE systems, and inform policymaking in addressing skills mismatches and graduate employment issues. Gathering information and analysing graduates' personal development, career paths and behaviour as citizens will have a positive impact at three main levels:

- individual – by helping individuals to make more informed decisions on the educational path they want to follow and ensuring support from HEIs and policymakers in developing the hard and soft skills required by the evolving labour market;
- employer – by empowering HEIs and policymakers to reduce skills mismatches and gaps and improving the balance between labour market supply and demand;
- education policies and education research – by using these data to gain more knowledge of young people's lives and employment pathways and adding a new piece to the adult education system that supports learning processes during the transition to the labour market.

But it will only be possible to achieve these results if all the academic programmes are involved in a systematic investigation – not just a survey – and the results produced are used by universities and future students at a large scale.

The results of this investigation could enrich the dataset of statistics services and at the same time give rise to a useful service for families and companies. Collecting information and disseminating it on the web in a self-directed career guidance service is merely a political option that could only be hindered by some stakeholders. Creating a university balanced scorecard based on graduates' professional careers would create greater transparency with respect to the ranking services currently available. It is well-known that where university balanced scorecards already exist, more efficient devices have been created that provide comparisons on the basis of criteria defined by the students themselves. Nevertheless, the simple decision to collect information on graduates and make it

accessible to universities and future students would definitely foster the improvement of the teaching programmes on offer and informed choices by new students.

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The Role of Adult Learning and Education in (Post-)Covid Times

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions to global education systems, with adult education shifting to a virtual world and relying heavily on digital and ICT tools to maintain continuity of learning. However, the prolonged pandemic raises important questions about the future of adult education. The current essay examines the most significant changes in three key areas of adult education: health, citizenship, and digital technologies. It argues that adult education should not only equip people with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate a crisis, but also play a proactive role in shaping the future of education and the world. It should critically analyse and challenge mainstream ideas and offer constructive alternatives to proposed solutions.

Keywords: Adult Education; Citizenship; COVID-19; ICT in Education; Paradigm Shift

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the most significant disruption to global education systems in history, with over 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries affected at its peak, and around half of the world's student population (more than 800 million learners) affected in 2021 (UNESCO 2021). This has resulted in dramatic consequences for education deprivation, affecting various areas of life and work. In the first year of the pandemic, education and learning were seen as the most obvious 'victims' of the disease and the accompanying preventive measures, with national efforts focused on ways to continue education and learning even at a reduced scope. The immediate priority was to prevent further learning loss, which resulted in a massive shift to the virtual space and an enormous increase in the use of digital technology in education.

As adult education is more prone to react to changes in the social and economic environment than school education, it was either massively interrupted or moved to online platforms, digitally supported formats, and relied more on the internet than educational organizations or institutions. The second year of the pandemic brought a certain level of adaptation to the health crisis, but the feeling of uncertainty increased, and the perception of crises as a continuous

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element of modern society became more prevalent. Additionally, the current situation is viewed as a major challenge, a crossroad, a turning point where humankind must decide which path to choose, as some of the main traits of social environment and social practices must be changed.

During the prolonged pandemic, questions are emerging about whether we are facing a new paradigm shift. Is the world going to be completely different? This paper explores the possibility of a paradigm shift, as defined by Thomas Kuhn in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). Kuhn explains that a 'paradigm' represents a universally recognized scientific achievement or a narrative that provides explanations for the current problem and solutions to a community of practitioners. The change of paradigm happens during crises, when anomalies in the existing paradigm become serious, and basic assumptions are challenged, leading to new theories and a new paradigm that offers a better explanation of the observed changes and fits better with the objective, external reality. The paradigm has broad power as it offers a dominant narrative, controls methods and problems, and defines standards; it is a «constellation of beliefs, values, and techniques» in humans (Kuhn 1970, 175). A paradigm shift is a fundamental change in the way people perceive events, and it is not only a matter of changing the current theory but the whole view of the world (Kuhn 1970).

Is this what is happening to the world during COVID-19, and what might be the consequences of the prolonged pandemic? The review of current publications, web pages, and digital sources shows that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are the dominant topic among policy makers, researchers, and practitioners. These consequences affect health, economy, politics, social context, cultural environment, and education, including adult education. The main question is how the 'new normal' will look like, and the answers range from a return to the 'good old times' (an idealized picture of a world that is even better since people have learned important lessons due to the pandemic) to the technologically driven dystopia of isolated individuals, closed borders, and drastically reduced interactions and social practice, where life is concentrated in the heart of the virtual world.

We are dealing with competing paradigms. Kuhn believed that the acceptance or rejection of a paradigm is a social as well as a logical process. He explains that the incommensurability of paradigms happens since they share no common measure and cannot be compared. Although he focused on scientific development, his explanation that social and political systems are changing in ways that call for new interpretations can apply to the current situation, as we face changes in many scientific disciplines, including education, together with changes in social practices.

Although the use of this concept is mostly associated with natural sciences, similar considerations can also be applied in an educational context. This is confirmed by Kuhn himself in the text *Second Thoughts on Paradigms*, published a few years after the aforementioned book. One definition of the term 'paradigm' is «a characteristic set of beliefs and preconceptions», which includes theoretical assumptions of a discourse related to education.

> A scientific community consists, in this view, of the practitioners of a scientific specialty. Bound together by common elements in their education and apprenticeship, they see themselves and are seen by others as the men responsible for the pursuit of a set of shared goals, including the training of their successors. Such communities are characterized by the relative fullness of communication within the group and by the relative unanimity of the group's judgment in professional matters. To a remarkable extent the members of a given community will have absorbed the same literature and drawn similar lessons from it. Because the attention of different communities is focused on different matters, professional communication across group lines is likely to be arduous, often gives rise to misunderstanding, and may, if pursued, isolate significant disagreement (Khun 1974, 461-462).

However, problems, uncertainties, and disagreements inevitably arise, especially in times of crisis such as the one we are still experiencing. There is no answer to the uncertainty of the current development yet, no clear vision of the 'new normal', and no definitive answer to what a new education paradigm might look like. The reasons are multiple:

- The pandemic is still ongoing, and we are intensively dealing with questions about role, meaning, content, and forms of adult learning and education in the current situation. At the same time, we are thinking about the time after the pandemic. Therefore, the question here is about the role of adult learning and education both during and after the pandemic, as current actions and perceptions will shape the future as well;
- The educational response to the pandemic, as well as the future position and shape of this response, will depend on the answers coming from other spheres of life, which are even more difficult to predict. Therefore, we can only indicate the tendencies in the field of education and the ways in which other sectors might influence adult learning and education;
- Full analysis of changes in the field would require a comprehensive exploration of different aspects, such as the goal of education, current paradigms and discourses, roles and functions, content, numerous subsectors and specific areas of adult learning and education, methods, and organizational forms. Therefore, we will only choose a few of the most visible and dominant aspects and characteristics that might indicate the possible direction of changes and the type of crossroads the world of adult learning and education finds itself at.

2. Adult Education and Health

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the vital role of non-formal adult learning and education in adapting to changing circumstances. As the pandemic unfolded, fast and flexible measures were required to help people cope. Non-formal education and learning, including through online channels such as the internet, social media, television, radio, online courses, and newspapers, were employed

to share information on the virus, preventive measures, hygiene practices, and proper behaviour. The dissemination of knowledge and information on public health was massive, and the recent «Stay Responsible» campaign was one of the most widespread awareness-raising campaigns in history. The speed of response and ability to react to urgent needs in the case of a massive threat to public health was a unique aspect of non-formal education that no formal education unit could match.

Understandably, the pandemic imposed some urgent topics and motivated people to learn about very concrete health issues related to COVID-19, but the scope of health education was not to broaden so and to include issues that do play a role: healthy life-styles, new relationship between health and environment, awareness of all the risks and traps of the food industry etc.

While numerous papers, strategies, and recommendations have been published on broader strategic questions concerning public health, such as how the education system can develop individual and systemic resiliencies in health crises, how education systems can anticipate, respond to, and mitigate the effects of pandemics and similar crises, the proposed measures are usually limited to practical and technical solutions or general recommendations that could have been formulated without any lessons learned from the pandemic. Although research exploring lifestyle and eating habits before and during COVID-19 quarantine has been conducted, there have been hardly any lessons learned from the specific pandemic or any suggestions for policy makers and curriculum developers to change the curriculum and content of education and learning to include broader knowledge of health.

While media and portals have provided superficial advice on health awareness, urging people to «Stay hydrated! Stay energetic! ... Feeling stressed? Breathe!» (News 18 2021), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has not shown any ambitious awareness-raising effort. Instead, they instruct people to «follow World Health Organization (WHO) guidance and governmental advice to protect against COVID-19 infection and transmission. Physical distancing and good hygiene are the best protection for yourself and others against COVID-19», continuing with the usual «eat plenty of fruits and vegetables ... Watch your intake of fats, sugar, and salt» (FAO 2020).

Well, we knew that. Will education system undertake steps to enable transformative learning and create new awareness and long-term changes this time? This wasn't done enough after swine flu pandemic, chicken flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola...

It seems that this will be left to individuals, and in a known, neoliberal style, main actors who shape response to the pandemic will stick to the following position: adult learners are mature and it is up to them to learn and educate themselves even in a life-important issues. According to Schram, «people are expected to practice personal responsibility by investing in their own human capital to make themselves less of a burden on society as a whole or face the consequences of a heightened disciplinary regime» (2018, 308). The same way the responsibility for the jobs and employment was 'transferred' to the individuals through the

concepts of 'employability' and 'flexicurity' (while the economy and industry shifted to what J. Varoufakis 2021 called «techno-feudalism»), their health and resilience are now seen as a purely individual matter. Some new coined concepts, such as 'healthicurity' or 'healthability,' might emerge as a result.

The concept that individual adaptability is essential for a healthy lifestyle has been criticized as having a neoliberal nature by Maksimović (2021). Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, Lemke explains that «the strategy of rendering individual subjects 'responsible' (and also collectives, such as families, associations, etc.) entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc. and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of 'self-care' » (2001, 201). This is precisely what has happened with the neoliberal approach to the pandemic. Even vaccination, which could have relieved social tensions, has been framed as an individual responsibility. The state has fulfilled its duty by providing the opportunity for vaccination, and any failure to get vaccinated is deemed the fault of individuals.

Another aspect of the pandemic that has not received enough attention in current educational content is the global and political nature of health. While earlier teaching material for public health professionals, such as the Global Health Education Competencies Tool Kit by Astle et al. (2015), touches on this, there is a need to delve further into the North-South divide and health in different political-economic contexts to better understand the varied effects of the pandemic. The short tweet by Damian Barr: «We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm» has been doing the rounds of social media, as well as his explanation that «some are in super-yachts. Some have just the one oar» (Barr 2020). We are in the same storm (COVID-19-storm), but we are hit in a very different way and the consequences are vastly different for different communities and countries. While physical distancing was a kind of responsible behaviour for Europe, North America or Australia, it was not possible for many communities and countries, especially in the Global South, but also in remote areas, cities and disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the North.

> It is imperative to note that when preventive measures become social norms that are reluctant to any contextualization or critical reflection, physical distancing can easily lead to social distancing and consequently increase existing gaps in the society or create new ones. Physical distancing, avoiding gathering and working from home are luxuries that millions cannot afford, so calling for such might be cynical (Popović 2020).

The pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of masses of people and a big number of countries,and raised the question of preconditions that led to massive suffering in some parts of the world.

> For populations that make their daily living working outside, not adhering to physical distancing rules is a matter of survival rather than irresponsible behaviour. Many vulnerable groups have a very high risk of unemployment,

> as well as threats to their livelihoods (especially for farmers, small and micro enterprises...). Working from home is a kind of 'luxury' available only for a small number of privileged people and a few countries (Popović 2020).

Resilience has become a buzzword in discussions and plans for pandemic recovery and building back better. UNESCO defines system resilience as «building and reinforcing the preparedness of the education system to anticipate, respond to and mitigate the effects of current and future crises» (2020, 2). However, it is mostly conceptualized as a normalization process that addresses learning losses, incorporates more digital technologies, and prepares for the next crisis.

> The underlying assumption in the discourse of resilience appears to be that the world is beyond our control … In other words, we should only try to find the best way to adapt and thus overcome the troubles. This takes away the personal agency of creating and influencing the society. Such an adaptable subject is reflexive and takes responsibility for his/her own well-being. This position can hinder community and political engagement, as the problem is not located within the structures that produce radical uncertainty, but within the person (Maksimović 2021).

In the more global context, it reminds of Schram's explanation of moralistic and tutorial dimensions of neoliberal social welfare, which is «focused on telling the poor how to behave more so than providing them with needed assistance» (2018, 313).

The crossroad for adult education in the coming time is indeed a challenging one. While it is important to prepare people to react, protect themselves, and develop capacities to face problems alone or with the community, education should not just stress the feeling of coming catastrophe and increase uncertainty and feeling of being threatened and endangered, while the question of decreased access to public services remains untouched. In other words: is education only a toll to deal with the health emergency? Or should it go deeper and address the structural and systemic inequalities that hit stronger and multiply when the crises wipe out the tiny net of social support and exacerbate the impact of crises?

The discussion on health and education as public services is often silenced by the health emergency, but also by the continuous tendency in last decade to undermine the requirements for more responsibility of the governments and expectations of welfare state. A range of neoliberal measures trying to reduce the burdens of the state and to shift both financial burden and moral responsibility to individuals, did leave serious marks on readiness of the state, social structures and system to cope with the pandemic. This hypertrophy of market logic and privatisation of health system, even in the developed European countries, have ruined the capacity of the health systems to deal with the pandemic. For example, massive privatisation of hospitals in Italy and Spain (Disamistade 2020; Hedgecoe 2020) and drastically reduced number of hospital beds and staff in Germany (Busse and Nimptsch 2021) are only some examples of the consequences of privatisation and marketisation of health system, that shape countries' response to crises.

The call for truly transformative education, which became quite loud in the last few years, should mean (in the context of health education) more than collecting skills, competencies and knowledge needed for personal maintenance and betterment of health; it requires questioning the social structures, the state's role and the responsibilities in the field of health, it requires challenging the economic and social models that are not adequate for the needs of the majority of the population, and it demands to put human well-being before profit – not only in crisis situations, but as a way to prevent or mild them.

3. Adult Education and Citizenship

The COVID-19 pandemic has been referred to as not only «a biological and health emergency. It is also a political emergency, an economic emergency and a social emergency intertwined. Its educational dynamics and forms of emergency weave through these larger processes [...]» (NORRAG 2021, 8). Initially, many restrictions imposed by states were accepted with little question; however, the adequacy of these restrictions was later questioned. While reliable estimations were lacking in the first phase, recent research shows a decline in democracy in many countries around the globe. «The volume of repressive responses to COVID-19 in both dictatorships and democracies reflects a growing global trend toward authoritarianism, which features the politicization of natural crises» (Slipowitz 2021). Freedom House, a reliable source, confirms: «Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have eroded the essential pillars of democracy in countries around the world, creating a crisis for global freedom» (Reputzi and Slipowitz 2020, 3). Furthermore, they state: «As a lethal pandemic, economic and physical insecurity, and violent conflict ravaged the world in 2020, democracy's defenders sustained heavy new losses in their struggle against authoritarian foes, shifting the international balance in favour of tyranny» (Reputzi and Slipowitz 2021, 1).

Many countries have used the pandemic to quash opposition, violate human rights, especially those of vulnerable groups, cut freedom of expression, and harass and arrest social media users and political opponents. Lockdowns, restrictions on mobility, and limited use of public spaces have caused a decline in civic activism, reduced freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of speech. Many governments used the pandemic as an excuse for authoritarian measures and violent actions, but even in countries with long-standing democracies, discussions are taking place about the line that can or mustn't be crossed when it comes to the rights of governments over citizens. «For the general population's sake, political elites undertake actions that would be hardly imaginable (and even less acceptable) under normal circumstances, especially in democratic societies (though perhaps not in illiberal democracies)» (Vankovska 2020, 72).

The imposed limits and measures can be considered a legitimate response to a public health threat, assuming they are proportionate, not long-lasting, and non-discriminatory. However, questions remain about what constitutes disproportionate government power, what constitutes discrimination, and where and

how freedom should be limited. These are questions that have not found good answers even at the theoretical level in the discussion among philosophers (see for example Peters 2020).

In this dispute, the Italian philosopher G. Agamben came dangerously close to espousing conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, his warning that there is a «tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government» should be taken seriously, given that this is precisely what is happening in many countries. This view is supported by a range of sources (see Reputzi and Slipowitz 2020, 2021; Friedersdorf 2021; Council of Europe 2020). The normalization of otherwise unacceptable practices and the disciplining of citizens are reminiscent of the ideas of Michel Foucault, as presented in Lemke's essay (2001) on Foucault's neoliberal governmentality and self-disciplined citizen, and the birth of biopolitics. Similarly, in his book *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World* (2020), the famous philosopher S. Žižek advocates accepting restrictions and deprivations derived from the pandemic as a new reality. However, this attitude has been heavily criticized by C. Herrera de la Fuente, who warns that «a kind of permanent state of exception can be established, in which confinements, curfews and extreme police surveillance will be constant», that the 'novel' coronavirus might be «the perfect excuse to exploit fear in its maximum expression with media hysteria on a massive, global scale» and invites to question and «activate again our critical reasoning before promulgating compliance with the standards that are implemented worldwide, even realizing that there is only a minute level of ethical commitment and solidarity with others» (2021, 9, 5). Similarly, B. Vankovska warns about the dramatic decrease in critical thinking and about self-censorship: «Even the most lucid analysts have joined the chorus: it's not the right time for regular political debates and blame games, now when people die and everyone is under threat we should stand united and obey the health authorities' orders» (2020, 73).

In this situation, instead of taking position, adult education can play an important role by equipping people for discussion, providing knowledge, arguments, historical, analytical, and comparative tools to participate in the debate and ensuing decision-making. Throughout history, the relationship between the state/government and citizens has been a constant process of negotiation, where the lines and limits have been discussed and changed, both in peaceful times and in times of crisis. Such discussions and participation in decision-making are always important, not just under favourable circumstances. Adult education has the task of helping people overcome a passive position as mere objects of actions and measures and becoming active participants in the process, making informed decisions or grounded demands. Additionally, it is essential to create awareness that this must be an ongoing process, not just in times of upheaval and disruption. Active citizenship means not just voting once every four years and being obedient in times of crisis; it means permanent activity in creating the body of social knowledge, enabling channels of dialogue, and strengthening agency through education.

During the pandemic, various mechanisms were applied to 'normalize' unusual behavioural practices related to the pandemic, and many of these practices are still required, thereby transforming them into established social norms. The set of values behind the universalization of these practices is not sufficiently challenged or put up for open discussion, so at least harmful side-effects could be addressed. This is necessary for the protection of common interests, human rights, minority rights, as well as preserving solidarity, community cooperation, and maintaining some level of civic activism and political reflection.

Another aspect highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic is the need for global citizenship education to expand its scope to include a broader range of topics and tasks. This includes raising awareness about the importance of upholding human rights worldwide, particularly during the pandemic, and

> awareness towards the ways in which we participate in democratic societies and decision making. Also central is sharing information and raising awareness about the global issues of sustainable development, anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation that could cause or encourage the spread of new diseases (i.e.: large-scale deforestation, habitat degradation and fragmentation, agriculture intensification, trade in species and plants, eating habits etc.) (Popović 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic has also highlighted the resurgence of nationalism, which has been fuelled by fear and anxiety during times of crisis.

> India, Brazil, Hungary … Regimes that openly profess militant nationalism are among the hardest hit by the pandemic. However, outside of these countries, Covid-19 has given rise to nationalistic variants in crisis management policies, with varying degrees of effectiveness […] All over the world, national withdrawal was proposed as an emergency solution, triggering the closure of borders at rates and in ways that were specific to individual nations, even when they belonged to the Schengen area (Badie 2021).

Nationalism has been used as a narrative to interpret the crisis, with some attributing a nationality to the virus and finding 'another nation' to blame. Others have returned to the old concept of national security, which is limited to a national scope. The pandemic has also fuelled economic nationalism, vaccine nationalism, and competitions in pandemic measures, offering a wide range of possibilities for populist movements across the political spectrum.

> Denouncing the illegitimacy and inefficiency of institutions, technocrats and scholars, it values a reference to the people immediately conceived in reference to the nation, even to the purity of identity, thus enshrining a triple advantage. It is easy to create a scapegoat where migrants, foreigners and globalization are intermingled. It is easy to close the borders as a low-cost solution (Badie 2021).

The intersection of adult education and the pandemic presents a complex challenge, as the emphasis on responsible behaviour and protecting oneself and others can inadvertently provide a platform or excuse for nationalist and populist

ideologies. However, adult education also holds the potential to cultivate new forms of solidarity and cooperation, foster critical reflection, and assist in the exploration of fresh sources of identity and meaning. According to Antonsich (2020), the crisis has intensified feelings of national exceptionalism and solidarity. Nonetheless, adult education can expand the spectrum of possibilities for identity development and facilitate the process of coping with fears and evaluating the temporary nature of changes that may be frightening to individuals.

> The early period of the pandemic crisis revealed some hybrid form of medical nationalism, economic nationalism, and everyday nationalism. However, the common crisis has also heightened the importance of regional solidarity, and reinforces a strengthening of cross-national cooperation and multilateral institutions (Wang 2021, 20).

This is another cross-road for adult education and contradictory generator of alternative perspectives.

Another disturbing trend during the pandemic has been the widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and superstitions. While not a new phenomenon, their consequences have been particularly damaging during the COVID-19 crisis, impeding an appropriate response. The shift towards online learning and alternative sources of information has facilitated the dissemination of unverified and potentially hazardous ideas. This problem cannot be solely attributed to a lack of critical knowledge, as it also represents an exaggerated 'explosion' of critical thinking that disregards fundamental scientific truths and social reliability.

Like any danger, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and prejudices patiently await fertile ground where they can multiply, develop, and spread. Their existence is undeniable, and their power is destructive, especially when they emerge during times of crisis. The pandemic took us all by surprise, capturing our attention unexpectedly and leaving us unprepared. While the scientific community made every effort to address the new situation, such processes take time, leaving ample space for the aforementioned dangers to gladly fill. Their power takes various forms, but two particularly devastating aspects can be highlighted. The first relates to the erosion of trust in science, scientists, and the scientific system and method. By trivializing the scientific approach, it creates an opening for untested (and unverifiable) delusions disguised as revolutionary and original ideas and theories. Additionally, the other side of the coin involves an extreme and harmful position that rigidly upholds positivistic science as the sole viable approach to finding solutions, without considering alternatives or individual and exceptional cases. Both of these aspects enable the infiltration of malicious, fear-based, and often lucrative forms of human thought that present themselves as new or alternative approaches, promising definitive and accurate answers.

To address this problem, adult education can provide reliable information, science education, promote media literacy and critical thinking, but its efficacy is limited during crises. Instead, the emphasis should be on developing a more stable value system that prevents the outbreak of these phenomena in times of

crisis, and offering individuals opportunities for personal growth and connections with their communities. This could help individuals to deal with uncertainties, with greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence navigate better ambiguities and insecurities. Through fostering dialogue and community engagement, the spaces could be created for individuals to engage in meaningful dialogue with others who hold different views. This can help to build empathy, understanding, and mutual respect and provide opportunities for individuals to learn from diverse perspectives.

In summary, adult education has a crucial role to play in navigating the complex intersection of the pandemic and education, and must actively promote responsible behaviour, critical thinking, and social cohesion.

The field of adult education is presented with the choice of either becoming a part of desperate efforts to address the crises as they unfold or taking a proactive approach towards the creation of a 'new normal'. The latter would involve an examination of the failures of education concepts, paradigms, and approaches that have proven to be ineffective and providing transformative perspectives based on current lessons learned. This is perfectly expressed in the recent UNESCO's document, which is created with the awareness of the possible consequences of the health crisis:

> We need a new social contract for education that can repair injustices while transforming the future. This new social contract must be grounded in human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity. It must encompass an ethic of care, reciprocity, and solidarity. It must strengthen education as a public endeavour and a common good (UNESCO 2021a).

4. Adult Education and Technology

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a dramatic and apparent transformation in the practices of adult education, characterized by a shift to the virtual space and a heavy reliance on digital and information and communication technology (ICT) tools. The urgent need to address the learning losses and formulate mitigation strategies prompted a massive utilization of online platforms, tools, and applications. As a result, non-formal and informal adult learning and education have flourished, and the internet has become a vast repository of knowledge and information for acquiring new skills and solving emerging problems.

Digital technology has enabled the learning process to continue to a significant extent and compensate for some of the individual and social losses in the education sector. Some potentials of technology that existed even before the COVID-19 interruption were 'discovered' and extensively used. Even resistant 'old fashioners' who were initially resistant to digital learning embraced the online realm and acknowledged its numerous advantages. The term 'Zoomification'

became a byword for this new phenomenon, making home chair and screen the biggest learning space and educational unit in the history.

As a result of this remarkable achievement, ICT has not only been extolled but also deified and proclaimed as the 'silver bullet' for most of the learning problems and losses during and after the pandemic. UNESCO and the Global Education Coalition advocate for Education and Technological Transformations for Human-centered recovery (UNESCO 2021b), while research praises the potential of ICT technology to bridge the learning gaps and reach marginalized groups: «The strategic role of information and communication technologies (ICTs, in view of what has happened worldwide over the first six months of the pandemic in 2020) in contributing towards the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the United Nations» has been underlined (Lázaro Lorente et al. 2021). There are numerous calls to integrate digital skills and online learning methods into teacher training programs, integrate ICT and digital skills into studies, and launch projects that aim to increase the utilization of ICT in schools and education (Manco-Chavez et al. 2020)[1].

Despite numerous researches warning about the risks of overuse or over-reliance on digital technology in education, technological enthusiasm is prevailing. The World Economic Forum states: «Research suggests that online learning has been shown to increase retention of information and take less time, meaning the changes coronavirus has caused might be here to stay» (Li and Lalani 2020). The OECD acknowledges certain limitations but maintains an optimistic stance, as they perceive the limitations and risks to be primarily of a technical nature.

> […] the crisis provides a powerful test of the potential of learning online […] Expanding adult training provision through online learning would have significant advantages. In particular, online learning could help reach a much bigger number of learners with a smaller investment in education infrastructure, making it a cost-effective solution in the context of rising unemployment due to the COVID-19 crisis […] Issues of inclusiveness would also need to be tackled to ensure that all adults can benefit from online learning, including adults with lower digital skills and limited access to computer and internet facilities, adults with less self-motivation and those requiring blue-collar training. Lessons learnt during the COVID-19 crisis can help address the existing limitations to realise the full potential of online learning (OECD 2020).

The promotion of a technology-driven approach to education is not a new phenomenon, as evidenced by the inclusion of digital skills as one of the three main competency groups measured by PISA and PIAAC for several years. Examples of attempts to replace teachers with digital technology in certain con-

[1] One extreme case is the use of gamification methods, even in fields such as adult literacy. Computer games adapted for mobile phones are promoted as a valid replacement for existing literacy methods, reducing literacy to a mere skill (Session 4 of the UNESCO's International Literacy Day – International Conference on 'Literacy and Skills Development' – UNESCO 2018).

texts, such as the Liberian project to use scripted education via tablet computers, have also been reported (Brown-Martin 2016), as have similar endeavours in developing countries to outsource education to for-profit corporations (AFP 2017). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated this trend, elevating it to a central topic in discussions about education during the pandemic, as well as in recovery plans and envisioning the future of education in a post-COVID-19 world

> The application of digital technologies has apparently taken up the most space in the conception of all educational responses to the pandemic. With uncritical enthusiasm or with cautious recommendations, online education is the first, and perhaps the last, response of education to a pandemic (Popović 2021).[2]

Much of the criticism directed towards digital education pertains to its 'technical' aspects, such as the digital gap, lack of digital infrastructure and skills, and the fact that half of the world's population does not have internet access (ITU 2018). However, some researchers and practitioners have attempted to draw attention to other limitations and risks associated with digital education. These include the absence of social-emotional[3] and embodied learning, reduced opportunities to teach critical thinking, creativity, citizenship, interculturalism, and tolerance, as well as issues with motivation, communication, limited use of interactive methods, and cooperative learning, among others. Furthermore, the learner-centered approach, previously considered a 'golden rule' of education, has almost disappeared from educational narratives, with the focus shifting to digital triggers, rewards, and games, while the requirement for strict data protection has limited the scope for personalized teaching approaches. Will a 'human-centered recovery' (UNESCO) be achievable when a human-centered approach has to rely on padlets and shared screens, digital triggers and rewards, computer games, and the digital skills of teachers? While there may be greater possibilities when working with small groups, teaching large groups of learners from different locations (which is often highlighted as an advantage of digital teaching) may lead us back to traditional forms of teaching with their inherent limitations and exclusions.

Moreover, even if teaching can be effectively conducted through screens, what about training and skills acquisition? How do we address emotional learning and develop social skills? What about peace education and fostering tolerance?

This crossroad is probably the biggest challenge for adult education, because of the powerful interests that are involved in deciding about the direction of future development. N. Klein, famous for her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), where she elaborated the ways that neoliberal capi-

[2] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

[3] Social-emotional learning was one of the top themes until recently! See for example: Nissem Global Briefs: Educating for the social, the emotional and the sustainable (Smart et al. 2019) and SEL for SDGs: Why Social and Emotional Learning is necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO MGIEP 2019).

talism exploits crises and natural disasters, wrote already about the persisting attempt of big technological companies to seize the opportunity to extend their reach and power, most recent one being COVID-19 pandemic:

> […] something resembling a coherent pandemic shock doctrine is beginning to emerge. Call it the Screen New Deal. Far more hi-tech than anything we have seen during previous disasters, the future that is being rushed into being as the bodies still pile up treats our past weeks of physical isolation not as a painful necessity to save lives, but as a living laboratory for a permanent – and highly profitable – no-touch future (Klein 2020).

We are facing here two competing paradigms of future, human nature and education. Future visions of adult learning and education are rooted in two main contradicting paradigms:

> Thanatos and Eros policies have both shown great power over people's mindsets and behavior, but the debate between their respective proponents is not over yet. There are romanticized versions of a virus whose role is to awaken mankind's conscience but also *Brave New World* or *1984* versions of the COVID crisis (Vankovska 2020, 73).

The idea of technological dystopia (see for example: Foucault, Agamben, Benvenuto 2020) in education gets strengthened by the global policy makers: not only that the emergence of digital policies became dominant and recommended to the governments by UNESCO, OECD and The World Bank, but they also promote artificial intelligence (AI) which is becoming a mainstream. In 2021 UNESCO promotes AI as «a common good to transform education»[4] (UNESCO 2021c) and doesn't limit its recommendation to increased use of AI and other tools in education, but raises the bar: AI should redefine not only education, but humanity:

> The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is part and parcel of the digital transformation of all facets of our societies – from our daily lives to the world of work and to public services, including education. Specifically, the AI-powered digitalization of learning is not only about digital transmission of 'traditional' forms of knowledge. It is also increasingly about the digitalization of knowledge production and representation, driven by machine learning and increasingly powerful algorithms. In general, the rapid growth of human-AI collaboration and the digital transformation of our societies have profound implications for what it means to be human and how we relate to each other and to technology. The traditional conceptions of humanism need to be reframed, and a digital humanism is being defined and will guide our education and development efforts (UNESCO 2021c, 1).

[4] Already in 2020 (7-8 December), International Forum *AI and the Futures of Education* was held under the title *Developing Competencies for the AI Era*, announcing the ambition of transforming human society (UNESCO 2021d, 12).

Additional calls to use the technology in the service of people to enhance human capacity, protect human rights and ensure sustainable development, doesn't really indicate how AI in education can help the world facing the serious global problems that UNESCO itself lists based on the Report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education: «Widening social and economic inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, resource use that exceeds planetary boundaries, democratic backsliding and disruptive technological automation». The same Commission, while agreeing about the «tremendous transformative potential in digital technologies», warns that «we have not yet figured out how to deliver on these many promises» and that «the challenge of creating decent human-centred work is about to get much harder as Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation and structural transformations remake employment landscapes around the globe» (UNESCO 2021a, 3). And not only employment landscape – it intervenes in education, in social tissue, in human bodies and humanity in general.

Adding to these concerns, the next UNESCO forum on AI is co-organized with China, a country that is known a 'champion' in using advanced technology to control and surveil its citizens, and for exporting these practices to other countries (such as Serbia; Gomez 2021). «An enduring legacy of the COVID19 crisis will be the incremental development of surveillance technologies, ostensibly purposed to identify the threat and spread of a pandemic, giving birth to what amounts to the pandemic surveillance state» (Kampmark 2020, 59).

The pandemic has also accelerated the adoption of technology-driven practices, with ICT-based learning touted as a magical solution. However, this 'normalization' of techniques represents a shift from Foucault's 'disciplinary technology' to a realm where the limitations imposed by the pandemic are taken as axiomatic and inflexible. This trend warrants further analysis and reflection.

A true historical juncture! Edward O. Wilson, American sociobiologist, said: «The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology» (2009). The overwhelming emphasis on technology often eclipses the importance of addressing the first two elements, thereby underscoring the enduring significance of adult education. This task remains crucial not only during times of crises but precisely because of the diverse range of crises.

5. Concluding Remarks

It remains to be seen whether the COVID-19 pandemic will bring about a paradigm shift in education, but there are several indicators pointing in that direction. Kuhn's definition of paradigm shift can be applied beyond the field of science, as we witness the need for new explanations and approaches in adult education, and the incapability of existing ones to address current and emerging societal needs, without understanding it too broad.

The pandemic has brought about dramatic changes, and their depth, duration, and persistence will inevitably impact the role of education. Moreover, some of

the basic assumptions of educational paradigms have been questioned, such as the exclusive focus on cognitive skills, the reductive understanding of human nature, and the dominance of technology over content and values in education. As a result, we are witnessing substantial changes in the role of teachers, the replacement of traditional teaching methods with digital tools, and the emergence of contradictory new assumptions. The main elements of the system have changed and their functioning too; new approaches are being offered, but they are also contradicting each other. Do we need more of the 'old', just better and deeper, or do we need to create a new educational realm? Should we explore the less travelled roads or build completely new ones?

This dilemma highlights the need for a 'learning to change' approach in the global education world, From the perspective of Jack Mezirow (1978), the COVID-19 pandemic might be a 'disorienting dilemma', that will inspire critical reflection, exploration of alternatives and new roles, as well as capacity development for the new stage and integration. Crises can be an opportunity for change and improvement.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic may be viewed as a perspective change or paradigm shift, one thing is certain: passive reactions by the adult education sector to the ongoing debates and discussions between conflicting approaches and interests will make it a blind follower of changes in other sectors and a servant of future directions of development within the imposed paradigms. The educational experiences and practices during COVID-19 provide valuable insights and opportunities for critical reflection. It is crucial to shift research focus beyond common issues like evaluating user satisfaction with platforms such as Zoom or MSTeams and delve into substantial pedagogical and andragogical inquiries. They have the potential to provide a significant, influential, and well-informed perspective on the post-COVID-19 era, and to be a loud and grounded voice in the ongoing discussions about it.

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The International Adult Education Academy and Its Contribution to Professionalisation in Adult Education

Lisa Breitschwerdt, Regina Egetenmeyer

Abstract:

Planning and designing lifelong teaching-learning processes requires well-educated professionals in adult and continuing education. Against the background of changing social structures, they must be able to act confidently in interdisciplinary, cooperative and unpredictable interaction situations. This requires the development of professionalism in adult education with respect to the following perspectives: 1) interdependencies within the multi-level system of adult education, 2) inference between academic knowledge and adult educational practice, and 3) mediation processes between different social logics of action. Using the example of the International Adult Education Academy, we present and discuss ways of referencing the three perspectives of professionalism in the academic professionalisation of adult education.

Keywords: Adult Education; Adult Education Academy; Professionalisation; Professionalism Development

1. Introduction

Planning and designing educational offerings for adults requires well-educated professionals in adult and continuing education. Against the background of changing social structures, they must be able to act confidently in interdisciplinary, cooperative and unpredictable interaction situations. The professionalisation of adult and continuing education staff is therefore a key task of the discipline (e.g. Jütte and Lattke 2014; Mikulec 2019). To accomplish this, however, it is necessary to define what is meant by professionalism in adult education and how it can be promoted.

When defining the term professionalism in adult education, it was long common to refer to classical theories of professionalisation, which emphasise the special significance of professions as occupations of a specific quality (Nittel 2000). These theories are based on certain attributes, such as control of knowl-

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edge, central ethical values or the academic knowledge base of professions. Professionalism is understood in relation to this as a special quality of action. This action is based on specialised (academic) knowledge, skills and competences to be developed and used in individual situations based on processes of reflection and interpretation (Tietgens 1988; Nittel 2000). This specialised (academic) knowledge is usually developed through study programmes in academic settings (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2012; Gieseke 2018; Nittel 2018).

Currently, social changes lead away from the classic concept of professions (Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). These changes include a growing orientation towards markets and customers, a decrease in national licensing and funding in the professions, heterogeneous adult learning populations, and a takeover of professional development by organisations (Kloke 2014, 136-37). This new theoretical perspective gives adult education a new perspective for its professionalisation project and for the design and promotion of professionalism development (Egetenmeyer et al. 2019).

Through the Adult Education Academy 'International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning', an international programme has been developed since 2014 that promotes the professional development of (future) adult educators against the background of the changing context of professionalisation. Based on the experiences, this paper explores the question:

How does the Adult Education Academy 'International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning' contribute to professionalisation in adult and continuing education?

To that end, we begin by giving a short overview of the programme and setting of the Adult Education Academy (Chapter 2). Next, we outline the understanding of professionalisation and professionalism, which takes into account the changed social conditions and refers to the new theoretical perspectives. Emphasis is placed on the aspects of multi-level perspectives, the connection between academic and practical knowledge, and the mediation between different logics of action (Chapter 3). We present each of these aspects in more detail, both in theory and in terms of how they are promoted in academic studies through the Adult Education Academy (Chapters 3.1 to 3.3). Finally, we summarise the didactical approach of the Adult Education Academy with respect to its contribution to professionalisation in adult and continuing education (Chapter 4).

2. The Adult Education Academy

The Adult Education Academy 'International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning' is a one-semester programme that aims to foster a connection between academic learning and adult education practice (see *infra* Danquah et al.; "Professorship of Adult and Continuing Education" 2021). The basic idea of the programme is to apply international perspectives from academic research and practice to various topics in adult education and

continuing education. Based on this exchange, the Academy serves to strengthen a general and deeper mutual understanding of adult education worldwide. The programme is divided into an asynchronous and synchronous three-month online preparation phase and a synchronous two-week face-to-face event, which takes place at Julius-Maximilian University of Würzburg, Germany, in February each year. Participants of the Adult Education Academy are master's and doctoral students in adult education from all around the world. Likewise, the programme enrols practitioners from the field of adult education and lifelong learning who are affiliated with DVV International or the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA). More than 500 participants from more than 20 countries have attended the Adult Education Academy since 2014 (INTALL 2021). Throughout the whole programme, the participants are accompanied by a team of experienced moderators and learning facilitators who are professors and doctoral students in adult education.

Preparation Phase (Online, Asynchronous and Synchronous)

The preparation phase usually starts in early November and lasts about three months. It takes place completely online. It includes asynchronous parts of self-directed learning, based on pre-prepared material on the Moodle platform, and synchronous live online sessions with moderators and facilitators. The aim is to prepare participants for the subsequent intensive in-person phase of the programme in Würzburg. This includes preparatory reading assignments on the topics of the intense face-to-face programme in Würzburg. Furthermore, participants prepare a 'transnational essay' on an issue in a specific field of adult education from their national perspective, which is the basis for the work in week two of the following face-to-face event. In addition, an optional programme module on employability in adult education takes place in December and January. Here, practitioners give live online sessions providing insights into their practical fields. In addition, master's and doctoral students are guided to reflect on their own competences acquired so far and to consider options for their further professional biography.

Two-week Programme in Würzburg (Face-to-face, Synchronous)

In early February, an intensive face-to-face programme takes place in Würzburg. In the first week, participants get an insight into topics concerning 'International strategies in adult education' (Master's students) or 'Theories for international adult education - Paulo Freire' (PhD students). The week also includes an overview of adult education structures in Germany and field visits to adult education providers in Würzburg and in the south of Germany. During the second week, participants work in smaller groups of six to eight persons on specific issues in adult and continuing education. The aim is to shed light on the different national perspectives on the issue and, based on this, to analytically

identify commonalities and differences. The participants are prepared for this analytical procedure during the sessions in week one. The basis for the comparison is the 'transnational essay' prepared in the preparatory phase.

3. Perspective on Professionalism

The discourse on professionalisation in adult and continuing education in Germany is based on traditional sociological theories of the professions. Overall, it emphasises the special quality of occupations and vocational actions. On a structural level, it concerns the emergence of professions that are characterised by specific attributes as occupations with special qualities, including abstract academic knowledge, authority and monopoly over specified knowledge areas, autonomy over professional associations, or a purely altruistic perspective on common welfare (Mieg 2016). From the structural perspective, professionalisation in adult and continuing education means establishing degree programmes, cross-cutting training programmes, professional associations, and legal as well as financial framework conditions, for example (Nittel 2018).

From the 1990s onwards, the perspectives of professionalisation theory shifted in adult and continuing education, starting from the faltering discussion about establishing adult and continuing education as a profession at the structural level. On the level of action, the focus is now on professional action and the prerequisites and development of professionalism (Gieseke 1988; Helsper and Tippelt 2011). The understanding of professionalism refers to the disputes about professions at the structural level. As the special quality of professional action is based on academic knowledge and specific skills and competences. Professionals are faced with the challenge of interpreting unpredictable action situations in a situational manner and in reflexive recourse to this knowledge. Professionalism is therefore «not a 'state' that can be achieved or attained, but a fleeting occupational achievement that has to be produced situationally anew each time» (Nittel 2000, 85)[1]. With regard to the level of action and the development of professionalism, the focus is therefore on questions such as the necessary competencies of trainers, the need for further training or spaces for individual development.

Against the backdrop of changing social conditions, a shift can be observed in the debate about professions and professionalism and their development (Breitschwerdt 2022). There are concurrent trends towards a pluralisation of work contexts and an individualisation of professional activity (Pfadenhauer 2003). Fields of activity and job profiles, as well as organisational structures, are becoming increasingly differentiated. This results in requirements for cooperative and interdisciplinary collaboration between different professional groups. At the same time, economic, market-oriented and standardisation trends based on neo-liberal perspectives are finding their way into modern work contexts. This makes individual workers increasingly responsible for managing their own professional careers.

[1] Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the author.

These changes and their significance for professions and professionalism are taken up by the new professional theories (e.g. Evetts 2003, 2009; Kloke 2014; Schnell and Hirvonen 2018). They refer to classic aspects of professionalisation theories, such as the special importance of abstract academic knowledge as a basis for the interpretation of concrete situations. At the same time, they take up the changing general conditions of working environments and emphasise the special importance of organisations (Egetenmeyer et al. 2019; Breitschwerdt 2022) for professionalisation, renewing the discussion on the formation of professionalism. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the fields of activity, the focus is on negotiations among different stakeholders and clients and on cooperation with other professional groups. A classic understanding of professional activity (abstract academic knowledge, autonomy, altruistic perspective) is interpreted in relation to bureaucratic and economic understandings.

Based on these developments, professionalism can be understood as the interplay of three perspectives: the perspective on *interdependencies* within the multi-level system of adult education, the perspective on *inference*, which looks at the relationship between research-based knowledge and adult educational practice, and the perspective on *mediation processes* between different social logics of action against the backdrop of changed working worlds. The central point of reference for shaping these perspectives in adult education practice is the organisation (Kloke 2014; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). This is where managerial and bureaucratic elements come together in concrete work contexts, e.g. monitoring of work in social and public services required by the state. The organisation provides working contexts in which professionalism takes shape in an organisation-specific way (professionalism within organisations).

In the following, the three perspectives of professionalism in adult education will be outlined in detail. Based on the outline, we discuss how this aspect of professionalism is supported in the International Adult Education Academy. This discussion provides an insight into how professionalism in adult education can be developed within higher education and how the internationalisation of the programme supports this process.

3.1 Interdependence: Multi-level Perspectives in Adult Education

Professionalism concerns not only the individual development of actors, for instance through training and competence development; it also depends on societal contexts. Major changes in society, such as the extensive digitalisation triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, show that individual development must always be considered in interdependence with surrounding organisational and societal structures. In adult education, multi-level perspectives play an important role for analysing the field (e.g. Lima and Guimarães 2011; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019) – for example, in relation to organisational structures, which are very heterogeneous in Germany for historical reasons (Schrader 2010), or the reflection of didactic considerations which takes place on different levels before and during learning set-

tings (Fleige et al. 2018; von Hippel et al. 2019). Depending on access and depth of knowledge, more or less differentiated models are available. A more comprehensive model used in recent studies (e.g. Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2014; Egetenmeyer and Grafe 2017; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019) considers the following levels (see Fig. 1):

Figure 1 – Multi-level model (Egetenmeyer and Grafe 2017; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019).

The first level is that of adult learners participating in adult education with different motivations and interests. The second level is continuing education staff, who are very diverse in terms of their qualifications and enter the field of adult education in many different ways. Third, the level of programmes and offerings refers to the importance of didactic considerations and design in adult education, which must be taken into account in different ways, depending on content and target groups. On the fourth level of organisational context, the organisation not only plays a role in the professional development of staff but it also implements framework conditions for how employees work together, the understanding of learning, or the design of educational settings. Fifth, the context of the umbrella organisations refers to the specific structures of adult education, which are manifested in the level framing organisations, which shapes different contexts of financial and legal structures and supports infrastructures for working in the field. Finally, the level of social contexts and changes, whose three central reference points (state, market and civil society) shape adult education nationally.

Promoting Multi-level Perspectives in the Adult Education Academy

In the Adult Education Academy, the perspective on the different levels is taken up in various ways. During an online self-study phase, participants learn about the different levels and their importance for investigating adult education topics through academic texts and videos designed for this purpose. Based on this, they prepare a paper in advance focussing on a specific research question with regard to one context, which is frequently a national context (their home country).

During the first week on campus, participants get a deeper insight in multi-level perspectives and their importance for academic work. Using the multi-level model developed by Lima and Guimarães (2011) to analyse educational policy structures, participants are introduced to the differentiation of the following levels:

- mega level: international policies, adult education, lifelong learning;
- macro level: national policies, adult education, lifelong learning;
- meso level: adult education providers;
- micro level: participants in adult education.

Working in groups, participants consider these levels to reflect on similarities and differences of adult education in participants' various countries of reference (e.g. home countries, study countries). Therefore, the multi-level perspective provides a pattern enabling participants to adopt a first structured comparative perspective between their countries of reference.

During the first week, participants perform field visits to various adult education institutions in Southern Germany in order to get to know adult education organisations in Germany. The field visits, too, are observed based on the multi-level perspective. To that end, participants use an observation guideline, enabling them to carry out systematic and theory-based observations during the field visits. Furthermore, the levels become more tangible through the practice examples.

In week two on campus, participants use the multi-level perspective for comparing selected aspects in adult education. Using the analytical perspectives introduced in week one, they develop features for the comparison that take into account the different contexts of the compared aspects (Egetenmeyer 2020). The multi-level perspective enables them to analytically identify similarities and differences as well as reasons for the similarities and differences. For this analytical step in comparative adult education, a multi-level perspective is very important, as arguments for similarities and differences can frequently be found in the different levels, which influence the concrete aspect of adult education (see Fig. 2).

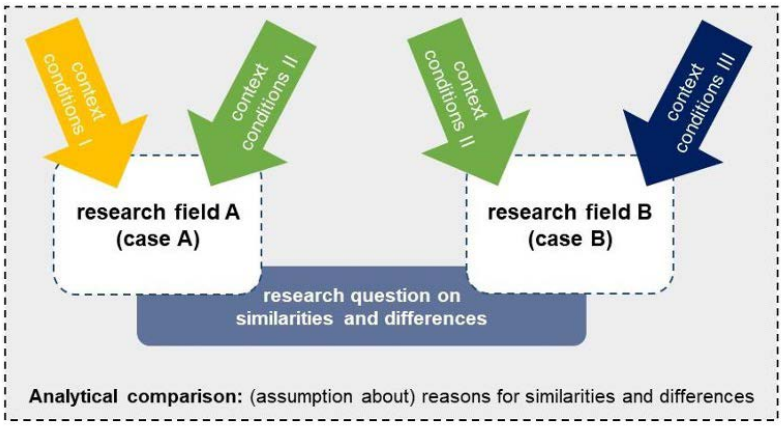

Figure 2 – Analytical comparison as research of context conditions (own illustration).

