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ARTICLE



Adult learning and education in Spain and Portugal: an interpretative study of doctoral theses (2006–2018)

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a cartography of the field of research in adult learning and education (ALE) via a comparative study of academic production at doctoral level in Spain and Portugal based on a systematic documentary analysis of the summaries of doctoral theses concluded between 2006 and 2018. The aim is to advance the state of the art of research on ALE in recent doctoral theses in both Countries and highlight trends of contemporary knowledge construction in the field of continuing education of adults. Two analytical strategies are applied: i) a characterisation of the doctoral theses' abstracts by a constructed grid with general and specific categories; and ii) a quantitative strategy of identifying frequencies in the grid for 18 keywords, 6 frameworks and paradigms and 12 associated to concepts. The mapping of priorities and absences in doctoral research at Higher Education Institutions (HEI) demonstrate that in Spain, there is a tendency to present the role of ALE closely related to assisting individuals and groups to adapt to the educational system, to society and to labour demands. In Portugal an unresolved tension between the adaptation of adults to society through ALE and the conscientization of adults by ALE to transform society remains.

KEYWORDS

Adult learning and education (ALE); doctoral thesis and academic production; higher Education Institutions (HEI); comparative study

Introduction

In the Human Development Report of 2018 (UNDP, 2018, 7) it is recognised that 'in low Human development countries 47.5 percent of adults are illiterate'. Despite this, it acknowledges the progress achieved in recent years in the average schooling of the world's adult population that has gone from a 5.8 in 1990 to 8.4 in 2017. These data are a sample of the major differences by region and explains that in European countries such as Spain and Portugal, research on ALE does not focus on literacy as alphabetisation, or recently illiterate or 'neo-literate' adults and communities, but on literacy perceived in relation to more complex issues, like digital literacy (Jimoyiannis, 2015) or critical democratic literacy (Laginder et al., 2013). This article tries to offer an original panorama of those issues, by means of the analysis of recent doctoral theses produced in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Spain and Portugal, from 2006 to 2018. In view of the above aims, the main objectives in this article are: to produce a cartography of HEIs based on thesis production in ALE; collect data to establish whether there is a gender bias in ALE doctoral researchers; analyse methodological trends in ALE doctoral research; deconstruct how the tension between the adaptation or transformation of society by ALE is framed in doctoral research; establish whether there is an interest in researching the supranational dimension of ALE policy and the impacts of

International Organizations in the field; disclose the prime areas of research selected for doctoral research in ALE; and produce evidence on the mainstream rationale/paradigm supporting ALE doctoral research.

This seven-point framework elicited five main research questions addressed in this article, namely: 1) What are the general values/principles/aims attributed to ALE in doctoral research across Spain and Portugal?; 2) How do doctoral theses perceive the role of ALE? Is there greater support for an education that promotes adaptation or transformation of society?;

3) Has the supranational dimension of policy and International Organisations been included in doctoral research about ALE?; 4) What are the major topics of discourse selected in ALE doctoral research?; and 5) Is there a main rationale/paradigm pervading ALE doctoral research in Spain and Portugal?

Through the analysis of 127 doctoral theses on ALE, this study provides useful insights for adult education specialists and to a broader readership whilst: (i) identifying the national trends of contemporary knowledge construction in the field, ii) mapping priorities and absences in HEIs supervision of doctoral research, and iii) comparing scenarios of advanced research in the field across two southern European countries. Thus, the study discussion and results allowed the authors to establish the reasons and to report on some problems derived from the lower status of ALE in Spanish and Portuguese HEI when compared with the status of education in early stages of life.

Major facts influencing research in the field of ALE in both countries

The interest in ALE in Spain has been noticeable for the last four decades, essentially through state laws and an increasing number of groups and associations acting in the field. However, this area has suffered historically in Spain from a lack of specialised studies. One of the reasons for this shortfall has been the absence of a specialised degree programme on ALE at the Higher Education (HE) level, which influence the absence of professionalisation. Indeed, there is a wide variety of degree courses in education which generate very divergent teacher profiles (Rumbo, 2010), with specialised training for ALE educators only available at the postgraduate level, particularly through master's degree courses and doctoral programmes. From 2006, one could choose from a range of master's degrees, of which at least 16 are still active, with public universities offering all of them. The low number of master's degrees in such a large country does not even cover all the 17 different autonomous Spanish communities. In addition, the majority are concentrated in universities in the autonomous Community of Madrid and Andalusia.

