

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

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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.

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