3.2 Inference: Links Between Academic Knowledge and Practice

Inference between academic knowledge and adult education practice targets the characteristics of professional actions. Professional actions are characterised by the situation that academic knowledge has to be interpreted for each individual practical case. The theory-practice realisation therefore represents the core of theoretical debates about professionalism and its development (e.g. Dewe 1996, 2014; Oevermann 1996).

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the question is which forms of knowledge are inherent in theory and practice (Dewe 1996, 2014) and how these can be linked in individual cases. This linkage is not a simple mediation between scientific knowledge and knowledge of action and everyday life. Rather, it presupposes reflexivity, which must be developed as the core of professional activity (Dewe 2004). The development of (self-)reflexive competences (e.g. Pachner 2018; Dewe and Gensicke 2018) and autonomy of action (Freidson 2001) is therefore increasingly discussed as a central aspect of professionalism development. Self-reflection cannot be assumed or learned in formal settings. Rather, it develops in the course of the individual professional biography. Professionalism from the perspective of inference is «not developed in a succession of academic research and practice, but within the framework of hermeneutic processes that relate the two functional systems of professional practice and research to each other» (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2012, 12). Organisational contexts, especially structures of academic professionalisation, can provide and support the foundations for this (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2012, 2014). But inference also emphasises the importance of continuing education structures for adult education staff to promote professionalism throughout the work biography, such as continuing education opportunities at universities or less formal structures such as professional learning communities.

For promoting professionalism from the inference perspective, it is important to keep in mind that research and practice each represent independent worlds of understanding that can never fully understand each other (see Fig. 3). Rather, the aim of promoting professional competences is to initiate and advance mutual processes of convergence and understanding based on a continuous dialogue (Gómez et al. 2011).

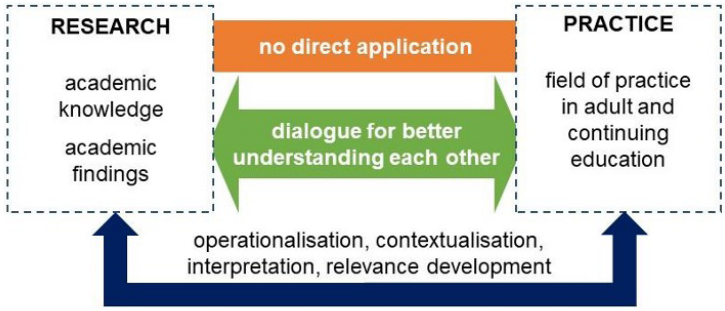

Figure 3 – Dialogue between research and practice as basis for adult education research (own illustration; Egetenmeyer and Grafe 2017; Breitschwerdt and Egetenmeyer 2022).

This dialogue represents the basis of gaining inference. It presupposes an open relationship between the academic discipline and practice characterised by mutual interest. For example, this can mean integrating practitioners' perspectives into study programmes by offering guest lectures in teaching and learning settings or having students complete internships and reflect on them as part of the studies (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2014). But it is also important when it comes to meeting the current needs of adult education practice throughout adult education research. Practice is not only the object of research but actively involved in the whole research process. Based on a relationship of trust, it is about the joint operationalisation of terms and concepts, the joint development of questions, research designs and interpretations (see Fig. 3). The aim of dialogical research is to enhance the relevance of academic investigations and findings for practice. Based on the results provided, practitioners themselves decide what is useful and implementable in their context of understanding (Breitschwerdt and Egetenmeyer 2022).

Promoting Perspectives on Inference in the Adult Education Academy

Insights into adult education practice are a key focus of the Adult Education Academy, which is developed in different ways. During the first week, there are field visits to adult education providers in South Germany, providing insights into adult education organisations. Practitioners present their organisations on site and guide participants through the premises. The participants are prepared for these practice explorations through an overview of the institutional and organisational field of adult education practice in Germany. Furthermore, participants are introduced to an observation grid for the field visits before going there. The grid comprises different theory-based observation categories on which participants are asked to take notes. For example, those categories are 'political-administrative guidelines', 'political priorities', 'organisational and ad-

ministrative dimensions' or 'conceptual elements of public policies'. After the visits, participants return to campus and reflect on their notes together.

In addition, practitioners from various international adult education organisations (DVV International and EAEA) join the Adult Education Academy as participants. They add practical perspectives on the various topics to the academic discussion and they present their work with a focus on one of the comparative groups. Furthermore, by participating during both weeks, practitioners get an insight into current issues and research projects in adult education. This promotes the direct exchange of academic and practical perspectives between students, practitioners and lecturers during the event, highlighting the importance of lifelong learning throughout the professional biography for developing professionalism. Moreover, it enlarges the perspective of the professors and academic teachers about international adult education practice.

3.3 Mediation: Relationship Between the Logics of Professionalism, Bureaucracy, and Economics

In relation to new professional theories, professionalism is to be understood as a mediating action between different logics (Breitschwerdt et al. 2019; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). It no longer traditionally refers to an underlying profession but is becoming increasingly hybrid in differentiated fields of activity (Noordegraaf 2007, 2015). Work contexts and action situations are becoming increasingly complex. Professionals with different expertise work together in an interdisciplinary and cooperative way. Adult education has always been an area of the educational system connected and referring to other disciplines and functional systems. For example, it relates to psychology and sociology when it comes to the question of reaching target groups and their learning motivations. Likewise, it relates to economic principles when budgeting course plans or supporting the development of competences as a learning target in vocational adult education. In addition, state regulation of work contexts continues to decline. Other control mechanisms for professional activity are taking its place. On the one hand, these are characterised by market-oriented standardisation criteria outside the professional context, such as quality management systems and certifications. On the other hand, responsibility for monitoring professional performance is increasingly being placed in the hands of the actors themselves (Pfadenhauer 2003).

Adult education as a field of work is permeated by these processes of social change, which necessitate a changed approach on professionalism. In this hybridity of work contexts, being professional means understanding and mediating between the ideal-typical logics of professionalism, bureaucracy and economics (Freidson 2001) in concrete situations (see Fig. 4).

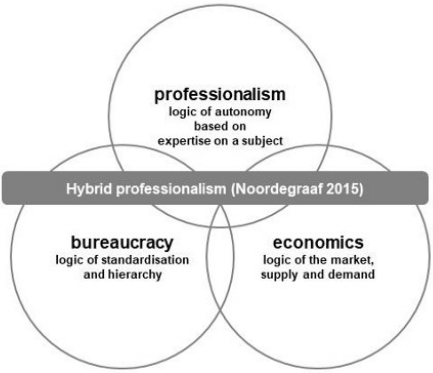

Figure 4 – Perspectives on hybrid professionalism (Breitschwerdt et al. 2019, 89).

The perspective on (1) professionalism emphasises the autonomy of adult educational expertise in action. Based on this expertise, adult educators have the sovereignty to organise, plan and implement educational processes for adults. From the perspective of (2) bureaucracy, requirements and processes of standardisation and hierarchisation introduced by public authorities become relevant. These include, for example, quality management requirements that have to be implemented in adult education organisations and programmes in order to obtain public certification. With the perspective of (3) economics, questions of supply and demand in the independent adult education market are taken up. Adult educators and organisations are challenged to design their own educational offerings in a cost-covering or profit-oriented way. Among other things, this includes comparing their own goals with the needs of different target groups articulated on the market. Being a professional adult educator means being able to balance and mediate between the demands of the three perspectives in specific situations of action (Breitschwerdt et al. 2019; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019).

Promoting Perspectives on the Relationship between the Logics of Professionalism, Bureaucracy and Economics in the Adult Education Academy

The Adult Education Academy takes all three logics into account. During the whole programme, participants are asked to engage with theoretical and research-based perspectives on adult and continuing education and to reflect on them in relation to their own life world as students or practitioners. This emphasises the perspective of professionalism in adult education based on different theoretical perspectives. But by reflecting on participants' individual contexts, the approach takes into account that they are working and studying in contexts affected by different framework conditions, such as legal or financial requirements. While practitioners are already more familiar with the economic perspective, students get a deeper insight during the employability part of the

programme 'Working in Adult Education'. Here, practitioners recount 'employability stories' from their own work contexts and students are accompanied by the reflection on their own competences and future professional path. Finally, the bureaucracy logic is taken into account during the Adult Education Academy through aspects of project funding. Various sources of funding are available for participants to help finance their participation in the Adult Education Academy (e.g. DAAD Summer School, ERASMUS+). These cover travel and accommodation expenses during their time in Germany. To receive that funding, participants have to go through an extensive application process in which they have to prepare and submit all the necessary documents and forms. From their perspective, participants thus gain an insight into the bureaucratic framework of international event management. Through the transparent procedure (all information is published on the website and participants are advised individually), they get to know different funding bodies and gain an insight into the project and funding framework conditions and how these influence the design of an event.

4. Conclusion

This paper discusses a perspective on adult education professionalism that takes into account the changing work and action contexts in a knowledge-based society that is both pluralist and increasingly individualised. We conceptualise professionalism in adult and continuing education as the interplay of three perspectives: 1) interdependencies within the multi-level system of adult education, 2) inference between research-based knowledge and adult education practice and 3) mediation processes between the logics of professionalism, bureaucracy, and economics. Academic professionalisation (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2012) is a central area in which professionalism is promoted and developed in relation to the three perspectives presented. We use the example of the Adult Education Academy to show how such professionalism can be promoted and cultivated within the framework of organised structures (see Fig. 5).

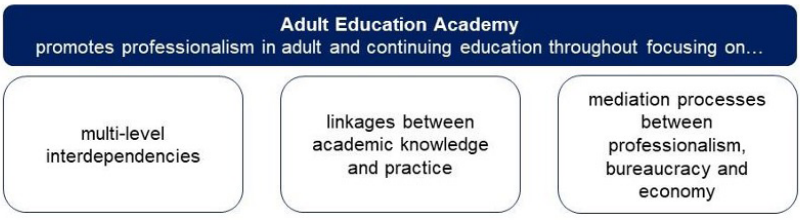

Figure 5 – Promotion of professionalism throughout the Adult Education Academy. Own illustration.

The inclusion of multi-level cross-cutting perspectives (interdependence) within the Adult Education Academy promotes the understanding that research topics and questions of adult education are related to multiple contexts. In order to understand them, it is first necessary to analyse the context of a research topic or question. Understanding adult education in a multi-level perspective helps to differentiate the corresponding levels of the research topic or question to be analysed and to understand the influence of its contexts. Participants gain insights into these perspectives and are given tools for performing such an analysis on their own during the Adult Education Academy. Further, by doing their own comparison they have the opportunity to transfer their knowledge and try out the methods they have learnt on a specific example.

Given the heterogeneity of the field of practice in adult education, a basic understanding of the empirical and practical field of adult education is necessary for the development of professionalism (inference). Adult education researchers must always consider the relevance of their approaches and objects of investigation to adult education practitioners. This requires a fundamental interest in the design and needs of practitioners as well as the creation of a relationship of trust to initiate dialogues between research and practice. Therefore not only academic education but also continuous opportunities for insights into adult education practice is needed. Through the combined participation of students and practitioners, this exchange is made possible during the AEA and is strengthened through the joint work on topics over several months. In addition, long-term networks between future researchers and practitioners in the international field of adult education are formed through this close cooperation (e.g. Network on LinkedIn; co-authoring articles).

Professionalism as an ideal-typical logic (Freidson 2001) of autonomous, science-based action is always related to other logics of action (mediation processes). These must be linked to each other. Adult education is located at many interfaces to other functional systems and disciplines. Professionalism gets hybrid (Noordegraaf 2007) and requires an understanding of adult education as it relates to the logics of professionalism, bureaucracy, and economics (Breitschwerdt et al. 2019). During the Adult Education Academy all three logics are promoted. The theoretical perspectives and methods of adult education, presented and discussed during the programme, provide a deep insight into adult education as a professional field. Aspects of economics are addressed by reflecting on the practical perspectives presented and by participants' own path of employability. Finally, bureaucracy perspectives are taken into account by organisational questions that participants have to deal with to be able to participate in the programme (e.g. manage paperwork for the funding).

Overall, the article outlines that the Adult Education Academy is a programme that promotes the professionalism of (future) adult educators in a university-based, academic setting. At the same time, due to its openness and flexibility, the programme integrates practice-related, cross-level and international perspectives and enables reverse connections to academic discourses. In this way, fundamental structures of professionalism development are developed,

piloted and established, taking into account the requirements of modern working environments in adult education.

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PART I

Innovation and Future Competences in Adult Education Research

Quality Culture and Innovation in Higher Education

Fabio Togni

Abstract:

The Quality Assurance history and, in general, the building of quality concept have accompanied the humanity history. With the advent of the production systems of the second and third Industrialisations Movement, this meant strengthening the control of products and services. With the end of the last century, more and more quality has affected processes and organisations as a whole. Today, Total Quality Management models cover all sectors of goods and services. Thus, also education systems can have great benefits from the spread of a Quality Culture. The essay aims to trace the history of TQM and shows how it also concerns formal and informal training. It also wants to show how the introduction of Quality Assurance Systems helps to create positive effects at both the micro, meso, macro and mega levels.

Keywords: Higher Education; Quality Assurance; Quality Culture; Stakeholders

1. The Long History of Quality

«*Substance* in the precise sense, in the first place and to the greatest extent, is that which is not said of some substratum, nor is it in any substratum, for example, a certain man, or a certain horse. On the other hand, *second substances* are called the species, to which are immanent the substances that are called first, and in addition to the species, the genera of these. For example, a particular man is immanent to a species, that is, to the notion of man, and on the other hand the genus of that species is the notion of animal» (Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a 11-18; 2b 15-17; 2b 30-3a 7).

For Aristotle, quality could be the principle (*substance*) that made it possible to determine specificity within the same class or gender. Having the opposable thumb or being bipedal was, therefore, the first *substance* of the human animal. Quality, then, in this first sense is a *descriptive characteristic of diversity*.

Diversity and quality are strongly interrelated.

In the second meaning – perhaps the most famous – *quality described the accidental and non-essential forms of the substance* and was therefore inferior to it.

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Thanks to it, continuity and discontinuity could be defined according to four groups: habitus and dispositions, forms, capacities and sensitive affections or qualities.

Medieval Scholasticism limited itself to noting, because of a more magical, alchemical and popular idea of nature, that, in addition to the sensitive qualities, experienced by one or more senses, there could also be occult and 'insensitive' ones.

On the contrary, modern philosophers could not admit the existence of elements that were not measurable and mathematizable.

For this reason, the quality of realities and objects came more and more to coincide with their material and quantitative element. This meant that the 'Quality' idea was increasingly connected to the idea of measurement and, by extension, to the idea of conformation and standardization of products and processes.

Quality as an 'element of differences enhancement' gave the stage to quality understood as 'maintenance of identity and replicability without errors or variations'.

This transition shifted the overall focus on quality and helped change the idea of value.

Before modernity and, in general, industrialisation, value/quality was connected to the ability to produce 'exemplum', unique pieces built 'in a workmanlike manner' within family and proximity production contexts, governed by a hierarchy similar to the domestic one (the father of the family was the teacher, the older children of the family were the workers and the younger children the apprentices). The quality was guaranteed by the direct and sensitive experience of the customer who had as his only intermediary figure that of the master of the workshop. Control actions were dominated by a qualitative approach.

With the affirmation of the industrial economy, value/quality has increasingly refined its technological tools of production (linked to the Market transformation) and, above all, of control. The links between the different circles of the productive organisation has become increasingly distant, progressively defamiliarising itself. The figure of the worker, that in the 'workshops model' was characterised by a high level of specialisation and complete responsibility for the production process, will progressively reduce his systemic vision and, in compliance with the rule of the scientific division of labor (Adam Smith), will be less and less specialised.

The emperors, categorised by Taylor, will be: one best way and de-responsibility.

In this context, the Control Strategies will be technologized by providing a quantitative approach, functional to mass production, obliged by the new consumerist logic of the market.

In the current post-industrial context, value/quality is increasingly considered as a useful element of competition in the supply of goods and services. Since the Seventies of the last century, models have been established (Japanese Industrial Standard and Company Wide Quality Control) in which the principles of control are increasingly touching the production relationships of the various

actors of the organisation, that become the main object of control and management strategies, thus guaranteeing the quality of the product.

That is, the natural and proportional relationship between 'internal quality' and 'production quality' is expressed in the belief that quality 'is produced and not controlled' through an internal government action of the organisation, oriented to the project quality, connected to the suitability of use of the product and its conformity.

Increasingly, therefore, the focus shifts from products (which are good as they are the result of a good production path) to production processes. The transition of attention from products to processes has characterised the movements of the so-called Quality Assurance.

2. The Total Quality Management

The latest evolution of quality/value has been realised since the mid-Eighties with the inclusion of the Total Quality Management (TQM) models that, in addition to the product (suitability for use, compliance with the project, satisfactory for the customer) and the process (set of practices, responsibilities, policies and procedures), have included the customer as a quality 'place'.

In a systemic and global way, in fact, the TQM tries to find an agreement in terms of efficiency and effectiveness between product quality, guaranteed by the Quality Assurance of the processes and the implicit and explicit expectations of customers and other stakeholders related to the organisation. The customer, in fact, is, like the other stakeholders, committed to building the value that represents the heart of the quality process.

In general, the TQM is based on four principles:

1. *Compliance*: consistency between the project specifications of goods and services and their actual 'grounding'.
2. *Control*: introduction of elements for measuring the expected and/or perceived quality with respect to the goods and services offered.
3. *Partnership*: involve all members of the organisation in the identification and organisation of quality improvement actions.
4. *Co-design*: involving customers in providing indications of customer satisfaction not in terms of response, but of redesign (second-level CRM).

Precisely, this last element shows how CRM systems are not simply functional to know their customers, in their expectations, in their perceptions and in their needs (first level CRM or Customer Satisfaction - CSM). These systems must have at their heart the relationship (the relationship of the acronym CRM), offering the customers spaces that allow them to redesign goods and services, enhancing an increasingly customised approach to quality.

In the same way, the involvement of all the components and all the actors of the organisation in the improvement process, with a view to sharing, is strategic to generate clear repercussions in the continuous Quality Assurance Process, both internally and at the level of goods and services.

Finally, the technical components, related to the principles of *Compliance* and *Control* help to improve the overall quality, structuring the supply paths of goods and services in which each phase has the same dignity (avoiding 'double-time theories' that enhance only the design aspects or, vice versa, the product ones) and has an organic role with respect to goods and services supply.

On this common basis, over time, according to the different organisational cultures and 'Quality Culture' different approaches to TQM have developed.

While keeping faith with the general dictates, each of these models attributes different weights to improvement actions, useful in different contexts.

The first variant consists of the so-called Edwards Deming Model (1993) based on the process called Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) or about a cycle that includes: planning; experimental application of what has been planned; control of the results and verification of compatibility with what has been planned and, finally, implementation of the solutions that have passed the checks.

The model is inspired by the evidence-based approach, but above all focuses on a psycho-economic key, understanding and containing the so-called *change resistance*, interpreted as the main obstacle to quality processes that are, instead, by definition, transformative, dynamic and innovative.

A second variant, is the model inspired by Philip Crosby (1980, 1995, 1996) which, in a more financial key, underlines the opportunity of investments in terms of quality to reduce the financial dispersions of errors and discrepancies, elements that must be brought to zero, if the company is to be understood as a Quality Organization. The model seeks to highlight how preventive actions (and not only improvements) are an integral part of quality models.

A third variant, is proposed by Joseph Juran (Juran and Gryna 1988). The theme of training on quality benefits as constant and continuous improvement, that was already present in the previous model, here becomes a central and defining element of the organisation actions. A greater sensitivity and aptitude for quality represents a real added value of the organisation that must engage in a precise and timely definition of the improvement actions, the related monitoring strategies that must be implemented by tracking tools of these actions. This perspective makes quality almost perfectly coincide with improvement, shifting the focus from compliance to innovation.

On the front of greater control and feedback of the improvement through evidence, the version of the TQM proposed by Kaoru Ishikawa (QBP2 2001, 30-33) arises. With a strongly engineering approach, Ishikawa makes operational the so-called Pareto Analysis (20/80 Model) which, in terms of negative quality, shows how 80% of the problems that can be found in all productive areas, are attributable to 20% of causes and, in terms of work and proactivity, that 20% of the work is able to obtain 80% of the results. Ishikawa is the first to correlate Risk Management with Quality Management, showing that there is some form of relationship between risk appetite and Quality Assurance. Quality, in fact, is in his opinion, closely connected with the ability to predict errors based on specific 'control charts and algorithms' and to act in preventive rather than reparative terms.

In Europe, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM 2003) has intervened by creating a taxonomy useful for Quality Management that provides for a continuous and constant relationship with the customer. In the same way, constancy is required towards the logic of improvement. To achieve these objectives, the Foundation stresses the constant training needs of the actors involved in the various roles of the organisation.

In a synthetic key with respect to the different perspectives of the TQM, the so-called Six Sigma Methodology is placed, which focuses on the relationship between quality and value creation that has its origin and its purpose in the customer. It is in fact the customer who directs and activates the building-value process that must flow smoothly along each of the processes involved. In particular, the Six Sigma Methodology focuses on the constant reduction of waste and unnecessary energy investments; that are the subject of continuous improvement actions in the form of real projects and reorientation. This is possible through the systematic application of the so-called DIMAC cycle (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control) which allows to continuously restructure and re-discuss the mission and vision of the organisation.

These models have had wide application in the productive sectors, but in the last two decades they have also had a wide application in the organisations of the first and third sectors, activating a process of continuous rethinking of training, educational and social activity, progressively transforming 'quality' into a content and a peculiar form of transformative Educational Policy.

Education and training systems have been progressively involved in a process of standardisation of Quality Assurance that has tried to put the 'customer', his needs and his overall well-being, at the center. However, as we will see below, the Quality Assurance processes in Higher Education systems and services have necessarily had to deal with the overall rigidity that characterises these organisations and, at the same time, have had to take into account the need to ensure a certain 'asymmetry' with the 'student-clients' and their training demands.

3. Quality Assurance in Non-formal Training Courses

The Quality Assurance process has also involved the so-called non-formal (indirect) training, that is, the training carried out by people within non-institutionalised paths that do not issue certificates with legal value. It is offered by Learning Services Providers (LSP). In general terms, it concerns professional training courses within companies, but, above all, it covers all areas of training related to leisure, including the so-called development of human capital.

Within the agencies and bodies that deal with non-formal training, based on the ISO 9001 standard, specific standards have been developed that have led to the introduction of the ISO 29990 Quality Standard, specific for this sector.

The standard, whose adherence is voluntary, is specifically aimed at public or private training institutions that have as their mission vocational, corporate and intra-company training (both direct and outsourced), as well as continuous learning (life-long). It is also useful to companies and organisations that offer

training as a support service to the main business in the form of specific training, related to goods and services of their own or others' production.

Moreover, it is aimed at organisations in the second sector which, through the HR divisions, offer training services exclusively to their own staff or to the staff of their subsidiaries (typical of large companies that have Internal Training Centers).

Finally, it is useful for training agencies set up within second- and third-level educational institutions.

ISO 29990 is an international standard dedicated to training and education services from a TQM perspective. In fact, in the two parts that constitute it – where the first one, is dedicated to defining the standards of the services construction process from design to verification and, the second, to the minimum requirements of the organisation –, we find most of the principles of quality of the models listed above, with particular attention to: the creation of value; the compliance of the service offered; the attention to the customer and his active role as a stakeholder. In particular, the LSPs are called, according to this standard, to build their offer starting from the training demand of their customers and, from an organisational point of view, they are intended in a continuous improvement structure. The overall benefits of adherence to this standard help to catalyze and broaden the idea that the training process coincides with a process of continuous value creation and, at the same time, of continuous quality creation.

Always indirectly, we can also include the Quality Assurance process that is guaranteed by national norms and international standards that recognise the social value of companies. We refer to the so-called Benefit Corporations and the movement that the American non-profit company B-Corp has activated thanks to the famous B-Assessment, a standard of certification and self-certification, which gave rise to the 'fourth sector'. The latter is populated by a very wide variety of companies, belonging to the most varied production sectors, which choose to undertake a process of value creation, rediscovering the social profile of their productive action. Quality, in these companies, is configured not only towards products and customers, but is combined with: social values of inclusion; promotion of territories, peculiarities and local traditions; financial, environmental and social sustainability. These standards are created to underline value and to support values and recognise the social profile of Quality Assurance processes, that have positive and sensitive effects both internally and externally within the organisation, rediscovering the political profile of Quality Assurance.

4. Quality Assurance in the European Education Area

A greater culture of quality and the need to create tools that would allow its further dissemination are the basis of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015).

This has meant that the principles of quality have changed their role from tools to monitor improvement actions within formal education systems to principles that inform and shape training policies, that are increasingly student-centered.

Thanks to Quality Assurance systems, there have been beneficial effects in the construction and redesign of national education systems in the name of: transparency; tracking and Quality Assurance; greater perception of overall trust between institution and stakeholders. This widespread culture, which takes the form of common and shared processes, has also had the effect of improving bilateral and transactional relations, by allowing greater dialogue and a better transition between education systems within the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The fundamental axes that govern ESG are:

1. *Accountability*: the provision logic of goods and services to the citizen with a view to responsibility and fairness.
2. *Enhancement*: the improvement logic as an intrinsic and transformative device of the education process.

The application of standards therefore allows not only a uniformity between the goods and services of education in European contexts, but, above all, contributes to a cultural revolution that identifies quality as the catalyst for the construction of Higher Education Policies. In other words, the path that has characterised Quality Assurance has been a significant example of Policy Making, in a non-conservative but transformative perspective.

It has also helped to facilitate the transition from a product-centered quality to a true culture of quality (Mackenzie 2011) that has effects not only on the service, but above all on the organisation. In fact, a true culture of organisation is realised when those who work in it not only follow quality guidelines, but also consistently see others taking quality-focused actions, hear others talking about quality, and feel quality all around them. In this way, quality dimension and ethical dimension are recomposed and efforts for Quality Assurance also lead to significant effects of well-being and cultural and social inclusion inside and outside the organisation (Flevy and Norhayati 2019).

5. Innovation of Higher Education and Quality

The inclusion of Quality Culture in the paths and processes of Higher Education has had very tangible effects. Above all, this introduction has helped to make the fundamental and strategic idea of HE's paths as places of organisational learning and not only as places of cultural products and services delivery truer and more equipped with content.

Taking up the four pillars of the TQM we can identify some operational aspects that can make the process of innovation and transformation of European education pathways stronger.

About *compliance*, we can say that the HE paths must maintain constant attention to the aspects declared (e.g. in the Teaching Syllabi) in terms of Learning outcomes, connected with the Dublin Descriptors and what is actually acted in the individual teachings and in the activities of the Study Programs. One of the fundamental assets of quality is, in fact, the compliance between what is declared during the design and the goods and service offered. Continuous monitoring re-

quires the development of tools to measure the 'learning incomes', the cultural and educational offer provided and the 'learning outcomes'. Any deviation or discontinuity in this line of process must be the subject of improvement interventions in order to consolidate the trust pact and the training contract between students (who are a peculiar type of customers) and institution.

This work of conformity must start, in line with the professionalizing dimension of the EQF, from the pedagogical principle of Employability. Learning outcomes, as well as the cultural and educational offer and the measurement of incoming knowledge, cannot be separated from professionalization. The objective of HE's paths is, in fact, to promote smooth transition processes that accompany 'customers' in the labor market. Therefore, quality understood as conformity cannot be separated from a dimension of employability (Boffo and Fedeli 2018; Boffo 2019).

As a consequence and corollary of compliance, the tools and actions of *Control* must be placed and addressed not so much to the products, but to the procedures/processes. It is, in fact, essential to equip oneself with control tools that measure objective aspects. For this reason, in the context of the control, we can include all the indicators that measure, for example, the students' regularity in the course of study. In Italy, ANVUR (the central agency that presides over the evaluation and control of training processes in HE) measures: the acquisition of 33% or 66% of ECTs in the first year; the conclusion of the course of study on schedule; the drop-outing in training courses, etc. These indicators show the quality interventions effectiveness and contribute to making the compliance of training courses increasingly effective.

In the field of compliance and control, it seems that the comparison methods (cf. Egetenmeyer) can be effective and can help to build a convergence based on the enhancement of the common aspects and, at the same time, of the peculiar and specific elements of each national HE system.

With regard to *partnership*, the innovation introduced by quality systems has revealed that this principle does not follow specific professional figures. Once upon a time, in the organisational contexts there were, in fact, figures in charge of control and quality. In TQM systems that also concern HE contexts, quality is an 'organisation posture' and concerns all members. That is, everyone is involved in making and offering quality *goods and services* and the latter is the result of the quality action of all members of the organisation. This means that in organisations, especially those engaged in the construction of intangible goods and services, it is important to invest in terms of a culture of shared quality. Technical, administrative and academic staff are, in fact, called to operate with quality and, above all, to understand their work with a view to continuous improvement. This involves investing in HE policies to overcome the *resist changing* by investing in continuing education for working adults.

Finally, with regard to *co-design*, innovation must concern the strengthening of co-design tools that enhance all stakeholders. Above all, among the stakeholders, students are bearers of value and can, in an innovative and quality climate, become more and more valueable creators. This involves not only using classic

CSM (Customer Satisfaction Management) tools, based on the collection of students' opinion and their perceptions, but advanced CRM (Customer Relationship Management) tools, that are able to provide *guidance* on the general experience of student-customers (Togni and Boffo 2021). In other words, it is necessary to make a transition from monitoring systems centered on customer perception to experience-centered systems that, in addition to collecting opinion and perception data, can combine them profitably with data on the final realization and on obtaining results, in the expected time (see the *Control* description).

Precisely in these two areas – those of *co-design* and *partnership* – narrative and qualitative approaches could easily be used (cf. Di Rienzo), because they can build real tracking systems for training experiences, intended as a result of Quality Assurance.

It therefore seems to us that the TQM has had and will have a fundamental role with interesting follow-up at the micro-level of the individual teachings both at the meso-level of the local HE systems and at the macro-level of the national education systems.

At the same time the TQM has led to a revolution at the mega-level, of the complex of the HE system in Europe, helping more and more to place the education and training *goods and services* at the level of people's daily lives. HE is able to train *Life Skills* and, in addition, it can understand itself as a continuous education system (not only a training actor for young people), transforming itself into a continuing social value creator.

Only in this transversal and continuing perspective, in fact, we can call HE a total quality system.

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Internationalisation in Higher Education: A Virtual Adult Education Academy in Times of COVID-19

Jennifer Danquah, Vanessa Beu, Regina Egetenmeyer

Abstract:

COVID-19 calls for new ways of approaching internationalisation in adult learning and education. Based on experiences gathered during the 2021 virtual Adult Education Academy, this paper identifies challenges in international virtual learning settings in higher education. Such settings involve different levels of digital literacy among participants and moderators, limited access to high-speed internet, different time zones, and difficulties in social interactions. The article presents the didactical and methodological conceptualisation of a virtual setting to overcome these challenges. The concept involves facilitating exchanges between moderators, providing technical support, implementing (a-)synchronous sessions, and establishing a virtual space in which learning materials are created.

Keywords: Adult Education Academy; Adult Learning and Education; COVID-19; Internationalisation; Virtual Learning Setting

1. Introduction

Adult learning and education is embedded in international contexts. Various international collaborations between European countries have been established in the field of adult learning and education during the last years (Egetenmeyer 2017b). These collaborations lead to the deconstruction of the dualism between national and international perspectives and the emergence of interwoven perspectives in relation to internationalisation (Egetenmeyer 2017b, 2).

According to Egetenmeyer (2017b), this phenomenon also exists in adult learning and education as an academic discipline. Internationalisation processes thus not only take place in adult learning and education itself but also in higher education. This is also put forward by the German government, which emphasises the importance of internationalisation in higher education and teaching (BMBF 2016). Given that internationalisation and globalisation also involve new ways of exchanging, learning, and communicating, new technologies have to be taken into account.

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In the policies of the European Union, digitalisation is seen as an opportunity to make education efficient and fair (European Commission 2014, 6). The policies aim to integrate digital technologies to foster social inclusion, better living conditions, and higher economic growth (European Commission 2005).

Digital elements have been considered in the domains of both higher education and adult education for the past 20 years (Staab and Egetenmeyer 2019, 279). But 2020 saw a boost in the digital components regarding spaces of learning and teaching. The European University Association finds: «In this regard, 2020 was a year of change: There have never been so many students and staff exposed to online learning and teaching» (2020, 3). Due to the lockdown restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation saw great expansion in the field of education and training systems. The European Commission (2021a) observes that the integration of digital components in teaching settings was accelerated. Educational providers tried to keep the learning and teaching environment functioning with the help of digital tools (European Commission 2021a). According to the European Commission (2021b), the main challenge of COVID-19 was to mitigate learning losses, to deploy remote learning, and to not leave vulnerable learners behind, leading to an «accelerating transformation that was already taking place in the form of online learning and teaching» (European Commission 2021b, 6). Likewise, internationalisation in higher education was reconsidered because of the strict travel restrictions. New ways of internationalisation at home had to be fostered, an area that is still less developed in contrast to classic internationalisation (Brandenburg 2020, 11; Lecon 2020, 57).

The Adult Education Academy 'International and comparative studies in adult education and lifelong learning', hosted by the University of Würzburg, is one example of how to implement virtual learning settings to support internationalisation even during times of fundamental changes in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Adult Education Academy gives international master's students, doctoral students and practitioners the opportunity to pursue international comparative studies on topics in adult learning and education as well as lifelong learning. Run by a consortium of eight European universities, the academy is conceptualised as a joint module[1]. The joint module aims to embed internationalisation in academic curricula. Furthermore, it has helped establish structures for combining professionalisation in higher education and practice institutions in adult learning and education. This creates the possibility of teaching practitioners, doctoral and master's students together and to build professional networks between students and practitioners.

[1] The partner universities are the University of Florence, the University of Lisbon, Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg, the University of Pécs, the University of Ljubljana, the University of Padua, Dublin City University, the University of Belgrade, Bayero University Kano, West Liberty University, Obafemi Awolowo University, the International Institute of Adult and Lifelong Learning in Delhi and the University of Delhi. Partners from practice are DVV International and EAEA.

In this paper, we discuss how the 2021 Adult Education Academy contributes to internationalisation in higher education despite the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we address the challenges arising from the changed conditions and outline the experiences gathered. In a first step, we present the core structure of the Adult Education Academy as the basis of the virtual learning setting (Chapter 2). Next, we introduce the virtual setting of the 2021 Adult Education Academy (Chapter 3). Subsequently, the challenges arising from the switch to virtual implementation are addressed (Chapter 4). Finally, we focus on future perspectives on virtual learning settings and opportunities in relation to internationalisation in higher education.

2. The Structure of the Adult Education Academy: International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

The Adult Education Academy is designed for master's and doctoral students studying a subject related to adult learning and education and for practitioners as international professionals from the field of adult learning and education from all over the world. Since 2014, the Adult Education Academy has taken place in February each year. So far, around 70 to 90 participants have joined the academy each year. Most participants are enrolled at one of the partner universities of the Adult Education Academy, which means that both students and their professors travel to Würzburg, Germany, to study together in an international group.

The Adult Education Academy is divided into three parts. It consists of a virtual preparatory phase, a two-week intensive phase at Campus Würzburg and a virtual follow-up, which includes the possibility for doctoral students and practitioners to publish an international comparative paper in joint authorship in an international group of authors (refers to Fig. 1 – Adult Education Academy: International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education).

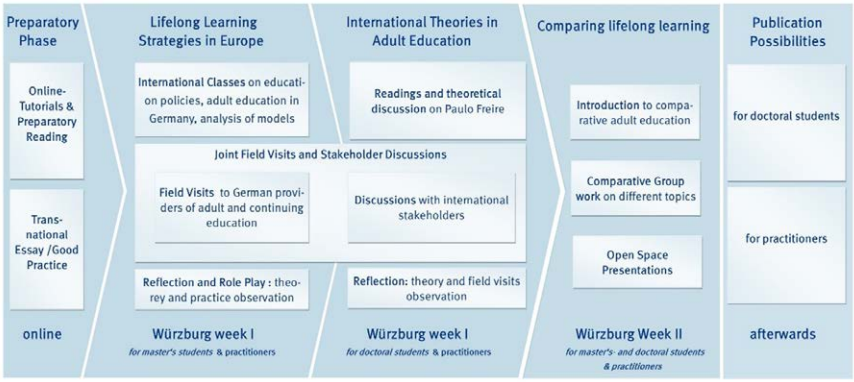

Figure 1 – Adult Education Academy: International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education joint module. Source: INTALL 2021.

2.1 Preparatory Phase

The virtual preparatory phase starts in November and takes place via a Moodle platform provided by the University of Würzburg. In addition, some partner universities offer on-campus preparation. All participants are prepared with online tutorials and preparatory readings to build a common knowledge base for the first week of the Adult Education Academy in Würzburg. In preparation for the second week of the Adult Education Academy, master's and doctoral students write a transnational essay and practitioners prepare good practice presentations linked to the topic of their comparative groups. Students and practitioners are guided on a Moodle platform by the moderators and co-moderators of their group.

2.2 Two-week Intensive Phase

In the first week of the Adult Education Academy in Würzburg, participants are divided into two groups:

Group A: In the option 'Lifelong Learning Strategies in Europe', participants focus their analysis on questions of international policies in adult education and lifelong learning, work from a perspective of policy analysis and practice.

Group B: In the 'International Theories in Adult Education' option, participants focus on the development of a theoretical-analytical perspective based on readings and discussions of selected texts by Paulo Freire. The aim is to develop much more specialised theoretical knowledge to be able to synthesise different perspectives systematically and theoretically.

The theoretical insights and perspectives are accompanied by joint field visits to adult education providers in and around Würzburg (e.g. Frankenwarte Academy, Kolping Academy, Public Fire Fighting Academy, Caritas Frankfurt, DRK Language School Frankfurt, Volkshochschule Hassberge). Presentations and discussions with international stakeholders in adult education (e.g. ICEAE, DVV International, EAEA, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning) round off the first week and serve as case studies for practicing the analytical models and theories addressed in the classroom.

During the second week, the group is divided into around ten subgroups working with international colleagues on the comparison of selected topics in adult education and lifelong learning (e.g., learning cities, professionalisation in adult education, national lifelong learning policies). The second week ends with an open space presentation on the last Friday, showing the results of the comparison.

After successfully participating in the Adult Education Academy and submitting a transnational essay or good practice example, students and practitioners can receive a certificate of attendance and ECTS. Recognition formats have been developed for that purpose, giving students and practitioners the possibility of having their learning activities recognised in both university curricula and in professionalisation programmes in adult education practice.

2.3 Follow Up

Following the principle «from studies to researcher» (Egetenmeyer 2017c, 166)[2] doctoral students and practitioners have the option to publish a co-authored paper about the results of their comparative groups in internationally published anthologies under the guidance of their moderators and co-moderators (Egetenmeyer 2016, 2017a; Egetenmeyer, Schmidt-Lauff and Boffo 2017; Fedeli and Egetenmeyer 2018; Despotovic and Popović 2020a, 2020b; Egetenmeyer, Boffo and Kröner 2020). An online tutorial and a virtual meeting are provided to guide the international author group in writing their international comparative paper.

3. Virtual Adult Education Academy

After seven on-campus editions of the Adult Education Academy (2014-2020), the 2021 edition was conducted virtually due to COVID-19. The switch to a digital format called for adapting the programme to continue the possibility to provide international learning experiences even if students or staff are unable to travel. These changes led to a set of challenges regarding communication and organisation methods, such as the implementation and didactical conceptualisation of synchronous and asynchronous virtual learning settings as well as the use of media platforms. This resulted in a modified didactical structure for the academy, which is presented in Fig. 2 – Virtual Adult Education Academy 2021.

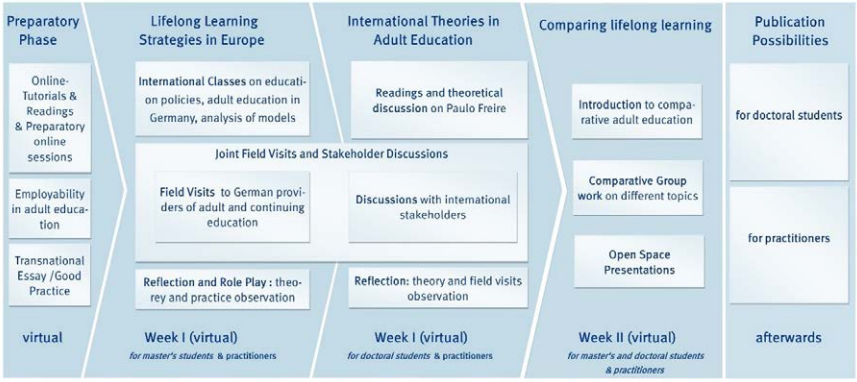

Figure 2 – Virtual Adult Education Academy 2021. Source: INTALL 2021.

[2] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

3.1 Joint Didactical Preparation of the Virtual Adult Education Academy with All (Co-)moderators

During the first and the second week of the Adult Education Academy, moderators from the partner universities were involved in facilitating an online learning environment for the participants. As most (co-)moderators had little experience implementing an online event, they conducted four online meetings in November 2020, December 2020, and January 2021 to share their ideas, plans and experiences with online teaching and to introduce each other to different collaborative tools. One of the four meetings was a Mahara staff training led by ePortfolio expert Lisa Donaldson from Dublin City University, Ireland[3].

3.2 Preparation Phase

As in previous years, self-study phases during the preparation phase were implemented as part of the didactical concept. Again, a Moodle platform was used to prepare participants for the Adult Education Academy. Additionally, in 2021, the self-study online tutorials and self-study readings were supplemented by synchronous virtual sessions for reflecting on and discussing the tutorials and readings. Synchronous virtual sessions were also held in the comparative groups to prepare the transnational essays and good practice presentations. These online sessions helped participants get to know the moderators and other participants.

In their programme evaluation, participants of the 2020 Adult Education Academy expressed their desire to extent the comparative group work period during the second week and to have more time to talk about employability. In response to that feedback, and because virtual learning needs more time, the 'Employability in Adult Education' module was shifted to the preparatory phase[4]. In one of four virtual employment sessions, the participants were introduced to Mahara with the aim to prepare them for using the platform during the two-week programme.

3.3 Two-week Intensive Phase

Following the structure of the pre-COVID-19 intensive phase, in the first week of the 2021 Adult Education Academy, master's students, doctoral students and practitioners focused on educational policies, adult education in Germany and analytical models. Doctoral students and practitioners had classes on Paulo Freire's theories on adult learning and education. The theoretical insights were accompanied by virtual field visits to German adult education providers and presentations of international stakeholders. In order to enable participants

[3] Mahara is an ePortfolio-software for learning programmes and learning results used at the University of Würzburg and, which was included in the two-week Adult Education Academy in February 2021.

[4] Evaluation results: <https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/results/evaluation-results/> (2023-03-15).

to reflect on the theoretical input given and to discuss different thoughts and ideas, sessions in smaller virtual groups were implemented.

The second week of the 2021 Adult Education Academy focussed completely on comparing lifelong learning. Participants worked in nine different comparative groups with the (co-)moderators and presented their results to the plenary session. Each group met synchronously. Besides PowerPoint Presentations, participants used online tools to process tasks in smalls groups and to share the results with the other participants. For instance, digital metaplan boards, digital pin boards, interactive presentation software and query tools were used. Furthermore, each comparative group created its own page on Mahara, which was designed to activate and instruct participants to capture the process of comparison carried out in order to finally present the group results via Mahara in the open space presentation[5]. The 2021 joint module thus lead to the combination of Moodle as a preparation platform and Mahara as a joint website used for the virtual implementation of the programme.

4. Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities of a Virtual Adult Education Academy

Planning and implementing a virtual programme for the first time comes with increased requirements for organisers, students and moderators. However, this is not reflected in the evaluation, which shows higher ratings compared to the previous years. Nevertheless, the results point to challenges that arise in virtual learning settings. How participants assessed the 2021 virtual Adult Education Academy and how organisers and moderators addressed the emerging challenges is discussed in the following.

4.1 Experiences

Since the 2016 Adult Education Academy, the development of the joint module has been accompanied by an external evaluation that helps to assess and measure the development and the impact of the joint module. The questionnaire, which mixes qualitative and quantitative questions, was developed by the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) (Lattke and Egetenmeyer 2017) and refined each year by the University of Würzburg and an external evaluator as the programme evolved.

The evaluations of the Adult Education Academy consistently showed good results. Participants rated the programme in an overall perspective with mean values of 4.39 (2019) and 4.33 (2020), with the 2021 Adult Education Academy earning an even higher score (4.68)[6]. This means that the virtual format

[5] <https://openwuecampus.uni-wuerzburg.de/moodle/course/view.php?id=139> (2023-03-15).

[6] For presenting the following data, mean values 1 to 5 on the 5-point scales or the absolute number of respondents will be used.

was rated even better than the on-site intensive programme in Würzburg. Respondents' feedback regarding the organisational, academic and didactical quality of the various programme components shows higher results compared to the 2020 evaluation. Additionally, compared to 2020, participants in 2021 believed the various programme parts were more useful for their own development. The synchronous virtual sessions during the preparation phase were rated very positively. The reason may be that the various topics could be addressed in more depth, allowing participants to clarify questions and uncertainties directly. Likewise, discussions with other participants helped participants internalise the contents. Low ratings were given to exchanges and networking opportunities during breaks. This may be attributed to the fact that the entire programme required sitting in front of the screen, meaning participants may have preferred to spend time away from the screen during breaks.

As in previous years, the results show positive effects on the academic, personal and professional level. The participants name a positive impact on their thematic interest in adult learning and education (2021: mean values from 4.31 to 4.56; 2020: 4.04 to 4.29; 2019: 4.16 to 4.31), on their future academic, career and mobility plans (2021: mean values from 3.72 to 4.60; 2020: 3.72 to 4.32; 2019: 3.57 to 4.37), and on the development of competences and skills (2021: mean values from 4.00 to 4.52; 2020: 3.76 to 4.37; 2019: 4.05 to 4.42). Before participating in the 2021 Adult Education Academy, 70% of respondents had a strong interest in trans- or international adult learning and education, a higher rate than in 2020 (64%). Whereas interest in international adult education and the positive impact on participants' thematic interest increased, the 2021 Adult Education Academy saw fewer participants who were previously involved in trans- or international topics in their study or work context than in 2020 (2021: mean value 3.18; 2020: mean value 3.44). Likewise, in comparison with 2020, fewer respondents had previously undertaken international academic travel (2021: 49%; 2020: 39%). This is shown in the different types of international mobilities undertaken by the respondents, such as international conferences, exchange semesters, study excursions abroad and intensive courses abroad[7]. This means the higher ratings indicating a positive impact on making future plans for mobilities in 2021 might result from fewer previous mobilities. This, like the other differences listed above, may be traced back to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has led to travel restrictions and a lower number of international learning opportunities.

Regarding the virtual implementation, some 2021 participants stressed an increase in their digital skills as a result of using interactive online tools. In addition, the respondents reported having better knowledge of digital applications

[7] Differences can be seen by type of mobility: international programmes (2021: 15 respondents; 2020: 13 respondents), international conferences (2021: 10; 2020: 20), exchange semesters (2021: 7; 2020: 14), study excursions abroad (2021: 5; 2020: 5) and intensive courses abroad (2021: 4; 2020: 11).

that can be used in the context of their own work. Some participants, however, found there was too much variety, suggesting more intensive moderation in group works and a shorter programme with more breaks.

It can thus be assumed that the Adult Education Academy was successfully transferred into a virtual concept. Given that a reduced number of learning programmes – especially international programmes – are offered in times of COVID-19, the increased mean values compared to the previous years may be attributed to participants' gratitude for having the possibility to attend an international online programme. This made attendance possible for students and practitioners who, for a variety of reasons, would not normally be able to participate in face-to-face international programmes. Thus, these persons also had the opportunity – through the developed recognition model – to obtain a formal university certificate with grades and ECTS points.

4.2 Challenges and Opportunities

Taking these results into consideration, the need for international programmes in adult learning and education, even in a virtual format, has become clear. In order to provide an international learning environment and thus raise participants' engagement in international settings in higher education during a pandemic, the organisers faced multiple challenges while conducting the virtual Adult Education Academy. In the following, we present the challenges faced and the strategies implemented to tackle these challenges.

Preparation of (co-)moderators for digital teaching: As the Adult Education Academy was implemented virtually for the first time, most (co-)moderators had little experience in planning and conducting an international virtual programme. This presented the (co-)moderators with the challenge of familiarising themselves with different online platforms such as Mahara, video-conferencing systems, digital pinboards or digital polls in a short period of time. The preparatory meetings of the (co-)moderators can be considered an important way to share ideas, plans and experiences with online teaching and to instruct each other in using different collaborative tools. The meetings created a learning community between the (co-)moderators of the Adult Education Academy. This led to a very open atmosphere between the (co-)moderators, who learned from each other's ideas and experiences.