Indeed, postgraduate academic research has been the path for much improved research on ALE in Spain because project grants and funding in this specialist field are highly competitive and insufficient.

The interest in ALE in Portugal has been intermittent during the last four decades. Hybrid political orientations for the sector have led to a body of incoherent state laws, and many of those have been found to be contradictory (Barros, 2013, 2016; Guimarães, 2011, 2012). Despite this, there is number of groups and associations acting in the field. Yet, like Spain, this scientific area has historically suffered in Portugal from a lack of comprehensive studies.

One of the reasons for the scarcity of studies on ALE in Portugal is that the provision of adult education has not been planned with basis on its sustainability. Another reason is that likewise Spain, Portugal lacks a specialised ALE degree programme at the HE level which influence the absence of professionalisation. Indeed, the possibility of specialisation only occurs in postgraduate courses. However, students could choose from a range of master's degrees, of which at least 20 are still active since 2006. This abundance of master's degrees in a small country like Portugal means that full national coverage is offered (although it is divided between public and private education). Postgraduate academic research, particularly doctorates, have also been the pathway for increased

research on ALE in Portugal since competitive research project grants and other sources of funding in this field of interest are very limited.

Therefore, in a brief comparative remark we argue that a cartography of this field of research (Fejes & Nylander, 2019) based on doctoral theses is also necessary, particularly on both national contexts studied here, as these academic works are, unlike other countries, a major component in the construction of advanced scientific knowledge in ALE. Despite the *Memorandum of Lifelong Learning* (Commission of the European Communities, 2000) recommendations for a European research policy in this field, during the period in question (2006–2018) national research governance of both countries marginalized ALE's studies in calls for funding. Indeed, the scarcity of financed research projects on ALE, together with the non-existence of first cycle specialised courses on ALE in HEIs, which influence the absence of professionalisation, are indicators that help to explain the low *status* (Rubenson & Elfert, 2015) of this area of knowledge in Academia and Research Centres.¹

Methodology

About comparative studies and the chosen path

Comparing research in the ALE area may help to expose different questions and assist with interpretations of singular phenomena without losing sight of their relationship with the wider social and international context (Rezende et al., 2013). These comparisons also imply positioning the data to better explain uniqueness (Bray et al., 2007) because comparative studies allow for the detection of clues with heuristic possibilities (Chen et al., 2008). Therefore, those inklings have the potentiality to equip researchers with a better understanding of the realities and tensions that involve, for example, academic productions at a national doctoral level on ALE. Comparative studies may also constitute a challenge to scientific activity to the extent that one is looking for new perspectives of analysis that may explain the production of knowledge in this field of education in untapped directions (Field et al., 2019a, 2019b; Milana, 2019).

In this area of research there are precedents from studies that carried out a qualitative analysis of the papers presented at European and North American ALE Conferences. In the analyses several categories were contemplated (genre of authors, country of place of work, theories of learning, methodology, topic or subject of research, international perspective, etc.) (Käpplinger, 2015; Long, 1983; Troy, 2006).

The methodological framework underpinning the interpretative study of doctoral theses in Spain and Portugal consisted of a mixed approach (qualitative and quantitative) which retained a comprehensive and interpretative perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The preferred research technique was documental analysis of recent (2006–2018) doctoral theses abstracts produced in Spain and Portugal. A total of 127 doctoral theses abstracts were available in the national repositories of each country² and this documentary *corpus* was the object of content analysis (Bardin, 1977; Krippendorff, 1989).

The authors were aware of the unresolved methodological issues pertaining to how to handle qualitative data, as previously reported (e.g., Morse et al., 2008). To address coding, and establish reliability as well as internal and external validity, we followed Jiménez-Buedo (2011) and Syed and Nelson (2015) recommendations.

In this study, reliability in coding stems from a subjective consensus (Merriam, 2009) and involved collectively deciding on which units of analysis would receive a code. As mentioned above, the dataset in question consisted of 127 doctoral theses abstracts sourced from the national repositories of each country. Using a *template for comparative analysis grid in the field of ALE* (appendix 1), each abstract was sectioned off into codable units (phrases), with general and specific categories. After reading the 127 doctoral theses abstracts a *Presence/Absence Registry* was made. The latter includes *Classification and modalities* (3 codes), *Scope, objects, and targets* (7 codes) and

Range of intervention (2 codes). Individual coders selected one of the 12 codes indicated in *Presence/Absence Registry* and attributed to phrases containing statement on the topic, for example, ‘Formal learning/education’ or ‘Social inclusion/cohesion’. That is to say, the unit of analysis was determined from the outset to ensure the coding process was both consistent with the research questions and analytically feasible.

The coding scheme, composed of consecutive steps (including considering other coding schemes, which have been used in ALE Research), was developed using a deductive theory-driven top-down approach. The option was keeping a restricted number of codes to be used, to increase the reliability of coding.

After the coding procedure a characterisation of doctoral theses abstracts was combined with a quantitative strategy of identifying frequencies in the grid for 18 keywords, 6 related to frameworks and paradigms and 12 associated with concepts. Those keywords are intrinsic to the ALE’s domain and debates. Both methodological strategies allowed for the collection of ‘meaningful relationships’ (Bardin, 1977) suggested by doctoral researchers (and supervisors) within ALE and those relationships were further scrutinised by means of data analysis.

Following Reischmann (2008), after the comparison of Spanish and Portuguese doctoral discourses on ALE, as expressed in doctoral theses abstracts, it was possible to identify similarities and differences between the two case studies. A second stage in the comparative exercise involved an attempt to understand why the differences and similarities between Spain and Portugal occur.

The analysis grid of doctoral theses

The idea underpinning the present work was to produce a comparative study in the field of ALE by means of a semi-quantitative grid (appendix 1). This kind of operative tool could help the analysis to focus on specific dimensions of research and could contribute to better identify significant categories that are present and absent (Keskitalo-Foley & Naskali, 2018). Categories in the grid were operational to classify doctoral theses on ALE, concluded between January 2006 and December 2018, according to a set of generic and specific categories.

With 89 theses selected for Spain and 38 for Portugal, this *semi-quantitative grid* assisted with the organisation of a considerable volume of information. It also supported the building of a comprehensive panorama of doctoral research in ALE in both countries. Thus, the resulting analysis grid supported the systematic reading of data for each national context whilst registering the presence/absence of key concepts relating to ALE. The grid also facilitated the identification of the number of ALE theses produced per year, university department, student gender, methods used and keywords.

The grid supported a general characterisation of each thesis on ALE through the content analysis of its abstract. Such characterisation required not only an overview of values and principles supporting arguments but also the aims and the perceived role of ALE, regarding adaptation or transformation of society.

Indeed, the grid allowed for a summarisation of each of the 127 doctoral theses on ALE, based on two sets of categories: i) generic macro categories, and ii) specific micro categories. Exploring a macro level of analysis, a first section of the grid included seven generic macro categories, specifically: (1) *title*, (2) *university*, (3) *department*, (4) *authorship (male/female)*, (5) *year*, (6) *keywords*, and (7) *methodology*. On the micro level of analysis, a second section of the grid incorporated the six categories listed here: (1) *General overview, general values/principles* (Titmus, 1989). (2) *Aims of adult education/learning/lifelong learning* (Brown, 2000; Peters, 1972). (3) *Role of adult education/learning/lifelong learning in achieving education for adaptation* (McLean & McLean, 2001); Watkins, 1991). (4) *Role of adult education/learning/lifelong learning in achieving education for transformation* (Freire, 2017; Mayo, 2012). (5) *Exploration of the political role of the international organisation in adult education/learning/lifelong learning* (Grek, 2010; Nemeth, 2016). (6) *Other relevant issues (like professionalisation and employment, etc.)*.