Participants' individual digital preconditions: Getting familiar with Mahara also helped to overcome obstacles such as time differences between participants (from Brazil to Siberia in Russia), which are hard to overcome in synchronous virtual settings. The recordings of the online sessions during the intensive programme, made available on Mahara each day, created a certain degree of flexibility. This made it possible for participants with personal or professional obligations to participate in the programme from all over the world. Besides using Mahara to give participants the possibility to create and capture their own learning process, all teaching and learning materials were collected on Mahara and made freely accessible via Moodle. Therefore, the materials can be used beyond the

programme as good practice examples of how to implement educational programmes digitally at universities and in practice and as an information tool for students to work on international theories and comparative topics in adult education and lifelong learning.

Creation of a learning community: Furthermore, as participants did not have the possibility to see each other face-to-face in Würzburg, it was important to already create a sense of community and belonging during the preparatory phase of the Adult Education Academy. Thus, a didactical concept of synchronous and asynchronous online sessions was created. To that end, the self-study online tutorials and self-study readings were supplemented by synchronous virtual sessions. These sessions helped participants to get direct feedback on their thoughts and to get in touch with each other in an early stage of the programme, thereby improving cooperation and preventing possible dropouts.

Technical support tailored to individual needs and knowledge: In addition, in order to keep participants from dropping out because they lack digital skills, extra resources were provided by the organising team of the Adult Education Academy to support participants less familiar with digital tools. The low dropout figures in the preparatory phase, compared to previous years and the highly rated synchronous virtual sessions during the preparation phase, indicate participants' satisfaction with these offerings. Additionally, during the Academy's intensive phase, networking opportunities were implemented during breaks to facilitate exchanges between the participants. Also, working in small groups helped to create a familiar learning environment.

The online setting featuring synchronous and asynchronous sessions may have led to a stronger sense of community and therefore to higher self-commitment in the Academy. It may also be responsible for the high degree of personal growth and the development of skills and competences shown by the evaluation results. According to the respondents, the programme can help participants increase their digital competences and their knowledge of digital applications. However, not everyone found it easy to deal with the digital learning setting. During the intensive programme, internet connectivity emerged as an obstacle for some participants. Not all participants had access to a stable internet connection or even to a device that allowed full attendance. Several participants took part via their smartphone, restricting their ability to participate in group works using online tools. This led to increased moderation in group work and in the use of easily accessible online tools to prevent participants from being excluded. On the one hand, virtual teaching and learning may require actions regarding participants' individual needs and knowledge; on the other hand, it means allowing for more time to guide everyone through the process. A high degree of flexibility is required.

In conclusion, beside the challenges faced during the implementation of the Adult Education Academy, virtual learning settings also offer opportunities in relation to internationalisation in higher education. For example, the virtual Adult Education Academy made it possible for students and practitioners to attend an international programme who, for a variety of reasons, would

not normally be able to participate in face-to-face international programmes. Likewise, the virtual setting is an opportunity for participants to expand their digital competencies and knowledge. What is more, international topics in adult learning and education are included in the curricula of the partner universities as a result of the joint module.

5. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

The Adult Education Academy is an example demonstrating that it is possible to offer internationalisation in academic adult learning and education even in times of COVID-19, when physical mobility is not possible. The joint module, in which the Adult Education Academy is embedded, provides a clear structure that may be flexibly adapted to changing needs. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous virtual sessions, self-directed learning phases and discussion sessions in larger groups connects different teaching and learning settings, leading to high levels of satisfaction among learners. In addition, the preparatory phase helps create a sense of community and prepares participants to take part in the intensive programme with a shared set of knowledge and theoretical background before the short intensive programme begins. During the intensive programme, participants are highly engaged in the courses offered. Participants' interactions are supported by ice breaker games, which were used during the introductory session and in the afternoon sessions. In addition, the moderators encouraged the participants to switch on their cameras. This helps to create a virtual space of trust and community. Also, frequent methodological changes between lectures and group work, as well as permanent technical support, are important. The moderators and organising team patiently offered technical support, creating an inclusive and respectful learning environment. A wide range of teaching and learning methods and trust-building between participants leads to strong interactions and thus constant engagement.

Furthermore, the Adult Education Academy offers the possibility to create a set of resources on adult learning and education, such as videos, literature references and group presentations accessible for an audience working and studying in the field of adult learning and education. In this way, it helps to address inequity issues regarding the accessibility of knowledge. The open access enables other universities and institutions in adult learning and education to be part of the learning experience. As a result, the Academy facilitates a sustainable exchange of good practices and professionalisation standards regarding adult education. The publication option gives doctoral students and practitioners the opportunity to become part of a professional network in adult learning and education.

In conclusion, the concept of the Adult Education Academy carries the potential of constructing new learning and teaching environments, which emphasise the possibility of internationalisation without traveling. By accompanying learners through various online platforms, ensuring technical support and providing a clear structure, the Academy has produced a complex virtual education concept. The virtual Adult Education Academy shows that it can contribute to the

internationalisation of universities and the field of practice if learners' needs are met and limitations such as high-speed internet, different time zones, different levels of digital skills and the importance of social interactions are considered.

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Narrative Approach in the Portfolio Method for Adult Education. Guidance for the Recognition of Competences in the Perspective of Lifelong Learning

Paolo Di Rienzo

Abstract:

The present paper is a contribution to the broad field of adult education within a lifelong learning perspective. It starts from literature and theories in this field, and develops a reflection based on empirical work, related in particular to the use of qualitative methodologies in the guidance process for adults engaged in the recognition of strategic competences acquired in non formal and informal learning contexts of civil service. The lifelong learning perspective places the valorisation of experience, reflective and transformative learning at the center to remove barriers that hinder adult participation. The outcome of this experimentation was the tutoring procedure to support reflexive and self-analysis activities for the construction of the competences portfolio.

Keywords: Biographical Methods; Guidance; Lifelong Learning; Recognition of Competences; Third Sector

1. Adult Education, Guidance and Lifelong Learning

The relationship between adults and their learning and education is characterised by an irrepressible complexity, due to the plurality of adult dimensions, the multiplicity of situations of relationship and communication, the plurality and diversity of learning contexts, and the pervasiveness and rapidity of change.

In this way, a perspective of lifelong learning is assumed, in which the concept of learning expands, beyond the specific dimensions of educational paths, and declines as a potential that can be realised throughout life and in a variety of situations (Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007). The principle of lifelong learning conceives individuals as epistemic subjects, producing their own biographies, interpreting developmental processes in a transformative way (Mezirow 2003; Formenti 2017).

Lifelong learning potential represents an unquestionable aspect, even in the sense of a driving force (Jarvis 2004), in human beings. Regarding the knowl-

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edge society, such ability proves to be a complex issue, if we consider the new conception of the human mind and the deep changes that modern society is going through in all its different aspects. With the metaphor of the learning society, attention is focused on the concept of a social system in which knowledge is an emerging lever for development and learning is configured as a condition for the functioning and health of the system itself. The development of this system is increasingly correlated with the enhancement of so-called intangible resources; the heart of which are human resources.

With contemporary changes of social, economic and productive conditions and the formative trajectories in the pathways of becoming adults, the concept of lifelong learning is affirmed. Learning takes place during the entire course of one's life. It expands, goes beyond specific dimensions of educational pathways, and declines as a potentiality that can be realised throughout one's life in a plurality of situations: such as in the workplace, at home, in groups, alone; not only, therefore, in those situations that are defined as formal places and organisations aimed at education.

The freedom, self-realisation and autonomy of individuals are linked to the possibilities of accessing knowledge, competences and learning in general. The emphasis is on the human capacity to create and use knowledge effectively and intelligently. But managing one's own life projects and responding dynamically to the constant challenges of social life and work involves the need to acquire, maintain and develop the knowledge and competences necessary throughout one's life.

In this way, a universalistic and inclusive perspective is adopted that hinges on the right of each individual to be educated, develop his or her talents and be recognised for his or her own intrinsic value. This is constituted, among other things, by the knowledge and competences he or she has acquired in all the experiences of life. Therefore, the enhancement of a person's cultural and professional heritage, starting from the reconstruction of his or her individual history, is an innovative aspect of education policies and systems and constitutes a cardinal principle of adult education, consistent with the perspective of lifelong learning (Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007; Di Rienzo 2017; Milana et al. 2018).

The most recent UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning report (2019) on adult education and learning is dedicated to the theme of participation and educational inclusion, recognising lifelong learning as a pivotal concept for raising the cultural profile of individuals, starting with the attention placed on the multiplicity of learning contexts and the enhancement of competences.

The transformations underway in society and in the world of work and education, however, bring to light problem areas that pertain to the sphere of educational inclusion, participation in the form of active citizenship, the recognition of cultural diversity, gender equality, and the enhancement of human and social capital. These problem areas require an overall view; in particular, a pedagogical perspective attentive to human development in its entirety and a transformation of the culture of education. Among the factors undergoing transformation, guidance plays a crucial role. From being an accessory and/or marginal element,

guidance must be understood as a constitutive component of educational processes in the lifelong dimension.

In literature (Rubenson 2011), the barriers that hinder adult participation in education and learning are connected to multiple factors, which give rise to three categories: situational factors (family, social and professional environment), institutional factors (the organisational contexts responsible for education), and personal factors (individual dispositions and attitudes towards learning).

Institutional factors include, in particular, those ways in which guidance activities are carried out. In this context, the provision of methods and tools aimed at the enhancement and recognition of the competences of adults, who return to education in formal and non-formal contexts, positively affects their participation and contributes, in this way, to making education contexts more inclusive (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2018).

Guidance inspired by a pedagogical accompaniment device of a biographical-narrative type (Dominicé 2000) can play a supportive role in the re-entry of adult individuals to education. These are methods that can be considered particularly functional in the implementation of processes for the reconstruction of one's work path and, in general, of life (Reggio and Righetti 2013; Honoré 2014; Breton 2019; Di Rienzo 2020).

It is within this horizon of meaning that the concept of lifelong guidance must be understood: guidance takes place during the entire course of life, expands, goes beyond the episodic and instrumental character in education and education paths, to constitute itself as a strategic resource for the life of individuals that can be used throughout life and for a plurality of reasons.

Guidance is today considered as a formative process of changethrough the exercise of one's own freedom, self-evaluation, and the search for meaning and existential significance. It is the process of evolution that has historically marked the development of theoretical models and the definition of guidance practices and systems.Considering the conception adopted, guidance is understood as a fundamental element in supporting people in facing the future and essential for the achievement of social objectives to which it provides a fundamental contribution (Loiodice 2004).

Guidance refers, therefore, also to the possibility of a learning process that occurs with individuals throughout the course of their existence, embracing different spheres of life: professional, private, familial, and social.

It is within this new context, derived from the explosion-dilation of learning, that individuals can actualise personal fulfillment and substantial citizenship, based on the ability to access knowledge, and competences; in general learning and knowing how to maintain and develop themselves throughout their lives in different organisational, social, professional and territorial contexts. Hence a completely new attention to the life experience of individuals, and their biographies, in which experiences are realised and the unexperienced possibilities and development of potential, including education, are manifested. The construction of personal and professional identity thus assumes the form of an unstoppable experimentation (Di Rienzo 2012).

Within this framework of reasoning, the category of transition is particularly significant in focusing attention on the processes of adulthood. We are talking about the process of becoming adulthood rather than a static and abstract idea of adulthood (Biasin 2012).

In this sense, the concepts of change and transition have been adopted as possible interpretative keys to contemporaneity. In short, individual biographies are increasingly presented as multiform, multiple or otherwise in motion. Crisis and/or transition increasingly represent a structural datum of the course of life. Even with conflicts, contrasts and hardships, the character of adulthood presents itself as a possibility to continue growing and learning in the dimension of lifelong learning. If one assumes this new scenario of adulting processes, transitions can be conceived as a dimension of life made up of expectations and needs/constraints, and a space between present and possible futures (Biasin 2012).

On a more descriptive level, the moments and spaces of crossing and passage (transitions) in adult biographies can concern:

- Transitions to the working world: in this category we can consider the transition from school or university; and, more generally, from various education paths to the world of work. In this type of transition, guidance services are fundamental in explaining the characteristics of various occupations and the framework in which they are placed, thus contributing to the preparation of the subject who is facing the transition;
- Intra-work transitions and transitions between work and non-work: these are moments of transition from one job to another, and very often between work and non-work, which necessitate monitoring and planning the development of one's professional career, moments of growth or slowdown, professional updating activities and continuing education, etc. The person in the middle of his or her career usually sets new professional goals and objectives, which necessarily involve transitional crises. Such crises are even more profound in the case of transitions between employment and non-employment and are relatively increasing;
- Vital transitions: other transitions, such as those of women/men who do not work (for example: maternity/paternity leave to care for their children) and who do so by choice or who wish to be reintegrated into the world of work; those of migration, those related to total changes and not only professional changes of country, context, culture, or of purely personal choices, of study, and of the realisation of desired projects of self-realisation which can involve even radical and difficult changes.

Going through transitions presupposes both a strategic individual dimension of action and organisational conditions of education systems that make it possible to deal with change and to be supported at key moments of transition, such as, precisely, guidance services centered on the individual, who is understood as a subject in constant becoming (Biasin 2012).

It is widely recognised, therefore, that there is the need to focus attention on the capacity of competences acquired in the many contexts of life.

Studies that have focused attention on the effectiveness and quality of adult students' return to education, highlight the importance of offering personalised guidance services with a biographical-narrative approach, which presents new forms compared to those traditionally provided for school and career guidance. This is an innovative approach that gives importance to the valorisation of the competences acquired in life experiences in order to favour the personalisation of education paths and the empowerment of adults (Loiodice 1998, 2004).

In accordance with the perspective presented, innovation in adult education systems cannot be sustained by curricular reorganisation alone. It must be approached with qualitative approaches on the level of education and organisational practices; in particular, in the manner of guidance. In this context, innovation implies a constant synergy between research, teaching and the organisational-institutional dimension, as a function of guidance, re-motivation, and the enhancement of the experiences of adult students.

The qualitative methods of guidance of the narrative-biographical matrix are characterised as individualised and personalised actions. They can be used within a project of re-motivation and guidance of students who have had a major slowdown, interruption or abandonment of their studies. There are students who in the meantime have found a stable job, while others have gone through multiple precarious jobs. We are in the presence, therefore, of a universe for which an approach from the point of view of competences and their reconstruction appears sufficiently justified and appropriate (Batini and Giusti 2008).

This approach offers the possibility of identifying and reconstructing, starting from experience, the wealth of competences available to the individual, by anchoring competences, knowledge and psychosocial resources to real events and situations. The meticulous description of work activities and of the ways of dealing with them, the analysis of the extra-work experiences and of the education history, the possibility of creating links, of establishing relationships, reinterpreting experiences lived, and identifying strengths and weaknesses, are all activities that allow one to make one's competences explicit and conceptually articulated and organised.

Guidance thus understood is proposed as a support, an accompaniment to individual planning, an opportunity to develop and/or acquire learning strategies and motivation, such as to support effectively, with continuity and harmony, both the commitments of study and those related to work, to be able to realise their personal and professional projects, and to deal with the demands, changes and opportunities for realisation (Breton and Pesce 2019).

Specifically, the objectives consistent with the paths of qualitative guidance consist of:

- Re-reading and re-attributing meaning to the biographical path with particular reference to the formative and work dimensions, as well as personal, of the student;
- Enhancing the value of narrative thinking and the autobiographical approach in a formative and orientativemanner;
- Develop individual empowerment;

- Adequately and critically place the education pathway within the student's general planning, supporting the positive circularity of the different vital spheres of the person (work, education, values, self-development);
- Developing a project strategy in the short term (conclusion of education), in the medium and long term (career prospects, life projects).

Through unusual parameters and methods, the reinterpretation of the subject's personal, educational and professional biography facilitates the maturation of new awareness, especially in the direction of the usability of one's knowledge and know-how. The term awareness becomes the key word of a path that plays a function of empowerment, strengthening and re-motivation linked to the activity of self-analysis, self-assessment and awareness. A clear awareness of the wealth of resources possessed gives the individual the possibility of subsequently channeling them into the elaboration of a professional development project; and strengthens the feeling of self-efficacy. Without these prerequisites, any prospect of planning and returning to education would be compromised at the root.

2. Biographical Approach of Guidance in the Competences Recognition Procedure

Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education adopted by UNESCO in 2015 states that acquired competences resulting from participation in non-formal and informal learning contexts should be recognised and accredited, also in order to remove barriers to adult participation in educational and education pathways (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2018, 2019).

The recognition of the competences of adults returning to education can be traced back to a pedagogical device based on the principles of valuing experience and personalising the learning pathway, which are cornerstones in adult education (Knowles 1996; Jarvis 2004; Mortari 2004). This topic is part of the studies that point to the recognition of the value, particularly for adults, of experience, as a resource for learning, including the rediscovery of subjects in the education of knowledge and competences, often tacit, acquired in different contexts of life and work (Di Rienzo 2012; Reggio and Righetti 2013).

By adopting the pedagogical perspective that draws on the cultural (Bruner 2015), humanistic (Knowles 1996) and constructive (Mezirow 2003) dimensions of educational processes, the individual is seen in his/her totality as an active learning subject and the attribution of meaning that he assigns to hisown experience is crucial.

In this sense, autobiographical narration becomes a fundamental tool to operate the reflection and reworking of one's own experience (Bertaux 2008). According to Bruner (1990) narrative thinking is one of the two main modes of thought by which human beings organise and manage their knowledge of the world, and indeed structure their own immediate experience.

The story has as its nature the property of expressing multiple meanings. The polysemy of the story means openness to the possible: the story becomes a way of open transmission of knowledge that cannot be limited to the demonstrative statements of science but conveyed by a process that refers to the desire

to know, to know how to listen, to know how to choose, and to know how to do. In addition, for the American psychologist, narrative thinking would perform an essential function for the cohesion of a culture as for the structuring of an individual life (Bruner 2015).

Jerome Bruner (2006) emphasised two fundamental aspects of narrative thinking. The first aspect is characterised by its interpretive dimension: in it, the canonicity of a narrative and its openness to possibility are contrasted. In this, narrative thought constitutes the means of stabilisation of a culture, but also of its continuous renewal. The second fundamental aspect of narrative thought is the narrative creation of the self, an essential dimension of the construction of subjective identity and at the same time of constant openness to others.

On the other hand, Mezirow (2003) himself has emphasised the transformative potential of biographical practices and paths of reflection on experience. According to Mezirow (2003), learning is a conscious, critical, and reflective process through which the adult attributes new and updated interpretations of meanings attributed to past experiences or thoughts in order to guide the present and direct future action. Transformative learning occurs only through the transformation of perspectives of meaning, understood as: the patterns of expectations that filter perception and cognition; the perceptual and conceptual codes to shape, limit, and distort the way we think, believe, and feel; and the how, what, and why of our learning.

In this sense, autobiographical narration becomes a fundamental tool for the reflection and reworking of one's own experience, in a transformative sense. An assisted activity of biographical reflexivity sets in motion a process of learning and self-determination project, which starts from the respect of identity in diversity, and from the protection of individual peculiarities, which has as its objective to enhance and safeguard the originality of the individual.

This is the case of the Bilan de compétences (BdC) that represents a method of qualitative and biographical narrative guidance. In adult guidance and more specifically in the accompaniment of transitions in adulthood, the BdC is known and used as a fine and in-depth tool for the self-analysis and assisted self-assessment of knowledge, and the competences and interests of individuals in the development of a professional project (Levy-Leboyer 1993).

The BdC, for its intrinsic characteristics, helps to support, facilitate, and encourage the process of reflection without which an experience is likely to slip by without leaving any trace or nourishing any project dimension. Reflexivity makes it possible to transform lived experience into experience and the acquisition of experience into knowledge. It enables 'doing' to become conscious and meaningful. It also makes it possible to give order to experiences,put them into a meaningful sequence, give them a rhythm, and indicate times and deadlines. The BdC, as a personalised tool to support and develop the reflective and planning potential of the subjects and as a process that develops within an established time –the sense is also governed by governing time – facilitates in the individual the metabolization and systematisation of their experience (Levy-Leboyer 1993).

Through the BdC, the person is accompanied on a path that leads him to reconsider, at different times – past, present, possible future – and in different ways, the same themes, behaviours, and events using his own view, that of others and that of the counselor. The valorisation of recursiveness, as a distinctive feature of the Bilan de compétences, recalls Wittgenstein's criss-crossing landscape, the crossing and re-crossing of the same contents of a domain of knowledge in a non-linear and multidimensional way, returning to the same place of the conceptual landscape several times, but in different circumstances and coming from different directions (Wittgenstein 1999).

With the BdC, again, the person has the opportunity – by using new ways of narrating their experiences and through the re-appropriation of a language (the autobiographical one) – to think and rethink their experience by making it the object of change. The person has, therefore, the opportunity to reconstruct their learning; and to focus on their interests and the pieces that make up the puzzle of their history and their professional identity. In short, the person has the opportunity to discover or re-discover, by enhancing their learning, the entire wealth of resources possessed (hidden curriculum) or accumulated over the years and to transform them into resources to reinvest in the future (Lemoine 2002).

The BdC, thus understood, maintains its nature as a device centered on the person, his or her motivations, his or her needs, as well as on the valorisation and appropriation of the competences necessary for the construction of a professional and life project. It also tends to specifically affect knowledge and meta-cognitive processes through an amplification of the subjects' ability to capitalise and reinvest in new contexts the experiences made elsewhere (internships, apprenticeships, real work activities carried out before, during or immediately after studies, as in the case of recent graduates) and develop the strategic competences that underlie and support specific and contextualised competences. The BdC aims, therefore, to create a virtuous circle between work, life and education experiences that are able to expand, in terms of knowledge and awareness, the horizon of one's future conduct and, therefore, of one's planning (Lemoine 2002).

All this takes place through the attention to the person, his or herlearning potential, and the protection of otherness and difference that is inherent in the authenticity and uniqueness of each individual.

The general outline of the articulation of the BdC pathways, while referring to a specific model – the biographical-relational model integrated by the self-image model – and while maintaining the focus of attention on the individual history and the post-graduate professional project, represented a sort of light scaffolding that allows the counselor to move safely and with the necessary flexibility dictated by the adaptation of the pathway, to the needs of the individual case and the particular target. The path (i.e., the set of activities and actions) is organised according to the traditional structure of the French model, which provides and identifies three basic phases: reception, investigation/deepening and synthesis/restitution.

By way of example, here are some of the tools used, chosen from among those that best give an idea of the approach adopted and those most congruent with the objectives of the case study presented in the next paragraph:

- *The Competence Portfolio*. It is both a product and a process that, by recovering the traces of what has been achieved in education and work, brings out and reinforces the awareness of one's own knowledge and know-how. In a coherent way, it allows the organisation of one's own path of past educational and professional growth through the collection and production of data, information and evidence attesting to the learning obtained in formal, informal and non-formal contexts. It facilitates reflection on oneself and one's own potential and, by attributing/reattributing a dimension of meaning to one's own path, orients future choices;
- *The Competency Descriptor*. It is a tool that supports the recognition of learning because it reconstructs experiences in terms of knowledge and competences. Starting from a conception of competence as a dynamic, recursive and emerging construct (Bresciani 2004), the descriptive tool implements a process of analysis and synthesis that breaks down and articulates competences into the different resources that constitute them (knowledge, knowing how to do, knowing how to be, knowing how to act, wanting to act), starting from the description of the actions and activities carried out by the subject. A subsequent process of synthesis aims to relate the different resources and these, in turn, with personal characteristics, interests, attitudes and motivations. In this way, we arrive at a new, clearer attribution of meaning and project value onto the set of resources possessed by the subject. Among other things, the tool allows the subject himself to position his own competences with respect to a level of mastery supported by elements that justify self-assessment;
- *What I look for in work*. Several researches have highlighted some values regarding work. This tool, specifically designed to dig deep, proposes 13 of them (by way of example: absence of harmful factors, physical fatigue, risk, etc.; availability of free time; flexibility of hours; stability of position; independence; leadership; level of professionalism; social prestige; social utility). The beneficiary is invited to indicate which of these values most closely correspond to what he/she is looking for and/or expects from work, indicating a degree of correspondence between a little, quite a lot, much, and very much. Once his or her preferences for the 13 values are expressed (to which he or she may freely add others), the subject is invited to find the links and any points of contradiction between the values he or she has identified and the work, study or life experiences actually lived. Then, the subject is invited to summarise what he or she expects and/or would like in terms of the work expected. Finally, again with reference to work, he or she is invited to indicate what his or her constraints are (what he or she cannot do) and what his or her refusals are (what he or she does not want);
- *What I do when I'm not studying or working*. This tool allows us to broaden our viewpoints with respect to the analysis of competences, since it facilitates the re-appropriation of experiences that are apparently unrelated to work or education contexts and the development of knowledge and competences that are often undervalued, focusing attention on the competences developed by the

individual in all activities that require a structured commitment outside of the work or study context (family, free time, associations, etc.);

- *Knowledge and Work*. Facilitates reflection on learning and its use in the professional context and above all on its evolution, promoting a shift in view of the elements of knowledge usually linked to education. The tool provides for the identification of the knowledge expected/required to carry out activities and self-assessment of the gap between the level of mastery of the knowledge possessed at the commencement and that acquired during the experience. The subject, in this way, has the opportunity to reflect on the acquisition and expansion of knowledge, as well as on the processes of change that have affected the knowledge acquired over time and their transferability to other contexts, sometimes completely different from those of acquisition;
- *The point about my knowledge*. This is characterised as an interview outline that, starting from the reconstruction of the knowledge to be implemented, the knowledge possessed and the knowledge mastered, encourages reflection on the importance of the constant integration between theory and practice in the construction of knowledge as well as; the necessity of knowledge maintenance to avoid obsolescence and to plan professional evolution also through the transfer of knowledge;
- *Temporal perspective*. This tool is used between the second and third phases of the BdC. Like 'What I look for in work', it is very articulate and digs deep because it represents the premise and logical structure on which to base the final project. The tool is divided into three parts. In the first part the subject is invited to identify and write down as precisely as possible the events (facts, situations, projects, etc.) that he/she believes may occur (or may happen) in the future; in the second part he/she is invited to group them and distribute them over time (events that may happen within six months; within one year; within 2 or more years) and by degree of importance from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (completely important); in the third part the subject is invited to produce an overall 'reading' and an argument (i.e., an attribution of meaning) about what is outlined in the grid;
- *My personal project*. This is one of the last tools proposed in the third phase before the summary document and the conclusion of the BdC. It is a format that requires the person to indicate: a) the general objective of the project; b) the resources available to invest in the realisation of the project (intellectual, material, financial and time resources, etc.); and c) the areas of development for the realisation of the project. Then, the stages of development of the project are given with an indication of the relative timing. The format concludes with a section on general observations.

3. The Third Sector as Case Study

As part of the National Forum of the Third Sector (FNTS), a research project was carried out aimed at developing narrative-biographical guidance prac-

tices for the identification and validation of the strategic competences of civil service volunteer operators.

The research project entitled 'The competences of Universal Civil Service youth serving the country' was conducted in the period between September 2019 and March 2020.

The research group saw the involvement of several institutional entities, among which we include the Roma Tre University, the National Forum of the Third Sector, which is the representative body of the third sector recognised by the Italian government, and Arci Servizio Civile (ASC APS).

Civil service represents an important opportunity for education, personal and professional growth for young people, who are an indispensable and vital resource for the cultural, social and economic progress of a country. The activity of a civil service volunteer allows the acquisition of knowledge and practical competences, but more generally represents an opportunity for personal growth and education. For this reason, the Universal Civil Service (SCU) can be a useful experience in the work environment.

The regulation provides for the determination of so-called education credits for those who perform civil service, which can then be recognised in education or vocational education. Universities may also recognise education credits for activities performed during community service that are relevant to the curriculum of studies.

The study conducted by the research group has as its elective object of analysis the strategic competences of volunteer civil service workers. In particular, the research focused on the organisations operating in ASC APS and the most suitable ways to enhance and recognise these competences. The purpose of the research was to develop a study on the definition of a referential of the strategic competences of ASC APS volunteer operators and on the adoption of the same referential within the guidance procedure for the emergence of competences.

This goal was translated into two specific objectives that correspond to two phases of activity:

1. to define the areas and components of the strategic competences of ASC volunteer operators;
2. to adopt a guidance procedure for the recognition and competences of ASC APS volunteer operators.

On the basis of the scientific literature of reference and the orientations expressed in the national and international spheres, a multidimensional nature of strategic competences can be sustained in which cognitive, volitional, motivational and emotional factors among others emerge (Ryken and Salganik 2007; Pellerey 2010; Alberici and Di Rienzo 2014; Deakin Crick et al. 2014; Margottini 2017). In addition to these factors, there are other dimensions for volunteer civil service workers, specifically referred to by the most recent standards, which present an explicit call with respect to citizenship competences and key competences for lifelong learning (Consiglio Europeo 2018).

Starting from an initial reconnaissance carried out by the FNTS, the partnership has carried out an activity to identify the areas of competence that char-

acterise in a transversal sense the role of volunteer operators. This was a work that, on the one hand, referred to Italian regulatory provisions on volunteering, including in particular the Legislative Decree of March 6, 2017, n. 40 on the Establishment and discipline of Universal Civil Service. On the other hand, the key competences for lifelong learning defined by the European Union (Consiglio Europeo 2018) and the OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2016) were taken into account.

On this basis the object of the research was an articulated set of competences, defined as a reference of the strategic competences of volunteer civil service workers, consisting of the following six areas: interpersonal/social competence; personal competence; civic competence; learning to learn competence; intercultural competence; communicative competence.

The methodology refers to collaborative intervention research with the aim of both exploratory and cognitive investigation and education with transformative purposes (Shani et al. 2008). Consistent with this approach, a multi-method approach was adopted that referred to qualitative-quantitative tools (Creswell 2014). The research assumes the dimensions of participation and involvement of the context in which the intervention takes place as essential aspects to reach significant results which do not remain confined to the purely theoretical and speculative sphere, but are able to bring about a real transformation of the actors and an improvement in practices.

In the first phase of the empirical surveying of strategic competences, the tools used were a structured questionnaire, a focus group addressed to volunteer operators, and a semi-structured interview, addressed to stakeholders.

From the quantitative analysis carried out, it emerges that the competences most frequently used in the civil service experience are interpersonal/social (30%), personal (25%) and learning to learn (18%). Less important are the areas of communication (14%), intercultural competences (11%) and civic competences (2%).

In the second phase, a biographical-narrative guidance device for the recognition of competences was tested. The procedure for the enhancement and recognition of the strategic competences of volunteer operators has provided guidance service to encourage reflection on life experiences and the production of documents to prove the existence of the same competences. To this end, the function carried out by tutors was essential.

The experimentation phase of the guidance procedure involved 55 volunteer operators belonging to ASC APS.

The procedure for the recognition of competences implies a great ability to make explicit one's own experiences and to consciously rework them into competences. These processes also require the ability to collect and produce evidence of the competences; that is, to build a portfolio; all activities that require a process of accompaniment by expert figures (Di Rienzo 2012). This has led to the adoption of an overall qualitative approach, based on narrative methods and tools aimed at promoting activation, self-assessment, and reflection on the formative and cognitive biography by volunteer operators (Di Rienzo 2015).

The activities were based on the use of procedures and qualitative tools borrowed mainly from the method of the Bilan de compétences (BdC). The tools used are justified in a logic aimed at achieving a path of gradual acquisition of awareness of their competences. They are therefore tools that encourage the activation of a process of conscious reflection and self-assessment on the strategic competences contained in the reference used for the research.

The accompanying path to the recognition of competences has engaged volunteer operators in four meetings with tutors. The total duration of the path corresponds to 55 hours that include both the participation in the meetings and the work of producing the tools.

The first meeting, the moment of the establishment of a relationship of trust, used the techniques of biographical interview to guide the beneficiary in the journey of the recognition of life experiences. At the end of each meeting, the beneficiary was given new instruments to fill out. The initial instruments had the objective of broadening the horizon and inviting a reflective look at the present over the past, giving new meaning and perspective to lived experiences. Subsequent meetings allowed for a focus on the SCU experience.

The referential of strategic competences was the reference to place the behaviours acted by volunteer operators within a well-defined framework.

4. Conclusions

The qualitative approach with which the guidance model is presented here has been defined and refers to an educational perspective inspired by the life course. The theoretical and practical development of a model of guidance based on competences, for their recognition, the strengthening of motivation, and the individualization of paths as a function of improving the education outcomes of adults, have demonstrated the successful applicability of qualitative methods in the field of lifelong learning. These methods refer to tools capable of carrying out actions of personalised accompaniment to promote and improve the outcomes of education, the enhancement and recognition of the outcomes of education, the enhancement and recognition of competences possessed, the strengthening of motivation and potential, and the ability to self-design and/or redesign life paths.

Regarding economy of the discourse developed in this contribution, the actions undertaken with the use of methods borrowed from the BdC revolve around some key issues that unite the participants and that can be synthetically traced to the need to recognise, acquire, develop, and implement those competences considered strategic for dealing with change and the demands of the future. Competencies can be acquired for successfully managing the possibilities of realisation, self-assessment understood as the ability to explore one's own resources, identifying strengths and weaknesses, decision-making, and the ability to operate autonomously and cope with the difficulties encountered using the resources available to choose and decide. One can also develop project competencies of self-design such as the ability to project oneself into the future

using the opportunities available and to develop new strategies and choices in the educational and professional spheres.

The centrality of the individual in the construction and enhancement of his or her resources and his or her way of accessing knowledge, the need for him or her to manage his or her own education and work path independently, bringing into play for this purpose his or her wealth of competences necessary for the achievement of full self-realisation, are just some of the conditions that make these approaches, aimed at reconstructing and enhancing the experience of the individual as a whole, particularly suitable for developing in adults the ability to self-design and/or redesign education and professional paths and the strengthening of motivation and potential (Boffo and Fedeli 2018).

The originality of the proposed methods lies in the centrality of the planning dimension; that is, in the possibility of prefiguring other possible scenarios and making choices in the direction of change with greater awareness. It follows that every guidance path represents an action that mobilises and invests resources towards change. It is characterised as a path of transformation that affects the system of representations of the individual, his/her definition of reality and the objectives that he/she sets. The project translates the goals that the individual pursues into an appropriate and coherent strategy to achieve the mand bears witness to the will to change. Through the development of self-esteem, the sense of efficacy and the assumption of responsibility, a process is activated in adults that moves in the direction of the development of planning competences. Through the experience of guidance based on these competences, the participants have the possibility to reflect and to understand the reasons for their educational choice and concretely foresee the solutions to give an acceleration to the path, and resume or conclude it; precisely, because for the first time, thanks to the possibility of placing the educational choice undertaken in a horizon of meaning, the reasons for their being students are clearer. The identification of a temporal perspective in which the accent emphasis is placed on the relationship between the present and the future constitutes the scenario for orienting education in a more conscious way, in view of the objective identified and for developing the ability to construct contexts in which to use one's competences (Piazza 2013).

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Ethics in Educational Research

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Abstract:

The ethical dimension of research in adult education is deeply connected to the real, substantial quality of research. The ethical dimension of adult education research, mostly neglected, is analysed from an epistemological perspective. We assume that ethical conduct of educational research is more complex than adhering to a set of rules and procedures as it has to deal with the meaning and purpose of adult education research, the distribution of pedagogical powers and the control over them to put individual and collective answers in practice. The analysis is based upon the specialised multidisciplinary literature as well as upon the pluriannual experience of the author being one of the members of the research ethic committee at higher education level.

Keywords: Ethics in Adult Educational Research; Research Ethic Committees; Research Quality Discourse; Substantial Quality

1. Ethics Matter. The Global Principle in Academic Research

1.1 Ethics: Principles and Sources in Higher Education Research

1.1.1 Seminal Documents on Ethics in Research

Ethics in academic research help protect individuals, communities, environments. It also offers the potential to increase the sum of good in the world and avoid doing long-term and systematic harm to individuals, communities, environments (Diener and Crandall 1978; Mitchell and Draper 1982; Peach 1995; Kass 2001; Israel and Hay 2006).

We may wonder how ethics in academic research is conceived. It is something that reflects the values of a collective subject: it can be a population, at their most general, or a professional group or even other kinds of aggregations. We should bear in mind that ethics is considered to be unconstrained by regulatory

* The reflections of this paper are based on the study experience carried out within the University Ethics Committee in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences (Careus, University of Siena), of which the author was a member from November 2019 to February 2023.

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prescriptions; it may exist (codes, regulations, conventions, etc.) but may also be lacking. This is because ethics and law are considered as two different issues (Horner 2003): the law is not necessarily the primary source in which ethical principles for research are elaborated, since they may represent the product of historical, cultural, social, and educational developments of which professional groups or associations or communities are the bearers who formalise them in sources that are not transposed into legally relevant acts, even though they have social recognition (Weinbaum et al. 2019).

The relationship between ethics and law can sometimes be difficult as each falls under its own system: of morality the former, of rules the latter (Greenawalt 1989; Hazard 1995; Tzafestas 2018; Tsosie et al. 2021). Ethics has to deal with what is good for both individuals and society. It has to do with how people should and should not behave. And this is different from societies, cultures, beliefs that have different ideas of ethical behaviour. Law is a set of rules and regulations that are meant to be separate from ethics and are enforced through social institutions like courts and law enforcement. This difficult relationship between ethics and law is described in the American Medical Association's Code of Ethics:

> The relationship between ethics and law is complex. Ethical values and legal principles are usually closely related, but ethical responsibilities usually exceed legal duties. Conduct that is legally permissible may be ethically unacceptable. Conversely, the fact that a physician who has been charged with allegedly illegal conduct has been acquitted or exonerated in criminal or civil proceedings does not necessarily mean that the physician acted ethically.
>
> In some cases, the law mandates conduct that is ethically unacceptable. When physicians believe a law violates ethical values or is unjust they should work to change it. In exceptional circumstances of unjust laws, ethical responsibilities should supersede legal duties (American Medical Association 2016, Preamble).

The core documents that represent a solid benchmark of ethics in academic research are the Declaration of Helsinki (1964, DoH[1]) and the Nuremberg Code (1947).

The Declaration of Helsinki is a historical document in the field of clinical research and was produced and adopted by the World Medical Association (WMA[2]) at its annual General Assembly in Helsinki in 1964. The DoH is one

[1] The Declaration of Helsinki was set up in 1964, revised several times, and the latest revision is dated from 2013. In April 2022 a working group was established to start an additional revision of this important Declaration. The American Medical Association is leading the process.

[2] The WMA was founded in Paris in 1947 as an association for national medical associations. Its mission, as currently stated, is «to serve humanity by endeavouring to achieve the highest international standards in medical education, medical science, medical art and medical ethics, and health care for all people in the world» (<https://www.wma.net/who-we-are/about-us/>). It was set up alongside other relevant events: the Nuremberg doctors' trial (1946-1947), the establishment of the United Nations (1945), the adoption of the Universal

of the most influential documents and a crucial milestone in research ethics as it fixes a universal set of ethical principles with the goal of protecting research subjects, including vulnerable populations, from physical and non-physical harm (Sprumont et al. 2007; Wiesing and Ehni 2014). These are principles that are widely accepted by virtually all scientists, clinician researchers, industry representatives, Contract Research Organisation professionals and others involved in today's clinical trial efforts. Ethical principles like those in the DoH are addressed to physicians and others «involved in medical research involving human subjects» (WMA 2013, paragraph 6). The well-being of human subjects and careful consideration of the risks and benefits that can derive from research are basic DoH principles: «Medical research involving human subjects may only be conducted if the importance of the objective outweighs the risks and burdens to the research subjects» (WMA 2013, paragraph 12). Ultimately, the DoH represents an effort on the part of the physicians' community to regulate its own behaviour by striking a balance between patients' rights and demands of advancement of medical research.

Before the DoH, the best-known ethical research principle was the Nuremberg Code (1947). It defined a set of guidelines that were created as a result of the dreadful human subject experimentation carried out by Nazi Germany and its allies. Principles are set up to allow clinical research to be carried out. The core principle is the informed consent by which the subject voluntarily gives his or her consent to be subjected to a medical experiment. For a free and informed expression of consent, the subject must know the nature, duration and purpose of the clinical trial, the method and means by which it will be conducted, the possible effects on health and well-being, and the possible risks involved. The code also draws a dividing line between licit and illicit experimentation, which lacks scientific and ethical foundations.

Compared with the Nuremberg Code, the DoH dealt with clinical research more directly, but was portrayed as a weakening of the stringent protections of Nuremberg (Goodyear et al. 2007). Nonetheless, it became engrained in the international culture of research ethics and evolved over many years (seven revisions, two clarifications, one revision in progress), a sign of the drafters' willingness to consider research ethics and practice in their dynamic dimension. Ethics are created, change and evolve due to historical and political events, social and legal considerations, continuous medical and technological advances, innovations, in response to changes in cultural values and behavioural norms that change over time (Artal and Rubenfeld 2017).

One last important historical document in the field of research ethics relates to the medical field. It is the Belmont Report, published in 1979 by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, entitled *The Belmont Report:*

Declaration of Human Rights (1948). These were years that witnessed the social initiative to promote respect for human rights whose violations had taken place in Germany and elsewhere during the Nazi period.

Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979). The Report defines three ethical principles that should guide the participation of human subjects in research: respect for people and their autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence, and justice. These are principles that, according to the authors of the Report, form the basis for establishing and evaluating specific rules for conducting clinical research (Emanuel et al. 2011; Mikesell et al. 2013; Friesen et al. 2017; Brothers et al. 2019; Siddiqui and Sharp 2021).

The reference to the three documents has enabled the scientific community to share internationally the principle that clinical research on humans is only permitted if it respects the cardinal principles already present in the Nuremberg Code, namely:

- participants must give their informed and voluntary consent;
- the research design must be such that risks are minimised and there is an acceptable balance between risks and benefits;
- participants must be carefully selected to avoid any form of exploitation or unfair exclusion;
- the privacy of participants must be protected in every way.

Most unanimous consensus in the research world is also expressed regarding the need for approval of the research by an independent body (e.g. ethics committee) before the research project begins.

The reason why we cite these three specific documents is because, ultimately, modern medicine and the humanities and social science are confronted with a dilemma, namely, that research involving human subjects allows to gain knowledge about the efficacy and safety of research interventions. This is true for research that involves both medical trials and social and educational activities/actions (Leont'ev 1979). On the other hand, research involving human subjects is fraught with ethical conflicts that cannot be completely prevented. If one conducts research *on* and *with* human subjects, there will always be the risk of harming them (Wiesingand and Ehni 2014). The type and intensity of damage suffered by the individual depends on the type of research. In the field of adult educational research, the potential harm is the 'educational harm', i.e. the exposure of human subjects to adverse learning actions (Federighi 2016) from which arise behaviours, actions, pre-assumptions that determine the quality of people's lives and work and their exposure to the arbitrary power of learning action.

To question the ethical issues involved in the conduct of research, whether in the medical field or in the humanities and social sciences, is to ask the question of what sense it makes in relation to individuals and society. In the field of clinical and medical research the topic has been debated since the end of the Second World War and has been the subject of attention by science and politics. Less copious are the reflections and even normative prescriptions in the field of educational research concerning adult education. On the other hand, the reflection deserves a space that has yet to be cultivated: in addition to the principles enabling medical research, already mentioned, also applied to research *in* or *on*

education in adulthood – albeit less regularly and meticulously by researchers and scientists – ethics in this field of investigation raises questions related to the very meaning of research and its epistemological framing. Educational research for the transformation and emancipation of the individual and collective subject is in itself an ethically oriented research because it is inspired by

- principles of distributive justice;
- principles of equality;
- ways of uncovering the negative learning values that are embedded in the totality of human relationships and prevent human subjects from constructing responses to their own aspirations for growth and development.

1.1.2 Ethics in Legal Acts

As a result of the process of reflection and elaboration described above, there has also been a regulation of ethical guiding principles for the conduct of scientific research. At an international level and in most countries, there are regulatory prescriptions that allow scientific research to be carried out, seeking to safeguard the autonomy of the human subjects involved and their rights.

We provide a partial list below and define four categories of documents dealing with research ethics. For each category we select one relevant document:

a. *Legal acts*, where general guiding principles are defined; they are also guiding research activities. In the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Convention 2000) they are conceived as «common values» (Preamble, paragraph 1) and expressed as «universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity» (Preamble, paragraph 2) to protect «fundamental rights in light of changes in society, social progress and scientific and technological developments» (Preamble, paragraph 4);
b. *Codes*, like *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (ALLEA 2017) that serves the research community as a «framework for self-regulation» and as a tool to realise their responsibilities to «formulate the principles of research, to define the criteria for proper research behaviour, to maximise the quality and robustness of research, and to respond adequately to threats to, or violations of, research integrity» (ALLEA 2017, 3);
c. *Guidelines*, such as the Ethics in Social Science and Humanities (European Commission 2021). It aims to «give practical advice on integrating ethics into the planned research by providing, wherever possible, checklists for points at which a pause is needed to reflect and plan the action to be taken». The European Guidelines focus on two ethical dimensions of research: «'procedural ethics', pertaining to the aspects of compliance in performing research, and 'ethics in practice', the everyday ethical issues that arise while doing research» (European Commission 2021, 4);
d. *Charters*, an example is the Commission Recommendation on the *European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* (European Commission 2005), which associates the ethical dimension of research with the 'accountability' of researchers able to efficiently use

taxpayers' money and for the purposes of research seen «for the good of mankind and for expanding the frontiers of scientific knowledge, while enjoying the freedom of thought and expression, and the freedom to identify methods by which problems are solved, according to recognised ethical principles and practices». The call is also to «adhere to the recognised ethical practices and fundamental ethical principles appropriate to their discipline(s) as well as to ethical standards as documented in the different national, sectoral or institutional Codes of Ethics» (European Commission 2005, 4).

Research ethics principles underpin the legal acts, codes, guidelines, charters encompass not only minimising harm to research participants, but also

- respecting their autonomy, dignity and integrity;
- protecting vulnerable groups;
- ensuring honesty and transparency towards research subjects;
- protecting their privacy;
- ensuring informed consent for them and privacy;
- ensuring equity, inclusivity and diversity;
- sharing the benefits with disadvantaged populations;
- demonstrating social responsibility of researchers and institutions promoting, developing, funding research activities (Hammersley and Traianou 2012; BERA 2018; Brown et al. 2020; European Commission 2021; ESRC 2021).

1.2 Ethics in Adult Educational Research

Specific to the adult educational research context, the question of ethics and its content has been faced by prominent bodies that defined well-structured ethical guidelines that apply equally to quantitative and qualitative research: i) American Educational Research Association (AERA 2011, 1992). ii) British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018). iii) Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA 1997, 2005). They all refer to ethical principles related to the different actors involved in adult educational research in various capacities:

- participants;
- sponsors, clients and stakeholders in research;
- community of educational researchers;
- 'users' who will benefit from research dependable findings (i.e. policy makers).

Depending on the type of research, the same subject may play different roles: e.g. in educational research analysing institutional learning processes connected to the policy transfer they aim to support, policymakers are both participants and users of the research (Torlone 2018).

Other ethical dimensions of andragogical research concern peculiar aspects of the entire research process, some still poorly investigated, others worthy of further development (Cohen et al. 2000). Here are some of those that literature has helped to define and that, in some cases, deserve further action and intervention:

- The risk of corruption in the performance of research activities in the andragogical field.
  Education is one of the sectors where corruption is most prevalent (Poisson 2010). «Corruption can be found at macro, meso and micro levels in the education sector. So-called 'grand corruption' involving large sums is found essentially in the field of procurement (school buildings, textbook production, etc.), while 'petty corruption' is found in the other areas» (Ochse 2004, 3). Such widespread corruptions reduce the quality and effectiveness of investments and increase exclusion from lifelong learning. They also hinder the achievement of learning outcomes by the adults involved (European Commission 2013).
- A further ethical aspect, linked to the economic-financial dimension of educational research, points to the researcher's responsibility for the way in which research funds are spent.
  Researchers have to take decisions about how to carry out research that makes the process as ethical as possible including budgets of time and finance, the way finance is used and allocated, and the amount of public funds that are devoted to specific research activities (ESRC 2005).
- Some areas of adult educational are being subjected to too much research while many others are neglected.
  There are certain areas that have been intensively explored, others that are still being explored and many others that have been neglected in the past and still remain neglected. The ethical dimension invokes the need to explore useful, unexplored andragogical fields of study for the benefit of adults and society (Govil 2013; Baykara et al. 2015).
- Ethics in adult education research can reinforce the complexity of the phenomena investigated and the contexts in which they take place.
  Adult educational research, ethically oriented, does not reduce its validity and reliability but highlights the contextual complexities within which it has been carried out (Kelly 1989).
- The ethical dimension of andragogical research helps to question the transferability of results.
  The transferability and generalisability of the results of andragogical research are strongly related to compliance with ethical principles that influence the results and their adaptability to different contexts, organisations, targets by those for which the research is designed (Bassey 1998).
- Extension of the ethical principles of clinical research to adult education research.
  Adult educational research that is not inspired by the principles of informed consent, confidentiality of information, and voluntary participation in the research activities exposes to dangers with respect to the positioning of researched subjects in the research process (ESRC 2005). In adult educational research, researchers need to consider whether it is worthwhile to undertake a project by weighing up the balance of harm and benefit that arise to participants and to society from carrying it out (Marlene de Laine 2000).