Additionally, a selection of relevant conceptual categories from international literature on ALE generated a third section for the grid. This last section allowed a systematic comparative reading of doctoral theses abstracts by means of quantification as a presence/absence matrix. This conceptual in-depth work supported by an ALE literature review endorsed the building of a third section for the grid with twelve justified conceptual categories. The concepts considered were organised across three main axes: a) concerning classification and modalities of adult education, we selected three conceptual categories: (1) *Formal learning/education* (Coombs, 1989). (2) *Non-formal Learning/education* (Bock & Bock, 1989; Coombs, 1989). (3) *Informal Learning/education* (CEDEFOP, 2002; Foley, 1999). b) Within the scope, objects and targets underpinning doctoral theses, we designated seven conceptual categories: (1) *Social Inclusion/cohesion* (Askonas and Stewart, 2000). (2) *Participation* (Mayo & Thompson, 1997). (3) *Awareness* (Mayo & Thompson, 1997). (4) *Human/social rights* (Dean, 2015). (5) *Development (economic)* (Jessop, 1998). (6) *Development (human centred)* (Gelpi, 1994). (7) *Equality* (Page, 2016). c) Concerning range of intervention (Fragoso et al., 2006), we selected two conceptual categories: (1) *Global level* and (2) *Local level*.

Finally, to better identify similarities and differences between doctoral theses and sustain a comparative reading across Spain and Portugal, we constructed a syntetic comparative grid containing the quantitative data from each national case. Those actions sustained a comprehensive view of trends in the construction of knowledge in ALE in both countries.

Perceptions of trends in the construction of knowledge in ALE through doctoral thesis analysis

The mapping of the main characteristics of doctoral research in Spain

The production of doctoral theses in Spain, according to the data of TESEO, in the period analysed was remarkably low (only 89 theses) when compared with the theses dedicated to education in the early stages of life. For example, amongst the theses submitted and successfully defended, 212 targeted early childhood education and 436 theses studied primary education. However, the number of studies in ALE almost multiply by six the number of theses produced on education and the elderly (16). The financing of projects and academic publications also reflects this considerable difference in educational research across the different stages of life. Focus is mainly on the age groups in which professional opportunities are more numerous and more consolidated.

The results of the analysis of the 89 ALE theses show that in all the years analysed, from 2006 to 2018 a minimum of 3 (in 2009) and a maximum of 15 theses (in 2016) were submitted (view Figure 1).

Women tended to author most of the reported research works in Spain, with 53 theses written by females and 36 by males. The results by gender did not follow the general trend up to 2014 since, at

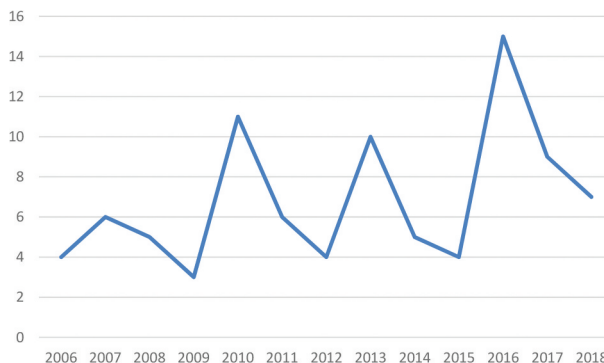


Figure 1. Evolution of doctoral theses on ALE in Spain (2006–2018).

that time, male authorship of doctoral theses was slightly higher than female. The gender balance changed slightly after 2014 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, 2016). However, this figure reflects the reality of doctoral students from Social and Legal Sciences, and especially of doctoral programmes in education, in which the female sex prevails.

The geographical distribution of ALE theses across HEIs is uneven. In 23 universities, one or two theses on ALE were accepted but ten were accepted at the University of Barcelona. Looking at the 32 universities singled out, these were mainly mainland and belonged to 13 of the 17 autonomous communities around which Spain is structured. Insular universities have not produced theses on ALE up to 2013; one thesis was presented in the University of the Balearic Islands and in 2016, two theses were submitted in two universities in the Canary Islands. A geographical imbalance in the production of doctoral theses is therefore evident in Spain when it comes to ALE studies.