- Adult educational research must be conducted by researchers who are aware that they are the appropriate individuals to undertake the specific educational research at hand (Gregory 2003).
  Researchers with organisational roles of leadership and scientific coordination of research activities have the task of recruiting researchers who are appropriate with respect to the topics and areas of investigation and to the ethical posture that the study activity requires. Researchers may not be selected on the basis of career development criteria or the attainment of qualifications or certificates that can be used in the workplace.
- The ethical dimension of research in the field of adult education conditions the growth and training processes of the researchers themselves.
  The conduct of research activities promotes and activates self-directed learning processes on the part of the researchers involved. These are processes embedded within the research. The fields of study, the theoretical paradigms that the researcher decides to adopt, and the ultimate goal that the researcher decides to assume as research purpose, are all elements that nourish and promote processes of self-directed learning and orient the identity choices of the researcher (what kind of researcher one intends to be and what kind of researcher vice versa one does not want to be) (Kumashiro 2014). In this conceptualisation of ethics in adult educational research, the dominant aspect is the process of researcher formation through the ethical orientation of his/her research (Head 2018). So codes, rules, procedures, principles formally established diminish their relevance and are superseded by identifying, addressing and resolving emerging and, in most cases, neglected ethical dilemmas.
- Ethics in adult educational research is deeply connected to the meaning of research.
  Ethics force virtuous researchers to be concerned that their research should aim at improving the quality of life and work of researched subjects and communities (Pendlebury and Enslin 2001). The ethical dimension of andragogical research is related to its transformative potential and to the principles of distributive justice: which learning opportunities for which people, who are able to change their current and future living and working conditions as a result of the research findings (Federighi 2019).

As a consequence, ethics in adult educational research is embedded in the construction of the Public (Dewey 1927). An ethically oriented andragogical research, which espouses the emancipative-transformative paradigm, assumes, as its epistemological foundation, the task of forming the Public, i.e. of orienting and nurturing the process of constructing the collective subject, historically positioned, capable of controlling the learning processes induced by authorities, institutions, and contexts and of elaborating the response to realise its own developmental objectives.

In conclusion, there is an urgent need for well defined ethical paradigms for andragogic research so that quality of adult education may improve and researchers may contribute to emancipation processes of individuals, organisations, in-

stitutions, communities and they can continuously nurture their identity as ethically rigorous researchers. One point of attention deserves to be noted: an ethics-oriented approach to andragogical research is in danger of being countered by a regime of power to control researchers «by compelling them to conduct their research according to the norms, practices and protocols of principalism approved by institutional, state and/or national guidelines» (Halse 2011, 244). Research Ethics Committees (RECs) that act in the frame of a solid and shared ethical framework contribute to the ethical sense of adult educational research. RECs that, on the other hand, fulfil their assigned tasks by «interpreting and enforcing normative behaviours in a disciplined and approved way» (Brown et al. 2020, 751) act a covert imposition by reproducing, even in the reality of university research, the control of the dominant (academic institution) over the dominated (researchers).

1.3 Research Ethic Committees in Higher Education. A Critical Analysis

Further to the DoH, the protection of human subjects is an ethical mandate for all contemporary research involving human beings. This is the reason why universities and institutions, that are responsible for conducting research with infant, young, and adult human beings, have instituted Research Ethics Committees[3].

The RECs are a key element of higher education governance and administration. They gained an increasing importance as a review mechanism for academicians who want to «conduct responsible research, along with safeguarding research ethics standards, scientific merit and human rights of participants» (Davies 2020, 1). The RECs serve as an advisory board for the assessment of policies, standards, programmes, research, education, guidance and awareness-raising among academicians about the university's ethical values, ethics culture, and ethical decision-making practices. Recommendations and guidelines, although needed, are not always formally developed by all RECs. They mostly develop ethics reviews, procedures and dashboards, whilst specific guidelines for human and social sciences protocols are not always clearly shared. Most often they refer to general ethics guidelines as set up in documents related to the specific areas of research they are expressing their assessment about. However, it is a common practice that many universities and research institutions require a review of all human and social science research involving human participants by an independent REC prior to data collection, and some have separate RECs for human and social science protocols (Wassenaar 2006). This concerns – as mentioned – any kind of research involving human beings in various ways, be they children, adolescents, young people, adults or elderly, in whatever condi-

[3] The establishment of ethics committees with the task of «evaluation, comments, guidelines and approval» of the research protocol is provided for in the DoH (WMA 2013, paragraph 23).

tion and territory they find themselves involved in research activities (e.g. in the administration of survey instruments, with or without forms of remuneration[4]). While it is true that the dominant discourse and development of regulatory frameworks have been driven by health and biomedical disciplines, it is important to recognise that, in spite of research methodologies, paradigms and approaches that may differ, all research, including educational and social science research, must be judged against the same ethical principles (Department of Health, South Africa 2015, 2004; Davies 2020).

Research ethics regulation is not only a requirement for higher education institutions, but it is also required by many editors of journals when publishing research. Editors are increasingly requiring proof of ethics review prior to acceptance of data-based publications. They require researchers to submit applications seeking approval from ethics committees to conduct research (Cleaton-Jones 2007; Head 2018). The approval of ethics committees is a condition for the feasibility and conduct of the research.

The use of ethics committees and ethic review procedures, also for publishing research purposes, has raised quite a few questions. RECs have been criticised and conceived as bureaucratic, behaving in an arrogant manner, being a hindrance rather than a help to research and even as being unnecessary, as social and educational scientists have always done this kind of research (Breckler 2005; Sikes and Piper 2010). Moreover, they have been accused of controlling, limiting or even preventing research from being undertaken. Consequently, the decisions they make act to determine what makes research ethical and what ethical researchers can and cannot do (Velardo and Elliot 2018). We take up the critical issues recurring in specialised literature, analysing them in light of the experience gained within a research ethics committee at higher education level:

- RECs as well as the rules and procedures they define and apply for ethics review are seen as obstructive (Parsell et al. 2014), unnecessarily bureaucratic and restrictive (Henderson and Esposito 2017; Velardo and Elliot 2018). Doing ethically oriented research is a cultural issue, both of individual researchers and research teams and of the academic body that researches, promotes, finances, and evaluates. The weaker this cultural dimension is, at every level (organisational, group, individual researcher), the more frequent is the absence of an ethical posture of research activities and products. It therefore happens that researchers themselves often do not consider the ethical implications of their work until it is time to fill out the various forms required by the ethics committees. It is only at that time that they become familiar with this dimension of research and the way they approach it really depends on the organisational culture of research ethics. To this regard, RECs may play a key role in making the academic community aware of the relevance of the ethical dimension of research in the framework of the research quality dis-

[4] By means of – often symbolic – sums of money or the issuing of vouchers, depending on the research software used and the research project's budget.

course and the authentic meaning of ethically oriented research. We are far from study approaches that look at the quality of academic activity, including research, from the perspective of total quality management or standards for the continuous improvement of production processes (ISO). RECs, on the other hand, have the opportunity to play a very compelling educational function with respect to the academic community of which they are the expression, provided that this role is not hindered by the cultural, academic and individual values of the researchers, the researched, and the society where research is taking place. RECs in some cases eschew the role of mere offices in which stamps or marks of a certifying power are affixed; they conceive themselves as collegial bodies whose mandate is fuelled by the assessment of the added value that submitted research projects or products are able to produce.

- Ethical research review is not an administrative process. It is not even a formal check on the existence of requirements prescribed by codes or legal norms (e.g. the regulations of GDPR 2016/679 prescribing the requirements and conditions for requesting informed consent: European Parliament and Council 2016).
  Author' experience confirms the need to discuss within the REC the meaning of regulatory prescriptions in the light of the mandate given by the university to the body overseeing the ethical dimension of research. The normative dictate, which from the perspective of the legal-administrative specialists, members of the REC, risks to become the sole guiding principle in the assessment of compliance with the principles of informed consent – also in the differentiation of protection measures for the most vulnerable or incapacitated –, is in reality a device for protecting the social (as well as the individual) value of the consent given by those participating in research. «Consensus promotes the consistency of values between researchers and researched in relation to the object of the adult educational research, its aims and objectives, the methodology in use. Moreover, consensus fuels trust in research activity by emphasising its transparency at all stages» (CNR 2017, 2). To the extent of the wording of the informed consent document, the type of researched subjects to whom it is administered for signature, and the manner in which the documentary support is shared with them, allow the verification of the adult subject's full, free, conscious determination as to his or her involvement in certain phases of the research in question, the ethical principle may be considered satisfied. This question deserves continuous investigation and discussion as much depends on the specificity of the research and the subjects asked to give their consent and their positioning with respect to the research topics.

- Members of RECs are often lacking knowledge and expertise of particular ethical contexts, including education (Sikes and Piper 2010). Moreover, «whilst ethics review boards are common they are not universal» (Head

2018, 4). The majority of institutions appear to have specific ethics committees for educational research but others do not as they may only have one committee with oversight of all disciplines, sometimes without an education representative (Sikes and Piper 2010).
This aspect is mitigated by the criteria adopted for the composition of the Research Ethics Committee: the more diverse the area of origin of the individual members, the less the knowledge gap with regard to specific aspects of the research submitted to the committee represents a serious obstacle to the preservation of the ethicality of research in all its multifaceted dimensions. The reference areas under consideration are the ERC ones[5].
In addition, in most of the research institutions, there is the establishment of a 'list of Experts' who may be involved in the activities of RECs, when required by the ethical issue specifically addressed by the research project or product under consideration.
A further mitigating device is represented by practices in use that allow consultation with other research ethics committees responsible for specific study and research activities (e.g. pharmacological clinical trials; medical, surgical, diagnostic and therapeutic protocols and procedures; clinical trials of medical devices; retrospective or prospective observational studies, pharmacological and non-pharmacological; activities involving the use of human organs, tissues and cells for scientific purposes; studies of food products on humans) and ethical and bioethical issues related to health and social welfare activities.

- Critics argue that ethics reviews prior to the conduct of research often constrain research activity and can impose restrictions and conditions that may actually result in unethical research conduct (Parsell et al. 2014; Henderson and Esposito 2017).
  Author' experience only partially confirms this critical argument. The preliminary steps carried out by the RECs in the person of the President and its members, preparatory to the study and analysis of the individual application, have a duration that may vary. This involves receiving the materials to be submitted to the Ethics Committee for analysis, checking for completeness and comprehensiveness, and the preliminary assessment by the receiving Ethics Committee (this is because some research issues can be pertinent to other Ethics Committees or can require the combined assessment of more than one Ethics Committee or need to be checked as for the territorial criterion[6]). In addition, there is the time required for the support secretariat to

[5] Areas refer to the ERC sectors including Physical Sciences and Engineering, Social Sciences and Humanities, Life Sciences.

[6] Applications from researchers affiliated with institutes with their own RECs are usually rejected with an invitation to submit the application to the ethics committee of their research organisation. On the other hand, applications from researchers of foreign nationalities but

carry out any additional preliminary investigations to be requested of the person submitting the opinion to the REC.
It should be noted, however, that in the author's experience the regularity of the monthly meetings, as well as the practice of extraordinary meetings based on the urgencies of the applicant researchers, represent measures to support the RECs' management of evaluation time that cannot be said to hinder the applicants' conduct of research, but on the contrary seek to mitigate the risks of an extension of research time and to incentivise the use of RECs for the promotion of research quality in its ethical dimension. Confirming this motivating purpose is the practice of RECs tending to provide positive opinions with reservations rather than negative opinions.

The ethical conduct of research in education is far more complex than adhering to a set of strict rules and procedures, defined at the international and university level (where they exist). It is rather an issue of resolving ethical dilemmas that are organic, dynamic and dependant on the complexities of research contexts (i.e. regional governments, prisons, welcome centres, manufacturing business, cooperatives) and relations (i.e. between workers, between employers and employees, between citizens and public institutions).

The researched contexts are also places where values, beliefs and experiences of researchers and researched subjects are not always shared and the power relationships between parties involved in research need to be negotiated constantly during the research development. In adult education research the negotiation of pedagogical powers and research interests is framed within the transformative/emancipative epistemology. This amounts to saying that the ethical dimension of research in this area tends to be based on «utilitarian ethical theory» (Brooks et al. 2014; Pring 2003; Stutchbury and Fox 2009). It is based upon the principle that doing something is ethical because it will produce a good result as it will produce transformations of living and working conditions of subjects researched because they will be emancipated as a consequence of the educational research (Federighi 2018). This is far from the 'deontology ethical approach' that is understood as adhering to a general rule of behaviour as a matter of duty, regardless of consequences and results.

2. Ethics Embedded in the Purpose and Substantial Quality in Adult Education Research Process

Ethics encourage researchers in adult learning and education to develop studies *with* the target community and population and other relevant stakeholders research is addressed to and developed for (Emanuel et al. 2008). This

integrated, even temporarily (i.e. as PhD students, visiting researchers), in the research institute that set up the Ethics Committee, are usually accepted and evaluated.

is an ethical characterisation of research in education that questions us about the conditions that delineate its real and material quality.

It is related to the specificity of research in adult education i.e. «its meaning, its raison d'être, its function» (Federighi 2019, 41), in other words its «purpose» (Federighi 2018, 14): to change the educational conditions of the population. These transformations affect both contexts and human subjects involved in the education research. The transformative capacity of the subject, both individual and collective, is connected to the role that the researcher recognises in the entire research process, i.e. the role of being itself part of a transformative process of which it is a conscious and driving actor. The configuration of adults as subjects transforming themselves and the social contexts that originated their need of learning (Federighi 1997, 1999) has within it the ethically relevant conceptualisation of a subject who is granted the power to acquire awareness, responsibility and transformative capacity. The transformative power acknowledged to the adult subject, which research promotes and solicits, is embodied in the ability of human subjects to «imagine, manage and control the processes of tendentially scientific research of the ways in which to effect change» (Federighi 2018, 15) and act to transform the educational valences present in all kinds of experience into motives for the development of their intellectual and material lives. This is why research in adult education has its meaning, its 'purpose' in the ability to socially organise adult demand for knowledge and change, and to formulate the resulting institutional, financial and educational responses. In other words, educational research deals with the powers that in education regulate access to knowledge and the possibility of imagining the unthinkable (Bernstein 1990).

It follows that educational research is born, develops and regulates itself through the ability of researchers to combine the relationship between university and society and to act with «the whole social complex of which men are the expression» (Gramsci 1932)[7] that helps the university to be and live itself as a «social university» (De Sanctis and Federighi 1976). It is a quest that invests society and is nurtured and oriented by the developmental motives and growth aspirations of the adult individuals that make it up, and evaluated by its capacity to transform and remove the «submergent determinants» (Habermas 1984, 194) that prevent people from expressing and realising their aspirations for change. An ethically oriented adult educational research is a research that is able to make this transformative dimension explicit right from its conception, i.e. in the explication of its transformative intent linked to the ability to provide tools to the human subjects involved and the stakeholders to whom it is addressed to tackle problems in society, at work, in people's daily lives with educational tools. It is no longer instrumental research, at the service of the ruling class, but useful for the promotion of processes of emancipation of the people. The constant and privileged reference that such an ethical approach requires in the entire research process is «the Public» (De Sanctis and Federighi 1976, 1981),

[7] Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the author.

whose problems and growth aspirations must be known and for whom useful control tools must be prepared to direct its formative processes and construct individual and collective responses. In this ethic dimension of adult education research the «Charter of Rights of the Public» (*Carta dei Diritti del Pubblico*) is particularly significant as it is conceived as an identitarian artefact of the collective subject that is able to react to the diverse forms of hidden persuasion (De Sanctis 1991, 201-3).

Other transformative meanings seem to appear desemantised and at risk of permeating ideological conditioning, false autonomy of researchers, authoritarian drifts.

RECs should be recognised, as part of their institutional mandate, to make transparent the ethical dimension of research in protocols, tools, products and the epistemological criteria that guide it. Failing this, educational research continues to replicate the existing educational and learning conditions, inequalities and heterodetermination of educational processes for large sections of the population, destined to remain deprived of the educational and cultural tools to take control and activate emancipatory processes that researchers declare without a coherent research practice.

3. Conclusion. For an Ethics in Adult Education and Learning Research

Questioning the quality of adult educational research goes far beyond the study and use of engineering devices (total quality management, PDCA, AVA, ISO, etc.). We believe that the actual quality of adult educational research deserves to be framed within the research quality discourse and the authentic meaning of ethical research. This authenticity is characterised by the particular attention that educational research pays to five dimensions:

1. The clarification of the *purpose* of research, which is substantiated in the transformative and emancipatory dimension and in the principle of distributive equity. Equity is expressed in the ability of research to: (i) identify real problems, (ii) define concrete, verifiable and measurable objectives, (iii) contribute to achieving the expected transformative outcomes.
2. The choice of *topics and fields* to research. The themes and fields orientate the ethical dimension because the ability of research to build a democratic society and accompany people's growth in school, work, consumption and 'leisure time' depends on them. The proliferation of topics on which educational research has evolved is undisputed, a sign of a broad and diverse research demand. However, it is research that still struggles to provide adequate answers for the transformation of the educational conditions of the population and its emancipation and to overcome the current stagnation (European Commission-Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion et al. 2020; Eurostat 2021).
3. The focus on the *public* Deweynianly understood, with whom and for whom to do research. It is the public who directs the research because of the prob-

lems they face and it is the public who determines the process by which educational research is carried out.
4. The choice of *transformative methods* that in research practice effectively enable the achievement of improvement goals and expected (or even unexpected) changes in living and working contexts and the people who live and work in them. In this sense, the choice of transformative methods is legitimised by virtue of the criterion of appropriateness with respect to the transformative objectives of the research.
5. The definition of *added value* that encompasses the meaning of adult educational research: what added value can be concretely hypothesised and what are the possible transformations expected from carrying out research activities? The answer to this question provides transparency to the ethical value of the expected results.

These five dimensions invoke the need for researchers to define a *multi-year research programme* that is constantly fed by projects that are consistent with and complementary to the aims of educational research and mirror the interest in the emancipation of the 'modern educational proletariat' and the ethical principle of distributive equity. The ethical principle guiding educational research helps to understand the equivocal nature of syntagmas and expressions, albeit in use, such as learners, participants, audience, inmates, migrants, low skilled workers, women, Neets, elderly, young adults, addicted people, etc. In them prevails a predefined and anonymous identity, incapable of organising itself as a collective subject promoting collective actions, decontextualised with respect to the historicity of problems and aspirations that instead ethically oriented adult educational research considers, analyses, and scientifically tends to overcome by providing educational and cultural resources adequate for the self-determination of the transforming subject and the development of the transformative processes referred to.

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PART II

Professionalisation in Adult Education

The Link between Universities and the Labour Market: Perceiving the Building of Employability Processes in Higher Education

Vanna Boffo, Dino Mancarella

Abstract:

The topic that we will deal with in this essay is central for the development of higher education in Italy, Europe and the world. Universities as academic and educational institutions have changed radically over the last 50 years. At present, their task is to educate and train new brackets of the population for a future in which competencies and learning will be the points of reference for an ever more rapidly and intensely evolving and developing world. To this end, it becomes important to reflect on the topic of building university curricula in the educational sector and on the competencies achieved by the graduates from master's courses designed to train the professional figure of pedagogist. The aim of the article is to concentrate on the internal aspects of university programmes whose goal is to train true professionals in the world of education and training, who are able to take on the responsibilities required of them and to display the necessary competencies. Here, it will be offered the last results of a qualitative research on the perceptions of the learning outcomes of two groups of master degree students in Adult Education and Pedagogical Sciences at the University of Florence. The principal points will consist into the reaching of the employability competences and into the acquiring of the knowledges about the labour market.

Keywords: Employability; Higher Education; Qualitative Method; Quality of Studies Courses; Skills

1. The Link Between Universities and the Labour Market: Building Bridges, Following Transitions

The topic that we will deal with in this essay is central for the development of higher education in Italy, Europe and the world. Universities as academic and educational institutions have changed radically over the last 50 years. At present, their task is to educate and train new brackets of the population for a future in which competencies and learning will be the points of reference for an ever more rapidly and intensely evolving and developing world.

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To this end, it becomes important to reflect on the topic of building university curricula in the educational sector and on the competencies achieved by the graduates from master's courses designed to train the professional figure of pedagogist. The classes in question are, of course, the LM 50 master's degree in 'Educational Service Planning and Management', the LM 57 master's degree in 'Adult Education and Continuing Training' and the LM 85 master's degree in 'Pedagogical Sciences', all of which concern the areas of pedagogy, education and training. We are interested in understanding if and how the training programmes offered to the students on these courses effectively define and cut out the non-teaching professional figures that they aim to educate and train. The research question (Fabbri and Torlone 2018) can be set out as follows: in a constantly changing and accelerating panorama, what training programmes can we offer graduates to best enter the professional labour market?

Our aim is to concentrate on the internal aspects of university programmes whose goal is to train true professionals in the world of education and training, who are able to take on the responsibilities required of them and to display the necessary competencies. Two things are increasingly clear: the impossibility to trace training programmes on paper and the connection between education and work. The road to claiming a clear framework is still long. The problem of professions and building solid professionalism is connected to the degree course structure and to what is stated in the syllabi drawn up for each separate course in the overall learning programme. However, in order to answer the research question, more urgent issues have to be dealt with: who are the professionals we are interested in, what job do they do, how do they come to do this job? All of this is needed to understand which contexts and workplaces we are preparing our students for.

The figures who we are interested in are level-two professionals (as per law no. 205 of 29 December 2017) who coordinate and manage education and training processes, organise services for citizens, head teams of educators or trainers and work in the field of human resource management. On one hand, they are professionals who will work in the social economy, in consortia or social cooperatives that organise, manage and develop services for citizens and, on the other, in firms and companies which employ education graduates in human resources, as training department heads and in human resources management. Concerning both areas, studies dealing with the relationship between education and work and offering reflection on the knowledge, competencies and capabilities provided by degree courses are few and far between. Instead, we deem it urgent to understand how universities can also be the place where professionals are given the competencies necessary for the professions of the future. Competencies and skills are central to the European Skills Agenda (Pact for Skills, European Skills Agenda 2030), hence they must provide the blueprint for the launch, development and growth of educational and training professions and for the preparation and accompaniment of the education-to-work transition.

The discourse proceeds in three directions: the first concerns the need to design learning programmes in line with the future of work; the second concerns

the urgency to further investigate the category of *competency*; and the third concerns new professional educational care and training roles in the social and corporate sectors. While the first direction takes in university degree courses and their relationship with the labour market, the second takes into consideration the legislation and political moves that should absorb the European directives into Italian educational policies. The third instead refers to the social economy and the cooperative labour market, namely the type of enterprise that has taken on the task of developing services for citizens.

The data from the last AlmaLaurea employment survey concerning graduate profiles and their employment status show a situation of growth, albeit minimal compared to the situation circa ten years ago, namely prior to the economic crisis (AlmaLaurea 2022). While on one hand the state of Italian universities seems to be improving in relation to the number of students graduating within the set time frame, which has increased since the university reform, on the other hand, the country is last in Europe for the number of graduates, as well as suffering from low starter pay levels in the first five years after graduating, and above all, despite the worth of a degree over a school diploma, a lack of job opportunities (AlmaLaurea 2022).

Both the AlmaLaurea and the OECD (2021) reports speak of the relationship between curricula and the work-to-education transition, between knowledge acquired during the degree courses and acquired professionalism. The topic of the connection between a graduate's job, job seeking and education, and the disciplines studied, methods and know-how acquired during the time at university is increasingly becoming the background for current reflection (CRUI 2018). However, we cannot rest on our laurels since, in Italy, little attention has been given to universities in terms of studies on their learning programmes, and above all, little research has dealt with the relationship between the training programmes and the labour market.

The term *employability* is not only the stuff of economists, it is beginning to enter the reflection on university training too. Pedagogy has started to deal with university teaching and as a consequence with its results in terms of jobs and quality of employment. Talking about these aspects also changes the way of looking at reflections on teaching, teaching methods and types of learning in higher education contexts (Yorke and Knight 2004).

The hypothesis behind this short essay refers to the centrality of the world of life, professions and work placement in understanding the sense of higher education teaching, the direction of teaching methods and the presence of 'different' techniques and tools to improve, boost and cement broad, transversal, innovative, transdisciplinary and technologically advanced learning.

The education and training programme cannot be separated from what the graduates will do 'afterwards'. It must be connected to transversal skills that they can put into practice in their future professional, working and personal life. As Dewey already stated over one hundred years ago, there has to be transparency between the worlds of the school, university and life (Dewey 1966 [1916], 1969 [1938]). This alone is enough to make us think how far university culture still

has to go, with its excessive focus on the disciplines and the content to be taught, and lack of attention as to how and why they are learnt.

2. Work-Related Education

In order to innovate degree courses, it is necessary to start from the everyday, that is, from the close link between the students and their learning (Kolb 1984). To do so, it is even more necessary to build a teacher-pupil relationship that is meaningful, dense, generative and exciting. Alongside the teacher-pupil relationship, it is crucial to adopt a method that can support the relationship and keep it moving with the times, having an innovative edge and making use of new technologies. University teaching can and must support transformations in know-how, also through methods and techniques that are able to speak to all students, young or older. One of the pillars of the relationship between the construction of competencies for the future, the centrality of developing future professionalism and the acquisition of basic, characteristic and, at the same time, visionary knowledge, is the capability to look at the labour market and to act using experience.

Therefore, from another point of view, if we want to reflect and think about creating competencies for the labour market, we also have to reflect on educational practices. Some good practices that are followed in university courses are: 1. use of the universities' MOODLE platform in order to create a community with the students on the various courses; 2. interaction between different courses, tackling topics and projects with a kaleidoscopic vision; 3. students' involvement in research activities on topics concerning building professionalism; 4. shared planning through MOODLE; 5. constant reference to the ground and the labour market as a 'bridge' between academic and experiential know-how; 6. inclusion of career services in the teaching programme; 7. presence of foreign researchers and using young entrepreneurs to show the transformations on the labour market first hand. The list of positive aspects could go on and on.

First of all, the use of the MOODLE platform on some courses not only introduces a technical innovation in its use of a new tool, but also new planning methods and ways of relating with the students. On one hand, designing a course using a platform that supports, accompanies and steers the teaching activities enables the extension of the class beyond the teaching hours, and an increase in the space and time available. On the other hand, the platform models relationships that develop in a certain way in person and can change, sometimes unexpectedly, online.

Creating a community where knowledge is shared, that acts as a constant point of reference, and where teachers and students can dialogue on forums; is a central step in making teaching a place where the action of educating really does get across. Planning a course *on* and *with* the MOODLE platform makes the class a community, reaches out to students who are unable to attend lessons, strengthens relationships, and implements and stimulates logical and deductive thought. During the course duration, the platform can be used as a tool to constantly build relationships and dialogue. It can be associated with record-

ings of the lessons so that the courses can also be followed by people in work or who, for personal reasons, cannot attend them in person. Recordings of lessons are a significant teaching asset and devoting time to putting them together is a new job for teachers. Digital tools are also used for in-course testing. The sense of fostering use of the platform lies in giving students the capability to get used to the digital interface, and honing their skills in using connected tools, mobile phones to do research in the classroom and computers after lesson time.

By using MOODLE alongside other teaching methods, a 'kaleidoscopically' interrelated vision can be created. If all teachers implement the same teaching strategies, it will be easier for students to understand their use. Similar behaviour has a strong impact and the tool can become an 'integral part' of the learning plan. This approach was widely tested during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. We can say that this innovation in teaching, taken up both rapidly and intensely, really did take new work-related teaching practices a step forward, much further than could ever have been hoped for. These days, the introduction of digital platforms as day-to-day work tools in university teaching has become inescapable for two more reasons: the first concerning the type of learning, the second technological progress.

We know that one of the most important transversal skills is the capability to learn to learn. In a world that is getting faster and faster, where technological innovation is behind the development of industrial, institutional and administrative systems and processes, learning is a pivotal human potential. Knowing how to learn, as Niklas Luhmann stated in the 1980s and Gardner over ten years ago reconfirmed as one of the five keys for the future, is the attitude we have to assume to gain knowledge in the present day. What we are teaching our students on university courses is, in contrast, already obsolete at the end of the semester so fast is the pace at which knowledge is advancing. As just remarked, Gardner underlined this in the volume *Five Keys for the Future* (2007), which gives us some precious tips on how to get along in tomorrow's world.

Technological progress enforces new types of learning, know-how and knowledge. This new know-how is inseparable from the digital. *E-competencies* will be the new literacy and numeracy. In other words, we inhabitants of the planet earth will not be able to do without them. It is actually a matter of justice, of obtaining social equality, of the right to humanity. Providing the possibility of digital learning, digital literacy and its implementation, must be the stuff of higher education. If the students who enrol on master's courses are required to have obtained credits in 'IT culture', we also have to provide the tools, learning possibilities and conditions to implement this *digital* culture. It does not mean adding techniques but using tools that are vital for being in the world, for work and for life in general. We could go back in our minds and make a comparison: for today's human beings, the Internet is what Gutenberg's discovery was for the civilisation of Humanism. As we underline the importance of connected and interdisciplinary learning, we know that there is still a long way to go to give graduates the skills to navigate and anticipate the digital tendencies and tools of the future.

A second reason for underlining the central importance of trying out new digital teaching concerns the education for the professions of the future. Big data will be a part of all new jobs, even relational and care work. As such, it is the task of universities to prepare young people for the world that awaits them through innovation. There is much evidence in this sense, starting from the fact that «1. A country's economic and industrial development is largely based on the capability to introduce new digital technologies and to promote a digital culture; 2. At European level, the importance of digital skills as a key competency for permanent learning is repeated strongly and with conviction; 3. Digital skills are, to different extents and specifics, present in all work contexts» (CRUI 2018, 8). The study by Fondazione CRUI on transversal skills (CRUI 2018, 73-87) underlines precisely the necessity to form digital skills, as well as a digital culture, by planning appropriate and transversal university training programmes, for everyone, not only for IT graduates. Talking of the digital economy and society, some digital skills should become an integral part of all university curricula, for example, 1. The digital as a factor of innovation; 2. planning for digital innovation; 3. knowledge of applications; 4. knowledge of the world of data and how to live in it; 5. IT security awareness (CRUI 2018, 77). Each of these factors must become a common asset of every graduate. Without a doubt, without these tools, it will be harder to look for a job. In addition, teachers and universities who fail to innovate their teaching in this sense will be less competitive.

Innovation in degree courses involves planning in relation to the labour market on one hand, and the acquisition of transversal skills and digital skills on the other. Teaching is the means to achieve these ends and as such it has a central role because there is no way that university training programmes can avoid transformation. Even the caring professions – educators, teachers, pedagogists and trainers – can and must make use of innovation processes for the future. In order to prepare graduates in these sectors, new educational models and new degree course organisation models need to be put into place, and competencies gained for teaching in higher education.

Italian universities are undergoing a passage of transformation and change; indeed, we could say that this is the case for most sectors. In particular, an agreement needs to be found as to the purpose of education. Should the aim of universities be for culture or for work? It goes without saying that without serious reflection on the role of universities in transforming Italian, European and global society, we will not be able to create the real conditions for innovation in teaching. Transformation commands great force at the legislative level, from the AVA 2.0 quality assurance system, to VQR research quality evaluation and the new university governance modalities set out by Law no. 240/2010.

As the incipit to his most famous book, Willard V. Quine quotes Otto Neurath's words on the role of science at the start of the twentieth century, a moment of great change: «We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom» (1970, 2).

The same could be thought about universities and their formative role in the society of the future.

3. The Perception of Employability Among Participants of the University of Florence LM 50 and LM 57/85 Master's Degree Courses: A Methodological Introduction

In order to provide for a smoother entry to the labour market, over the last 20 years, university reforms (Legislative Decree no. 509/1999; Legislative Decree no. 270/2004; Law no. 240/2010) have concentrated on bringing the courses on offer closer to the professional world. Hence, education departments have also begun to offer courses enabling those who will work in education and training to develop useful competencies for their employability, by which meaning a complex construct (Knight and Yorke 2002, 2003, 2004) linked to the capability to enter and navigate the world of work, develop one's potentials and go after one's desires (Harvey 1999, 2001; Yorke 2006; Yorke and Knight 2006).

The research presented here came about with the intention to investigate the topic of the relationship between *expected results* in terms of learning outcomes and the students' perception of their learning. Perception is very important because it then creates the awareness that will lead students to ask questions about circumstances and the environment, and builds the sensation of knowing where to go. Moreover, it allows them to better listen to and observe the labour market. If they really live out their perception of employability, then the students first and graduates later will have an awareness enabling them to find their way and grasp the opportunities that come up. All in all, employability is a state of the human person, a formative condition in which the subject is able to find their way, look around and know where to go. The employable subject can move from one workplace to another because they can recognise which competencies are needed and above all know that they possess them.

The interviews with the new graduates from two master's courses in the area of education and training, the University of Florence LM 50, *School Leadership and Clinical Pedagogy*, and LM 57/85, *Adult Education, Continuing Training and Pedagogical Sciences* courses cast light on the perception of employability gained thanks to the academic pathway leading to the master's degree. The results of this study could give a contribution at the social level (Smith 2005), by introducing proposals for the innovation of degree courses for non-teaching roles. This could lead to two results for the future master's graduates:

- acquiring the necessary competencies and knowledge to help guarantee the best university success and the best education-to-work transition;
- acquiring understanding, skills and values that can grow throughout their lifespan, allowing them to transfer the assets acquired during their university studies to an array of subsequent work contexts.

In educational research, the intention is to investigate the person by placing the educational act that they are involved in at the centre as well as their education and the acquisition of competencies and knowledge. A qualitative method was chosen for this research for two reasons. On one hand, it was chosen because the context within which the phenomenon is embedded is complex and from research it has emerged that this method is suited to adapting to complexity (González 2019). On the other hand, it was chosen because, to study the per-

ception of employability of recent graduates of master's courses, is to research a social phenomenon that is complex in its own right: «Research needs embodied conceptualising, not just continuous citing of numbers of deaths, stranded polar bears, wealth gaps, and hungry children» (Marshall et al. 2022, 15). This study cannot be performed in solitude, only producing numbers, although this is not to say that this aspect does not have to be taken into consideration. Qualitative measurements need to be taken as they can further the knowledge about a certain phenomenon by gathering more specific data than the data collected using quantitative methods. Grounded theory (GT) is a methodology or approach that is used in various fields, including education (Strauss and Corbin 1998). GT adapts well to the objective of this study as it enables a theory to be generated from the data that are collected (Punch 1998), without any preconceived hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss 2006). It explores the experience in order to obtain a holistic vision while at once dealing with complex phenomena (Goulding 1998; Charmaz 2014). The research strategy used in this thesis is the case study, where case means a unit or phenomenon outlined at a precise moment or in a specific period of time (Gerring 2007). Hence, a case might be an individual, a class, a work group, a study group, a school, an educational services centre, a city, a country. Case studies are used in various situations in order to develop knowledge of individuals, groups and social organisations and for an in-depth understanding and analysis (Gerring 2007) of complex phenomena. The research uses the qualitative focus group (FG) technique (Morgan 1988) to spark an exploration of a certain matter and then come to some significant discoveries that are useful for the research underway. The FG is one of the few forms of research that can lead to an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation without experts on the subject (Morgan 1998; Krueger and Casey 2015) and without really knowing at the beginning all of the questions that the interviewees will be asked (Byers and Wilcox 1991). Therefore, this non-directive way of interviewing the group involved in the research will generate a rich understanding of the participants' experiences and beliefs concerning the phenomenon. The goal will be to explore and discover the chosen object of study. In this way, the attention will shift from the interviewer to the interviewee (Krueger and Casey 2015). The participants in the FG will be invited to discover what they have in common and what their differences are. Given this premise, it is clear how FGs spark a knowledge process characterised by sharing and comparison among the participants.

4. Reading the Data from the FG with Students on the University of Florence LM 50 and LM 57/85 Courses

This essay sets out a preliminary reflection on data on the perception of employability among students on the LM 57/85 and LM 50 courses. The data were collected in four focus groups with final-year students from the two courses about ten days before presenting their thesis. They were considered qualified participants (Delli Zotti 2021), or experts (Bogner et al. 2009), thanks to their direct

experience of the master's degree courses. The first two focus groups were considered the pilot trial for this research. They were made up of final-year students from the LM 57/85 course finishing in February 2022. The two following focus groups instead involved final-year students from courses finishing in April, more precisely five students from the LM 50 course and six from the LM 57/85 course. The research will continue until April 2023, involving students from both courses who will graduate in November 2022, February 2023 and April 2023.

The data that have been collected thus far and that will be collected later will be used for multiple ends: for an in-depth study of the two degree courses; for a comparison between them; for the implementation of any necessary changes or integrations to the academic programmes. This is why the data analysis has been and will be carried out by grouping together the interviews by course, in order to explore the parallels and differences between the two cases later on (Azarian 2011), collect cues to improve the courses and use the positive aspects emerging from the study with greater awareness.

The focus groups took place (initially due to the Covid-19 pandemic in February 2022) and will continue to take place (seeing as the method proved to be a satisfactory) online (Kite and Phongsavan 2017), using the Webex platform. The interviews were recorded, following authorization from the participants. Four areas were investigated: desires, competencies, job search channels and expectations. The participants were asked the following stimulus questions: Area 1 – Desires: What made you want to carry on/resume your education? Area 2 – Competencies: Which knowledge and skills have you developed during your university studies that you think can be useful for the labour market? Area 3 – Channels: Which channels will you use to look for/change jobs? Area 4 – Expectations: How do you think this degree course has helped you to better understand the job prospects, professional figures and employment contexts coming out of the course you are attending? At the end of the FG, all of the participants were asked a final question linked to their general perception of the academic course that was coming to an end: Final reflection: since you enrolled on the degree course, do you feel that something has changed thanks to the course? If so, what?

As far as the LM 57/85 course is concerned, analysis of the interviews collected revealed that, concerning the first area, there were two main reasons that made them continue their studies and take a master's course: the need to further their education and reasons linked to the labour market. The first core category took in various facets: the need to further the programme followed in the bachelor's degree; the need to further develop competencies such as reflective and meta-reflective skills; an interest in investigating specific subjects (pedagogy, working with disabled children). The second core category mainly concerned the need to expand job prospects, for example, to work with adults; or the necessity to respond to labour market requirements, demanding a more complete education in order to work in a team and on projects.

«I also did the bachelor's degree in education so it was an easy choice for me, because I wanted to carry on and go into the subjects that were touched on a bit superficially in the bachelor's degree and I chose adult pedagogy because the two options I had before me were either this or school leadership and… let's say, I wasn't interested in leading a school so I chose this because of the job prospects it gives at the end of the course because they're… I'd say there's a much wider range than with a lot of other courses at the university» (Interview 17).

The second area relates to competencies. The qualified participants underlined that the master's course mainly enabled them to expand certain theoretical knowledge, namely: the different pedagogical and andragogical theories and theories on children's cognitive development. Emerging among the competencies developed, also thanks to the work groups on the various courses, were social skills (such as effective communication, listening, developing friendships, the ability to cooperate); personal skills (such as reflection and meta-reflection, critical thinking, flexibility, dealing with unexpected events, greater self-criticism, greater awareness of one's own capabilities); organisational and planning skills (for example, the capability to set goals and priorities, team building, teamwork); lastly, another category related to skills more directly usable in the labour market and more precisely for finding work (such as knowing how to write a cover letter, knowing how a company is structured).

«[…] so, let's say that definitely having an overview of the main andragogical theories, at least as far as I'm concerned… […] means I can make a critical interpretation of what's going on […] Another thing… for example… one course I found very useful was on corporate organization and human resource development because it made me more aware of how company organizations are structured […] so that course was fundamental for me to understand how they work and how then, let's say, various branches also of education and training slot together and work together […] another type of knowledge that I found very useful is also…ahhhh let's say a taster, because obviously it can't deal with everything, but also the main computer, technological tools a bit for… Also to stimulate … let's say to make the training context more interactive. I found this very useful because they're things used by companies and getting a first taste of these things is always useful, yes. In terms of competencies, let's say more structured ones… that I put into practice, I'd definitely say, well reflective capabilities, because I think that the course… that is, we're constantly urged to… to…. to reflect about what … about what we learn. And also organizational and planning capabilities, let's say I feel I'm pretty good from this point of view. Uhhhhhh…. Yes, let's say these are the main ones […] Then there are definitely others too… capabilities also interpersonal type of skills because all the courses are set up like projects, so you have to… deal with other people and the other people in the group and… in this case too there are competencies that are somehow tested and developed» (Interview 1).

As regards the third area under investigation, the thoughts shared by the students highlighted the different channels used to look for work. The most widely used means is the Internet. Various sites were mentioned: Indeed, InfoJobs, Monster, Tuttojob, Bakeca; several FG participants highlighted the importance of sites for spontaneous teaching assistant candidacies (MAD); competitive state examinations (at regional and national level); the Official Gazette; online competitions; and social media (LinkedIn and Facebook). Some students highlighted the importance of online research for positions in line with their interests before sending emails directly to the companies or cooperatives that were looking for those figures. Another aspect that emerged in looking for work was word of mouth and networks of friends and work colleagues. Community service and work placements in companies or cooperatives enabled them to make themselves known in the workplace and to then receive job offers. Lastly, the career day promoted by the University of Florence was also mentioned.

> «Well, it's a nice question in that… it was the job that found me… in this case. Well, a channel that I definitely used a bit to get an idea of what job prospects there could be was LinkedIn. LinkedIn and Indeed are the main channels I used, because they're a bit more complete and above all they also have offers, let's say, in education and training, while on others maybe… the other portals there aren'tuhm… yes, this helped me loads, but in reality what helped me a lot more was networking, uuhhh… because it was… let's say thanks to a… to a colleague that I well got the job that I'm doing now… and the work on my thesis also helped me expand my contacts like this… and perhaps it was a bit the topic… in this case too I was contacted by a company so it wasn't me who looked, but the company that found me eh… but in that case too it was because of… let's say… a third person somehow might have acted as a go-between eh. The topic of my thesis helped in this case too…» (Interview 1).

As for the last area, which investigates how the master's course helped the student to better understand the job prospects, professional figures and employment contexts coming out of the course they had attended, the students emphasised the importance of the correlated activities, such as the Winter School organised by the University of Würzburg (Germany) in which one of the partners is the University of Florence (since 2022, the Winter School has changed its name to the Adult Education Academy), the 'I professionisti si presentano' (Meet the Professionals) activity, career guidance, work placement activities and the UNESCO chair. Another core category that was pointed out concerned the single courses: Work Pedagogy, Andragogy, the 'Formarsi al lavoro' (Training for Work) placement and the Corporate Organization and Human Resources Development course. Last, but no less important, was the role covered by their peers, above all those who were coming to the end of their course or who had already finished.

> «Yes, I remember the first year [...] the Work Pedagogy course where we had to organize ourselves in groups [...] it was the spur for building our various theses, about... about what roles we could then, that we could... the job prospects that would be open to us. [...] corporate organization prepared me from a certain point of view [...]» (Interview 2).

In this first analysis, the elements that the students shared in the last stimulus question, but also in the rich and generous answers to the previous questions, were put together in the following categories: professional aspirations; positive aspects and the proposed initiatives encountered on the degree courses; weak points of the degree courses; students' reflections.

As far as professional aspirations are concerned, the professions indicated were teaching in upper secondary schools, human resources manager or corporate training, pedagogist, pedagogical coordinator and researcher. The positive aspects included some courses that the students deemed particularly useful, such as Work Pedagogy, Psychology of Disability, Pedagogical Epistemology, Corporate Organization and Human Resource Development as well as the Training for Work and online work placements. The projects and work groups put together during the courses were also appreciated because they enabled the students to develop various useful skills for the labour market, and the work on the thesis proved useful too. The training programme also received a positive judgement: the students recognised the desire to modernise the course and the intention to link the course with the labour market. Lastly, various correlated activities were very much appreciated: interviews with tutors, conferences and seminars, work placement activities, light assessment, activities with the UNESCO chair and the activities relating to the Adult Education Academy, Impresa Campus entrepreneurship development programme and the Enterprise Training Centre.

The students pointed out various weak points, for example, the relationship between the course and the labour market. Despite the efforts pointed out in the previous categories to link up the degree course with the labour market, there still appears to be a yawning gap between the two. On one hand, there need to be more practical lessons and workshops and on the other hand, more 'practical' and up-to-date authors. The explanation of job prospects should also be more practical and less theoretical. Again, with regard to the labour market, more development of competencies is needed, especially those skills useful to enter the employment context. Other weak points that were raised pointed in three directions: the communication of the University of Florence, the teaching and syllabus, and career guidance. As far as communication is concerned, some of the students interviewed complained that the university failed to communicate the initiatives in a satisfactory way. As far as the second point is concerned, they requested a more recent and wide-ranging reading list. Furthermore, they did not consider the teaching to be in line with the methods studied since on many occasions it is very one-way and does not involve the students. They deemed the online work placement less useful than work placement in person. Lastly, they considered the career guidance is unsatisfactory and that the two master's courses fail to outline a clear and precise professional figure.

The final reflections category was also very rich. On one hand, the students were extremely insecure and afraid of leaving the university environment. Indeed, university gives students a certain feeling of security. The lack of security is also linked to the fact that the course failed to outline a clear, strong professional profile. Other students underlined that they had achieved a certain awareness of the competencies they had acquired. The students' observations were linked to the fact that the work placement is underrated because it only counts for 3 credits. The students made some proposals: the need for the university to plan more opportunities to learn to create a network with fellow students; longer work placement; more tools to become a trainer and planner; more practice in drawing up individualised educational plans (PEI). The focus group participants also highlighted the importance of the role that students have to cover within the university, that is: a) they must be aware that it is up to them to find opportunities offered by the course to grow professionally; b) they must find ways to put what they have learned into practice in order to fill the gap between university and the labour market. As far as the reflections on the relationship between the course and the labour market are concerned, once again the need emerged for the course to be more practical; for the work placements to be longer; and for the students to have more possibilities to go into companies and to put what they have learned into practice. As far as the university communication is concerned, it should be made clearer and more transparent. Finally, there were four more reflections. One concerned the job prospects which appeared unclear and confused because too many were indicated. Universities appeared to be a protected place where various professional experiences could be gained. The personal perception of the courses was nevertheless positive among several students. The perception of the education given on one hand underlined the necessity to put what had been learnt into practice and on the other hand that university can be important in stimulating working activities.

This preliminary analysis now takes into consideration the elements emerging from the two FGs involving the final-year students on the LM 50 course.

As far as the first area is concerned, namely what made the students want to enrol on the master's course, two categories emerged: education and the desire to further and expand knowledge that the students already possessed; the labour market and the need to diversify their employment activity (for example, wanting to become a upper secondary school teacher).

> «[…] at the moment I'm an teaching assistant […] I obviously chose at the same time as… as my profession I chose this master's course because I wanted to gain knowledge, also from a legal point of view, and we've done a law course. It was very interesting. We did this, well, we didn't do it at all in the primary school education degree… the legal, well management side of things. And also… I'd like in the future, not now because I like what I'm doing, maybe to coordinate and so to become a pedagogical coordinator or, why not, maybe try out the competition to become a school leader.» (Interview 8).

In the answers concerning the second area, namely, the competencies developed during the course, reference was made to the theoretical knowledge learnt; the social skills; personal skills (critical thinking; greater humanity) and the competencies linked to the labour market, to put into practice in the working context.

> «But, actually, getting there then, no, in the end I see that in itself, much more, that is, it didn't give much… For me, in reality that's fine, ah, that is, I, I'm happy let's say that I carried on and did this course too» (Interview 11).

As for the area of job search channels, the students on the LM 50 course used the channels offered by the university: Almalaurea and the career day. There were students who wrote emails directly to the companies and cooperatives after doing research on the Internet. Then they used social media, in particular LinkedIn. Then, networking proved important, thanks to word of mouth. Websites also proved to be important in looking for a job, for example institutional websites where competitions are published and spontaneous teaching assistant applications (MAD) can be filled in. And some delivered their CV in person.

In the fourth area, the students referred to meeting the course chair, as well as university websites and fellow students. Among the other areas that emerged were the professions that they would like to do. Some wanted to be a pedagogical coordinator or school leader; some wanted to work in hospitals and others in companies (in human resources). In the area relating to the positive aspects of the degree courses and the initiatives proposed, they mentioned the following courses and workshops: Neuropsychiatry; Law; Rehabilitation and Disability Management Techniques; Gender Pedagogy; Clinical Pedagogy; Family Pedagogy, School Leadership; and the training for work placement. Then reference was made to the activities proposed in the single courses: teamwork and planning. The criticisms that emerged can be grouped into the following core categories: the relationship with the labour market; the syllabus; the career guidance; the professional figure at the course end and the teaching. As far as the first core category is concerned, the lack of practical exercises in the subjects taught was underlined. In the second core category, a certain degree of repetition and superficiality in the contents of the various courses emerged as well as a repetition of the subjects studied during the bachelor's degree course. In addition, online work placement proved less useful than in-person work placement and the lack of an obligatory course on teaching was also underlined. With regard to career guidance, the lack of space devoted to explaining the outgoing professional profile was underlined. Another core category was linked specifically to the figure of clinical pedagogist. The students complained that the description of this figure was confused as, in order to become a clinical pedagogist it is not sufficient to finish the master's course which is what might be understood by reading the degree course description on the website. Lastly, a final criticism was levelled against the teaching as in most of the single courses it was very much one-way and not of the type to involve or make the students participate actively during the lessons.

The opinions and experiences were different in the area relating to the students' reflections. Some students underlined that the lack of relationships with other students owing to the lessons held online due to the pandemic had deeply affected them. Some found it very interesting to work with different people thanks to the group work. There were different visions of the education given by the course. There were some students who expressed a certain regret and disappointment because the course did not provide additional knowledge to the bachelor's degree course and they did not feel that they were leaving the master's course having developed the skills relating to the professional figure that was the reason for enrolling on the course. Instead, other students claimed that they had been culturally enriched and developed more awareness about the profession that they wanted to do. The focus group participants finally hoped that they would manage to use their master's qualification in the employment context. The proposals put forward were as follows: to explain the end-of-course job prospects earlier on because this would have enabled them to make a more informed or different choice as to the master's course; to do in-person work placement with professional figures presenting their profession.

For a more in-depth analysis of the data that emerged and a more systematic comparison between the two courses, it is possible to highlight some aspects in common emerging from the FGs. The most salient aspects divided by area were as follows: for the first area, the motivation for the students to enrol on the master's course was linked to the need to diversify their employment activity and further their education. As for the second area, there was agreement about the development of theoretical knowledge and social skills and competencies useful in looking for a job. As for the third area, the Internet was the favoured channel, with use of: institutional sites to look for and apply to competitions; job search websites (such as Indeed, InfoJobs,…) and social media (LinkedIn and Facebook). Word of mouth and networks of friends, and in particular fellow students, were mentioned, as were work placement or community service experiences, and the university Almalaurea and career day activities. The fourth area highlighted the importance of some courses and meetings such as the meeting with the chair of the master's course and exchanging opinions with students about to finish or who had already finished the course. The positive aspects in common that emerged highlighted the importance of the initiatives proposed by the University of Florence and the master's course, such as the 'Training for Work' placement. The group activities carried out during the single courses were also particularly appreciated because of the organisational and social skills they helped to develop. Furthermore, in both master's degree courses, the students made three requests: to present the outgoing professional profiles right from the start and on several occasions, also by involving professionals who already work in the field; to increase the practical part of the academic programme; to provide teaching that enabled the students to be an active part of the learning process and not just a listener.

Two further considerations need to be to made concerning the use of FGs to carry out this research. The first is based on the feedback forms that were given to each participant at the end of every meeting. The second stems from the notes taken by the researcher. As far as the students' feedback is concerned, it is important to underline how taking part in the focus group allowed them to reflect on the education they had gained from a career guidance point of view (Loiodice 2004), by focusing their attention on the programme that they had followed and gaining a clear idea of the professional figure that they would like to be and the competencies and skills they had developed. The FG participants really did appreciate the fact that they were given a voice and could share their thoughts and therefore be listened to (Gemma and Grion 2015), something that they would have liked to have happened right from the beginning of the master's course, in similar moments planned from the first year on. Finally, the researcher underlined some positive aspects linked to the FG meetings: on one hand, there was an exchange of opinions and experiences but also advice and suggestions among the participants (e.g., how to look for work); for those who had not met previously, taking part in the focus group a few days before presenting their thesis allowed them to meet at their graduation having already shared something together, enabling them to experience the moment in a relaxed way.

5. Degree Courses and Education and Training Professions: Final Reflections

Professional know-how. It can be thought that the degree courses previously mentioned in this article allow for reflection on professional know-how and that part of this critical and reflective activity can become the epistemological dimension which needs to be looked at for the education of the professions of the future. On the topic of the connection between epistemology and education, a lot has been said by some outstanding adult education scholars, from Mezirow (1991) through Rogers (1951, 1980) to Schön (1983, 1987, 2006), who have investigated, outlined and interpreted some central aspects of the education professions. From the transformative dimensions (Mezirow 1978), through active listening (Rogers 1980), to reflective practice in the workplace (Schön 1983), these authors can be credited with bringing the importance of training as professionals to the centre of attention. The skill set can provide a good baseline for understanding how to reflect on a professional epistemology.

If we look at the definition of *occupation* given by the Italian institute of statistics (ISTAT),we can reveal that:

> The object of the classification, occupation, is defined as a set of working activities concretely performed by an individual, which involve their own knowledge, skills, identity and fields. The logic used to cluster different occupations within the same group unit is based on the concept of competency, in terms of both the *skill level and specialization* required to exercise the occupation. The *skill level* is defined as a function of the complexity and breadth of the tasks performed, the level of responsibility and decision-making autonomy of the occupation; the

> *skill specialization* instead refers to the differences in the sectoral domains, the disciplinary fields of the applied knowledge, the equipment used, the materials processed, the type of good produced or service provided in the sphere of the occupation (ISTAT 2013).

Thus, it is very important to connect the topic of professions and what a profession is with and through the topic of competencies. There is an inseparable link between profession and competencies. This relationship became even stronger with the update of the classification of occupations promoted by ISTAT in particular in recent decades:

> The new official classification of occupations (CP2011) officially came into force on 1 January 2011. It is based upon the same logic used by the two previous classifications (CP1991 and CP2001) and hence continues to fully comply with the format chosen at the international level. The basic criterion, as has been said, is the skill level and specialization required to appropriately perform the tasks associated with the occupation (ISTAT 2013, 15).

The topic of professions came bounding into the education and training sectors following the transformation that the Bologna process imposed not just on Italian universities, but also on European universities by decreeing the European area of higher education (MIUR 1999). We believe that it was within this context that the link between education and the labour market started to gain a stronger foothold. Then, finding their rightful place within this relationship, the education and training professions became the subject of studies at the start of the 2000s.

In Italy it is well known that a great deal of intense legislative work has been done in this direction. In particular, paragraphs 594-601 of Law no. 205/2017 introduced two hitherto undefined educational figures whose occupation had previously been unclear:

> Socio-pedagogical educators and pedagogists work in the sector of education, training and pedagogy, in relation to any activity carried out in a formal, non-formal and informal way, in the various phases of life, in a perspective of personal and social growth, according to the definitions contained in article 2 of Legislative Decree no. 13 of 16 January 2013, in pursuit of the goals of the European strategy resolved by the Lisbon European Council on 23 and 24 March 2000. The professional figures indicated in the first sentence work in socio-educational and socio-welfare services and facilities, for people of all ages, in particular in the following fields: education and training; school; socio-educational dimensions of the social and welfare sector; parenthood and family; culture; law; environment; sports and physical education; and international integration and cooperation. Pursuant to law no. 4 of 14 January 2013, the professions of socio-pedagogical educator and pedagogist are included within the unregulated professions (Law no. 205/2017, paragraph 594).

Alongside these legal outlines, we can also find others, such as article 14 of legislative decree no. 65/2017, which has brought substantial innovative changes in the direction of building an integrated system for children's education by clearly defining the qualifications to gain access to the profession of teacher in early childhood education services. The decree creates a direct route from the L-19 bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and Training to labour market entry. Paragraph 517 of Law no. 145/2018 opens the social and health sector to educators and pedagogists without registration on specific professional orders. Finally, legislative decree no. 96/2019 introduces the figure of pedagogist to multidisciplinary assessment teams for students with disabilities.

We have made this reference to the research and regulations in order to highlight the present extreme interest in the topic of the professional figures coming out of the master's degrees. This centrality helps us grasp the crucial importance of understanding the evolution of educational processes in light of transformations in the labour market. Above all, however, owing to the lack of structural frameworks in the professional world, it is important for university training programmes to seize upon competencies and skills as central objects to study and to put into practice. What do we mean by this? We want to underline the importance of shifting the idea of *professional epistemology* to take into consideration the know-how and competencies that have to be achieved by graduates in order to build the best transition and entry to the labour market as professionals with a solid, flexible and renewable, namely, sustainable set of transversal skills and techniques.

It is a duty of higher education to build the professions of the future and to accompany our young graduates towards the best education-to-work transition. Hence, the first step to take must be to seek every means to prevent the gap between education and work. We could say that the commitment, not just of higher education but of the whole country of Italy, must be to build employability. While referring to other research for reflection on the construct (Harvey 2001, 2003; Yorke and Knight 2003, 2006; Yorke 2006; Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Sumanasiri et al. 2015), we wish to conclude by urging that the speed at which the competencies requested by the labour market is changing and should be always taken into consideration when setting out degree course teaching and learning plans. Indeed, despite their importance in defining the level-two education and training professions, the crux does not lie in the professional families, but in which skills or competency drivers will be setting the pace for the future of employment in education and training.

If degree courses are able to read and interpret these changes, then universities really will be the place to build that 'social elevator' which has been broken down in Italy for too many years. While there is no doubt that knowledge, ongoing learning and know-how are central in making a people grow, it is equally as necessary to be able to build knowledge and capabilities and to be able to apply them in contexts undergoing rapid and immediate evolution. Employability means knowing how to develop the competencies to make personal, structural and systemic transformations in order continue to exist in an evolving world. One of the last steps taken to bring the education system closer to the labour market was Legislative Decree

no. 13/2021, published in the Official Gazette of 18 January 2021, on the adoption of guidelines to implement the *National Competency Certification System*. In the case of higher education, to acknowledge this link is to take systematic care of the bridge between universities and the labour market, wherein competencies and learning outcomes are central to pinpointing new needs and new professions.

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Adult Educators and Recognition of Prior Learning in Portugal: Guidance and Validation Tasks and Activities

Paula Guimarães

Abstract:

Under the European Union lifelong learning guidelines, in the last two decades the Portuguese adult education policy has noted the emergence of new offers that have enabled the establishment of new occupations, tasks and activities for adult educators, such as those referring to guidance and validation within recognition of prior learning. Guidance and validation are developed on the basis of a wide range of tools (recommendations, guidelines, qualification frameworks, standards of competencies). This circumstance has allowed adult educators to become lifelong learning technicians as shown by the research conducted for the writing of this essay.

Keywords: Adult Educators; Guidance; Portugal; Recognition of Prior Learning; Validation

1. Introduction

Several studies have focused on the discussion around adult educators (who they are, what formal and non-formal education paths they have followed, etc.). Nuissl and Lattke (2008), Research voorBeleid (2008, 2010), Jütte et al. (2011), Egetenmeyer (2014) and Egetenmeyer and Schüβler (2014), among others, have discussed the different aspects of adult educators' professional activities. Some of these analyses, of a comparative nature, have highlighted differences that can be observed at a national level, justified by the fact that adult education presents different characteristics from country to country and that it is a poorly regulated (especially when considering non-formal education), diverse and complex field (in terms of promoters, practices and the actors involved) (Canário 1999; Nuissl and Lattke 2008; Milana and Skrypnyk 2009).

In Portugal, Canário (1999), Rothes (2003), Lima (2006), Guimarães (2009, 2016), as well as Loureiro (2009) and Loureiro and Cristóvão (2010) have analysed the sociographic characteristics of adult educators, the teaching paths they have undertaken, in addition to the knowledge mobilised by those involved in

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formal and non-formal education. More recently, namely since the late 1990s, new provisions have been established, such as the recognition of prior learning (Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências [Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences]). Within this purpose, new occupations[1] with different designations have emerged in the context of a movement to restructure adult education in this country (Rothes 2009). The debate around adult educators has since gained new contours. These discussions have highlighted, among other issues, the innovative education and training methods targeting adults and their learning through a reflection on their biographies, as well as the impact of such methods on the work of these technicians (Cavaco 2007, 2009); the influence of the European Union's lifelong learning guidelines on the activities carried out by adult educators (Guimarães and Barros 2015); as well as the knowledge and learning developed in the workplace (Loureiro 2009; Loureiro and Cristóvão 2010; Paulos 2014, 2015).

Few studies have focused on the professional tasks and activities[2] undertaken by adult educators. Hence, and building on prior research on the same topic (Guimarães 2016; Guimarães and Alves 2017), this paper seeks to discuss the tasks and activities of educatorsworking on the recognition of prior learning. The tasks and activities carried out by adult educators are interpreted by means of a document analysis (Bowen 2009) of secondary sources, namely legal texts and official guidelines on their work in the context of centres promoting the recognition of prior learning. The aim of this analysis is to discuss the recruitment requirements (basic training, complementary continuing education and professional experience) and to identify the tasks of adult educators. In parallel, several studies focusing on the activities of adult educators in the workplace were collected. These studies were published in books (Loureiro 2009; Barros 2011), scientific journal papers (Cavaco 2007; Paulos 2014, 2015; Guimarães and Barros 2015) and integrated master dissertations and doctoral thesis (Cavaco 2009; Dias 2009; Loureiro 2009; Pereira L. 2009; Pereira N. 2010; Dias 2011; Martins 2012). This discussion highlights the fact that certain tasks and activity clusters are particularly valued in the legislation and in what adult educators effectively accomplish in their day-to-day work, namely within the scope of validation and

[1] The discussion on the differences between an occupation and a profession in adult (and continuing) education can be found in Egetenmeyer, Breitschwerdt and Lechner (2019). A profession is characterised by work tasks and activities related to a specific professional area, such as adult education. It includes the power held by a professional over a certain work field, social prestige in the development of professional roles and a significant degree of autonomy and responsibility that an individual who carries out an occupation does not hold. Owing to the lack of autonomy and responsibility of adult educators, as well as a brief or non-existent higher education path specialised in adult education, several authors such as Loureiro (2009) and Egetenmeyer, Breitschwerdt and Lechner (2019) have questioned adult educators as professionals and adult education as a professional area.

[2] Falzon and Teiger (2001) distinguish task (understood as a prescribed orientation for work, within the context of a prescription that is external to the operator) from activity (what is actually done, what is mobilised when someone performs a task).

guidance. These tasks and activities enable adult educators to be seen primarily as lifelong learning practitioners (Guimarães and Barros 2015).

2. The Work of Adult Educators

The term adult educator is a broad analytic category, due to the many definitions of the adult education concept (Merriam and Brockett 2007) and the significant diversity of occupations that can be found (Loureiro 2009). It is, however, a useful category in discussions on the work content of those who work directly with adults in educational initiatives.

Although it is not possible to find a designated adult educator professional category in Portugal and other countries, nowadays there is a broad consensus that the work in adult education requires specific knowledge and skills, as well as responsibility on the part of the technicians that intervene in this domain (Lattke and Jütte 2014; Paulos 2014, 2015; Guimarães and Barros 2015; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). In addition to the references in many policy documents to the importance of the quality of adult educators' work (European Commission 2015, among others), a debate has emerged, mainly of a theoretical nature, around the professionalisation of these educators. This discussion has highlighted the complexity of tensions inherent to a labour market that reflect diverse power relations and different perspectives and discourses of adult education stakeholders (Jütte et al. 2011).

To complement these discussions, another debate has focused on the activities performed in the workplace by adult educators, supported by a theoretical model of the social division of labour (Dausien and Schwendowius 2009). In this context, Nuissl and Pehl (2004) specify four adult educator profiles: teacher; adult education manager; education practitioner; and administrative technician. Other authors have identified activity clusters, taken as sets of tasks and competences linked to different areas of adult education. According to this approach, Nuissl (2009) proposed six activity clusters: teaching, management, counselling and guidance, programme planning, support activities and activities involving media education. Loureiro (2009, 329) also advanced six types of activities: technical activities; coordination of technical teams; management; direction; administrative; and other activities .

On the basis of empirical data collected in several countries, Research voor-Beleid (2010, 35-39) presented thirteen clusters of activities performed by adult educators:

- needs assessment activities (to identify the various adult learners' needs; to identify and assess the entry levels, prior learning and experience of adult learners);
- preparation of courses activities (to identify learning resources and adequate methods; to plan and organise the learning process bearing in mind the various backgrounds, learning needs, levels, etc., of the adult learners; to set, negotiate and convey the objectives of the course and to inform the adult learners of the structure of the learning process);

- facilitation of learning activities (to relate the learning process to the living world and practice of the adult learners; to empower, to activate, to motivate and to encourage the adult learners, to be a challenger, inspirer of adult learners, and mobiliser of their motivations; to create a positive learning/development environment; to raise awareness and understanding of diversity and to promote insight into potential problems resulting from diversity in order to anticipate the consequences for adult learners, the group and oneself; among others);
- monitoring and evaluation activities (to provide support and feedback as a two-way process to the adult learners; to evaluate the context, the process and the outcomes of the learning process);
- counselling and guidance activities (to offer career information and basic information on work environments; to apply tests to obtain information on the relevant characteristics of adult learners for their career; to offer preentry, on-course and pre-exit guidance; to develop personal guidance and counselling skills; among others);
- programme development activities (to develop curriculum design at module and programme level; to develop programmes that are flexible in terms of their arrangement: full-time/part-time, timing, modularity and location, face-to-face/distance/blended learning =, taking into account adult learners' personal situations);
- financial management activities (to manage existing resources; to construct and manage budgets; to prepare applications for funding; to determine and to enlighten on the benefits of such applications; among others)
- human resources management activities (to manage daily teaching and non-teaching staff; to organise course teams, to build such teams and an institutional culture; to conduct interviews for appraisal and to organise professional development; among others);
- overall management activities (to work according to organisational procedures; to arrange committees and boards; to oversee learning environments; to monitor and evaluate programmes and to implement improvements; among others);
- marketing and public relations activities (to build marketing strategies for existing programmes; to assess the demand for existing provision and for new programmes; to build relationships with external communities);
- administrative support activities (to deal with administrative issues with regards to adult learners and adult educators; to inform adult learners and staff on administrative issues);
- information and communication technologies support activities (to design ICT-based and blended study programmes; to deliver ICT-based programmes; to collaborate in design teams, involving teachers, learners, administrators and instructional designers; to conduct and facilitate assessment within on-line environments; among others);
- overarching activities (to work with others – co-workers, stakeholders, managers, enterprises and adult learners – in order to develop the learning process;

to establish links to the social context, networks, stakeholders by creating relevant networks with actors in the field outside the workplace; to establish links to relevant professional networks, other co-workers, sharing experiences with co-workers; to contribute to the wider community, and the promotion of effective learning activities within wider social contexts; among others).

While this broad range of activities does not include others that are more characteristic of, for example, occupations within local development, sociocultural animation or social movements, where it is less frequent to find adult educators employed on a full-time basis, it is useful in the discussion of professional tasks and activities related to the recognition of prior learning, such as validation and guidance. When considering guidance specifically in the context of adult educators' work in the recognition of prior learning, this feature focuses on the personal/professional development of the individual learner (Ford 2007). It includes counselling, advising and assessing, with the aim of developing informative activities, career management skills and autonomy, direct support and capacity building, managing critical information and assuring the quality of choices made by the adult learner. These activities are offered in schools, training providers, public/state dependent employment services, private training companies, recruitment agencies, local administrations, company HR departments and NGOs, among others (Dzhengozova et al. 2019). As for validation, it refers to the formal recognition of the learning developed by adult learners, irrespective of how and where it has been acquired (Souto-Otero 2016). Within the European Union guidelines, validation includes a process resting upon four consecutive stages: identification, documentation, assessment and certification of knowledge developed throughout life, and it is common in education and also in vocational training (Dzhengozova et al. 2019). The aim of validation is to a) recognise and place value on knowledge and competences – passive/summative or instrumental validation; b) stimulate further learning, which places a value on personal education/learning development – activating/formative validation; c) focus on the person him/herself, a process in which the individual self-evaluates or assesses within a reflective form of validation (Harris 1999; Duvekot 2014).

3. Adult Educators in the Context of Public Policies in Portugal: The Recognition of Prior Learning

Due to the intermittent and discontinuous nature of public policies on adult education since the 1974 Democratic Revolution (Lima 2005), up to the late 1990s, adult educators had formed a strongly heterogeneous professional group, in terms of basic training paths, professional experience and status and employment status, etc. (Rothes 2003; Lima 2006). Many were teachers of second-chance education and, simultaneously, of formal education of children and young people; others were trainers in vocational training. Some were involved in emancipatory and autonomous social movements and projects; others led non-formal education activities in the context of socio-cultural animation and

local development. The diversity of the contexts of intervention and the heterogeneity of their practices showed how adult educators carried out a great variety of activities. They also suggested that they did not consider themselves as adult educators. In accordance with their professional activity or basic training, they saw themselves mainly as teachers, trainers, sociocultural promoters, local development agents and activists (Paulos 2015).

This situation also stemmed from the fact that many adult education practices, namely those connected to community education, local development, social movements, socio-cultural animation, etc., derived from the historical and philosophical foundations of adult education in which value was placed on collective participation, political education and forms of intervention that were strongly committed to resolving social and political problems and, therefore, did not highlight the action of a professional. Other practices, linked to other foundations, such as self-directed learning, autobiographical narratives, etc., attributed less significance to the action of the adult educator to focus more on the experience and learning of the learners (Murphy 2015). These practices led to a devaluation of the creation of a profession for which, albeit in professional terms, more and more knowledge and specific tasks are required, in addition to stricter regulations, new requirements for entry into the labour market, as well as innovative performance benchmarks defined by government or other entities (Nuissl 2009; Sava 2011).

Following the publication of the EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (European Commission 2000), as well as other European Union guidelines and specific legislation for adult education and training provision established in Portugal in the meantime, the situation of certain adult educators presents new contours in the framework of the public policy implementation in force since then. The new offerings proposed to adults, such as the recognition of prior learning, led to the emergence of new occupations, tasks and professional activities. One of the pillars of this policy was the enhancement of adult learner-centred educational and pedagogical methods and learning stemming from life experience in both non-formal and informal contexts (Cavaco 2007, 2009), to value the guidance and validation of competences (Lima and Guimarães 2011; Guimarães and Barros 2015; Guimarães 2016).

The official guidelines and the legislation published since 2000 fostered the emergence of new occupations and the creation of a labour market targeting adult educators, initially in Centres for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences[3]. Among these, the recognition, validation and certification professionals, and later, after 2007, the practitioners who were in charge of diagnosis and referral in the New Opportunities Centres, were confronted with a highly significant increase of adults enrolled in the courses on offer. Therefore, between 2000 and 2005, 153,719 adults were enrolled in the recognition of prior learning and, of these, 44,192 received school certification.

[3] Order no. 1082-A/2001, 5/09.

While these figures already reflected a considerable increase in the number of adult learners enrolled and certified by second-chance education in the 1990s (Pinto et al. 1998), under the New Opportunities Initiative (2005), between 2006 and 2010, that difference increased as 1,163,236 adults were enrolled in the New Opportunities Centres[4] and, of these, 365,449 received a school and/or vocational certificate through recognition of prior learning. This situation led to the presence of 11,611 adult educators in the existing Centres in 2010 (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação 2011).

The legislation in force introduced the requirement of a higher academic certification as a condition for the employment of these educators. Therefore, in several studies (Guimarães 2009; Conselho Nacional de Educação 2010; Guimarães and Barros 2015; Guimarães 2016) it was argued that these educators were more qualified than those working in other fields of adult education, such as, for example, in socio-cultural animation. With regard to (professional) associations, after 2008, the national association of adult education and training (Associação Portuguesa de Educação e Formação de Adultos) was created, although few developments were seen in areas deemed important by Afonso (2008) and Loureiro (2009) for the construction of a professionalization process, such as the adoption of codes of ethics and conduct with respect to professional autonomy and responsibility.

In 2011, the suspension of the public policy on adult education and training led to the unemployment of the adult educators working in the Centres. However, as in 2013, the Centres for Qualification and Vocational Education were established[5], and (some) technicians for the guidance, recognition and validation of competences were recruited. More recently, in 2016, the published legislation provided for the establishment of Qualifica Centres[6] and the significant recruitment of these technicians. Today, in 2021, there are more than 300 Qualifica Centres operating throughout the country, in which adult learners' validation and guidance are developed[7].

4. New Occupation

Denoting the importance of the role of the State in the construction of new occupations (Steiner 2014), according to the official documents, the criteria for the recruitment of technicians for the guidance, recognition and validation of competences refer to basic training and complementary training and/or work experience. As far as the recruitment of these technicians is concerned, no specific basic training at the level of higher education is required[8]. The 2002 docu-

[4] Order no. 370/2008, 21/05.

[5] Order no. 135-A/2013, 28/03.

[6] Order no. 232/2016, 29/08.

[7] For more information, see <https://www.qualifica.gov.pt/#/pesquisaCentros> (2023-03-15).

[8] Order no. 232/2016, 29/08.

mentation (Agência Nacional de Educação e Formação de Adultos 2002) and the legislation published in the meantime, such as, for example, the legislation of 2016[9], indicate that these adult educators should have a higher education certification, at a degree level. Yet while the document of 2002 specifies basic training in social sciences and humanities as an entry requirement, the later legislation does not refer to this specification.

According to Rothes (2003), until 1989, there was no formal basic training for adult educators in Portugal that specifically addressed adult education themes. This circumstance reflected the marginal status of the field within the education system and public policies, as well as the alienation of higher education in the definition of formal education paths for a sector that was barely acknowledged socially. In the 1990s, graduate training offerings emerged, at first at the bachelor's level, and later at degree, master and doctoral levels. Some of these offerings included adult education as a field of specialisation. Initially, the animation and intervention (community and socio-cultural) courses were the most prevalent; at a later stage, social education, education, education sciences and education and training degrees were established. However, despite the existence of these degrees, weaknesses were still denoted in the social and academic recognition of adult education (Steiner 2014), reflected in the lack of an indication of the specific basic initial education required for recruitment. Thus, several authors (Cavaco 2007; Loureiro 2009; Barros 2011; Paulos 2014) reported in their studies that many of these recruited by centres promoting the recognition, validation and certification of competences since 2001, had basic training in a variety of areas, such as psychology, sociology, education sciences/education/education and training and other fields, mainly of a social and educational nature. Therefore, many of these were not aware of the theoretical developments concerning adult education.

As for the adult educators' complementary training and/or previous work experience, the documents under analysis state that technicians for the guidance, recognition and validation of competences should have knowledge and professional experience in adult education methodologies, namely in the assessment of competences and the construction of learning portfolios. Additionally, they should be familiar with and have professional experience in the techniques and strategies for diagnosis and guidance, academic and vocational guidance, for the monitoring of young people and adults in different training modalities and in training in a work context. On the one hand preference was given to candidates with knowledge in the field of validation (related to the assessment of competences, to the construction of life stories and learning portfolios which would highlight the competences acquired by the adult learners throughout life), on the other hand, the importance of knowledge in the field of guidance was emphasised, an area which is characteristic, for example, of a psychologist's work.

[9] Order no. 232/2016, 29/08.

4.1 Tasks Foreseen

As regards the tasks foreseen in the legislation, the technician for the guidance, recognition and validation of competences should[10]: promote guidance sessions for young people and adults; identify education and training paths; organise information sessions on education and training offerings, the labour market, career avenues, training needs, as well as mobility opportunities within Europe and overseas with regard to training and work; refer them to education and training offerings; monitor them while attending education and training courses and later, upon insertion in the labour market. Tasks are also intended to frame the adults in the recognition, validation and certification of school, professional and double certification, according to their life experience and competences held; inform them of the content and stages of that process; accompany them throughout the process, by dynamizing the recognition sessions, providing support in the construction of the portfolio and applying specific assessment instruments, in liaison with the trainers and/or teachers; and identify the training needs, considering the work of others, such as trainers and teachers.

With a view to interpreting these tasks in light of the proposal of Research voorBeleid (2010), value was found to be given to the following clusters:

- assessment of the education and training needs through an analysis of the life history of the learner and the recognition of knowledge developed throughout life;
- information on existing education and training offerings, in coordination with guidance processes, including those geared towards school and professional careers, work and work contexts;
- identification and/or facilitation of learning through competence validation and certification, namely in the relationship between acquired learning and adults' life contexts; development of motivation and encouragement strategies; creation of positive individual or collective learning environments; promotion of individual strategies for the identification of acquired learning and group dynamics; monitoring and evaluation of activities focusing on lifelong learning, regarding contexts, processes and results obtained.

5. Activities Carried Out in the Work Context

Overall, the activities carried out by the adult educators corresponded to those suggested by the legislation and official documents. Additionally, the studies under analysis referred to activities focusing on two dimensions (Martins 2012):

- the technical, pedagogical and educational dimension, which globally involved guidance and validation of competences, supporting adults in their autobiography construction (Cavaco 2007, 2009);

[10] Order no. 232/2016, 29/08.

- the organisation and procedural management dimension, referred to by Barros (2011) as handling paperwork and by Dias (2011) as back-office work, including administrative activities such as preparing minutes, reports, appraisals, referral proposals, completing various forms on paper or on electronic platforms, drawing up schedules and summaries or other records of an administrative nature.

While the latter activities consumed much of the technicians' working time and were not particularly challenging in terms of mobilising theoretical and relational knowledge and know-how (Barros 2011), the former, which fell within the technical, pedagogical and educational dimension, consisted of three levels:

Level One

This first level specified the weight of the activities with adults within the scope of the validation of competences, including the connection between the competences specified in the Key Competences Benchmarks (fundamental mediation instruments in the work of these technicians), and the knowledge acquired by adult learners throughout their lives, in the context of portfolio construction. In this context, the relationship established between the technician for the guidance, recognition and validation of competences and the adults in the construction of their biographies was highly relevant, as far as the validation of competences was concerned, based on dialogue and cooperation which stemmed from their remembrance of life experience, the explicitness of those moments and the writing and reflection on events and life stages. Cavaco (2007) also highlighted the importance of promoting the stimulation and motivation of adults to identify what they had learned throughout their lives, which involved a variety of activities (such as indicating what had been learned, reflection and self-analysis, self-recognition and self-evaluation of acquired knowledge). Martins (2012) also underlined guidance activities related to receiving and informing adults about the recognition of prior learning, assessing education and training needs, coaching and mentoring.

As at this level the experimentation and application of instructions, benchmarks and guidelines, etc. were central (Pereira 2009) within the scope of validation, it also included activities with a strong relational component. In this regard, Cavaco (2007) went further and argued that these technicians emerged as the adults' gatekeepers (who helped adults with where they wanted to go and the extent they were able to go) and allies (namely when they listened to them, helped them, guided them in their autobiographical reflection). Martins (2012) also argued that, due to the specific nature of the educational relationship established, the technicians for the guidance, recognition and validation of competences practised guidance and emerged as tutors, mentors, counsellors and companions. Such work characteristics, particularly the close relationship with adults in validation and guidance, led Barros (2011) to state that there was even a psychologization of the process of recognition and validation of competences, which devalued the political and critical dimension that could be included in this adult education offering.

Level Two

The second level involved the individual reading of legislation, benchmarks, guidelines, instructions, namely the documentation produced internally by the centres, an analysis and appropriation of the prescribed tasks which would later be carried out in professional daily life. This level included several stages, according to Pereira (2009): preparation for performing a task; production of knowledge and meanings, theoretical preparation, often shared with other co-workers and which fostered an understanding of ways of doing; and the development of an activity followed by reflection on the action, such as by assessing the work performed, awareness, a reflection on action that could lead to the reorganisation of knowledge (Schön 2000). Since this level was centred on the adult educator, it resulted from a period of self-directed learning or *formation expérientielle* (Pineau 1988), of reflection on what had been done and how it had been carried out, with a view to doing it better and faster. In this respect, Barros (2011) argued that these technicians often sought the correct interpretation of the centrally defined benchmarks, with the purpose of reproducing technical guidelines, in a process of implicit acceptance of top-down action logics. Thus, there were practices of adjustment to a model of educational and pedagogical intervention defined outside the space of the centres but imposed on the daily life of these technicians which, in the case of some entities based in civil society organisations, was not in line with the mission of those institutions. It was at this level that the pressure regarding the fulfilment of the certified adult learners' benchmarks imposed on the centres and consequently on individual productivity was felt, namely when assessing the efficacy and efficiency of the public offering, which translated into a significant technicalisation of the work of these technicians (Guimarães 2009; Guimarães and Barros 2015).

It should also be noted that this level was highlighted in the analysed texts, especially as the technicians interviewed and observed were young adult educators with little professional experience, particularly in the field of adult education (Dias 2009; Pereira 2010; Barros 2011; Dias 2011) or, when they had some professional experience, it had been acquired in other professional areas, such as teaching (Pereira 2009) or vocational education and training, culture and community intervention (Paulos 2014). Professional development was being conducted by means of successive adjustments (Martins 2012). In this context, the processes of recontextualisation, mobilisation, interpretation and adaptation of the knowledge held to new contexts and professional situations were dominant, allowing previous practices, after being understood, internalised and reflected, to give rise to new knowledge and ways of acting (Dias 2009; Loureiro 2009).

Level Three

The third level referred to the work carried out with co-workers. Here the references in the analysed texts to the validation of competences involving the processes of reading and interpreting the prescribed work, referred to as decod-

ing, deconstruction, de-occultation, simplification, translation, etc., particularly of the Key Competences Benchmarks, but also of the guidance guidelines, are particularly noteworthy. Working with co-workers with the same or other occupations, from the same centre or from other centres, in teams, was frequently mentioned, and references to periods of sharing work materials, discussing problems faced in daily life with technicians from other centres in networks or collaborative spaces were also made. In this regard, Martins (2012) emphasised the role of networking performed by these technicians. Dias (2011), in turn, pointed to the emergence of practice communities (Lave and Wenger 2003). They stemmed from the educators' discussions of the problems encountered in their professional daily lives, with the purpose of improving practices and correcting deviations from the guidelines of the official documents. In this process, joint decision-making was valued, framed by the centre coordinator who defined the standards to be followed. In this respect Dias (2011, 63) argued that adult educators, in particular the technicians for the guidance, recognition and validation of competences, were more concerned about taking action than about the reasons that had led them to take action, and therefore little value was given to the critical and political dimension of the work conducted (Barros 2011).

Resorting once again to the proposal of Research voorBeleid (2010), the activities carried out by the technicians under analysis included those already specified in the previous point, related to validation and guidance, as well as the assessment of education and training needs and the information on education and training offerings. These activities have a strong technical but weak educational component, thus accentuating the technicalisation of the work, but devaluing the political and critical dimension of education. Additionally, largely due to the (little) professional experience of these technicians and the (lack of or little) continuing training, many of the activities resulted in self-directed learning (Pineau 1988) through the reproduction and recontextualisation of knowledge and know-how (Loureiro 2009), referring to the preparation of education and training activities involving the reading and analysis of various documents (laws, guidelines, resources for education, training, learning, etc.), the construction of knowledge regarding the recognition and validation of competences and the understanding of the stages of a process that differed from those that were characteristic of formal teaching and education. Finally, the connection activities, namely working with co-workers, dialogue and sharing and on-the-job training, were particularly highlighted in the analysed studies, in moments of reflection in action and, above all, on action (Schön 2000). In this context, the hidden curriculum (Apple 2002) inherent to work contexts was brought to light, reflected in the weight of these locations as spaces for mobilising knowledge and developing new knowledge associated with practice. The new learning acquired by these technicians emphasised the informal knowledge constructed and learned on the job. These periods of eco-training with other technicians focused on the problems encountered and the thought through, applied and evaluated solutions. They transformed the centres into spaces of collectively developed knowledge

which was built, rebuilt, shared and used in practice. Thus, these technicians were able to manage the margins of (some degree of) autonomy and to recontextualise the defined tasks (Loureiro 2009).

6. Final Considerations

This chapter has addressed the expected tasks of adult educators, such as technicians for the guidance, validation and certification of competences and the activities they perform in the workplace in light of a proposed analysis framework (Research voorBeleid 2010). The ensuing discussion highlights the importance of validation and guidance in the work of these adult educators. However, it is important to note that activities of an educational and pedagogical nature carry little weight for these technicians. Therefore, these tasks demonstrate the individual learning of adult learners (devaluing social learning and the collective dimensions of education). Additionally, the stress upon guidance and validation considering labour market needs (devaluing other kinds of needs and problems adult learners might have that can be fulfilled by adult education offerings) places a strong emphasis upon knowledge that is relevant for work (devaluing other sorts of knowledge). It is important to note that adult educators who develop guidance and validation may be seen as lifelong learning technicians (Guimarães 2016), fostering knowledge that is relevant for making people employable, work performance, anticipating employment/work problems and promoting adaptative solutions, thus devaluing the transformative and emancipatory dimensions of adult education.

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Professionalisation of Adult Education in Slovenia from a Multi-level Perspective

Borut Mikulec, Mateja Kovšca

Abstract:

The adult education (AE) research community emphasise the importance of well-qualified personnel working in the field of AE. However, the field is facing with challenges achieving this aim. This chapter research professionalisation of AE from a multi-level perspective in one European Union member state – Slovenia. Based on empirical data from Slovenia, the chapter argues that coordination at three levels is important: at the national level, professionalisation is strengthened by state policies and regulations; at the organisational level, the professional development of adult educators is supported by organisations; and at the individual level, the focus is on professional knowledge and strengthening the professional identity of adult educators.

Keywords: Adult Educators; Professionalisation of Adult Education; Slovenia

1. Introduction

The adult education (AE) research community (e.g. Jarvis and Chadwick 1991; Nuissl and Lattke 2008; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019) and international organisations active in the field of AE (e.g. Council of the European Union 2011; DVV International 2013) emphasise the importance of well-qualified personnel working in the field. However, the question of whether AE should professionalise has been discussed since the 1920s. One camp is in favour of professionalisation, because it may help improve AE's marginal status in society and quality; the other has been raising concerns that professionalisation may lead to the marginalisation or exclusion of different voices and approaches to AE (Merriam and Brockett 2007; Grotlüschen et al. 2020). Furthermore, the range of professionals working in this field is wide and diverse, as AE is linked to a country's social structure, its socio-economic, cultural, and political traditions and the low regulation of the AE system (Jütte et al. 2011). Moreover, the field is characterised by fragmented training opportunities and precarious job status, with many adult educators working in the field lacking formal prepara-

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tion for teaching, counselling, programme planning, and so on before entering the profession (Andersson et al. 2013).

In recent years, especially in the European educational space, studies of professionalisation focused mainly on competences that adult educators should have (see Mikulec 2019; Zagir and Mandel 2020), but less attention has been given to the important role organisations play in the professionalisation of adult educators (see Breitschwerdt et al. 2019; Schwarz and Mikulec 2020), as well as to career paths, professional identity and professional development of adult educators (see Bron and Jarvis 2008; Evans 2008; Bierema 2011). From a multi-level perspective on professionalisation, the general importance of interdependencies between the state-society (macro), organisations (meso) and staff-personnel (micro) levels of professionalisation is emphasised (Egetenmeyer et al.2019). Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to analyse and discuss professionalisation from a multi-level perspective in one European Union (EU) member state – Slovenia –, and to gain insights into professional development of adult educators in Slovenia. The primarily research focus is on staff-personnel (micro) level, but the state-society (macro level) and organisations (meso level) contexts are also analysed. This chapter explores the following research question: How is professionalism in AE ensured from a multi-level perspective in Slovenia?

In the following, we first briefly introduce the theoretical insights on professionalisation of AE. Next, we discuss professionalisation of AE in Slovenia, outline our methodological approach and present results on state-society, organisations and staff-personnel levels. In the final section, we argue that coordinated action at all three levels is crucial for the quality professionalisation of AE in Slovenia: at the national level, professionalisation is strengthened by state policies and systemic regulation of the field; at the organisational level, the professional development of staff-personnel is supported by AE organisations; and at the individual level, attention is focused on professional knowledge and strengthening the professional identity of adult educators.

2. Theoretical Insights on Professionalisation of Adult Education

2.1 Between 'Traditional' and 'New' Professionalism

Professionalization is a concept that is not uniformly defined and remains the subject of discussion in the field of AE. Egetenmeyer, Breitschwerdt and Lechner (2019) argue that professionalism in the modern world is perceived as a sign of quality. Only well-trained and professional personnel can cope with complex learning situations and can reduce the number of mistakes in their work (Käpplinger 2017). Authors distinguish between 'traditional' and 'new' professionalism or between a harder and softer approaches to the professionalization of AE; the first being understood as a process of development of an (academic) profession, and the second as a process of achieving professionalism (Egetenmeyer and Käplinger 2011; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019).

Professionalism in the 'traditional' sense is characterised by following characteristics: (a) research and theoretical corpus of knowledge; (b) formal education system (usually at university level) that ensures minimum quality and serves as a mandatory basis for entry into a profession; (c) (legally) determined entry conditions, which have a selection and control function; (d) code of ethics; (e) formally organised social group which represents the interests of the professional group and strengthens its social power and visibility; and (f) professional autonomy as a result of social recognition of the profession (Egetenmeyer and Käpplinger 2011, 23; Jütte et al. 2011, 18; Sava 2011, 12-13).However, following understanding of professionalism in this traditional sense, we can emphasise that AE is not a profession, as it does not meet all of the above characteristics: AE study programmes are not a condition for entering the profession, AE is mostly not regulated, AE does not have its own professional association which would represent interests of all adult educators, and there is no common code of ethics (Lattke and Nuissl 2008).

Nevertheless, contemporary discussions point out that the understanding of professionalism in traditional sense is too narrowly designed and outdated. Nowadays, we cannot talk about a single process of professionalisation, but about many patterns that lead to the development of professionalism. We are faced with precarious working conditions, variable work tasks and career paths that are nonlinear and fluid. Accordingly, professions are losing their power, while professionalism is strengthening in organisations and non-formal networks and professional associations. Consequently, 'new' professionalism shifts the focus from social mechanisms that regulate the sphere of work towards organisations, individuals and their continuous professional development. Such understanding of professionalism deviates from normative regulations, individual and attributive aspects of professionalisation, and encourages consideration of the social and institutional contexts in which the process of professionalisation is placed. It can be applied to a wide range of 'professions', while its focus is on professional conduct in practice, which is a reflection of an individual's professional development. Therefore, professionalism is understood as the ability to comprehensively understand professional situations and to use a wide range of knowledge in concrete situations (Evetts 2006; Evans 2008; Egetenmeyer and Käpplinger 2011; Breitschwerdt et al. 2019; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019; Schwarz and Mikulec 2020).

2.2 Challenges in Professionalisation of Adult Education

The field of AE is facing several challenges towards greater professionalisation of which we will highlight the following three ones.

First challenge is related to the complexity of the filed. Treatment of AE as a single field is extremely difficult due to its diversity, different philosophies and practices and decentralisation structures (e.g. Merriam and Brockett 2007; Knox and Fleming 2010). Furthermore, some authors pointed out that the field of AE is still systematically unregulated and marginalised, despite being the main com-

ponent of lifelong learning (e.g. Bierema 2011; Jütte and Latke 2014), while responsibility for the AE governance is often divided between different ministries, other bodies and different stakeholders (Sava 2011; Desjardins 2017). Overall, the field of AE is extremely diverse in terms of target groups, learning content, providers, institutional arrangements, funding structures and legislation, meaning that this diversity of the field makes it difficult to establish a common vision and causes difficulties in the efforts to professionalise the field (Knox and Fleming 2010; Jütte and Lattke 2014).

Second challenge is related to diversity of organisations (providers), as organised form of learning takes place in AE institutions (folk schools), companies, museums, libraries, various non-governmental organisations, health care institutions, trade unions, schools, colleges and universities, etc. (Jütte et al. 2011). These are being classified in four mayor types of organisations: (a) *independent adult education organisations* which main role is to provide learning opportunities for adults; (b) *educational institutions* which main role is to serve youth, but can serve adults as well (e.g. community colleges), (c) *quasieducational organisations* that see education as corollary function of their primary mission (libraries, museums), and (d) *noneducational organisations* that see education as a means to some other ends (e.g. business, unions, correctional institutions) (Merriam and Brockett 2007, 106-7). Organisations significantly shape the practice of AE according to the role and purpose attributed to it, meaning that when AE in an organisation is of secondary importance, identification with the field of AE is much lower or non-existent. As emphasised by Nuissl (2010), the care for the professionalism and professional development of employees is focused primarily on the minority of adult educators, those who work exclusively in organisations established solely for the purpose of education of adults.

Finally, a third challenge is related to the diversity of roles adult educators perform in their work. Overall, adult educators can be described as a large group of experts who deal with AE and performs varied tasks that enable learning and education of adults. However, the roles of adult educators can be also more closely defined. Nuissl (2010, 130-32) identified six main activities adult educators perform and which can be found in European countries: (a) *teaching*, that represents classical activity of adult educators; (b) *management*, that deals with quality management, staff development, educational marketing, fundraising, project management and other issues; (c) *counselling and guidance*, that support learners in searching of appropriate offers, analysing their learning needs and recognition of prior learning; (d) *media use*, that is related with production and the use of learning software for adults, learning opportunities with interactive media and internet; (e) *programme planning*, that includes planning of an offer of an educational institution, companies or local authorities; and (f) *support*, that includes technical, administrative or organisational support of AE. Furthermore, different studies show (Merriam and Brockett 2007; Bron and Jarvis 2008; Nuissl 2010; Bierema 2011) that many adult educators do not recognise themselves as adult educators, but define themselves according to their social or work context. Thus, they can identify with the content they perform (e.g. li-

brarian, health worker, human resources, etc.), with the organisation in which they work (e.g. teacher in basic school, upper-secondary school or folk university, counsellor in the company, etc.) or according to the educational approach they use (distance learning teacher, coach, mediator, counsellor, mentor, etc.). This also implies that career paths of adult educators are very diverse[1] and rarely conscious and planned, sometimes even completely random, while their working conditions are also insecure and precarious ones (ALPINE 2008; Andersson et al. 2013). As a result, a large number of adult educators is not related with the scientific discipline of AE, does not have basic disciplinary knowledge, does not read (professional) literature from the field, does not attend conferences and does not join associations that could strengthen their professional development (Merriam and Brockett 2007, 146; Bron and Jarvis 2008, 40).

2.3 Multi-level Perspective of Professionalisation in Adult Education

In accordance with the knowledge that 'new' professionalism brings in the field of AE, Egetenmeyer et al. (2019, 12-13) propose the use of a multi-level model of professionalisation that should be understood as a mutually conditioned relationship between staff-personnel, organisations and society contexts. To conduct research on professionalism in AE within multi-level perspective, we should address three different but interrelated levels: (1) *State, society and institutions*, i.e. the state defining laws and policies of AE, lifelong learning (LLL), labour market, as well as umbrella organisations or associations in the field; (2) *Organisations in AE* that are responsible for quality management, programme planning, learning cultures and professional development (skills training of staff) through initial or continuing formal and non-formal education programmes; (3) *Professional staff and adult learners* that includes professionals and learners, where teaching-learning process forms the centre of professionalism.

Having said that, we will now turn to discussion and research on professionalism in AE in Slovenia by addressing all three identified levels.

3. Professionalisation of Adult Education in Slovenia

From the historical perspective, professional development of adult educators in Slovenia can be traced back to the late 1950s, when Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia[2]. The training of the non-qualified adult population, mainly to meet the needs of the economy, and the growth of institutional structures of AE created a need for trained adult educators (organisers of adult education, managers, instructors, foremen, andragogues). Consequently, the systematic training

[1] Entry conditions in the field of AE are usually not regulated (Jütte and Lattke 2014) and entry is usually the result of one's own interests and experience, but rarely the result of previous study in the AE field (Knox and Fleming 2010).