In Spain, departments of Education originate most ALE doctoral theses. This applies in departments with diverse course offer, but which fall under two main areas: a) Theory and History of Education and Social Pedagogy; and b) Didactics and School Organisation. However, students enrolled in departments of Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology and Tourism, among others, have written doctoral theses on ALE.

The methodology used in the doctoral research under scrutiny is diverse. Comparative methodology prevails (between cities in Spain and other countries such as Brazil and Argentina, as well as amid cities in Brazil and Uruguay, and between several Spanish municipalities). There are also numerous exploratory, descriptive, and propositional studies and case studies (in institutions such as popular universities, people from specific groups such as immigrants or professionals, students from adult education centres). One can find many theses that deploy theoretical approaches about the different concepts related to ALE, to national political documents and documents issued by international organisations. One can find historical documents focused on the twentieth century in Spain and other countries, and theses on the political evolution of ALE and the role of international organisations. Examples of selected topics are the Conferences on Adult Education organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO. It is interesting to note that five of the doctoral theses presented at the University of Santiago de Compostela, the University of Salamanca and the University of Granada focused on adult education in Portugal. According to evidence produced, ALE theses also rely on mixed methodologies in which instruments used are mostly questionnaires and interviews.

A clear outline cannot be shaped from the characterisation of such doctoral works due to their great variety. Nevertheless, the state of the art captured through the grid seems to indicate that there is a slight tendency to present a role of adult education/learning/lifelong learning as an education for adaptation (23 theses versus 19 theses that focus on the role of ALE for transformation). Adaptation both to the educational system and to society, understood equally in relation to the work environment and to citizens' own experience. In addition, only three of these theses give prominence to the political role of International Organisations, mainly the European Union and UNESCO, in relation to ALE.

Nevertheless, some research outputs are oriented towards social transformation. This was the case of a thesis submitted in 2007 with focus on the social, human and economic impact of adult education. Another thesis, submitted in 2017, highlighted the contribution of ALE to social inclusion of the immigrant population. In both cases, the role of ALE was conceptualised as a factor of social transformation, through active citizenship and social participation.

Looking at the selection of conceptual categories used to classify doctoral theses across three major modalities – (1) Formal; (2) Non-formal and (3) Informal – it is notable that concepts dealt with in these studies, regarding classification and modalities relating to non-formal learning are more prominent than others (56). It is noteworthy that Informal Learning, much less present (6), is at the top of the agendas of international organisations as fundamental contributors to lifelong learning in adulthood. As for Formal Learning, a considerable number of theses (37) focuses on this modality. The weight of Formal Learning can be explained by the possibility of a direct impact of

the research but also by the ease of finding reliable documentation to analyse, and the ease of relying on large samples (of students, teachers and managers) to carry out this research. When it comes to matters such as scope, objects and targets categories, although there is a great variety (the 7 keywords used in this study were found in the sample), the following prevailed (all of which were found in more than 20 doctoral theses): Development (human centred) (35), Awareness (24) and Social Inclusion/cohesion (23). Participation was also prominent (19). However, fundamental concepts for advocacy and decision-making in international and national policy documents were significantly absent from the Spanish sample analysed. These absent concepts were related to: Development (economic) (12), Human/social rights (6) and Equality (7). (View Figure 2).

Finally, regarding the range of intervention, we found that studies at a Local level (55) prevail in contrast to the Global level (31). The difficulty of conducting larger investigations when the resources available to researchers are usually scarce can partially explain the prevalence of studies at a local level. The coexistence of two trends influencing in the roles of adult education/learning/lifelong learning in achieving education for adaptation/transformation exposes the difficult expansion of a hegemonic paradigm in doctoral ALE research in Spain. Such *hegemonic discourse* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987: 47) previously employed to post – critical curriculum theory (Rezende & Ostermann, 2019) would need to partially fix meaning around a central idea of ALE through articulation practices to produce a structured totality. The expansion of a unified notion of ALE would entail more than a passive consensus and mean the expansion of a discourse constituted by norms, values, and perceptions through convincing redescrptions of ALE. But one needs to consider that ‘how adult education practitioners and scholars communicate with each other through their various journals, although necessarily partial and subjective, both reflects and constitutes the field and helps shape its future development’ (Nesbit et al., 2009).