[2] Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia until 25 June 1991 when declared its independence.

of adult educators was first established at the People's and Worker's Universities (1957-59), which organised professional conferences, lectures, workshops and summer and winter schools, with the aim of training adult educators. In the 1960s and 1970s, Yugoslavian universities opened the door to systematic theoretical and empirical research in the field of AE and introduced study programmes on 'andragogy' at the Faculties of Arts. Because of the helpful social climate, a new profession called 'andragogue' emerged. In Slovenia, andragogy was introduced as a subject in higher education in 1972. From 1976 on, andragogy was one of the three possible fields of study in the study programme 'Pedagogy'; in 1993, an independent study university programme 'Andragogy' was established. Yugoslav (and thus Slovene) experience therefore pointed out the interdependence between andragogy as a science and the andragogue as a professional, the main outcome of this process being the awareness that people working in AE needed to acquire a certain amount of andragogical knowledge (see Mikulec 2019, 33-34).

However, nowadays there is lack of systematic research about adult educators in Slovenia and their professional development, although concerns have been raised about the need to systematically investigate who are the people working in adult education, what is their professional identity, what tasks and activities they perform, and how their professional development is organised.

Therefore, to address this gap we have researched professionalisation of AE at national, organisational and individual levels.

3.1 Method and Sources

Our qualitative research is based on document analysis and interviews. Research on the professionalization of AE at the *national* and *organisational levels* is based on the method of document analysis (Bowen 2009). At national level we analysed relevant legislation and policies, while at organisational level we analysed organisation's statutes and webpages. Furthermore, the analysis of the organisationallevel is also supplemented by three semi-structured interviews conducted with directors of three selected professional organisations: the Association of Folk Universities of Slovenia (D-ZLUS), the Association of Educational and Counselling Centres of Slovenia (D-ZiSS), and the Andragogical Society of Slovenia (D-ADS). To avoid any harm to the respondents, prior voluntary oral or written consent was secured and the goals of the study were explained to the interviewees so they could take informed decisions. Open type questions were formulated in advance and if necessary, we checked their understanding and asked sub-questions during the interviews. The director of ADS (D-ADS) answered the interview questions in writing, while interviews with other two directors (D-ZLUS and D-ZiSS) were performed orally and online on the videoconferencing platform Zoom. All three interviews were conducted in March 2021, with oral interviews lasting approximately forty minutes.

Research at the *individual level* was based on ten semi-structured interviews conducted with different adult educators. Before conducting the interviews, we

prepared general questions of a predominantly open type and provided a rough idea of the desired sample of interviewees. We purposefully selected adult educators who are employed in organisations of various types (Merriam and Brockett 2007), who work in various fields and perform various AE activities (Nuissl 2010). Thus, in our research we included adult educators from all four types of organisations and from five different areas of activity that enable and support AE[3]. Information on respondents is presented in Tab. 1.

Table 1– Information on interviewed adult educators.

Interviewees	**Demographic data**	**Type of organisation**	**AE activities**
LU1	46 years, woman, 20 years of work experience, permanent working contract	independent adult education organisation (folk university)	counselling and guidance, programme planning
LU2	56 years, woman, 30 years of work experience, permanent working contract	independent adult education organisation (folk university)	counselling and guidance, programme planning, management
MKLJ1	37 years, woman, 15 years of work experience, permanent working contract	quasieducational organisation (Ljubljana city library)	management
MKLJ2	40 years, woman, 12 years of work experience, permanent working contract	quasieducational organisation (Ljubljana city library)	management, programme planning
SŠ1	45 years, man, 8 years of work experience, permanent working contract	educational institution (upper-secondary school)	teaching

[3] The activity of media use has been omitted from our research because there are very few individuals who develop information and communication technology for the purpose of AE in Slovenia.

SŠ2	41 years, woman, 2 years of work experience, fixed-term working contract	educational institution (upper-secondary school)	teaching
U3O1	39 years, woman, 10 years of work experience, copyright contract	independent adult education organisation (third age university Ljubljana)	teaching
U3O2	36 years, woman, 5 years of work experience, permanent working contract	independent adult education organisation (third age university Ljubljana)	support
P	48 years, woman, 15 years of work experience, permanent working contract	noneducational organisation (counselling company)	teaching
F	64 years, man, 35 years of work experience, self-employed	educational institution (private educational organisation)	teaching, programme planning

We individually arranged for each of the interviewees to be interviewed via e-mail, informed them about the goals of the study, approximate length of the interview and provided them with anonymity. To avoid any harm to the respondents, prior voluntary oral or written consent was secured. Two interviews were conducted in direct contact with one of the interviewers in March 2019, while eight interviews were conducted via the videoconferencing platform Zoom or Microsoft Teams in February 2021. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour 20 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the Dictaphone smartphone application with the prior permission of the interviewees for the purpose of transcription.

The data obtained through interviews were qualitatively processed through coding. First, we edited the material and wrote a literal transcript of everything said. Interview transcripts were then imported into the Quirkos program, with the help of which we continued the qualitative analysis of the material. In the program, we marked the coding units and assigned to them the codes that came to our mind ('open' coding). In a set of different codes, we selected, edited, and redesigned those that seemed relevant to the purpose of our research ('selective' coding). Similar codes were identified and grouped into categories (Saldaña

2009). In the final part of coding, we created three categories – career paths, professional identity and professional development – on the basis of which we interpreted the results.

Regarding the sources, we analysed five policies and legislations that contribute to the professionalisation of AE at the national level: (a) Adult Education Act (2018), (b) Resolution on the Master Plan for Adult Education in the Republic of Slovenia for the period 2013-20 (2013), (c) White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (2011), (d) Lifelong Learning Strategy in Slovenia (2007) and (e) Rules on the selection and co-financing of continuing education and training programs for professionals in education (2017). At the organisational level, we analysed six keys (1) *professional organisations* statutes and websites: (i) Andragogical Society of Slovenia (ADS), (ii) Association of Folk Universities of Slovenia (ZLUS), (iii) Slovenian Third Age University (SUTŽO), (iv) Association of Adult Education Organisations in Upper-Secondary Schools (DOIO), (v) Association of Educational and Counselling Centres of Slovenia (ZiSS), and (vi) Slovenian Association of Facilitators (DMS). Furthermore, on the organisational level we as well analysed (2) *professionalisation organisations* that are responsible for primary education and continuing professional development of adult educators[4]: (i) three public universities study programmes offering first and second cycle of studies in AE, these being responsible for primary professional education, and (ii) non-formal educational programmes offered by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE), responsible for continuing professional development of adult educators.

Certain limitations need to be considered in our research as well. All participants come or work in the wider area of Ljubljana (the capital), where the opportunities for professional development are the most accessible and numerous. Situational barriers to participation in training that enable professional development are smaller in our case, while the situation in other parts of Slovenia may be different. In interpreting the results at the individual level, we took into account only the expressed views of adult educators, whereby for a more comprehensive insight into the professionalisation, it would make sense to extend the research also to learners who were involved in teaching-learning process.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 State-society Context

AE in Slovenia is one of the areas where the educational requirements for professionals – these being defined as teachers, organisers, counsellors, and 'other professionals' – working in formal and non-formal educational programmes for

[4] For further elaboration on professional and professionalisation organisations see Schwarz and Mikulec (2020, 13).

adults, financed by public funds, are regulated by the law. The obligatory conditions that adult educators working in formal and non-formal AE programmes must fulfil, and are defined by AE 'Act', are as follows: (a) mastery of the Slovene language; (b) education acquired through master's study programmes; (c) pedagogical-andragogical education[5]; (d) successful completion of a professional examination in the field of education; that is, graduates who finish higher education studies are obliged to complete a traineeship lasting from 8 to 10 months before employment. However, these rules do not apply to all of those adult educators who work in AE provisions that are not publicly funded, for example in enterprises that provide a high and growing share of continuous vocational education to employees (Mikulec 2019, 34; Schwarz and Mikulec 2020, 20).

By analysing policies and legislation that contribute to the professionalisation of AE at the national level we can highlight the following findings. In general, support for professionalism in AE is shown through the legislative framework and all important AE policies. The need for professionally trained staff is emphasised in the 'Resolution', 'White Paper' and the 'LLL Strategy'. These policies emphasise that: (a) a system of quality initial education for AE staff, as well as a system for further education and training based on the actual adult needs of the educators and their employment fields, needs to be established; (b) a sufficient number of professionals should be trained for different target groups and needs; (c) a database of adult educators should be maintained for public service in AE; (d) pedagogical-andragogical education should be adapted to different target groups; (e) quality teaching materials, learning resources and ICT-support should also be provided. Moreover, also the 'Rules' support in-service training and career development programs for adult educators and in this way ensure continuous and stable funding for further education and training programmes of adult educators. However, the Rules has also its blind spots as not all adult educators working in practice are equally addressed: teachers, organisers and counsellors counts as 'professionals' and are eligible to participate in professional training programmes, while other adult educators working in practice (e.g. cultural mediators, mentors in study circles, mentors in self-study centres, adult educators in private educational organisations, etc.) that are not covered by legislation, do not have the right to attain a co-financed program through which they could strengthen their skills needed for working with adults.

[5] These education programmes (for professionals working in basic and upper-secondary schools and vocational colleges) at university level aim at expanding the knowledge acquired in the academic education programmes and include pedagogical, psychological, andragogical/AE, general, and specialised didactic knowledge, as well as pedagogical or andragogical/AE practice. They are defined by laws and regulations and are mandatory prior to engaging in other professional or management work in the field of education.

3.2.2 Organisations

By analysing two main types of professionalisation organisations – public universities and SIAE – responsible for primary education and continuing professional development of adult educators we can highlight the following findings.

The University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, offers doctoral and master's programmes in 'Andragogy'; subjects covering AE can be studied at the undergraduate level in the bachelor's programme 'Pedagogy and Andragogy'. The University of Primorska, Faculty of Education, offers a master's programme in 'Adult Education and Career Development'; subjects covering AE can be studied at the undergraduate level in the bachelor's programme 'Education/Pedagogy'. AE as a subject can also be studied through the first- and second-cycle of study programme of 'Pedagogy' at the University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts and through some other study programmes as well (e.g. Organisation and Management, Human Resources). Therefore, all three of Slovenia's public universities offer study programmes at the master's level or AE subjects at the bachelor's level. Study programmes are aimed at full-time students and prepared in line with the Bologna requirements that took force in 2009. Broadly speaking, master's programmes in andragogy/AE equip students with generic competencies in the humanities and social sciences, as well as with professional competencies that enable them to comprehend the relations between various AE phenomena and processes, social and cultural environments, and the characteristics and expectations of individual adults (see Schwarz and Mikulec 2020, 23-24).

SIAE is the main institution responsible for the system of further education and training of adult educators. SIAE developed competence-based professional training programmes for adult educators, which aim to develop new knowledge and skills and help them to develop their own and the common professional identity of an adult educators. Three main types of professional training were developed: (a) general basic and continuing training of adult educators (knowledge of the discipline, andragogical cycle), (b) basic training on the special roles of adult educators (e.g. head and mentor in study circles, teacher in literacy programmes, counsellor in adult education guidance centres), and (c) further training of adult educators (see Schwarz andMikulec 2020, 24).

By analysing six key professional organisations active in AE[6] we can emphasise that no single professional association exists in Slovenia, but a variety of associations can be found, serving different objectives and needs of its members. Associations interconnect the same types of organisations (e.g. folk universities, universities for the third age, upper-secondary schools), provide training activities accessible to a smaller number of members (adult educators) and represent their specific interests at the national level (ZLUS, ZiSS, DOIO, SUTŽO). At the same time, they coordinate the activities of their members and through non-formal education, training, Erasmus mobility visits and exchanges, upgrade their

[6] Detail presentation of each of analysed professional organisations can be found in our previous work (Schwarz and Mikulec 2020, 21-23).

knowledge and help each other. However, two associations (ADS, DMS) target a wider range of adult educators as their members come from different types of organisations. They organise educational events, conferences and short trainings for those who are not members. Overall, all of these organisations first of all represent their interests, but they also provide some form of non-formal education and/or training of adult educators for the specific roles they perform: (a) training of municipal administration staff for the preparation of annual AE plans, (b) training of adult educators working with adults with special needs, migrants and prisoners; (c) training of adult educators for the career guidance and counselling process, mentoring in companies and mentoring of elderly.

3.2.3 Staff-personnel Level

In our interview transcripts, three main categories emerged as being important for professionalisation of adult educators in Slovenia: career paths, professional identity and professional development.

3.2.3.1 Career Paths

In Slovenia, there are two most common ways to enter the field of AE: first, through university study programmes dedicated to AE, and second, that is most common, by gaining knowledge of AE after graduation either through pedagogical-andragogical education or through professional training in non-formal education programmes, provided by SIAE or other professional organisations (Možina 2011). In our sample, four respondents come from the AE field of study, two from other fields of social sciences (psychology, architecture) and four from the technical or natural sciences (geology, forestry, mathematics, chemistry). Therefore, four respondents (Interviewee MKLJ1, U3O2, LU1 and F) acquired AE knowledge during their studies within the university study program Andragogy/AE or the andragogy course in the study program of Pedagogy, three respondents gained AE knowledge by finishing pedagogical-andragogical education at university (Interviewee SŠ1, SŠ2 and LU2), while one respondent acquired AE knowledge through extracurricular activities (later on also through in-service training in company and additional trainings provided by professional or professionalisation organisations [Interviewee P]). Two of the respondents (Interviewee MKLJ2 and U3O1) gained their AE knowledge after finishing their studies; first in the non-formal programs for adult educators provided by SIAE and second through the internal 3-day educational program offered by SUTŽO.

All of our respondents, that did not study AE, entered in the field by their unintentional decisions, 'by chance' or because of external influences, such as lack of jobs in the primary profession. Furthermore, they entered the field after some years of professional work experience outside AE (ALPINE 2008, 97). Among four respondents that studied AE, two (Interviewee MKLJ1 and U3O2) entered the field immediately after their studies, while other two (Interviewee LU1 and F) changed several jobs (types of organisations) in the field through their life course.

Overall, we can emphasise that career paths of respondents are very diverse and that these also differ between individuals who are employed in the same types of organisations or have the same educational background. Employment in AE is influenced by a number of (unpredictable) factors, such as labour market conditions and unexpected opportunities adult educators face. However, although some adult educators entered the field by chance, they enjoy their work and do not regret the given opportunities.

3.2.3.2 Professional Identity

Diverse education backgrounds of adult educators, different forms of employment and a wide range of their work tasks cause difficulties in forming the professional identity of adult educators (Možina 2011, 24-25). Therefore, formation of professional identity of adult educators is a complex process. Some respondents (Interviewee LU1, LU2, MKLJ1, U3O2) make it clear and identified themselves as adult educators: «I am adult education professional» (LU1) or «I think I'm an adult educator» (MKLJ1). Others, expressed their professional identity through achieved university education – for example «I am a forester» (SŠ1) or «If someone asks me who I am, I always say architect» (U3O1) –, but as well emphasised that their professional identity changed through their work experience, for example: «I started as a psychologist, which will help less skilled users to use a computer, computer programs […] it then developed, of course, that I also see myself as someone who has an impact on education […] I think in a way this sums up how my identity, the way I see myself, has changed» (MKLJ2) or «[I am] chemical engineer, but now a lecturer» (P). Third ones identify themselves not through university education or AE activities they do, but with something else: «I think I'm more of a *therapist* than a teacher. That I work more often on my psychological strength than on mathematics [I teach]» (SŠ2).

Thus, professional identity of respondents is shaped by their university education ('architect', 'psychologist', 'andragogue', 'forester'), by the AE activities they perform ('teacher', 'lecturer', 'moderator', 'facilitator', etc.) or even something else ('therapist'). We often find also combination of these – for example, engineers who have become teachers/adult educators; andragogues who do their work «beyond the boundaries of the [work] andragogue [do]» (U3O2); a psychologist who influences adult education – that signals coexistence of different identities of adult educators. This is also clearly evident in the case of respondent LU2, which, even though she works for many years in independent adult education type of organisation, also emphasised the importance of her primary professional identity, that she formed during her studies. She repeatedly pointed out that she was an engineer and emphasised that engineers differ from «typical social scientists […] as a technician, as an engineer you think differently» (LU2).

Last but not least, two of the respondents (MKLJ1 and F) emphasised also the importance of the context that shapes professional identity of adult educators as this can also represent an obstacle to the identification with the AE field: «I say I take care of AE in the library, but now the problem is if I say that

in different events aimed for AE professionals, e.g. Annual conference on AE, Andragogic Colloquium […] And everyone looks at me a little sideways, hey, it's that girl again, who came from the library […] Colleagues from folk universities, and others, never took us educators from the library as someone, who really deals with education in the true sense of the word» (Interviewee MKLJ1).

3.2.3.3 Professional Development

Professional development of adult educators is carried out through practice, gaining experience, learning at work, learning from colleagues and other people, self-education, and ongoing training. Two of the respondents (Interviewee SŠ1, SŠ2) attributed greatest value to experience («Experience is paramount», SŠ2), while others emphasised the importance of combining practice and learning from colleagues and other people, for example: «Thus, there must be mutual cooperation of everyone, *everyone* [of colleagues] […] exchange of experiences, opinions» (LU2). Experience brings different organisational and communication competencies, sovereignty at work, ability to solve problems, adapt and react to different situations. Therefore, respondents pointed out to the crucial role informal learning plays in adult educator's professional development.

However, this is not the only way of learning that respondents talked about. Most of them were as well constantly learning, educating and/or training themselves in an organised context. As part of their professional development, three respondents (Interviewee MKLJ1, F and P) highlighted the 'Train the trainer' model they were involved in, which is about «transfer of knowledge between each other and these good practices, what works, what doesn't work» (P), while one of them (MKLJ1) also highlighted the importance of job shadowing and international mobility. Others emphasised that they are systematically trained and educated in accordance with the organisation's annual plan for education (MKLJ1, MKLJ2) or that they strengthen their professional competencies within associations they are being part of (such as ADS and DMS in case of F) and the learning opportunities they provide. Other four respondents (SŠ1, SŠ2, U3O1, U3O2) have been in the past involved in organised AE training, but recently they are either upgrading their knowledge in other areas (in primary professions in case of SŠ1 and U3O1) or do not feel the need for additional AE training (SŠ2).

Professional development may also depend on the personal circumstances of adult educators. For example, one of the respondents pointed out that due to her family responsibilities she put her professional development a bit aside: «Now there is a little more emphasis on family life, maybe that's why *at the moment* is not so much ambition on the career» (U3O2). Moreover, we observed that some respondents educate themselves out of their own need and interest, while in certain cases, participation in certain educational programmes is also a condition for performing special roles in AE work – as some educational programs are required by the state (pedagogical-andragogical education) or by organisations that employ adult educators. As one of the respondents pointed out: «However, if it is an education to get a license or a certificate, which is a con-

dition for performing a certain activity […] for example in self-directed learning centres […] or for being a mentor in study circles […] These are then other types of education, where you do not acquire just knowledge, but you also get a license [to work]» (LU1). Furthermore, according to the respondents there are also enough opportunities for their professional development, but their use is related with self-initiative, interests and priorities of adult educators.

Overall, we can highlight that some segments of AE are not left to chance and require certain professional competence and that organisations (employers) can promote professional development of employees (through the organisation of internal training programs, or systematic preparation of individual training plans), while a large part of the responsibility for professional development still lies with adult educators themselves.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In our research we showed that focus on the professionalisation of AE and the professional development of adult educators in Slovenia can be traced at all three levels, at least as far as AE in the public interest is concerned.

The state establishes and promotes certain mechanisms through which the professionalisation of AE is strengthened (Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). National regulations and policies relate mainly to AE in the public interest where the need for professional competence and professional development of adult educators is emphasised. The state also regulates the selection and (co)financing of programs that promote professional development of adult educators and contribute to their quality work (Egetenmeyer and Käpplinger 2011). In addition, the AE Act legally determines the conditions that must be met by professionals in publicly recognised AE programs (among others, pedagogical-andragogical education). These are all «tendencies to professionalise the field» (Bron and Jarvis 2008, 41). However, one of the main blind spots at national level is that the state with its policies and regulations do not officially recognise some profiles of adult educators working in practice, which means that they are not eligible to attend co-financed programs of professional development organised by the state. Furthermore, the state also left out a big part of AE filed that is not covered by the state notion of 'public interest', such as areas of AE in companies (e.g. human resources departments), AE in non-governmental organisations etc. (Lattke and Nuissl 2008, 11-12).

For the strengthening of professionalism in AE, various organisations, such as universities associations and societies, are also responsible (Egetenmeyer et al. 2019; Schwarz and Mikulec 2020). In Slovenia, there is no single umbrella organisation for AE but a variety of associations can be found, serving different objectives and needs of its members and performing their activities in accordance with their own vision and mission. There are several higher education institutions that offer AE study programs and subjects, as well as programs of pedagogical-andragogical education, which equip students with AE competencies and in this way enable the development of professionalism through formal

educational pathways. However, AE study programmes are not compulsory to enter the job market (Lattke and Nuissl 2008, 12). In addition, SIAE is the main institution responsible for developing systems of further non-formal education and training of adult educators for their different roles in the field of AE. Furthermore, due to the complexity of the AE field, its segregation, a trend common in western societies (Rubenson 2010), is also taking place in Slovenia, which is reflected, among others, through the cooperation of interest groups and the formation of various associations (ZLUS, ZiSS, DOIO, SUTŽO, ADS). These try to assert their interests at the national level, while their influence, which positively promotes professionalism in AE as well, extends to various spheres of AE, including those areas that are not regulated by the state. The latter can be illustrated with the examples of ZLUS and ZiSS. ZLUS with the project 'Step' (*KORAK*) is targeting (private) companies and tries to become an «extended hand of human resources» in these companies (Interviewee D- ZLUS), while ZiSS, with its attitude towards quality and high standards based on professionalism of adult educators, sets an example to associations and non-governmental organisations with which it cooperates (Interviewee D-ZiSS). Overall, variety of organisations creates many opportunities for the professional development of adult educators, but different interest groups gathered in associations can find themselves also in conflict when pursuing their interests at the national level, lacking common and shared vision of AE.

At the individual level, adult educators are responsible for achieving professionalism, taking care of their professional development (Bierema 2011; Jütte et al. 2011). We elaborated that adult educators in Slovenia can develop their professional competence in many ways, such as by participating in formal and non-formal educational programmes aimed at their professional development, by attending educational events, by self-educating themselves, by learning from work experience and from others (colleagues, experts, participants), by participating in mobility programmes, etc. Furthermore, adult educators in Slovenia pointed out that there are enough opportunities for their professional development and that these depend on their motivation and the incentives of the employer, while those adult educators who are recognised as professionals by legislation also receive additional incentives from the state level. However, we also showed that career paths of adult educators are very diverse – some hold master's degree in AE, while others gained AE knowledge in very short trainings inside their organisations, although they could strengthen their AE knowledge in non-formal educational programmes that are specially developed for different roles adult educators perform by SIAE – and that they differ between personnel who are employed in the same types of organisations or have the same educational background. Moreover, we emphasised that the extent to which adult educators will focus on their professional development depends on their personal characteristics, interests, needs, self-initiative and the circumstances (context) in which they find themselves; special attention is paid to professional development by those adult educators who are primarily engaged in the field of AE, and less by those for whom AE is an additional or complementary field (Lattke and Nuissl

2008, 13). Thus, diverse education background, different forms of employment and a wide range of adult educator's work tasks also cause difficulties in forming their firm professional identity and consequently, as we showed, adult educators rather develop coexistence of different professional identities (Bron and Jarvis 2008, 40; Bierema 2011, 28).

In conclusion, the case of professionalisation of AE in Slovenia shows that the state has implemented some unique solutions through regulations regarding the professionalisation of AE and in this sense Slovenia differs from other European countries, where the field of AE is much less regulated and the responsibility for achieving professionalism is left to the organisations and individuals (workforce) (Jütte and Lattke 2014). Furthermore, Slovenian case also indicates that professionalism is easier to achieve in the areas of AE regulated by the state – as in these the importance of the professional competence of adult educators is constantly emphasised and the scope of opportunities for professional development is also more visible and accessible –, while areas of AE that are not regulated by the state depend on the value that employers and employees attach to their professional development. Finally, what is also evident from our case is that the state, with its policies and regulations, is not targeting all adult educators equally, but just those professionals working in publicly recognised AE programmes, meaning that many adult educators that work in practice are not being recognised as professionals in the field and lack equal opportunities for their professional development. This is one of the main shortcomings that should be more appropriately addressed in the field of AE in Slovenia in near future.

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Curriculum InstitutionALE – Professionalisation of Adult Education Institutions

Thomas Lichtenberg

Abstract:

Curriculum InstitutionALE is an orientation framework for strengthening Institutions of Adult Learning and Education. It provides basic guidelines for managing capacity and organisational development and suggests indicators and means of verification for organisational change and capacity development. It offers the basics for defining goals and criteria for capacity and organisational development, for collecting reliable baseline data, for designing and implementing processes of capacity and organisational development, and for assessing progress. Addressing leaders of Institutions of Adult Learning and Education and external advisors, it can be adjusted to fit various contexts and institutions across the world.

Keywords: Adult Education Institutions; Capacity Development; Organisational Development

1. Introduction

DVV International is the Institute for International Cooperation of the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V. (DVV), the German Adult Education Association. DVV represents the interests of the approximately 900 adult education centres (*Volkshochschulen*) and their state associations, the largest further education providers in Germany. As the leading professional organisation in the field of adult education and development cooperation, DVV International has committed itself to supporting lifelong learning for 50 years. DVV International provides worldwide support for the establishment and development of sustainable structures for Youth and Adult Education. To achieve this, DVV International cooperates with more than 200 civil society, government and academic partners in more than 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. In its work with partner organisations around the world, DVV International experienced repeatedly that the preconditions for the successful implementation of adult education varied greatly and that organisations sometimes operated inadequately because they lacked basic management skills. Curriculum InstitutionALE is to be understood against this background and was designed

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to inform the process of building and sustaining viable ALE[1] structures worldwide. The term 'Institutions of Adult Learning and Education' (IALEs) is used in this document to cover a broad range of governmental and non-governmental institutions or organisations providing ALE. The first elements of Curriculum institutionALE were developed in DVV International's Middle East office in 2013 – motivated by the need to apply a more strategic, consistent approach to strengthening IALEs, and to create a clear, common understanding of goals, stages and responsibilities between all parties involved.

2. What is Curriculum InstitutionALE

Curriculum InstitutionALE offers guidance in organisational development worldwide, but needs to be carefully adapted to the specific context in which it is used. The specific goals, stages and tools have to be worked out together with the partner organisations, and might differ from country to country, as well as from institution to institution (DVV International 2021, 4).

Curriculum InstitutionALE basically works like a quality management system, which follows the classical sequence of 'Plan-Do-Check-Act' as a continuous improvement process[2]. The sequence of steps is slightly different in Curriculum InstitutionALE but follows the same core approach of an analysis based on indicators, identification of weaknesses, strategic planning for targeted improvement of chess points and finally the evaluation of results. This process can be continued in a circular way, so that no fixed level of quality is reached, but that one's own processes and procedures are critically interrogated again and again. The Curriculum InstitutionALE aims to achieve certain indicators in order to reach a minimum level of quality.

When implementing Curriculum InstitutionALE, it must be taken into account that competence and institutional development is a very sensitive process that must be supported by the organisations themselves, otherwise no sustainable change can be achieved. External consultants can and should even be involved in this process, but the responsibility for implementing the individual steps remains entirely in the hands of the respective organisation.

[1] ALE refers to the term 'Adult Learning and Education' with the following definition: «The ultimate goal of ALE is to ensure that adults, throughout their lives, can participate fully in societies, including the world of work. ALE includes three key domains of learning and skills: literacy and basic skills, continuing education and vocational skills, and liberal, popular and community education and citizenship skills. ALE enables people to develop the necessary capabilities to exercise and realise their rights and take control of their destinies. It promotes personal and professional development, thereby supporting more active engagement by adults with their societies, communities and environments. It fosters environmental and inclusive economic well-being and decent work. It is therefore a crucial tool in alleviating poverty, improving health and well-being and contributing to sustainable learning societies». This definition is based on the UNESCO Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE).

[2] <https://der-prozessmanager.de/aktuell/wissensdatenbank/pdca-zyklus> (2023-03-15).

Many institutions do not exclusively offer adult education programmes but a variety of other services that do not necessarily have anything to do with adult education. However, it is important at the beginning of this process to develop a common understanding of what the capabilities and tasks of an institution are.

Curriculum InstitutionALE assumes that adult education institutions have three core tasks: orientation, education and participation.

Orientation: In its many years of work, DVV International has found that many participants first need orientation before they are actually willing to engage with training offers. Many participants first need to reflect on their own situation and become aware of where they stand, but also what perspectives they want to develop for the future and how they can improve their concrete life situation. Educational institutions must first offer this kind of orientation before it comes to practical educational offers. This kind of orientation can take place in different ways, be it in individual one-to-one meetings or in group events.

Education: Ideally, an adult education institution offers a broad set of different educational opportunities that cover different areas of people's lives and aim at improving their life situation.

Participation: In many countries, it has been found that community actions result directly from education. Education should also contribute to social participation and reflection on social issues. Therefore, education also has this transformational claim, namely that people actively and participatively influence their living environment.

Based on these three core tasks of adult education centres, Curriculum InstitutionALE assumes the following steps in implementation.

3. Identifying Potential for Improvement (Step 1)

The first step is to assess the current status of the adult learning and education institution with regard to its core tasks and different cross-cutting capacities which are being outlined in the following section. This assessment can be done in different ways. For example, a self-assessment can be made on the basis of so-called Key Performance Indicators underlying the core tasks and cross-cutting capacities. However, peer review procedures or an assessment by external consultants are also conceivable. In any case, all core tasks as well as the cross-cutting capacities of an institution should be clearly assessed in order to identify potential for improvement, which should then be systematically addressed in the next step.

In total, there are seven key performance fields that are evaluated according to certain indicators. In the following, the key performance indicators will be roughly outlined, as a complete presentation would go beyond the scope of this

report. For a detailed presentation, please refer to the corresponding publication on the DVV International website[3].

3.1 Cross-cutting Capacities (Key Performance Indicators) of Institutions Offering ALE

A. Strategy and Management

Adult learning and education provision should be guided by a strategy and a vision. This enables a systematic orientation of the teaching offers. In order to assess the institution, it is necessary to check whether corresponding documents (e.g. strategy) are available and how they are oriented in terms of content.

Indicator[4]	Means of verification
The IALE has a clear vision and strategy for ALE, or ALE forms part of its strategy.	Strategy for ALE or general strategy including ALE.
The strategy reflects the major fields of work and competences of the IALE, as well as its values and ethics.	Expert assessment.
A quality assurance system is in place.	M&E guidelines, indicators list, M&E reports.

B. Needs and Market Analysis

In any case, educational offers should ensure that they serve a need of the target groups. Accordingly, the needs should be analysed beforehand. In the case of employment-promoting training offers, the market situation for employment must also be taken into account. Is there a demand for the targeted vocational skills on the local labour market?

Indicator	Means of verification
The IALE regularly conducts needs analysis as a basis for programme development.	Needs/market analysis report.
The IALE has defined a mechanism for needs analysis, which includes quality criteria and timeframe.	Needs analysis concept.

C. Marketing, Outreach to and Admission of Participants

Since adult education often receives little attention and is little recognised as an educational field, it is desirable to give more prominence to adult education as a field in its own. Accordingly, adult education and its successes should be well 'marketed'. Clear access rules for participants should also be defined and implemented.

[3] <https://www.dvv-international.de/en/ale-toolbox/organisation-and-management/curriculum-institutionale> (2023-03-15).

[4] These are only examples, which are further elaborated in the corresponding publication.

Indicator	Means of verification
The IALE clearly labels its ALE services as such, and relates to relevant national terms and concepts.	Programme, flyers, website of the IALE, ALE strategy or similar.
The IALE applies a strategy for outreach to potential learners through various means that are useful and appropriate (newspaper, programme, leaflets, radio, Internet, social media, billboards, etc.).	Outreach activity documentation.
Clear admission and selection criteria have been defined and communicated to the target group.	Registration procedure announcements, registration, documentation, receipt of participants' fees.

D. Cooperation with Qualified Trainers

A basic prerequisite for successful adult education is the availability of sufficient teachers or volunteers who are trained both professionally and didactically so that they are able to respond to the specific needs of adults. This means that the relevant adult education institution has a pool of trainers who can be deployed as needed and in a professional manner. The following indicators have been formulated for this aspect.

Indicator	Means of verification
A cooperation system with volunteers and freelancers has been defined (including communication and reward system, team building, professional development…).	Cooperation concept.
Clear selection criteria and recruitment procedures for trainers/volunteers have been defined and communicated to potential trainers.	Criteria and procedure announcements, simplified application form for trainers.
Selection and recruitment are documented.	CVs, references, justification sheet for selection, contract, receipt of payment.
Trainers' performance is checked regularly.	Screening assessment of trainer's performance.

E. Networking and Referrals

An exchange with other institutions that are active in the field of adult education in a broader sense is therefore important, as good practice as well as dealing with challenges can be helpful for one's own work. The network of partner institutions can be very broad, e.g. decision-making bodies, schools, vocational training institutions, universities, NGOs, microfinance providers, businesses and business associations, use. In addition to the exchange with other institutions and the receipt of direct information, there is of course also the possibility of referring participants to other institutions where this appears useful.

Indicator	Means of verification
IALE has identified key networking/referral partners.	Strategic plan, list of key partners, existing agreements, database.
Range of contacts by sector (education, business, politics, sectors).	Stakeholder mapping.
IALE has established cooperation with partners.	Minutes of interview with the IALE Director, MoUs, reports of joint activities, media reports.

F. The Learning Environment

The learning environment naturally has a great influence on the motivation of the participants; therefore, the framework within which learning takes place is of great importance. This includes both the 'hard' equipment such as premises, inventory and other teaching equipment, but also 'soft' factors such as the staff, namely how friendly, attentive and welcoming the staff are towards interested parties and participants. It is about the first impression to attract new participants but also to keep participants and to win them for other offers.

Indicator	Means of verification
The IALE offers its programme on pleasant premises that are sufficiently lit/heated/cooled and appropriately equipped. Hygiene standards meet gender-specific needs.	M&E reports, facility audits, satisfaction surveys among participants, inventory.
The premises are easily accessed by the target group.	On-site visits, maps, public transport timetables, parking space, stairs/lifts, signs…
Regular maintenance plan is in place and is implemented.	Records of maintenance checks.

G. Funding

Adult education can of course only be carried out successfully if the appropriate resources are available. Therefore, it is the task of adult education institutions to develop as broad a portfolio of income sources as possible so as not to be dependent on a single source. It is not only sensible but necessary that the institutions include the question of resources in their strategic planning and try to position themselves accordingly broadly here.

Indicator	Means of verification
The IALE has identified diverse sources of funding.	Funding sources analysis.
A strategy has been developed for resource mobilisation and marketing, and is being implemented.	Strategy document and implementation records.
The IALE relies on a variety of sources of funding.	Budget, audit reports.

4. Defining Goals (Step 2)

The indicators presented so far serve to systematically assess certain fields of competence of institutions active in adult education. As already explained, this can be done in different ways, whereby the use of peer review procedures has the advantage that the assessing 'peers' look at the other institution in the light of their own institution, which usually leads to a reflection on the working methods and processes of their own institution.

By means of the systematic institution assessment based on key performance indicators, certain institutional weaknesses can be identified. Depending on the number of weaknesses identified, the respective institution must set priorities and decide which goals it wants to achieve concretely. These goals should be seen in the context of the institutional analysis.

5. Planning for Capacity/ Organisational Development (Step 3)

Once the objectives have been defined and the pre-identified weaknesses have been identified and prioritised, the next step is to plan concrete actions to improve specific weaknesses. As with all planning, a clear time frame must be set and appropriate resources must be made available. In development cooperation, DVV International usually provides very concrete support here to advance the institutional improvement of partners.

6. Organising Capacity/Organisational Development Process (Step 4)

This step is about the concrete implementation of the planned measures for institutional improvement. These measures can look very different. They can consist of improving the infrastructure, establishing or intensifying cooperation with other network partners or training staff specifically in certain fields. This can be classical training, where it is always important to consider how it can be determined whether the intended learning goals have actually been achieved. But staff can also go to other institutions to see the lived practice in other organisations.

7. Assessing Results

After implementing measures to specifically improve certain weak points in institutional management, it is important to get an overview of the results. If a demonstrable improvement has been achieved, the goal can be considered achieved and the next step is to look at improving other institutional areas. If the goal was not achieved, it is important to analyse what exactly caused this and how better results can be achieved in the next step.

Deciding on continued or future capacity/organisational development: as described at the beginning, this is a quality management system that is in continuous development. This means that over a longer period of time all identified weak points should be addressed. Thus, after certain areas have been success-

fully improved, the next steps are to address the other weak points. The aim is to systematically improve the overall management skills and processes of an adult education institution. However, this also includes the establishment of a quality management system (Key Perfomance Indicator 1), which critically questions the institutional processes on a regular basis in order to continuously review its own quality standard.

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PART III

Sustainability, Inclusion and Wellbeing: Topics for Adult Society and Smart Cities

Balancing Between Smart and Inclusive: Learning Cities for Sustainable Urban Communities

Balázs Németh

Abstract:

Since 2012, Global Learning Cities has become a successful network-based movement of UNESCO which demonstrates not only linkages, but also dependencies amongst community development, adult learning and active citizenship (UNESCO 2017). Examples of Cork, Espoo, Belgrade and South Korea have highlighted (Németh 2020), that communities are unable to develop successful models of learning cities unless they combine smart, creative and sustainability dimensions through community-based adult and lifelong learning for social cohesion, economic stability, growth and environmental awareness. Equitable ways of community learning can better reach underrepresented groups of adults who want to develop and sustain their neighbourhoods through collecting and sharing knowledge (Ó Tuama 2020). Other examples from India, Palestine and the UK demonstrate that it is not the label itself, but the smart and creative urban adult learning which can be combined with needs of communities (Németh et al. 2020). In the evolution of learning cities, we have arrived to an Era of uncertainties, therefore, we have to demonstrate that the learning cities depend on better participation, performance and partnerships in learning, surrounded by collective actions for better futures of education.

Keywords: Adult Learning; Community Local Engagement; Equity; Global Networking and Partnership

1. Learning City Evolution in Progress: A Creative Response to Global Challenges

Learning cities have become a focus for research, development and innovation as a consequence of the Maastricht-process of EU countries, leading up to the formation of lifelong learning policy orientations by 1996 and 1997 and through the initiation of the first budget-period of the EU by using several funds, especially the European Social Fund.

The return of a forgotten initiative of learning cities, based on OECD models of educating cities dated back to early 1970s, was a truly positive and rather inclusive approach to bridge social and economic aspirations around urban development. However, a better use of human potentials has signalled a stronger focus on building knowledge, skills and competences both at individual and community levels. This opened gates to a more flexible and inclusive concept of lifelong learning to connect formal and non-formal grounds of learning and recognise

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several kinds of informal learning based on community capacities. Learning cities and regions became incorporated to emerging discourses on learning spaces, place management and social capital (international conferences, PASCAL International Observatory website) as part of an accelerated dialogue on lifelong learning and not only economic, but also social stakeholders and governmental bodies shared the view of having to use models of learning cities and regions to reach for economic growth with sustainable development and social cohesion.

As Longworth (2003) identified, the mid-1990s discourse on lifelong learning helped rediscovering learning regions as a marker of the *Age of Innocence*, leading to planning and initiating local and regional models to connect better education/training, governance and lifelong learning.

In the second half of the decade, the result of the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) offered guidance to develop some of the early charters for learning regions – charters that demonstrated the commitment of a city-region to improve learning opportunities and methodologies for all its inhabitants. It resembled this – the grounds for a wides dialogue on promoting the culture of learning. Cities as far apart as Adelaide, Halifax in Canada, Espoo in Finland and Dublin applied this charter formula and exploited it for their own goals to develop lifelong learning in their communities and neighbourhood regions.

The middle of the same decade could experience the realisation of the European year of Lifelong Learning in 1996 – it was taken very seriously by ELLI and relatively many universities – as there was a funding initiative and programme contacted to it. Its value was soon neglected by many relevant organisations and institutions across Europe. However, the cornerstones of today's work on learning cities and regions are based in the early works on adult and lifelong learning, to which was given an impetus by the European Year. The year 1996 provided a renewed awareness of the impact of education and learning, more particularly to the scope that a world of rapid political, economic, technological and environmental change in turn takes rather quick steps in both the practice of learning and the provision of education. At the same time, a huge number of quality initiatives were either marginalised or ignored, the process still emerged on to *the age of experimentation* into the late 1990s when National Learning City networks began to raise – firstly in the United Kingdom and later joined by those in Finland and Sweden. Therefore, North European approaches signalled very much 'the centre of gravity' of lifelong learning and learning city focuses.

This was the same level of engagement and enthusiasm which drove a number of cities from the Scandinavian communities to make use of the model of the learning city-region so as to turn quality learning and education into a dynamic mood for economic growth, competitiveness and innovations, combined with inclusiveness and sound attention to vulnerable social groups. That approach also formulated a certain commitment with a wider perspective to incorporate learning cities into the global campaign for lifelong learning within the international community. With several distinguished exceptions, Southern, Central and Eastern Europe have taken much longer to realise the direct reward of creating learning cities and regions. In this *new age of experimentation*, Learning

City-Region projects began to be financially supported – one of them 'TELS – Towards a European Learning Society' delivered, what it is called a 'Learning Cities Audit Tool', and analysed the performance of 80 European municipalities. Unsurprisingly, it reflected that the words 'Learning City' and 'Learning Region' were almost unknown. Indeed, in more than two thirds of those 80 cities, they were completely missing.

At this time too, there were several conferences and learning city launches – at places like Liverpool, Espoo, Edinburgh, Glasgow and many others. Learning Festivals celebrated the joy of learning in Glasgow and in Sapporo, Japan, right before the Millennium. At the same time, when Europe stepped towards the new millennium, the *age of advance* accelerated mainly by the European Commission's Lisbon agenda, which put lifelong learning at the forefront of European policy. The development of learning cities and regions was one key strategy of that policy – and so the European policy paper on the local and regional dimension of lifelong learning was published in 2002. This important document was built on the results of TELS and written by Norman Longworth. The document clearly stated that «Cities and regions in a globalized world cannot afford not to become learning cities and regions. It is a matter of prosperity, stability, employability and the personal development of all citizens» (European Commission 2002). They were indeed clear and forward looking words and a striking challenge to every local and regional authority to have read them, which, because of the nature of information transmission, were unfortunately very few.

The OECD also geared up the process in 2001 with its learning regions project in five European regions – Jena in Germany, Oresund in Sweden and Denmark, Vienne in France, Kent in UK and Andalusia in Spain. Among its findings was the perhaps surprising statement that secondary education would apparently be strikingly important for regional development, and the more predictable one, that there was a need to encourage creativity at all levels of education. This particular conclusion, referring to regional development, highlighted the influential role and the potentials of public education upon the development of basic and vocational skills amongst the members of individuals and towards knowledge transfers within communities. That's a theme that crops over and over again in learning region folklore – creativity, innovation, vision at all levels of education.

Despite the fact that many cities and regions are still well behind the mark of the millennium, the movement to create learning cities and regions threatened to become an avalanche – as a couple of examples among many, Germany established around 76 learning regions as part of the 'Lisbon-process', while every city, town and municipality in Victoria, Australia, became a learning entity. Moreover, the Chinese government decreed that every large city in China should become a learning city by 2010 and beyond. Not too late for this, the IDEOPOLIS was born, described by Tom Cannon and his collaborators as «A City or Region whose economy is driven by the creative search for, and the application of, new ideas, thinking and knowledge, and which is firmly rooted to the creative transfer of ideas, to opportunities, to innovation, and eventually to production» (2003, 9).

These initiatives accelerated most researchers into what might be called *the age of understanding* and many of them finally thought they got it – or knew, or thought they knew – what was being a learning region, at a time when the number of European projects increased. From every part of the Commission – Learning Cities and Regions became included in the Framework research programmes and a lifelong learning element had to be included in the vast majority of the Commission's Social and Development Funding. There also came a great need for tools and materials that would help cities and regions to get that understanding.

Therefore, some relevant Socrates-funded projects developed those learning toolkits for city and regional management and learning materials to help them propagate the message to others. And yet, the OECD would have you believe that all regions seek to sustain economic activity through various combinations of lifelong learning, innovation and creative uses of information and communication technologies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001).

Since 2011, we have arrived to the *Age of Innovations* as learning city collaborations reached a level of character and complexity that made UNESCO to start with a Global Learning City Initiative so as to analyse the connections between urban-based community development, governance and lifelong learning with intercultural and intergenerational dimensions. This initiative provided good grounds for global networking amongst learning cities and the mainly Asian orientation turned into a wider global networking by 2013 at the Beijing International Conference of Learning Cities and resulted in a declaration to describe major goals of promoting lifelong learning by building learning cities and communities under the UNESCO umbrella of the Global Network of Learning Cities – GNLC (GNLC - Beijing Declaration 2013). Arne Carlsen, the director of UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), and his team worked immensely hard to get this idea a reality both in policy and collaborative contexts. UIL formulated several descriptive documents as guidelines to support cities of different continents to build up their learning city models based on different composite elements and interests (UNESCO UIL 2015). Since Carlsen had arrived from adult education, it was not at all hard for him to recognise the values and power of learning cities to make use of adult and lifelong learning by building various forms of knowledge transfers, based on the needs of local citizens.

2. Why and How to Develop Learning Cities in an 'Age of Uncertainties'?

Since 2012, the development of learning cities has become a flagship issue for UNESCO and its Institute for Lifelong Learning under the umbrella of Global Network of Learning cities (UNESCO UIL 2021). UNESCO has developed an internationally driven wide platform amongst cities as *sustainable cities* addressing a number of challenging issues like inclusion, creativity, health and well-being, resilience, innovation, smart developments, technology and digitalisation, education, workplaces and jobs. The global network was based on the realisation that learning cities would have to share their experience in

developing communities in urban environments and to collect good cases for reflecting the power and joy of learning in communities based on collaborative actions and the celebration of understanding and respecting each other. It is no wonder that the Beijing Declaration (2013) of the first International Conference of Learning Cities advocated such principles and demonstrated the collective power of urban environments of lifelong learning with intercultural and intergenerational dimensions (UNESCO UIL 2015).

The way the global movement has developed in the last ten years is a marker of potential ways out or rather to say effective forward-looking models for urban citizen to collaborate within and beyond their cities and their regions so as to understand and reflect upon their achievements, but also to pay attention and integrate messages and positive models of smart and creative cities for the benefit of their own communities.

On the other hand, learning cities have clearly signalled the capacity of integrating various interests to promote them all through lifelong learning, since it is certainly better to develop smart, creative and green cities, etc. through promoting learning based on public needs and on interests of stakeholder groups.

Our recent uncertainties of environmental and climate changes, challenges of stagnation and structural changes of economic sectors and finally the COVID-19 pandemic have deformed learning communities either to reduce community-based learning activities or to move them into virtual forms which resulted in alienation, exclusion, inequities. However, learning cities have clearly stepped forward and provided fairly strong responses to those challenges above through immensely lot of voluntary work, partnerships and mutual actions so as to pursue lifelong learning especially for vulnerable groups. All the examples UNESCO-bases sustainable cities platforms have recently gathered, may demonstrate how rich and innovative learning cities are (UNESCO. *Cities Platform*).

3. Learning Cities and Community Development Through Adult and Lifelong Learning. The Impact of PASCAL International Observatory

When someone may want to understand the reason why UNESCO incorporated the movement of learning cities into its activities and its policy concerns around lifelong learning, a strong attention to PASCAL International Observatory is inevitable. This globally driven international organisation was formed by former OECD researchers around CERI, the Center for Educational Research and Innovation, so as to make use of a non-governmental platform in the development of social capital, place management and lifelong learning right after the millennium (PASCAL International Observatory).

PASCAL turned attention to learning cities for its potential to integrate several dimensions of lifelong learning, for example to underline the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions, economic stakeholders and other respected local and regional bodies, as local and regional councils, to take action in the advancement of the so-called *learning economy*. Its *broader*

conceptualisation, the scope of actions and *value of learning go well beyond a limited definition of industry clusters and issues of competitiveness, innovation* (as important as these are).

As the flow of learning initiatives, described by Yarnit (2000), Longworth (1999), Longworth and Franson (2001), Allison and Keane (2001) and others, learning makes its way through/in the community in different manners. With each of these activities, the community may learn and develop sustainably. Learning enables communities to face, change, adapt and transform their own. When the concept of learning cities-and learning regions is understood in a broader framework, it opens up exciting potentials and possibilities for many communities, particularly, when considered against reductionist narratives on exclusively economy-centred structure, by turning to more balanced models.

The impact of PASCAL can be grabbed by the use of some of its models to get different fields of learning city innovations, combined for the sake of proper knowledge transfer through parallel collaborative actions for economic development, social cohesion and well-being. Namely, the EcCoWell model PASCAL was firmly developed in order to make use of potentials of several stakeholders in a combined way to reach for economic growth, and community actions for well-being. One good example was the Irish city of Cork, where distinguished stakeholders, together with the local council, decided that they would make firm steps in order to implement EcCoWell-frame as one composite element of a learning city through collaborative actions.

The Cork Learning City development is cemented on a special learning environment to represent four circles of learning embedded into a community model. This model resonates a community with strong local resonance and global reaches through UNESCO learning cities network and that of PASCAL International Exchange (PIE). Those circles of the learning environment demonstrate certain dimensions of a learning city which overlap with each other, however, they signal some specific aspects at the same time. They are the Cork Learning Festival, the UNESCO Learning City Award and Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork, Learning Neighbourhoods as a pilot project of UNESCO in partnerships with PIE and, finally, EcCoWell, to reflect that learning cities should include environmental, economic, health, well-being and lifelong learning in order to reach for good societies (ÓTuama 2016; UIL 2019a).

The Lifelong Learning Festival at Cork has particular community routes and has been dedicated to participatory actions with intercultural and intergenerational aspirations. In this respect adult and lifelong learning plays a specific role in planning its programmes and raising participation in its events, gatherings and local discoveries, by collecting and sharing good knowledge and experience amongst members of the community. Moreover, the Festival chains ten Community Education Networks which were established upon the 2000 governmental paper, called as *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education and Science 2000). These networks offer actions and programmes as parts of the Festival and have their special approach to some special groups of the community, for example, disadvantaged groups.

Distinguished stakeholder groups play an important role in the planning and achievement of their programmes.

Various forms and ways of communication are regularly used to reach out for the attention to different kinds of people, therefore, not only modern and electronic communication, but also traditional posters and brochures are used to capture the contact of potential visitors and participants. One has to point out that there is a significant free citizen engagement in the Festival, based on the principles of equality and inclusion so as to provide an opportunity to participate in learning (Neylon and Barrett 2013). In this regard, inclusiveness, free entry and open access to all are ongoing themes of the festival (Keane et al. 2013). The UNESCO Learning City initiative has also played a significant role in the achievements of the Cork Learning City development. Both the establishment of the Cork Learning City Forum and the initiation of the Lifelong Learning Festival provided significant forces to realise the vision of people behind the original plans to make Cork a learning city and community. The attention of PASCAL towards learning city developments and innovative approaches made PASCAL to get Cork be involved in its networking.

That step brought Cork close to international partnerships which soon accelerated engagement with UNESCO agenda on learning cities in 2012. The example of Cork also reflects outstanding partnerships with wide stakeholder groups so as to engage them with the mission and goals of the project. The Learning Neighbourhoods initiative signalled a serious focus on local people, especially concentrating on the needs of districts of the city and people living in those municipal areas of Cork with specific social, economic and cultural conditions and aspirations. There have been several impacts and challenges to the Cork Learning City initiative and project. But collective actions of the communities of the city strengthened alliances amongst participants and brought higher level institutions into contact with marginalised groups. UNESCO interest may also help the renewal of the commitment of politicians and stakeholders to the initiative.

Cork may provide a good lesson for other cities which are right at the step to expand their initiatives into a wider public project and movement: start small and build up systematically, keep participation voluntary, ask all your participants to publicise their events to provide a special ownership and belongingness to the programmes and networking. Another lesson is to make sure that the kinds of learning showcased are as broad as possible, do not restrict participation to the state sector, publicly recognise and thank all those who organise events and, finally, never forget that it is a festival – fun and celebration are a powerful means of changing attitudes to learning (Neylon 2015).

4. Combining Aspirations of PASCAL and UNESCO – the Example of Pécs

The Pécs Learning City-Region Forum was formally grounded in the year of 2010 amongst thirteen different institutions of education, training and culture, together with the local and regional authorities of Pécs and Baranya County and that of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Based on a decade-old international project-based partnership to have dealt with Learning City-Region innovations in association with PASCAL and UIL, the University of Pécs and its Faculty of Adult Education and HRD re-initiated the establishment of the Pécs Learning City Region Forum in 2013 to develop a direct tool in certain areas of pedagogical/andragogical work targeting training trainers, educators and facilitators of learning.

Through projects, like LILARA (Learning in Local and Regional Authorities), PENR3L (PASCAL University Network of Regions of Lifelong Learning), and Grundtvig R3L+ accelerated our partnership with the City of Pécs and its local authority together with several other distinguished stakeholders in education, training and culture Those former PASCAL projects together with special session of the Commission of Education (EDUC) of Committee of the Regions in 2006 and the 2007 PASCAL Conference in Pécs generated a good ground for further platform building amongst relevant bodies engaged in effective knowledge transfer lifelong learning activities (PASCAL Observatory 2007).

The Learning City-Region Forum identified some potential issues which accelerated the development of the learning city-region model of Pécs. On the one hand, the Forum renewed its membership in PASCAL International Observatory's Learning Cities Networks (LCN), more precisely, it integrated the Pécs Learning Festival programme into the group called 'Harnessing Cultural Policies in Building Sustainable Learning Cities' in order to continue its ties to this international platform which was formally established in 2007 when Pécs hosted PASCAL's annual international conference on learning city-regions (Németh 2016a).

The University of Pécs initiated, still in 2016, the realisation of close ties to UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities so as to prepare for the Global Learning City Award of UNESCO which may help in further developing collaborative actions amongst key providers of lifelong learning in and around the city of Pécs. In this regard, the University of Pécs and the local authority/municipality of Pécs decided to launch a campaign for using the Learning City-Region Forum to establish an annual Learning Festival where both the concept and the three areas of action of the Forum can be multiplied into a real learning community of around seventy institutions and organisations under the same umbrella movement.

The Learning City Programme of Pécs identified its first *Learning* Festival in 2017 as a set of three thematic topics in order offer flexible platforms to include each and all learning providers with their particular programmes based on the participation of local citizens from school-age to retired members of the community. There were three topics for 2017 set at the beginning of the year to represent a broad range of interest and, simultaneously, to incorporate different interests be channelled into representative topics to signal both global and local focuses with popular calls. Those 2017 learning city topics were (UIL 2019b): (1) *Culture and arts*; (2) *Environment and Green Pécs*; and (3) *Knowledge transfer and skills development.*

Those topics above generated growing participation since more than seventy organisations and institutions got involved into the 130 programmes of the First Learning Festival for 15-16 September in 2017. One can estimate whether it was a good decision and direction to get the House of Civic Communities to take a central role in the organisation of the Learning Festival. But having evaluated the impact of first Learning Festival, we can conclude that the learning community of Pécs has gained a lot to start getting used to the formation of the Learning City model and its flagship initiative called the Pécs Learning Festival. It is concerning that this focus cemented a bottom-up approach based on trust and partnership, but the initiative could not avoid the lack of funding and limited political attention although the City of Pécs received the Global Learning City Award on 18 September at the third UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities (Németh 2016b). The organisers of the Learning Festival had collected public proposals for topics of the Festival, and it was a great achievement that participating platforms of learning providers came to consensus to provide three authentic topics of lifelong learning which would definitely meet the characteristics of Pécs as a city of culture, high culture influenced by multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-religious dimension. This particular focus was highlighted in the GNLC reporting of Pécs as a Global Learning City and incorporated into the publication of UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and to its website (UIL 2019c).

According to the key features of learning cities, the Learning City Programme of Pécs and its Learning Festival has emphasised, from its start, the connection and partnership building with local and regional businesses, corporations and other market-led groups like the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UNESCO UIL 2015). This approach and special attention was lifted up through the organisation-process of the first learning festival in 2017 to initiate and promote the particular angle of business and economy driven narratives, understanding around the benefits of learning and of skills development. Companies like the local forestry group, the local public bus transportation corporation and the local power plant joined the Festival with its programmes and learning models, like environmental learning through the forest/woods, learning community skills on buses and learning new dimensions of the energy supplies for residential and business areas (Németh 2016c).

A necessary conclusion is that the initiation of the Learning Festival resulted in the move of the notion of learning away from negative meanings and contexts, moreover, it helped in the raising of participation, the growing needs towards community learning, intergenerational collaborations and the inclusion of depressed, underdeveloped districts of the city. Those three topics above helped to move Pécs towards smart and creative city directions with culture-based orientations in a city of culture (Németh 2016c). Finally, let us underline that the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities have generated two major clusters where many cities collaborate through advanced knowledge transfer and sharing good practices via webinars and other common actions.

These two clusters are:

Education for Sustainable Development;

Health and Well-being (Cork and Pécs have joined this cluster for the benefit of their stakeholders to promote healthy living, resilience and inclusion through lifelong learning activities at community levels) (UIL 2019c).

5. Recent Outlooks for Comparison – the Balanced Community Focus

The recent Adult Education Academies of 2020 and 2022 integrated the theme of Learning Cities and Learning Communities into its comparative group work (JMU INTALL Academies). The 2020 platform provided a good opportunity to further investigate some recent trends of learning cities across cultures and investigations in Palestinian cities and those from India were put into comparison with European cases from the UK and from Hungary to identify similarities and differences. This resulted in a study to reach for some reasons of the implications of learning communities and community development with strong attention and inclusive approaches to learning needs of adults and their communities and nearby regions based on voluntary work with vulnerable groups of adults (Németh et al. 2021).

Another scope of this research focus is the impact of smart and creative orientations as narratives of learning cities. Examples from Espoo in Finland would highlight such focus in a good combination with community and cultural developments in the city (Erkkilä 2020). Also, Osborne has recently called for the importance of smart cities to rely on learning cities where adult and lifelong learning would provide a potential to make communities recognise the use and benefits of technology, digitalisation, scientific advancements and innovations (2018).

6. Conclusion

Our examples may resonate the evolution of learning cities as connected to the expansion of lifelong and life-wide learning where professional adult educators will have specific roles to generate public engagement for better participation and performance in addressing both skills development from basic to vocational and life-skills, active citizenship and community care with intercultural and intergenerational dimensions. Learning cities, in our understanding, have been collaborating with adult learning and education since those five benchmarks of learning cities, UIL has addressed by 2013, depend on advanced adult and community education and lifelong learning, based on partnerships across and beyond sectors of education, economies, cultures, arts, health and well-being and matters of sustainability (UIL 2015).

Finally, let me underline the roles of HEIs in this specific aspect of urban development. Universities for lifelong learning have a profound role, according to eucen (Royo et al. 2021), in responding the UN Sustainable Development Goals and connect sustainable cities and communities to the development of education and lifelong learning through being committed to partnership-based

forms of knowledge transfer to balance smart, technology and digital-driven aspirations with socially constructed learning opportunities so as to form resilient and progressive communities based on dignity and solidarity.

We are concerned that universities have an important role both in the promotion and in the research and innovation of learning cities which demand mutuality, trust and collaborations around collecting and sharing knowledge and skills.

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Rethinking Learning Practices in the Covid-Era: Indications for Teachers and Educators

Maria Luisa Iavarone, Francesco Vincenzo Ferraro

Abstract:

The pandemic produced changes in the organisation of the socioeconomic tissue. The educational system, in particular, underwent a forced reconsideration of classrooms' space and time. To preserve inclusivity and wellbeing and to compensate for the lack of body-cognitive experiences, our research team worked with the educational systems before and during the pandemic, providing educators with effective indexes concerning didactic practices. What emerged from our studies is the necessity to help students and teachers to cope with isolation, boredom, and bullying. The following document aims to report the multidisciplinary approaches developed by the international team from the University of Naples Parthenope (Italy) and the University of Derby (United Kingdom).

Keywords: Anti-social Behaviours; Civic Education; Digital-Ecosystems; Education

1. The COVID-Era Call for Action: It Is Time of Profound Change in Education

The following session summarised part of our research finding along with the hypothesis and theories that are leading our research proposals and ideas. A reflective perspective upon the current situation in light of the latest pedagogic theories. During the pandemic, we understood the need to rethink our lives profoundly. In only one year, we have assisted to profound changes in the organisation of our life systems: in health, socio-economic, work organisation and education (Save The Children 2020; Sarkodie and Owusu 2021; Yang and Deng 2021). In particular, the school system has undergone a forced reorganisation that has affected the characteristics and quality of the teaching space, the learning environments, the forms and times of learning and knowledge (Basri et al. 2021). Additionally, governments have reacted differently to the pandemic with different lockdown and restriction strategies, which has additionally produced socio-economic gaps with profound influences in the educational system (Katić et al. 2021). What the pandemic has generated can be, in other words, synthe-

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sised in a sort of *educational atopy*, in the literal etymologically sense, from the Greek language alpha privative *atopos*, meaning without places. Hence, teaching during the pandemic has lost the proper places of education related to the coordinates of space and time characteristics of traditional teaching referring to a physical place (e.g., the classroom) and the time of lessons. The changes we experienced have therefore produced the era of post-didactics characterised by the *sunset of class time* where many pupils, and also many teachers, have experienced a severe discomfort in recognising themselves within a system deprived of the essential coordinates of orientation that act as an anchor for the formative experience: bodies, spaces and times codified, tangible objects, books, notebooks, blackboards and desks (Ferraro et al. 2021). The time we are living makes it necessary to monitor the growth of these *new digital-ecosystems* to reduce inequalities, prevent the risk of exclusion and protect students and teachers from antisocial behaviours (Riley 2007; Sandford et al. 2008). Hence, it is necessary to monitor the educational sustainability, of these new ecosystems, for a *civil-digital*, which means careful digitalisation to include as many citizens as possible in the processes of information and education in a lifelong learning perspective (Iavarone 2019). These areas of interest have become nowadays extremely topical, as the gap between education and metaverse is being filled (Duan et al. 2021; Sparkes 2021). In the *atopos* schools, the bodies learning experiences connected with educational, physical activities and personal experiences (i.e., embodied theories) (Shapiro and Stolz 2019) came out deeply mortified. However, it is well established how much the body experiences constitutes an essential pillar in the teaching-learning relationship (Immordino-Yang and Gotlieb 2017). It is also known that the absence of body-related experiences can produce a deep gap in the socio-cognitive interaction of adolescents (Von Hofsten and Rosander 2007; Pollatos 2015; Kosmas et al. 2019). Therefore, to preserve opportunities for inclusion and well-being in adolescence, our research team worked on embodies theories and reported the education system's effects before and during the pandemic with young adolescents (age range 13-19 years old), providing educators and teachers with effective indexes on how to support educational and didactic practices that can compensate the lack of body-cognitive experiences during distance learning (Katić et al. 2021).

What emerged from our studies is the necessity to help students and teachers to cope with phenomena of isolation, boredom and bullying, caused by a lack of physical interactions and cognitive experiences (Ferraro et al. 2020). The research team also showed how important it is to integrate embodied theories and physical activities in asynchronous *emergency*-teaching. These aspects are necessary to produce post-COVID education and regain positive cognitive interactions. On this pattern, by integrating motion-physical activities and learning outcomes, we have recently demonstrated how an intervention of unstructured dance practice, named Bodytasking (Aruta and Ambra 2020), is beneficial to be used with young students with positive results in terms of engagement and cognitive outcomes (Aruta et al. 2021).

In the past months following the lockdowns period, teachers and students have returned to class with a blended approach (Chimbunde 2021), in which is observed a combination of asynchronous, synchronous, distanced learning along with in presence, in class, teaching. However, the scenario does not keep into consideration left-behind children, or students that cannot afford high-speed internet connection and high-tech devices, as we have reported being an issue in the urban areas where the risk of delinquency is high (Ferraro et al. 2020; Iavarone and Trocchia 2020). Additionally, students perception of working remotely might leave behind the less motivated students that need to be able to self-manage their time and improve their Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills in order to keep up with teacher expectations (Kant 2020; Tropea and De Rango 2020; Ares et al. 2021). Moving forward in the post-pandemic scenarios we believe that a blended approach can be successful only if it addresses the potential lack of engagement and the necessity to bring all students to the same level of inclusivity and technologies (Bussey 2021). Additionally, we propose an integration to the blended approach with the combination of sport-related intervention that would positively affect students' engagement (Ambra et al. 2020; Aruta and Ambra 2020; Aruta et al. 2021) and will decrease the concurrent risk of sedentary behaviours (Meyer et al. 2020). Our research has used a dance-based approach, however future studies should be introduced to introduce additional distanced-sports activities (Bates et al. 2021).

2. The COVID-Era Call for Action: The Methodological Approaches

The following session summaries the approaches described in the previous section. The aim is to clearly describe the rigour and robustness of the methods that lead our research approaches and upon which we are rethinking the pedagogical theories. Finally, we aim to share these approaches hoping that this information will produce a solid starting point to open discussion upon education and how we all can rethink it. Our methodological approaches started with the development of a predictive questionnaire: the SMART. The SMART is an acronym for the words Sports, Meals, Activities, Relationships and Technologies. It was initially developed to produce a predictive index of students' behaviours that can be used by teachers and tutors to help young adolescents cope with situations of danger (such as criminality, domestic, drug or technology abuse) (Ambra 2019). The SMART has been fully published, and now the multidisciplinary team is working on its validity and reliability. The following steps would be to translate the questionnaire (currently in Italian) and adopt it in other territories where the risks of youth antisocial behaviours are equally high. In parallel to this research, the multidisciplinary team is exploring the potential use of telecommunications or synchronous online interventions in order to produce a high level of engagement with adolescents and students. Due to the pandemic synchronous online teaching structure, and Distanced Learning, has become the new normality. Hence, we have been collecting interviews and data from our students who reported a lack of engagements and interest in distances learning

classes. To cope with this, we are currently experimenting with interventions that combine physical activities with teaching. In particular, the first approach that we developed was to introduce a dance-based intervention, called Bodytasking, similar to some extent to the well-known Biodanza intervention (Toro 2008; Altamirano Quevedo et al. 2021), that combines a holistic unstructured dance base practice tailored for young adolescents. The first study that we have published using an unstructured interview showed great engagement from the students who were able to follow their dance instructor from their home via dedicated training rooms (e.g., Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams). The results have been integrated in further studies in which we will be looking at comparisons between the Bodystaking in distanced learning with other forms of dance-based intervention to increase the link between physical activities and cognitive capacity in the novelty of the metaverse (Ning et al. 2021). Following a similar approach, the multidisciplinary research team is also working on Functional Advanced Didactic (FAD). The project is extremely novel and is designed to integrate physical activity with standard didactic in order to develop a physical oriented approach in which young students can learn while they play. The Functional Advanced Didactic is currently under investigation and soon we will be able to provide the first evidence and guidelines to share with the national (in Italy) Ministry of Education. We are hoping to experiment with the Functional Advanced Didactic in schools in 2022 and progress on the development of this intervention. Another aspect that the research team is investigating, is in relation to prevention and rehabilitation in particular the role that education has in producing a higher level of awareness in populations at risk (e.g., older adults or minority socio-cultural groups). As a result of that, the University of Naples Parthenope (Italy) has currently fostered the Master in Media Education. Whereas in the broad area of training management, the course prepares qualified figures in distance learning technologies and experts in digital media education with particular reference to social inclusion and discomfort prevention activities within schools, organisations or cooperatives (Iavarone and Iavarone 2004; Iavarone 2009, 2019). The aim is to produce graduates that will find employment in public and private organisations (such as schools, third sector entities, social cooperatives, government institutions, etc.) as an expert in the design and implementation of educational, learning and media education interventions concerning to inclusion activities social and discomfort prevention. This pioneering master's degree, developed at the University of Naples Parthenope (Italy), intends to combine the previous research and increase the knowledge on the topic. Another important aspect of our research concerns postoperative and intensive care unit rehabilitation and the perception that patients had of their treatments and experiences. The purpose is to increase awareness, self-management, and overall wellness in the public health system. A recent example of our work can be found in the latest publication about respiratory muscle training and respiratory physiology (Ferraro 2021) in which clinical, sports and educational approaches are linked together under the aim of increasing people wellness. Finally, we are currently elaborating an integrated technology-didactic system that would

allow students to learn to live why perfume physical activates (such as biking or running) in a virtual environment. The purpose is to increase awareness, inclusivity and motivation in the younger generation, who are more comfortable engaging with technologies (Tootell et al. 2014; Jha 2020; McCrindle 2021).

The articles and research described above are part of the activities that the research team based at the University of Naples Parthenope (Italy) (supervised by Professor Maria Luisa Iavarone) and at the University of Derby (UK) (supervised by Dr Francesco V. Ferraro) have organised to understand and develop novel approaches that would allow and increase the discussion upon education. We have summaries the structure of our methodological approach in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 – The simplistic structure of the graph is an opportunity to consider the key steps that we are taking in developing novel interventions for education. In between each point, there is the collaboration of the whole research team that is collecting data, with mixed methods, developing intervention and reporting the results in open access journal that would increase accessibility and discussion on the topic.

3. Conclusion

The document reported our ideas on education and how we intend to rethink the educational approaches in the post-COVID scenarios. In particular, we have reported part of our results and publications and described in detail our methodological approaches. Our studies from the beginning of the pandemic are partially summarised in Tab. 2.

Table 2 – Part of the most recent work that the multidisciplinary team has produced since the beginning of the pandemic and that have been informed our theories and practices in re-thinking education.

Authors	Year	Title	Results
(Iavarone et al.)	2019	An Experiment of Civil Education the Master of Parthenope University in "Sports educator for risk prevention"	The manuscript explores the experience carried out in a shared vision of 'civil pedagogy' and 'education for territoriality', presenting the novel project related to the Master in Sports Educator for risk prevention now activated at the University of Naples Parthenope.

(Ambra et al.)	2019	Lo Sport come dispositivo educativo nell'ottica della Pedagogia del Benessere. Una ricerca pilota nell'ambito del Progetto Vivere SMART	The document produces a brief preliminary evaluation of an early stage of the SMART questionnaire with 128 young adolescents.
(Ferraro et al.)	2020	Evaluation of Health-Habits with the S.M.A.R.T. Questionnaire: An Observational Study	This paper is the first to report the use of the SMART questionnaire with a sample of 501 adolescents. The results showed a high response rate (93%) and significant differences in the use of technologies and relationship with food in different sex and age groups, respectively.
(Ferraro et al.)	2020	Distance Learning in the COVID-19 Era: Perceptions in Southern Italy	The study is amongst the first to report the effect of the pandemic from a student-centred perspective and produces information to develop future research on asynchronous learning. In particular, the results showed significant variation in the level of study related anxiety.
(Aruta et al.)	2021	Bodytasking. Analysis and perceptions of a distance dance experience	The study showed the first results of a dance-based approach (i.e., Bodytasking) performed in distanced learning with 6 to 10 years old students. Results showed good adherence to the activity and a high level of engagement to the programme. The results are auspicious and suggest implementing the pedagogic discussion toward physical activities in distanced learning.
(Ferraro et al.)	2021	Students' perception of distanced learning: a retrospective analysis	The documents follow up from previous research on students' perception of distanced learning and deeply explore the variation of perception from the early pandemic to the more recent period. The results suggest that students have normalised the current situation and feel more negligible effect by distanced learning.

(Katić et al.)	2021	Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic. A Comparison between European Countries	The research is a comparison between Italian and Central Slovenia students. In particular, the manuscripts explore the students' perception and investigate the potential correlation between the two EU countries. The results showed that it is recommended to foster collaboration between EU countries and to work to prevent students' social isolation.
(Aruta et al.)	2021	The ARTUR LAB: a social intervention for a sustainable well-being education	The operational guidelines of the National Strategies and the 2030 European Agenda for Sustainable Development towards educational activities underline the importance of fostering creative, inclusive, and positive communities in resilient territories; on this topic, The ARTUR Lab described in the document aims to implement pedagogic interventions to ensure the timing and effectiveness of education in territories at risk of adolescents' antisocial behaviour.
(Ferraro et al.)	2021	Preliminary Data from a Dancing Practice in Distanced Learning	The manuscript investigates the effects of a validated dance intervention in distanced learning. 25 adolescents (3 male, 22 females; age range 14-17 years old) were recruited and performed 15 lessons of 2 hours each. Preliminary data are currently under investigation.
(Aruta et al.)	*In press*	Pedagogic intervention for health: Biodanza a narrative systematic review	The document, currently reviewed and in press with the Journal *Movimento,* produces a systematic narrative review of the well-known Biodanza Intervention and compares some of the findings relative to Biodanza with the dance-based approach developed by the research team named: Bodytasking.

The aim of the whole manuscript is to open a table of discussion and reflection on pedagogic topics, and in particular of the high level of disengagement and dropouts that some EU areas are experiencing due to distanced learning and blended approaches. Our studies have been carried out in difficult socio-cultural areas in the South of Italy to raise awareness of the current issue in relation to high level of youth antisocial behaviours (Iavarone and Trocchia 2020; Ferraro et al. 2021). In conclusion, it is really important to explore new scenarios and take the current dramatic situation as an opportunity to rethink education. To build more engaging, more inclusive, more productive, greener, and

more positive schools for our students now (cross-pandemic) and after (post-pandemic). In other publications, we have called this a *call for action*, a call for responsible adults, responsible tutors that need to provide support and assist the younger generation in coping against the post-COVID Era and the raising complex social, cultural, economic and health challenges. Therefore, we recommend future publications to explore more in detail the overall mental health and its association with learning outcomes in the younger generation and build an up to date database that would allow to monitor and predict situations at risk of antisocial behaviours.

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Learning in Cities to Create Sustainable Societies

Roberta Piazza

Abstract:

Cities play a leading role in addressing many of the global challenges of the 21st century. They are an important part of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, which assigns them multiple tasks. Cities should be committed to reducing the ecological footprint and to creating solutions that respond in a differentiated way to the challenges and opportunities in different areas of the world. The sustainable development strategies of cities have determined the definition of different urban models, focused on the need to offer citizens well-being and innovation. This contribution presents the model of learning cities (LC), cities that put learning and education at the heart of their strategies. The paper identifies some of the possible strategies to make cities more responsive to the learning needs arising from the recent pandemic crisis.

Keywords: City; COVID-19; Governance; Learning; Sustainability

1. Why we Need to Care for Cities

Cities play a key role in the lives of most people. Not only do more than half of the world's population live in urban areas, but they are fundamental to social and economic development as engines of national and regional economies. Cities, moreover, as pointed out by the UN Population Division, play a leading role in addressing many of the global challenges of the 21st century, such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, environmental degradation and climate change (UN Habitat 2022).

This is why they are an important part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development because it is expected that the world's urban areas, in absorbing almost all future population growth, will be able to influence future changes.

Cities have the potential to reduce the ecological footprint, connect rural and natural environments and create solutions that respond in a differentiated way to the challenges and opportunities that States face in different areas of the world. Their role is also confirmed by UNESCO's 2030 Agenda, which identifies a specific objective for the development of sustainable cities and communities among the 17 objectives (SDGs) of the Agenda (UN 2015).

SDG 11 («Make cities [...] inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable») (UNESCO 2017, 5) addresses key issues such as affordable housing, sustainable

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mobility, participatory urban planning and air quality. However, an important indicator of the pervasiveness of the role of urban areas in supporting sustainable development is the presence of other objectives related to the competencies and responsibilities of cities in all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): not only in the SDGs relating to health (SDG 3), economic development (SDG 10), peace (SDG 10) and the fight against climate change (SDG 10) but, above all, in the objectives of SDG 4 («Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all») (UNESCO 2017, 22), which establishes lifelong learning as a guiding principle for building more sustainable cities and achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Indeed, the outbreak of the pandemic and the emergence of the massive economic crisis have shown that there is no alternative to the SDGs. This has led to the recognition of the role of cities in addressing the global problems that have arisen: social inclusion, inequalities, opportunities for education and training, the environment, etc. In ensuring prosperity and well-being for communities, international and national governments and local and regional governments are therefore called to design interventions that strengthen the resilience of cities in the face of the current economic recession and counteract the feeling of insecurity resulting from the spread of the pandemic.

Many cities have faced a significant loss of inclusive and cohesive power, with the increased exclusion and segregation of some groups, generally the most disadvantaged. Problems of integration, racist and xenophobic behaviour, and the increase of forms of social marginality have caused the loss of a sense of community, creating efficient governance problems in cities in a context increasingly dominated by the scarcity of public resources.

The sustainable development strategies of cities, focusing on the need to identify concrete actions to support lifelong learning in communities, therefore aim to increase skills and transfer knowledge, as essential tools to promote the well-being of communities. However, they argue that only the sectoral approach (Sector-Wide Approach, SWAp) (Oksanen 2000) at different levels of government – from central to local, with the involvement of different stakeholders and civil society – can respond to the economic and social security needs of communities and meet the learning needs of all citizens. Economic development, social and cultural development of cities are based on integrated actions, aimed at strengthening the ability of cities to react and adapt to constant change (UNESCO 2016). Studies on the resilience of cities show that only where there are cohesive communities and high levels of social capital are the chances of recovery faster than in cities without social cohesion. Only cities that provide the conditions for inclusive processes of learning and innovation are likely to progress more than others (Tibitt 2014). These are the elements that help define learning cities (LC), cities that put learning and education at the heart of their strategies, and that political actions of economic development should not neglect.

2. City Models: Learning Cities

If we consider the different models of cities that have developed globally, it is possible to identify as a common feature the attempt to respond to the problems arising from urban development strategies that are not sensitive to social and environmental sustainability. The Green City (OECD 2011), Smart City, Healthy City[1], EcCowell City (Kearns 2012a, 2012b), Resilient City (OECD 2018)[2] are characterised by particular specialisms, as demonstrated by their focus on technological dimensions, public health or creativity. In some cases, such as the Learning City, Health City and Green City initiatives, these cities share common interests. This makes it easier to realise the benefits for cities if we adopt integrated strategies that recognise these common interests. The EcCoWell Cities, for example, developed within the observatory PASCAL[3], are identified as «Cities that promote community, a shared identity, and the well-being of all citizens» (Kearns 2012a, 11). These cities aim at an integrated development that includes ecology, culture, community, and well-being within the objectives and strategies of lifelong learning (Kearns 2012a, 2012b).

The Learning City is a model now well known internationally (Longworth and Osborne 2010), whose origins date back to the work begun by the OECD in the early Nineties (OECD 1993). They represent a model of development oriented towards the integration of the economic, political, social, cultural and environmental dimensions for the enhancement of the talents of all citizens. Learning is the keyword in this idea of a city, within the framework offered by lifelong learning, which is considered to be the engine for local and regional regeneration. As Norman Longworth, one of the founding fathers of Learning City, reminds us, «a learning city provides both a structural and a mental framework which allows its citizen to understand and react positively to change» (1999, 110). It is, therefore, a learning community whose task is to provide answers to the changes taking place at the global and local level, learning to become prosperous, inclusive and sustainable (Faris and Peterson 2000). The term learning is different from the usual meaning related to traditional educational contexts. In Learning City learning refers to the collective culture of all the actors of a region in designing and implementing social and economic innovations and this implies, for the formal and non-formal education sector, the action of new strategies and the construction of new types of relations with the different economic, social and cultural actors.

[1] «A healthy» city «is continually creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and developing to their maximum potential» (WHO 1998, 13).

[2] See <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regionaldevelopment/resilient-cities.htm> (2023-03-15).

[3] The EcCoWell City was born within the PASCAL Observatory, which will be discussed later.

Putting learning and knowledge at the heart of the development of cities implies a reconsideration of the role of the city. Building a learning city cannot be limited to creating more learning opportunities. Nor does it imply the involvement of subjects in learning activities, often for purposes related to employability, according to a vision of the city as an economic entity (Plumb et al. 2006). The critical point is to support people (from children up to adulthood or old age), in acquiring new skills or new content, to become lifelong learners, able to interpret learning as a journey, a path, rather than an isolated event (Piazza 2015).

Learning city therefore explicitly promotes lifelong learning by encouraging people to self-guide themselves in their learning pathways and to develop a sense of self as an autonomous and self-regulating person. At the same time, it is called upon to encourage institutions to incorporate within their missions a different vision of cities: the aim is to create communities that recognise the value of their learning, as a tool to support the challenges posed by the economic crisis, but above all, as an engine for future planning.

The importance of the LC model is such that, in 2012, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) launched the development of the International LC Platform. The platform aims to create a network intended at mobilising cities and demonstrating how to use the resources available to them effectively in every sector, to develop and enrich the human potential that cities possess. The objectives are linked to supporting the growth of the lifelong person, the development of equality and social justice, the maintenance of social cohesion and the creation of sustainable prosperity (UNESCO 2013). UNESCO acknowledges that the principles and values identified as key features of the LC (UNESCO 2015) – focused on learning as an engine for the development of cities – are also applicable to those living in rural and remote areas, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities. This has allowed, in fact, the widespread diffusion of the model, so much to reach in 2020 230 cities from 64 countries in the world that have joined the network[4].

In the development of learning cities, a contribution is offered by the Place And Social Capital And Learning (PASCAL) Observatory, founded in 2002, an international observatory focused on local development and learning cities and regions[5]. The Observatory's activities include the creation of the Learning

[4] Cf. <http://pascalobservatory.org/pascalnow/pascal-activities/news/unesco-global-network-learning-cities-welcomes-55-new-member-cities> (2023-03-15). The Italian cities in the network are Turin (2016); Fermo (2018); Palermo (2019); Lucca (2020); Trieste (2020) (<http://www.unesco.it/it/ItaliaNellUnesco/Detail/192> [2023-03-15]).

[5] <http://pascalobservatory.org/>. PASCAL is an international network of locally engaged researchers, policy analysts, decision-makers and professionals from the administration, higher education, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector. The objective of PASCAL is the development and renewal of cities and regions. The network places particular emphasis on the role of social capital and lifelong learning in local renewal processes, focusing on the processes of sustainable economic, social and cultural development for the benefit of the communities concerned. But PASCAL also focuses on the sharing of ideas and knowledge between cities and regions, recognising that it is at the local level that

Cities Network (LCN)[6], a network of stakeholder groups within cities, exchanging ideas and direct experiences to develop innovative responses to problems affecting cities. The LCN was built on the positive experience derived from the programme implemented between 2011 and 2013 by PASCAL, called PIE (Pascal International Exchanges)[7], aimed at building sustainable learning cities. The network includes local administrators, academics and associations. The goal is to network regional and national administrations, businesses and work organisations, and establish links with different stakeholders. Networks can develop flexibly, both concerning the participation of members and depending on the priorities identified. The topics addressed include the implementation of integrated approaches to the development of cities built for the well-being of citizens and their families; the relationship between rural and urban learning initiatives; the role of cultural policies in building learning cities; learning cities' contribution to addressing disadvantage and fostering inclusion; building learning cities entrepreneurship-based; developing learning cities faith-based.

The LC model, like other city models, is a crucial resource for national governments – entrusted with the task of providing the regulatory and strategic framework that underpins lifelong learning – and for local governments committed to supporting the creation of sustainable cities.

This model reinforces the concept of 'social' sustainability, aimed at limiting economic dimensions to the benefit of social ones. In a sustainable society, all citizens are encouraged to imagine and create a future in which the means of economic and social security contribute to the sustainability of society as a whole. Social sustainability refers to a positive and long-term condition within communities and community processes that can achieve and maintain this condition. Therefore, the indicators to be considered in the creation and implementation of socially sustainable cities give priority to equity in access to key services (health, education, transport, housing...); the system of cultural relations which supports and promotes cultural integration; the widespread political participation of citizens, at a local level; mechanisms enabling a community to identify its strengths and needs and to meet its needs through community action.

In a design vision, the concept of social sustainability, focusing on the medium to long term future, draws attention to ideas and actions that can help improve society in the present, and to ensure its maintenance for future generations (Willis et al. 2008, 9).

the greatest impact of policy action can often be achieved to ensure a regional competitive advantage (<http://pascalobservatory.org/about/introduction>, [2023-03-15]).

[6] <https://lcn.pascalobservatory.org/> (2023-03-15).

[7] The PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE) project aims to mediate and support exchange, on a bilateral or multilateral basis, between local, community and city agencies and organisations in different parts of the world. Its goal is to connect those sites that have specific missions, including neighbourhood learning centres and libraries, with cultural heritage institutions and make a distinctive contribution to lifelong learning, to build innovative learning communities that promote the well-being and quality of life of all citizens (<http://pie.pascalobservatory.org/> [2023-03-15]).

3. Learning in Cities after COVID-19: Directions for the Future

Cities have been at the forefront in responding to the COVID-19 crisis and in continuing to pursue sustainable development goals. The pandemic has had a different impact at the local level, but many policy responses have been undifferentiated and not very attentive to territorial specificities. These choices, mostly determined by the emergency, highlighted the need for approaches based on local characteristics and centred on people.

The health crisis has turned into a severe economic and social shock and has surprisingly brought to light the inequality between people and places, especially in large cities, where vulnerable groups such as migrants, the poor, women and the elderly have been hardly affected (UN 2020a).

The progress made in the southern hemisphere over the past decade has certainly enabled cities to move towards sustainability, inclusion, better governance and poverty reduction objectives. However, the spread of the virus and the economic and political impact of the global crisis might impede, or even reverse, the significant progress made towards achieving such progress. Considering the profound inequalities between rich and poor areas of the world and the magnitude of the global crisis created by COVID-19, cities will experience the exacerbation of pre-existing problems (Martínez and Short 2021).

Digitalization, an important turning point during the crisis, has become a key component of a 'new normality'. However, the ability to work and learn at a distance has shown profound differences both between countries and within the same nation (UN 2020b). In adult education, a large percentage of users have been excluded from online and distance learning because they lack access to the Internet or do not have the skills to use digital technology. Even for adult education professionals, the pandemic has meant a revision of their digital skills, not always adequate to provide support to students in the changed learning conditions (Baltaci 2021).

In addition, the 'Greta effect' – understood as Greta Thunberg's ability to influence social groups and mobilise collective action to reduce global warming – has accelerated environmental awareness, making the transition to clean mobility and the circular economy more politically and socially acceptable (Sabherwal et al. 2021).

The shock caused by COVID-19 has called for greater attention to the resilience of cities[8]. The ability to be ready to face future crises has highlighted the need for local administrators to competently manage unpredictable situations and to learn in complex situations. Resilience – an important dimension that characterises the learning cities of the future – refers to the ability of cities to

[8] The effect of learning on the resilience of cities has been discussed in academic literature for several years, often in terms of the ability of local people to identify and respond to disruptions in the event of a major disaster (Robin et al. 2019). The notion of resilience in cities is present in SDG 11 and reiterated in Learning Cities and the SDGs: A Guide to Action (UIL 2017) as an approach to linking global goals to local communities (Atchoarena and Howells 2021).

transform themselves to protect vulnerable people from immediate threats, but also, according to the already introduced concept of social sustainability, to build answers for future emergencies. This requires the administrations to rethink urban policies. These should be aimed primarily at strengthening the capacity of administrations to respond to emergencies, and to make cities smarter, greener, more inclusive and resilient (UNESCO 2020, 6).

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that cities not only need resources but also need their citizens to be educated to act properly. The learning city model supports a vision of adult education and community education oriented towards social justice, which encourages the participation of all citizens. Within this model of the city, the right to citizenship is conceived as closely related to individual and collective participation in the living environment, in opposition to exclusively market-oriented values, which often guide education policies. Such a discourse requires to be supported by an effective lifelong learning implementation strategy, which is the basis of the learning city model. As Jarl Bengtsson (2013) had already pointed out, there is no universal strategy, but every nation, every city, and every administration is called to develop its strategy, considering the significant differences existing in the political context, economic, social and educational.

The pandemic crisis has shown that there are several political issues all countries have in common. The first problem is to create the basis for central government and local government to coordinate planning and strategies to support lifelong learning. Planning and actions must concern, vertically, the different actors of the education and training system, with the fundamental aim of identifying and adopting the unique contribution that each stakeholder can offer in promoting lifelong learning. At the horizontal level, it is necessary to promote the fundamental coordination between government at the national and regional levels and the involvement of areas relating to education, the economy, work and social affairs. An important issue is the need to create a coherent and sustainable lifelong learning funding system, based on public and private funding and the personal contribution that each person can offer.

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PART IV

Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in Post-Pandemic Time: A Digital Transformation

Higher Education in Post-Covid19: The Digital Transformation of Work-Integrated Learning Programmes

Daniela Frison

Abstract:

Due to the Sars-Cov-2 health emergency and the forced stoppage of regular teaching and traineeship activities, digital work-integrated learning models have been widely proposed to Higher Education students. Blended practices and experiences referred to as virtual or simulated work-integrated learning or digital workplace learning are emerging as instrumental in achieving several educational outcomes and, among them, a positive attitude toward Professional Learning and Development. The contribution intends to reflect on the main issues that the Higher Education systems have been facing during the pandemic, with a specific focus on the management of internship and work-integrated learning activities and projects, and the possible widening of the definition of work-integrated learning.

Keywords: Digital Transformation; Higher Education; Internship; Professional Development; Work-integrated Learning

1. Introduction

Due to the Sars-Cov-2 health emergency and social distancing measures imposed by governments around the world, Higher Education systems have been forced to evolve from an on-campus to an online teaching-learning scenario and to the exploration of alternative strategies to guarantee teaching, learning, and services to the students.

With reference to the education and training sector, the Council of the European Union, within the *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030),* emphasised that «the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that education Z and training systems must be sufficiently flexible and resistant to interruptions in their regular cycles» (Council Resolution 2021, C 66/3) in order to find strategies and «solutions to continue the delivery of teaching and learning processes in different ways and contexts, and to ensure that all learners [...] continue to learn». Under the goal of the European Education Area, by

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2025, education and training systems are expected to ensure «the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens» together with «sustainable economic prosperity, the green and digital transitions, and employability» (Council Resolution 2021, C 66/3).

Concerning specifically Higher Education systems, the focus on the digital transformation was evidenced by studies and empirical researches concerning the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. The phenomenon has been analysed also by international analysis and reports that underline, above all, three issues that Higher Education faced: firstly, the impact on teaching and learning due to restrictions on campus, face-to-face teaching, and the increase in online education and hybrid teaching mode; secondly, the impact on international mobility, with specific rules for incoming international students and the increase of virtual mobility and strategies to encourage forms of Internationalization at Home; and, thirdly, the impact on transition from Higher Education to work due to the reduction in job opportunities (EUA 2021, 2022; OECD 2021a; Unesco 2021). Regarding this last point, Unesco (2021) highlights that, on the one hand, COVID-19 has caused damage to the global economy by reducing job opportunities and increasing the unemployment rate. Nevertheless, on the other hand, many countries reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced the digitalization process based on the transition into teleworking, increasing the demand for information technology skills.

This transition has also concerned internship and job placement in Higher Education. However, little is known regarding the impact of this shift on internships and strategies followed by Higher Education institutions to guarantee forms of getting to know the world of work even during the pandemic and alternative solutions within study programmes that require internships for graduation to support their students so as not to delay their graduation (Teng et al. 2021). If reports especially focused on Work-Based Learning opportunities are available with reference to the VET systems, focused on challenges faced in order to guarantee practical components of VET in school-based settings facing a relevant shortage of opportunities (Cedefop 2020; OECD 2021b), this point emerges as only lightly explored by studies and analysis focused on Higher Education, and general data on the phenomenon are limited. Nevertheless, both conceptual and empirical studies are provided about micro-experiences offered to specific targets (e.g. students attending a specific study programme) with reference to blended practices and experiences referred to as virtual or simulated Work-Integrated Learning or digital workplace learning proposed to Higher Education students to replace on-site internship or job placement opportunities. Under this framework, the contribution aims to reflect on the main issues that the Higher Education systems have been facing during the pandemic, with a specific focus on the management of internship and Work-Integrated Learning activities, projects and programmes and their possible expansion based on the digital transformation forced by the health emergency.

2. Toward New Models of Work-Integrated Learning

The above-mentioned strategies to guarantee forms of getting to know the world of work refer to what is called in North American literature Work-Related Learning (Dirkx 2011) and in Australian literature as Work-Integrated Learning (Cooper et al. 2010; Gardner and Barktus 2014). Both terms concern the integration between formal and professional settings, to create meaningful benefits for students, organisations, and other stakeholders (Gardner and Barktus 2014; Frison 2016). Based on consolidated definitions provided internationally, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is used as an umbrella term referring to a period spent in a professional environment with different purposes and objectives such as study, the development of generic or technical skills, and the exploration of possible career options and job opportunities (Coll et al. 2011). On the other hand, it is more widely related to «a complex educational phenomenon. It is at once a set of educational missions (e.g., careers education), a range of activities (work experience), a collection of topics (understanding credit and work) and a repertoire of teaching and learning styles» (Huddleston and Stanley 2013, 11). Indeed, as Stewart and Owens (2013) underline, Work-Integrated Learning must combine workplace learning with theoretical learning, even in degrees without a vocational focus where spending time in the workplace is not required by the study programme. Beyond the traditional definitions of Work-Integrated Learning, Zegwaard and Rowe underline that «as the practice of WIL continues to expand, it is indeed time to broaden the range of types of WIL that are offered to higher education students» (2019, 330).

Already before the pandemic, new models of Work-Integrated Learning were emerging. As highlighted by Kay and others (Kay et al. 2018), models such as micro-placements, hackathons, competitions and events were moving away from approaches requiring extensive time in workplaces toward short, authentic activities. Furthermore, since before the health emergency, the literature highlighted the effectiveness of blended versions of Work-Integrated Learning, defined as virtual or simulated Work-Integrated Learning (Fong and Sims 2010; Sheridan et al. 2019, 8) or digital Workplace Learning (Littlejohn and Margaryan 2014), based above all on study cases focused on specific targets and referred to the offer of learning environments that enrich the workplace experience, generally according to a blended approach. An example was offered by Larkin and Beatson (2014) who proposed a blended approach combining face-to-face workshops and online resources, using online reflective journals and digital stories as assessment of a marketing internship. Fong and Sims (2010) shared the experience of using asynchronous Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to implement e-WIL (electronic Work-Integrated Learning) in the curriculum of an undergraduate business degree subject at Victoria University. ICT was used to support interactions between students and stakeholders to pursue a more inclusive WIL experience through technological networking capabilities. In 2019, always before the pandemic, Sheridan, Gibbons and Price referred to the use of online theoretical instruction and online WIL assessment within an

undergraduate Capstone core business subject. Empirical research has recognised these blended versions as instrumental in achieving several educational outcomes, such as the development of employability skills (Jackson 2015) and professional identity (Bowen 2018), as well as the exploration of career opportunities and the facilitation of students' transitions to the workplace (Billett 2009).

Study cases traceable in the literature show how these proposals have seen an important implementation in the lockdown phase and interruption of teaching and learning activities and on-site Work-Integrated Learning strategies. They are emerging as alternative ways to offer students de-situated WIL opportunities, which authentically refer to settings and professional challenges by emphasising their educational and learning potential, even if remotely. It seems that the digital version of WIL refers to virtual interactions that alternate moments of work in the field with online activities.

Anyway, in the course of 2020 and the epidemiological emergency, with a specific focus on internships, proposals carried out entirely remotely have increased together with blended internship. An example is the work of Bisland, Nagy and Smith with reference to the professions in the tourism and hospitality sector. The authors emphasise the centrality of «innovative virtual elements of the program served to prepare students for real placements, and also to develop their self-agency to experience learning in placements distant from the education provider» (2020, 426) led by the premise that «campuses can close, but learning must continue» (Nguyen and Pham 2020). Likewise, a significant literature review was developed by the Centre for Research on College-University of Wisconsin-Madison Workforce Transitions to find common criteria to define «online internship», guided by the recognition that«online internships have become the central modality of work-based learning for students around the world» (Hora et al. 2020, 3). The authors notice the variety of terms being used to describe Work-Based Learning programmes that do not occur in a face-to-face manner, such as virtual, micro-, remote, and online internships. They also underline that «the variability that exists among traditional in-person internships (e.g., duration, quality of tasks, type of mentoring) also applies to online or remote internships» (Hora et al. 2020, 7).

3. Work-Integrated Learning in Italy and at the University of Florence: Three Study Cases

Due to the Sars-Cov-2 health emergency and the forced stoppage of regular activities, digital WIL models have been proposed to higher education students in Italy as well. Concerning the Italian emergency, the Prime Minister's Decree of 4 March 2020, regarding urgent measures related to the containment and management of the pandemic, announced the stoppage of all educational activities in the schools of every order and degree and the attendance of higher education activities starting from 5 March 2020. Based on clarifications offered by Rectoral Decrees, Italian universities reacted almost immediately by providing guidelines and activating institutional platforms for the management of Distance

Learning, to guarantee a regular continuation of study paths during COVID-19. Conversely, the development of strategies to face the stoppage of WIL opportunities was more gradual and based on individual university initiatives.

An exploratory study conducted during the first lockdown months investigated universities' reactions within the wide area of career guidance and WIL to identify strategies to transfer face-to-face services into remote digital ones to deal with the health emergency (Frison and Pellegrini 2020). A documented analysis of university websites, specifically concerning internships, helped identify three different strategies activated by Italian universities: firstly, the stoppage of the internship experiences until the end of the lockdown; secondly, the replacement of the internship with a remote modality according to the host organisation in agreement with the university tutor; thirdly, the replacement of the internship with a distance proposal offered by the university, for carrying out the entire internship or part of it[1]. The analysis showed that six weeks after the suspension of the in-presence activities, only 5 out of 62 analysed universities offered and formalised alternative strategies for completing the hours missing until the end of the internship, proposing opportunities of «replacement of the internship with distance modalities»[2] (Frison and Pellegrini 2020, 246).

Within the third strategy of replacement of the internship with a distance proposal, two relevant experiences can be found at the University of Florence, both situated under the wide framework of digital WIL.

Indeed, among the five above-mentioned universities, the University of Florence was one of those that promptly reacted with the programme Training to work: building your future. The programme – still in progress – was aimed at students belonging to any course of study, from bachelor's degrees to doctoral courses, with the aim of supporting them in the process of personal and professional development. It was designed within the framework of Career Development Learning embedding the pedagogical and formative dimension of employability not as a result, but as a learning facilitation (Boffo 2018; Smith et al. 2020), via the implementation of work-related strategies and methods. Three modules have been proposed starting from March 2020, focused on: firstly, how to write a CV; secondly, how to write an introduction letter; thirdly, how to prepare for a job interview. From the beginning of the programme until January 2021, 1584 students and graduates were involved (Boffo and Frison 2014). Even if the programme was designed independently from and before the health emergency to offer an off-site, flexible and on-going opportunity for students inspired by digital work-integrated learning models, due to the lockdown it was opened to students who had not reached at least 60% of the scheduled internship hours,

[1] For an in-depth analysis of the survey carried out in the country, please refer to Frison and Pellegrini 2020. The goal of the exploratory study was to identify and distinguish between strategies that provided just an only one online transposition of face-to-face services into digital ones, opposite to strategies that led to a rethinking and redesigning - even partial - of guidance services and Internship.

[2] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

ensuring that they would acquire the ECTS necessary to complete the mandatory internships to obtain their degree in the April 2020 session[3].

While the above-mentioned experience was aimed at all students belonging to the University of Florence, a specific proposal targeted master's students on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. A formative model guided by the principles of WIL and a self-directed guidance approach (Federighi et al. 2021) implemented to enhance the training potential of digital exposure to the world of work. With the aim of offering students an opportunity for online internships, the programme Internship-ON proposed four modules, each with a different focus: firstly, encouraging a reflection on their professional prospects; secondly, enhancing knowledge about educational services and organisations (by means of scenarios, simulations, and a revised version of the business model canvas); thirdly, enhancing knowledge about educational services' management processes; fourthly, designing a Personal and Professional Development Plan. The digital internship proposal – which is still in progress – was first implemented between May 2020 and November 2020, in two distinct editions, and involved over 250 students, future adult learning and continuing education professionals[4].

The two above-mentioned programmes offer two different study cases on digital WIL in line with the international literature. The first one aims to support the development of employability skills offering students digital environments that allow them to benefit from first opportunities of connection with the world of work, facing tasks and challenges authentically related to professional contexts to facilitate students' transition to the workplace (Boffo and Frison 2020). The second one aims to replace a situated work experience, providing students with an opportunity of exploration of professional settings in the educational field, and a first contact with professionals to support the development of professional identity as well as the exploration of career opportunities in the sector and the knowledge of educational organisations.

4. Health Emergency and Digital WIL Proposals: Arising Themes

While referring to the sources cited above for a more in-depth analysis of the experiences presented, starting from them and from the international literature on digital WIL, it is possible to identify some emerging themes and lines of development regarding the proposals of WIL programmes in Higher Education.

First of all, the above-mentioned programmes carried out at the University of Florence, in line with the international literature on WIL, can enhance the reflection on the inclusive potential of digital and blended forms of WIL to deal

[3] For any further clarification on the proposal, here is the link to the Career Service of the University of Florence: <https://www.unifi.it/p10548.html>. For further details on the framework under which *Training to work: building your own future* was designed, please refer to Boffo and Frison 2020.

[4] For further details of results from a first survey of participants' perception of effectiveness and functionality of the digital internship proposal, please refer to Del Gobbo et al. 2021.

with inequalities and access difficulties to career education and Work-Integrated Learning opportunities (Frison 2022). Despite being focused on WIL to face the health emergency, the two case studies also offer a link to themes of equity, inclusion, and the differences in the ways students from low socio-economic backgrounds or rural/peripherical areas access information and opportunities and make decisions about their careers. As Groves and colleagues highlight about this issue, «one student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that» (2021, 1). Digital WIL programme shave the potential to reach wider numbers of students, facilitating access and an initial approach to the workplace.

Secondly, in this way digital WIL programmes can assume the profile of possible pre-WIL programmes (Davis et al. 2020), namely digital WIL opportunities as preparatory programmes, which initiate both students (and supervisors, if involved) in dealing with situated work experiences and figure out challenges and requests potentially coming from the workplace. According to this preparatory approach, digital WIL allows the university to design and arrange collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships (Groves 2021, 1) that become the basis for further in-presence work placement opportunities, starting from the inclusion of multiple stakeholders, such as education and training providers, companies, non-formal organisations, and the community as well, that provide more chances for students to explore a range of career options and pathways and expand their network.

Thirdly, this preparatory approach helps to overcome an association between WIL experiences as guidance opportunities strictly related to decisions and choices about further study paths or careers as well as the sequential approach 'study first, work later'. Independently from the stoppage of in-presence activities, digital WIL can be integrated within the curriculum offering regular face-to-face classroom sessions in conjunction with online WIL to overcome also the so-called 'too little, too late' proposals (Moote and Archer 2018) in favour of more, earlier, and longer-term work-related programmes and offers.

Fourthly, an earlier approach – even if undirected – with the workplace and with the university's work-related proposals, can encourage students' awareness about the relevance of attending academic events and work-related opportunities provided by the university and the study programme based on a collaborative partnership with stakeholders and the community (e.g. programmes provided by the university's career service or guidance, career education, and job placement opportunities especially designed and carried out within the study programme). The theme of networking and university-community partnership emerges as a key issue: both as an entry factor for the design of digital WIL activities – with support and cooperation provided by workplace witnesses and companies, key actors involved in both the above-mentioned programmes – and as an outcome for attending students who have the chance to know, meet and keep in contact with representatives of the world of work.

Arising themes about Higher Education in post-COVID19 and the ongoing digital transformation of Work-Integrated Learning highlight how the definition of WIL is embracing more and more challenges, opportunities, and a va-

riety of methods and activities, toward a broader perspective compared to the past. The impact of digital strategies followed by Higher Education institutions to guarantee forms of WIL even during the health emergency and the evolution in the post-COVID period of these alternative solutions provided by study programmes require deeper analysis in order to identify success factors and methodological inputs toward an increase of WIL opportunities that exceed the goals, the design and the timing provided so far.

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Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in Post-Covid Times: A Digital Transformation

Sabine Schmidt-Lauff

Abstract:

Learning and teaching in higher education can help to face the rapidly changing demands and transformations in social, professional, and individual life. «Digitalisation is not only an additional challenge but also an effective means to address key challenges for higher education in the 21st century» (Rampelt et al. 2019, 6). Digital practices in Higher Education forced by the Covid-19 disruption are challenging educational processes at every level. Digitization is here no longer just about the question of the technical dimension, but, about the structural interweaving and relational co-constitution of the digital with the social, the cultural, and the individual. Here the INTALL@home vision of learning international comparison without being physically mobile – theoretically framed and elaborated in this paper – starts.

Keywords: Digitalization; Digitization; Higher Education; Online Learning; Transformation

1. Transformation, Digitization and Digitalization in Education

In a very general and everyday meaning, *transformation* can be first of all understood as a synonym for *dynamics or movements*. Our daily experiences are characterised by rapid changes, not always as progressions, but with deep effects on the individual subject centrally. Going beyond this natural understanding of transformation «[t]he clarification of the concept of transformation» can trace secondly «a 'continuity in change'» (Müller et al. 2002, in Schäffter 2020, 289). Central paradigms for transformation are its radical accelerative dynamic (Rosa 2013), its omnipresence and ubiquity (none and nothing excluded), its non-linear but multi-complex movements (Schmidt-Lauff 2012; von Felden and Schmidt-Lauff 2015, 12), and, the contingencies, unpredictable side-effects or incalculable consequences (world, society, individual; Beck 1986). From a relation-theoretical point of view, *transformations* are a marker of our human being: the human life course itself might be understood as an interlocking, reciprocal set of conditions of interfering developments or changes, which follow an obstinate course logically, but at the same time are resonantly related to each other (Schäffter 2020).

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The concept of interference within transformation means both: the possibility of an interacting amplification and its mutual neutralisation.

To understand transformation better, its difference from just 'movement' or '(step by step) change' is important in our modernity. Schäffter is talking about an «existential drama» (2020, 288), which is «structured around open experience thresholds» (Giddens 2010 [1991], 148). Accordingly, *digitization* is hereby an interfering factor: it mirrors the global potential to virtual move or connect worldwide and interconnect from time, space, or local presence. It is about the technical ability to dissolve or replace body-bound communication. The self-identity and the individual lifespan «becomes separated from the externalities of place, while place itself is undermined by expansion of disembedding mechanism» (Giddens 2010 [1991], 146), as Giddens almost stated more than twenty years ago.

Digital Transformation affects all social spheres: our social relationships, forms of communication, and interaction are permeated by them, as are our spatiotemporal worlds of movement (life), cultural practices, and the systems of economy, politics, work, and education involved in them. *Digitization* in a broad understanding «is the conversion of analog to digital, whereas *digitalization* is the use of digital technologies and digitized data to impact» work, life, education, etc. (Chapco-Wade 2018). Accordingly, digitalization creates new revenue streams. The education sector (currently mostly for school and higher education, not so much for the sector of adult education till today) was discussed and critically reflected under the term 'EdTech'.

In its original meaning, the term *digitization* describes the transformation of analog values into a digitally usable format – from the invention of the electric telegraph in the 19th century to the first digital circuit in the 1930s and the first hypertext systems in the 1960s to today's World Wide Web.

> With increasing computing power, the networking of systems and (mobile) devices, and access to data and information independent of time and place, digital media and tools are changing the way people communicate, inform themselves, work, and learn. Likewise, ways and modalities of opinion formation, participation in political decision-making processes, and social and cultural participation are changing.
> This also fundamentally changes the framework conditions and opportunities for education (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2020, 231)[1].

On top of, the ongoing scenario of the COVID-pandemic emergency occurred as *sand in the world gears*[2]. It generates today's and future upheavals which are not yet foreseeable. Learning and Teaching in Higher Education may help to face these changing demands as transformations, and opens for critical reflections as well. Like Schäfer and Ebersbach resume «[…] the relevance of new

[1] Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the author.

[2] Arte TV-Documentation. n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnvqZbfcSEE> (2023-03-15).

media in educational processes and the relevance of digitization for a sustainable society» seem to be clear: «Digitization is the backbone, the material and at the same time the informational basis of the knowledge society. No one can get around it. So as many analog processes as possible must be digitized», but on the second glance, our reality «and thus the subject matter of science, is more complex. Digitization changes perception» (2021, 8).

Digitization is no longer just about the question of the technical dimension (e.g. EdTech, programmed algorithms), but about the structural interweaving and relational co-constitution of technical with social, cultural and individual. Algorithms intervene in everyday life by suggesting certain decision options to users, and in return excluding non-preprogrammed decisions. Thus, algorithms themselves become constitutive or regulating factors for individual and social action. Klinge empirically shows how the use of everyday life learning apps is controlled by (teaching-)algorithms: «Apps are not pedagogically neutral […] they frame the learning activities in a certain (mainly playful-behavioristic) way and thus generate certain ways of thinking and acting in the first place» (2020, 67).

For education, teaching, and learning the structural interweaving of the digital with the social and individual is relevant in many ways. Recent studies on teaching staff show that a positive basic attitude towards new media correlates positively with self-efficacy expectations and use in the mediation process (Gegenfurter et al. 2020). Others point out; that and how digital competencies (digital literacy) become necessary as learning competencies in higher education. Digital practices in Higher and Adult Education forced by the Corona pandemic are changing both the teachers and the learner's settings, as well as the learning and educational processes or styles of teaching and learning, the means of interaction as well as communication and relationships. The educational landscape as a whole is confronted with a digital continuation of traditional inequalities and at the same time with *new* types of inequality lines.

2. (European) Framing Actions for Digital Learning

One of the largest and currently most powerful Mega-Projects focuses on «a **strategic dialogue with Member States** in order to prepare a possible proposal for a Council Recommendation by 2022 on the enabling factors for successful digital education»[3] (EU COM 2020, 11). This «**Council Recommendation on online and distance learning**» offers a proposal in a first step «**for primary and secondary education**», but, focus on «an EU-wide common understanding of how to make distance, online and blended learning effective, inclusive and engaging» (EU COM 2020, 11, 6).

The aim of «resetting education and training for the digital age» is enhancing digital skills and competencies, literally for «the digital transformation» (EU

[3] <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0624> (2023-03-15).

COM 2020, 2). Digital literacy, digital skills, and competencies from an early age also include the knowledge and awareness of «fighting disinformation» (EU COM 2020, 2). The European strategy sets on offering «computing education», «good knowledge and understanding of data-intensive technologies, such as artificial intelligence» and «**advanced digital skills,** which produce more digital specialists and also ensure that girls and young women are equally represented in digital studies and careers» (EU COM 2020, 2).

This is framed by a consultation of 42 EU partner organisations within and based on empirical data about the necessity. The following figure illustrates, why action is needed:

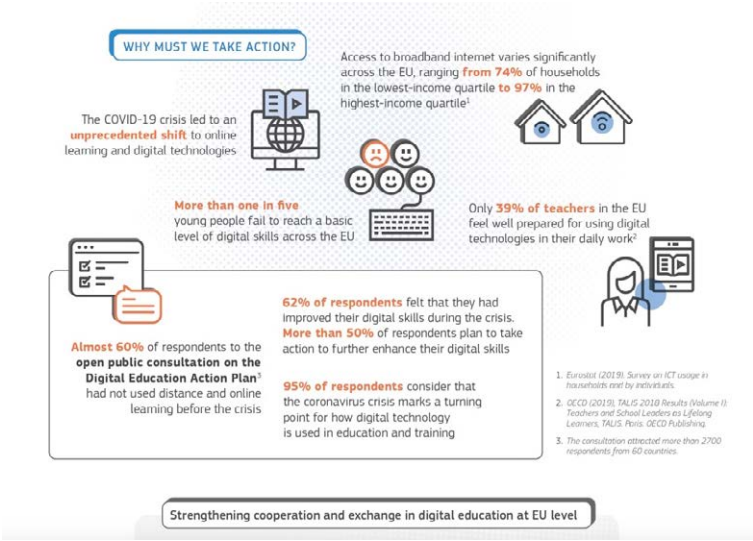

Figure 1 – Why action is needed? Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/deap-factsheet-sept2020_en.pdf (2023-03-15).

The factsheets in Fig. 1 show that still, many low-income homes have no access to computers and broadband access varies widely across the EU depending on household income. Additionally, UNESCO estimations showed that, at the end of 2020, 90% of the world's students are currently out of school, and «[o]ne year into the COVID-19 pandemic, close to half the world's students are still affected by partial or full school closures» (UNESCO 2021)[4].

On the other hand, «more than one in five young people fail to reach a basic level of digital skills across the EU» and «only 39% of teachers in the EU feel well prepared for using digital technologies in their daily work» (see Fig. 1). The picture also points out that the COVID-19 crisis leads to an unprecedented shift to online learning and the use of digital technologies (UNESCO 2021).

[4] <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> (2023-03-15).

Studies show that, unlike in schools, campus- (87%) and learning-management systems (85%) were almost universally implemented prior to COVID-19, so that teachers and students in higher education have access to a generally good technical infrastructure (Schmid et al. 2017). The fact that during the COVID-19 lockdown higher education institutions – not least in comparison with schools – were able to switch relatively quickly and easily to almost fully digitized teaching (Dreyer 2020) is due to this previously mentioned status quo. However, the extent to which students are prepared for such a comprehensive digitalization of working in their learning, both in terms of technology and infrastructure and in terms of competencies, has not yet been sufficiently investigated. Studies in the USA on digital literacy confirm: «exposure does not equal understanding concerning students' daily interaction with digital technologies» (Murray and Pérez 2014, 95). Even for the generation of digital natives, a self-determined, creative, or even reflective use of digital media in studies cannot be assumed per se, and the «private use of digital media» in both hardware and software «does not necessarily translate into everyday university life» (Persike and Friedrich 2016, 7). This calls for an expansion and acquisition of digital competencies for students as well as for teachers in higher education. In particular, the public EU consultation results from September 2020 shed more light on some issues (refer to Fig. 1), which are later on relevant for INTALL@home (see Chapter 3):

- almost 60% of the respondents had not used distance and online learning before the crisis;
- respondents say that online learning resources and content need to be more relevant, interactive, and easy to use;
- over 60% felt that they had improved their digital skills during the crisisand more than 50% of respondents want to do more;
- 95% consider that the COVID-19 crisis marks a point of no return for how technology is used in education and training.

Especially the last aspect – 'point of no return' – is important for this paper. Although we cannot predict the future, we can reflect on earlier digital developments like blended learning studying programmes or OERs (Open Educational Resources like INTALL@home). The digitalization of learning and higher education is not new, and how many already established instruments might play out in 'Post-COVID-times'?

3. INTALL@home: One Tool within the Digital Transformation in Higher Education

Online Education or online learning generally

> […] implies that students are physically distant from the instructors and require a delivery method […]. The interaction between students and teachers is mediated by technology, and the design of learning environments can have a considerable influence on learning outcomes […]. Online education has been studied for decades and effective online teaching is the result of careful instructional design and planning […] (Aguilera-Hermida 2020).

For INTALL@home the vision to 'understand international comparison' and 'learn about international comparative education' *without* being physically mobile is the center point for its instructional design. Our vision of a digital-supported studying approach at home was to provide all interested learners and teachers international comparison in ALE (adult learning and education) with an open (digital) architecture. As OER it contains three different 'content boxes' (a. Sustainable Development Goals, b. Professionalisation, c. Employability[5]) with a collection of materials, commented texts, online tutorials, and a quiz to reflect upon the individual learning outcome – all fully open access.

3.1 The Vision of International Comparison Without Being Physically Mobile

INTALL@home was developed as one intellectual output and part of the whole INTALL-concept and blended learning framework within the ERAMUS+ strategic partnership INTALL (2018-2021 *International and Comparative Studies for Students and Practitioners in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning*[6]). We started nearly two years before the world faced the health crisis COVID-19.

The idea of studying international comparison without being physically mobile roots in the needs of non-traditional students in ALE and practitioners: non-traditional university student enrolment in Higher Education is growing globally, partly driven by the growing number of students in employment (OECD 2017). This is especially true for those students, who frequently come from a lower socio-economic background and are frequently the first in their families to go to university[7].

Especially in Ireland – one INTALL-partner –, many of those who are interested in studying and researching adult education are themselves adult learners, who returned to study later in life and have significant work and/or caring responsibilities. In Ireland and other partner countries, there is a policy commitment to social inclusion, widening access to higher education for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, Eurostudent data clearly show that more socially privileged students most likely tend to benefit from traditional mobility programmes (DZHW 2018).

The obstacles to mobility are especially strong for the target group of practitioners in adult education, which are the second addressed target group of our ERASMUS+ project INTALL. This was the rationale for a high need at all partner organisations to offer study opportunities for physically non-mobile students as well.

[5] <https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/intallhome/> (2023-03-15).

[6] <https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/home> (2023-03-15).

[7] Cf. INTALL Application KA2 - Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices; KA203 - Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education.

3.2 Instructional Design and Digital Tools

An instructional design, in short, describes the «systematic planning of learning units and learning environments» (Zawacki-Richter 2016, 16). More in detail:

> As a process, the instructional design aims at the creation of learning environments, including experts' knowledge on individual conditions of learning, specific situational requirements, resources, and related systems. As a product, the instructional design includes the learning environment *following didactical principles* as well as unfold the structure of the included *learning topics and activities* (Zawacki-Richter 2016, 16).

INTALL@home is embedded as a stand-alone unit in INTALL's blended-learning environment. The chart unfolds the digital learning environment and visualises how existing[8] and new materials were included and arranged as didactical elements with three different learning topics:

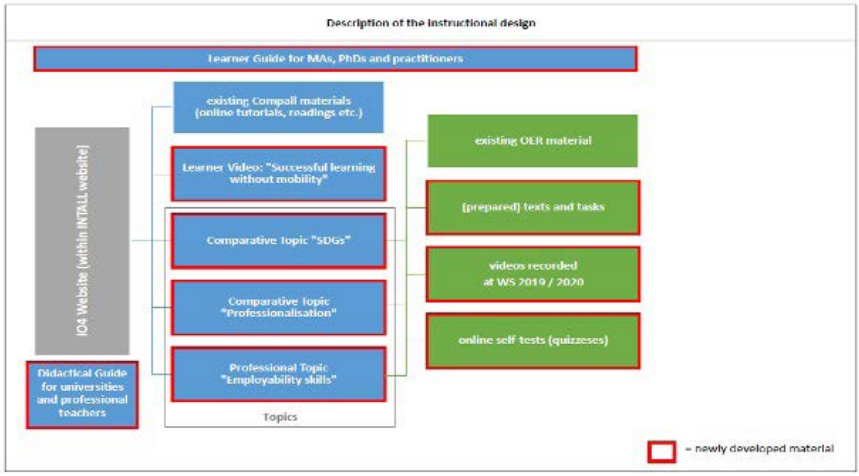

Figure 2 – INTALL@home instructional design.

For the redesign (Wannemacher and Bodmann 2021), new online material e.g. videos, guides, tasks, and self-tests were produced. Already available online learning elements from the partner consortium's past EU projects were integrated. The instructional design additionally focuses on easy accessibility to and efficient use of OERs and tries to balance the outlines for the development of self-directed new didactical elements and the integration of existing ones from

[8] INTALL@home integrated or further developed the COMPALL **joint module** (COMPALL - Comparative Studies in Adult and Lifelong Learning), which offers online tutorials, information sheets, and several materials.

previous projects. Moreover, new digital material by INTALL (e.g. ePortfolios, digital employment stories) is cross-linked. INTALL@home is fully based on open accessible resources to create a sustainable environment (independent from its 'mother-project').

At this point, the complexity that has arisen may need to be critically marked. Accordingly, the interim evaluation with students and practitioners showed that some learners need more patience to go through all the pages to find a topic and content they like to work on. On the other hand, no one criticised the fact that you could be really 'lost in space' due to the framing information. I will try to elaborate this further and invite you to explore INTALL@home by reading[9].

3.3 Exploring INTALL@home

One traditional and core pedagogical principle is about the interaction with the learner: deep and meaningful learning experiences are best supported by actively engaged learners. To support this, INTALL@home follows the idea of *pre-structured* but *self-directed* learning pathways. The overall question is: how can ICT support intense, varied, and motivated engagement in learning processes in our case? Accordingly, the landing page starts with an infographic about 'How to work on this page in 4 steps'.

Additionally, the landing page offers an introduction video about 'Successful learning in comparison without mobility' which elaborates, what is meant by 'successful' and our definition of online learning:

> [...] INTALL presents you with options and possibilities in international comparative analysis, but there is not the ONE way – you have to build your own pathway through self-directed inquiry but with all the support from this web space![10]

Moreover, a *digital didactical guide* elaborates «[w]hat are the key benefits of comparative analysis in adult education, and how can you get started?». Together with international experts and colleagues «we look at why comparative research is at the heart of what science is today, and how it can support adult education as a field» by eight short clips in .mp4 format for easy streaming:

[9] Or trying out: <https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/intallhome/> (2023-03-15) .

[10] <https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/intallhome/> (2023-03-15).

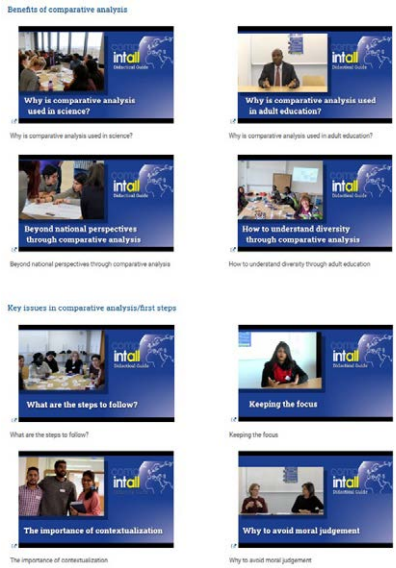

Figure 3 – Didactical (online) guide (<https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/intallhome/>).

The above-mentioned 'content boxes' offer two comparative topics (a. Sustainable Development Goals, b. Professionalisation) and one professional topic (c. Employability). All topics are starting with the same style of a *digital advance organiser* to provide the user with a first piece of information and guiding pathway:

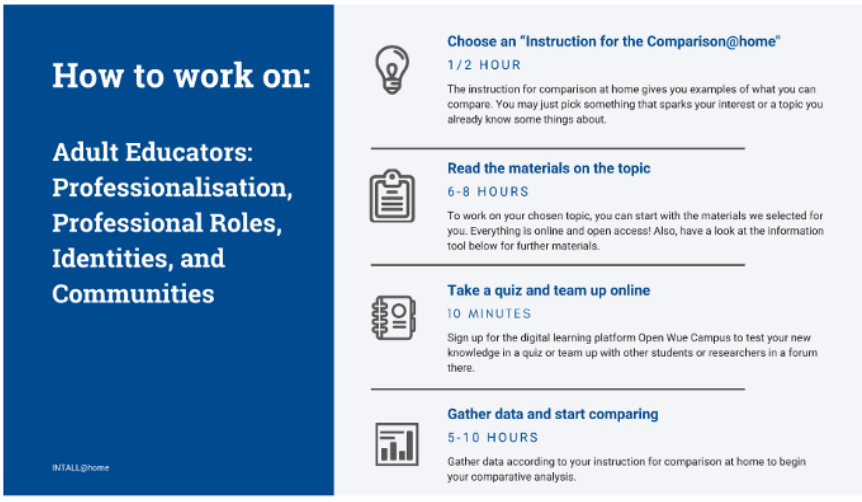

Figure 4 – Example Landing page 'content-box Professionalisation' (<https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/intallhome/professionalisation/>).

Each content box and each *learning material* too can be used in combination or as a stand-alone unit. The pages provide again recommendations on how to work on the topic, links to online tutorials and didactical guiding short-videos, reading recommendations plus abstract, crosslinks to video material (e.g. from practice), online self-tests as well as networking options (e.g. links to interactive online groups for collaboration like LinkedIn; synchronic discussion via Adobe-Connect).

3.4 General Remarks

The learners and teachers as users can find *semantic signposts* on each INTALL@home page. These signposts can be understood as further didactical (online) guidelines. The *digital semantic signposts* differ from providing short information (e.g. abstract to a recommended text) to more complex guiding questions (e.g. what can be expected here). They are complemented by *diagrammatic signposts* containing 'pictorial knowledge', like Klinge (2020) states. The user will see the hand or an arrow to mark starting here the online tutorial or video:

Figure 5 – Digital diagrammatic signposts. Own source.

However, INTALL@home may be used and adapted by teachers in their courses and syllabus. Therefore, we would kindly invite colleagues, to try INTALL@home as a didactical methodology in their home universities or adult education associations for professionalization activities e.g. within blended-learning settings.

4. Conclusions

The instructional design (architecture) and the main objectives were developed during a time when COVID-19, the pandemic, and the health crisis were

far out of our thinking. Maybe examples like INTALL@home can mark the next step into a Past-COVID time. Giannini, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education, states:

> We need to come together not only to address the immediate educational consequences of this unprecedented crisis but to build up the longer-term resilience of education systems. (Huang et al. 2020, 4)

INTALL@home may hereby offer a fully open-access learning environment enabling learners as well as teachers to international and comparative studies in adult education and lifelong learning in a self-directed online format or via blended-learning settings. It, therefore, combines digital material and support with human encouragement, the same as voices in online tutorials or videos, given by students and international colleagues.

In addition, INTALL is expected to encourage the use of existing open access learning and reflection tools for capacity building in comparative adult education research in a globalized and digitized world. Moreover, we follow the European idea and hope and focus on the potential of social inclusion of non-mobile students and practitioners. INTALL@home counts on the learners' interest and potential to navigate through all the materials and digital options on INTALL@home. We – as creators – count on future visions, which enable a digital transformation and not just a digital adaptation.

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The Digital Transformation of Higher Education: From INTALL Project Results to Practical Implications for the *New Normal*

Concetta Tino

Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaped every area of our lives in few months, and the consequent effects at personal, professional and organisational level are unprecedented. Specifically, as a consequence of this forced change, Higher Education systems have registered the necessity to transform learning and teaching processes to provide responses to new learners' needs. The aim of the paper is to present the output of a comparative group discussion of Intall project, and to show how it supports reflection on some practical implication for the *New Normal*. Reflecting on the output obtained through a comparative group discussion on 'Re-thinking teaching and learning during the pandemic Covid-19', the paper wants to present the main issues that the education systems have been facing during the pandemic, and to provide insight into the practical implications for the *New Normal* in higher and adult education. This paper provides some contributions to the debate on teaching and learning in higher education for the *New Normal*.

Keywords: Covid-19; Higher/Adult Education; Learning; *New Normal*; Teaching

1. Introduction

The outbreak of Covid-19 has upended life (EdSource 2020) and caused an enduring threat to our educational institutions from kindergarten to tertiary level and day by day exacerbated the teaching-learning. It has required faculty and students globally to respond to an unprecedented challenge: to transform rapidly their traditional face-to-face curriculum to distance learning formats. Teachers and students felt compelled to embrace the digital academic experience as the *summum bonum* of the online teaching-learning process (Lederman 2020). Many students have been at home and they have been required to maintain their academic work under completely different circumstances and demands than prior to the annulment of face-to-face instruction at university. In different ways for students and faculty the virtual classroom and its associated activities has become the anchor to normalcy in their dramatically changed lives.

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While the shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning seems like a temporary adjustment required by the circumstance of the pandemic, the catastrophic event of pandemic has played the role of a 'change agent' into the ecological university system. In fact, it has forced the higher education systems to react and try to achieve a new equilibrium, waiting for the things to return to normality.

Despite the effort made by different academic organisations to face the challenges caused by the pandemic, the delivery of learning pathways through virtual classrooms has shown quite soon the challenges related to the quality of education, faculty's digital abilities, students' engagement, distance teaching and learning approaches, and assessment processes as well. The mentioned weaknesses have shown how much unprepared we are and how the early universities' reaction was interpreted as a temporary adaptation.

The named issues were the main themes of discussion for the participants in the comparative group work, during the intensive programme that was the heart of the Intall project. They belonged to three different countries: Brazil, Serbia and Nigeria.

The initiatives of teaching and learning adopted by the three higher education institutions (HEIs) of the different three countries, as reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, were the units of analysis during the sessions of a comparative group work-2021 of the Intall intensive programme, that was leaded by two Italian moderators. The comparative approach used for the analysis of the three cases, provided a meaningful picture of the main issues connected to the online teaching and learning during the pandemic. The paper, after presenting briefly the process of the analysis carried out by the CGW, focused on the topic of 'Re-thinking teaching and learning during the pandemic Covid-19', sought to respond to the following research questions: (i)What are the main challenges that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have faced during the first year of pandemic? (ii)What are the main practical implication for teaching and learning in higher education in the *New Normal*?

2. Teaching and Learning in Higher Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused never-before-seen global challenges for learning and teaching processes in higher education, generating impact on individuals and on the contexts, and heightening the importance of online teaching and learning (Paudel 2021). It was an unpredicted event that has rapidly accelerated the digital transformation of education globally, and many universities have had to make a lot of changes to their teaching styles, research process, and relationships. For many universities, the most substantial change has been the shifting from fully residential of providing instruction to fully online, or hybrid learning environments (Mseleku 2020). This, inevitably, affected many aspects of higher education systems, such as:

- The *spaces of learning*: universities were constrained to move from physical contexts to exclusively online setting for delivering the different courses. In general, distance learning is a free option or, in some universities, is just a part

of the learning process, while during the pandemic it has become an essential determinant for maintaining the activity of universities (Coman et al. 2020). HEIs were obliged to guarantee the continuity of the educational processes but taking in account the governmental measures aimed at avoiding the spreading of the virus. The shift from face-to-face to online teaching required, in the different HEIs a substantial transformation related to routines, the structural organisation (with attention to the ways of using spaces, resources, tools), rules, responsibility, and policy. It was a process that required HEIs to think about themselves in a new way. Indeed, this forced transformative process has showed their levels of readiness for facing the unpredicted changes, creativity, proactivity, and reaction as well. The pandemic has opened Pandora's box and has shown the strengths and the weaknesses of the different HE systems.

- The *way of learning*: distance learning has offered students a flexible format for learning, through both synchronous and asynchronous lessons; it has facilitated the access to learning and content to a larger number of learners, and it has offered them the possibility to control their time according their needs and goals (Yusuf and Al-Banawi 2013). The online learning is indeed practical because it can be used anywhere and anytime (Özyurt et al. 2013; Nakamura et al. 2018),but it has presented some disadvantages for both the HEIs, and for some students. In fact, HEIs that has limited experience of e-learning or few e-learning resources have met difficulties, especially, when teachers haven't knowledge of how to use online applications (Zaharah and Kirilova 2020). For many students the online learning hasn't been a free choice, but an enforcement that required them to change their expectations, their way to follow the lessons, to interact with peers and teachers, to experience the academic learning. In some cases, the lack of physical distance, has caused the decrease of students' motivation, and the rise of feelings of isolation due to the lack of physical presence of their peers with consequent impact on their ways of learning. In fact, they needed to become more self-directed in the use of technological tools for learning, for interacting with others, and, sometimes, for receiving and providing feedback from/to peers or teachers.
- *Teaching methods*: during Covid-19 pandemic, distance learning has also represented a challenge for both those teachers who hadn't so much familiarity with technology, and those who usually believed that learning occurs only in the classroom by using traditional approaches. Therefore, in many situations, distance learning highlighted not only the lack of teachers' digital skills, but also the lack of online teaching design skills. In fact, face-to-face teaching methods and strategies were often just transferred to the online settings, without thinking of the development of an accurate integration of pedagogical, technological and content knowledge (Koehler and Mishra 2008, 2009). The effective integration of technology in a specific educational and training context should be based on a careful alignment of content, pedagogy and technology. This process assumes that teachers who want to integrate technology into their teaching practice must be competent in all three domains (Koehler et al. 2013).

- The *interaction between teachers and students*: the communication between teachers and students has been, in many situations, a real issue during the online learning in pandemic time. In fact, the lack of using proper teaching strategies to give students feedback or help at the right time while their learning process has affected their educational relationship, participation and motivation (Irfan et al. 2020). The complexity of teacher-students interaction has often been due to, also, the lack of teachers' experience in using E-learning and the sudden transformation required of their teaching style to the new conditions; the lack of care to the equilibrium between online courses that require taking in account students' spending hours in front of a screen, and non-digital activities. Reducing the complexity of distance interaction would have required teachers to taking in account of the pandemic effects on student's emotional status, providing them with support throughout the process of learning, managing and facilitating their collaboration and interaction with peers and teachers (OECD 2020). In some cases, further challenges that have made teacher-student interaction more difficult were related to accessibility and connectivity. They are aspects that, sometimes, have increased the difficulty of interaction and the social distance with effects on the students' sense of isolation.

All the aspects above mentioned show important practical implication for HEIs in the *New Normal*. In fact, the construction of virtual classes similarly to a traditional face-to-face course, the lack of teachers' digital skills and distance learning and teaching pedagogical knowledge, the unpreparedness of some HEIs to face transformative events, the lack of the proper digital resources to respond students' needs and goals, have arisen different important problems that need to be considered. They refer to the development of learning contexts that can combine distance and face-to-face teaching; teachers' professional development that should include the development of their digital skills, the use of innovative teaching methods focused not on instruction but on learning, and aimed to facilitate students' participation, motivation, learning and engagement also during distance learning, the use of strategies for providing students with proper and continuous formative feedback, the use of interactive strategies aimed to make students feel part of a learning and welcoming environment also in virtual class. In other words, the distance teaching and learning experienced during pandemic pressures HEIs to shift from a traditional education based on teacher-centered perspective to a student-centered approach (Gallie and Joubert, 2004; Coman et al. 2020).

3. From the Comparative Group Work Results to the Implications for the *New Normal*

In this section, there were presented the topic of comparative group work (CGW) discussion, the related and involved contexts, the methodological process that supported the international group during the implementation of the

comparative approach, but the main attention was focused on the results of CGW, because from them emerged different practical implication for HEIs.

3.1 The Comparative Group Work: Context, Problem Discussed, and Methodology

Context of CGW

The comparative group work named *Re-thinking teaching and learning in higher and adult education during COVID-19,* of which the author was one of the moderators, was part of the intensive programme of Intall project during 2021.

In general, the programme has always foreseen the comparative groups work made of people coming from different countries, and during this last experience, in the mentioned group the 4 participants came from:

- Brazil (State of Rio Grande do Sul) (1);
- Nigeria (University of Lagos) (2);
- Serbia (University of Belgrade) (1).

The three countries represented an interesting context of analysis, due to their differences in terms of culture, geopolitical positions, their resources, and contexts of teaching and learning.

Problem Discussed

The CGW discussion was focused on the outbreak of Covid-19 that has required faculty and students globally to respond to an unprecedented challenge, transforming rapidly their traditional face-to-face courses to distance learning formats. The rapid shift from the traditional classroom engagement to virtual learning has also exposed the gap in policies and practices to support online teaching/learning. There is no doubt that the pandemic will affect the future of teaching/learning. Therefore, the main question has been to understand to what extent the unpredicted event will shape teaching and learning processes. This requires innovative methods, especially, they need to be tailored on online education. The pressure to migrate from the traditional face-to-face mode to online teaching was faced in different ways within the diverse contexts, and the level of success of this transition depends on several factors. The attempt to identify these factors opened up dialogue and comparison among the representatives of the three countries about their Higher Education online policies and practices.

Methodology

The main purpose of CGW discussion was to identify and compare in which way the HEIs in the different contexts faced the challenges generated by the pandemic, and what are the factors that have determined the different modes of managing the unpredicted teaching and learning changes.

The CGW carried out the discussion according to a comparative approach that focused on the context of comparison useful for answering the specific research questions as required by comparative adult education research (Egetenmeyer 2017). The comparative methodological perspective foreseen to analyze the three case-studies through different phases: (i) during the juxtaposition phase, the group members described the different countries' situations taking in account the purpose of discussion; (ii) the following phase involved participants in the identification of three comparative categories: digital literacy, political and economic issues, attitudes towards online education (referred to students, teachers, family); (iii) the next phase required to compare the three categories identifying similarities and differences among the three HEIs of countries involved; (iv) the last phase involved the group members in the interpretation process aimed to explain the reasons of differences and similarities among the HEIs.

The CGW was involved in this comparative analysis for one week, and at the end of the process on the basis of the three selected comparative categories, the group members presented the main results of CGW discussion, and comparative analysis and interpretation.

3.2 Main Findings of Comparative Group Work

In line with the purpose of the CGW, and on the basis of the three selected comparative categories the long process of analysis led the group members to present the results related to the main challenges that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have faced during the first year of pandemic. Specifically, the three different systems reacted similarly or differently due to different factors:

- the availability of resources and funding;
- the distribution of resources among states of the same countries;
- the political priorities;
- the level of the government's attention to educational issues;
- the level of technological access and internet connection;
- the level of infrastructure development;
- the level of prompt political solution and strategies for facing the teaching and learning challenges caused by pandemic;
- the level of individuals attitudes and dispositions forwards changes, innovation, and the use of technology for learning and teaching.

To respond the first research question 'What are the main challenges that the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have faced during the first year of pandemic?'. The results that can be summarised according three contextual levels of comparison (Fig. 1).

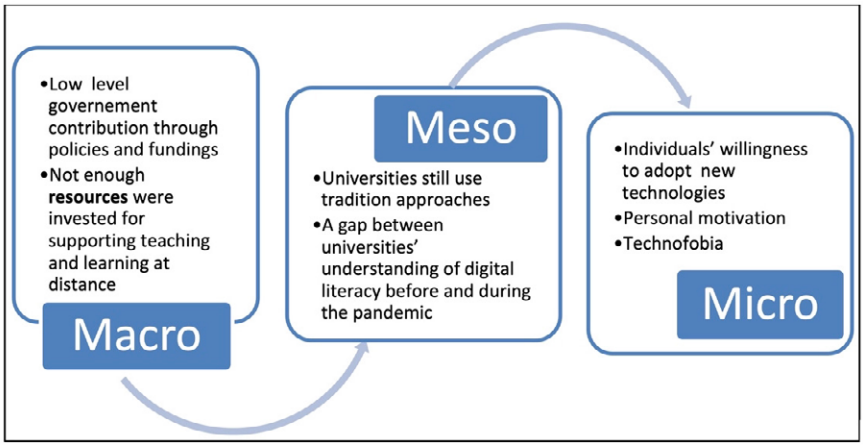

Figure 1 – The main issues faced by universities during the pandemic (own illustration).

4. From Intall CGW Results to the General Issues and Consequences Emerged during the Pandemic

The three main issues highlighted by the CGW-members and identified also in other studies carried out during pandemic (e.g., Dubey and Pandey 2020; Jena 2020; Mishra et al. 2020; Williamson et al. 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021) are related to: (i) the risk of exclusion and inequality in education; (ii) the lack of resources and educational policies; (iii) the risk of a low level of education quality.

The pandemic has not increased only the differences among the HEIs according their characteristics (old, new, urban, rural, in the North, in the South), but it has also sharply increased the inequality among countries and enforced its links with mutual constitutive factors such as gender, culture, race, and their geopolitical position.

The lack of proper infrastructure sharply increased the difference between poor and rich countries or institutions, and the phenomenon of educational exclusion. For countries and HEIs, having effective infrastructures means to guarantee home internet access and high-speed connectivity to universities and schools, high-quality of devices, the quality of digital content and resources for the quality of interactive lectures, an effective feedback and assessment for students during their learning path.

A further issue connected to the pandemic event has been the risk of a low quality of education, above all where HEIs haven't reacted immediately, because of the lack of appropriate policies and educational priorities, the digital unpreparedness of academic staff and students, the lack of resources and their investment in providing the proper responses to students' educational rights. These are factors that have affected the construction of effective online learning environments that should always be, in any setting (face-to-face, online, blended, hybrid), focused on the students, and on the quality of content and processes aimed to ensure the learning outcomes for students.

5. Practical Implication for Higher Education Institutions in the *New Normal*

The digital transformation of higher education during the pandemic has not only shown the relevant learning and teaching issues, but it has also generated consequent implications for HEIs in the *New Normal*. In fact, the pandemic, playing the role of Pandora's box, has brought to light issues that probably were hidden.

The risk of *inequality* and *exclusion* in education is a phenomenon that has always existed. Approximately, 264 million children and adolescents are not in school (UNESCO 2017) and this unpredicted pandemic event made this situation further worst. In fact, it highlighted the existing problem and also expanded it, involving a larger number of individuals. Consequently, the first implication of this first big issue for HEIs is related to the necessity to develop a new higher education digital culture based on inclusive education. Thinking of inclusive digital, HE transformation requires to rethink the ways to create contents and products for learning. This includes the development of: (i) open educational resources (OER), for which both teachers and students can be prosumers (producers and consumers); (ii) reusable open resources made of content and learning materials that can be recognised as effective and gain credit in any academic context; (iii) free spaces of sharing teaching and learning practices, as way to support also the harmonization of HE courses, as required by Bologna process (1999); (iv) an Open Learning Students Community formally recognised by the EU and by all the other universities in the world that want to take part, providing digital resources, exchanging content, strategies. It could be an useful organism to support students in each country and in the world, above all in those situations in which unpredictable events threaten their educational rights.

The issue related to the *lack of resources and educational policies* creates a second implication for HEIs related to the importance to develop a flexible political culture based on the ability to react and define educational priorities in emergency situations. This requires for HEIs to develop their proactive and creative attitudes, oriented to guarantee students' learning and professionals' support in any situation. Developing these attitudes in the digital era means for HEIs to be ready for changes, for promoting institutional priorities and policies that can guarantee the equal access to education and knowledge without leaving no one behind.

From the digital transformation of HEIs caused by pandemic emerged the *risk of a low quality of education*. Indeed, this issue outlines a third implication for HEIs, related to the importance to develop new universities' staff distance competences and new learning and teaching pedagogies. HE digitalization during the pandemic event has questioned teaching and learning methods used. It has remarked the weaknesses of traditional approaches made of lecturing based on the delivery of content and on the passive role of students, the staff's ability to design distance courses that would take in account new variables such as virtual spaces of learning, new teacher-student interactions and relationships, physical distance, students' distance engagement, distance feedback and assessment.

Considering a new horizon of opportunities for teaching and learning, and new pedagogies has become an emergency that calls for: (i) re-thinking methods, students' and teachers' roles, levels of interaction, responsibility, and collaboration; (ii) integrating technologies in teaching and learning to pursue pedagogical goals and learning needs; (iii) developing flexible resources for teaching/learning: synchronous, asynchronous, Hyflex, videos, simulations. Creating free diverse typology of resources allows HEIs to respond to all students' goals with different needs, and diverse resources available.

Responding effectively to these implications means that HEIs would play a relevant function in the development of some sustainable Goals, in relation to the reduction of inequality among individuals of different countries (*Goal 10*); the innovation through new free infrastructures of learning that can overcome the barriers of low individuals' incomes and lack of countries' resources (*Goal 9*); the quality of education for all individuals decreasing the disparities among countries and individuals despite their geo-position or their incomes (*Goal 4*).

The mentioned implications determine relevant responsibilities for HEIs in the era of digitalization. In fact, they call for responding not only individuals' and contexts' needs of local territories, but they also require that HEIs develop a new vision capable of taking charge of a global educational mission and transforming them as social change agents in the *New Normal*.

6. Conclusion

The global pandemic has reshaped higher education institutions' modes of teaching and learning radically and in unprecedented ways. Education has moved into the online space at breakneck speed. Higher education practices have altered significantly, causing new pressures on staff and students, because they were called for innovating their teaching and learning processes and strategies, for facing new challenges due also to the level of resources, connectivity, and access to knowledge. The Covid-19 pandemic, and the rapid moving from residential to online teaching and learning, made visible the invisible, or ignored manifestations and mechanisms of inequality.

The pandemic has forced us to look much closerto where our students are, where they are positioned, what resources they have, what opportunities they have to engage in learning. It helped us to reflect in action (Schön 1983) during the pandemic to develop a new HE perspective, imagining the way of remaking the future in the post-pandemic world. In fact, despite its terrible effects at national, institutional, and individual level, the pandemic has provided a critical moment to reflect on the current role and values of HE and it has built a new imagine of this level of education as a more resilient and transformative. The Covid-19 pandemic has given us the possibilities to re-think the role of universities, recognising them as change agents with social function, because it has opened up possibilities to transform disruption and precarity into creative, flexible and inclusive teaching and learning. In fact, well designed virtual programmes can

offer meaningful and inclusive learning opportunities and wider educational access, especially for those students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

The higher education digitalization forced by pandemic has the potentiality to provide a practical support for one of the most important mission of HEIs: thinking of education as part of individuals' rights and social justice at global level. These are global goals that call for developing global partnerships among universities. All the implications mentioned for HEIs can be considered lessons learnt during the pandemic experience, therefore, the universities are now at a crossroads where they can choose to implement their practices according their traditional habits or promote changes at global level.

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Studies on Adult Learning and Education

Re-thinking Adult Education Research. Beyond the Pandemic

This work is the result of the European INTALL Project, *International and Comparative Studies for Students and Practitioners in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* (2018-2021). From early September 2018 to the end of August 2021, this project allowed us to build knowhow about some specific issues of adult education. The latest meeting of the INTALL project partners led to a conference about the role of Adult Education Research, during and after Covid-19, and the importance of re-thinking Lifelong and Lifewide Learning for the future. Based on four sections, *Innovation and Future Competences in Adult Education Research, Professionalisation in Adult Education*, *Sustainability, Inclusion and Wellbeing: Topics for Adult Society* and *Smart Cities and Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in Post-Pandemic Time: A Digital Transformation*, the volume represents an opportunity to foster a debate on key issues in the field of Adult Learning and Education across Europe.

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