The mapping of the main characteristics of doctoral research in Portugal

According to the data from the National Register for Theses and Dissertations (RENATES) managed by the General Directorate for Statistics in Sciences and Education, and theses deposited in Portugal’s Scientific Repository of Open Access (RCAAP) in the period analysed (2006–2018), a total of 38 doctoral theses in the field of ALE were submitted and approved. Assessing this number in relation to the total number of theses produced in Portugal in the broader field of Social Sciences and Humanities (PhDs ending in 2006, 2011, 2017 and 2018) those submitted in the field of ALE corresponded to 4.6 percent of all theses in Social Sciences and Humanities produced in Portugal. Like in Spain, this is a remarkably low number when compared with the theses dedicated to education in the early stages of life. For example, PhD students wrote 160 doctoral theses relating to early childhood education and 37 on Basic Education in Portugal, with numbers rising in 2018.

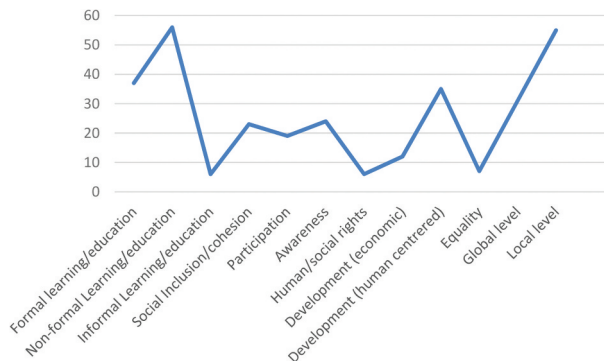


Figure 2. Conceptual description of doctoral theses on ALE in Spain.

These results corresponded to more than double of the theses focusing on education and the elderly (12), a setup that did not change in 2018. Analogous to Spain, this considerable difference in educational research at the different stages of life also applies to the financing of projects and academic publications. In Portugal, funding support benefits the age groups in which professional opportunities are more numerous and more consolidated.

The results of the analysis of the 38 theses on ALE revealed that in all the years analysed, since 2006 to 2018, except for 2007, theses on ALE were concluded, ranging from a minimum of 0 (in 2007) to a maximum of 7 (in 2013) (view [Figure 3](#)). Authorship of doctoral theses was attributed mainly to women (30), illustrating a clear gender bias in ALE doctoral researchers. The results are in accordance with the main panorama of students in the field of education in Portuguese HEIs, which tends to be more feminine than masculine.

In terms of geographical distribution, we can say that there is evidence of a horizontal distribution across the mainland, except for the absence of doctoral theses in the field of ALE in the two archipelagos. The study shows there were 14 universities promoting research on ALE subjects, however there was a clear specialisation in one of those HEIs situated in the north of the country, where 20 of those doctoral theses were produced. However, Lisbon was the city with the most results, with 13 doctoral theses on ALE distributed through 3 HEIs.

Regarding the Departments where the doctoral theses on ALE were developed, there was a clear predominance of Education departments (21). Yet one could also emphasise other departments such as Social Sciences and Sociology (5), Science and Technology (5), Communication and Arts (3) and Literature (2). Finally, a department of Economics (1) and a department of Psychology (1) presented the same number of occurrences.

In relation to methodologies that doctoral researchers prefer, one could detect a prevalence of a case study as a research method (14). Subsequently, a biographical approach, including learning portfolios and interviews with teachers and immigrant students (3) appeared linked to experimental methods (2) amongst which action-research methods (1) that were more associated with the use of new information technologies and communication. Ethnographic approaches to adult education in a non-governmental organisation for local development (1) and education in the prison system (1) also closely integrated with participant observation (3) and comparative methods (1). A Psychological instrument, the *adaptability inventory* (1) shaped questionnaires on attitudes and behaviours of the unemployed attending vocational training in Portugal. The remaining doctoral theses adopted triangulation between case studies and other methods (4), discourse analysis and content analysis (3), analyses of public policy documents (2), development of training workshops on Web tools (1), Specialists' inquiry panel (1), structural analysis of interactions (1) and pre-experimental methods underpinned by focus groups. The majority of the methodological designs

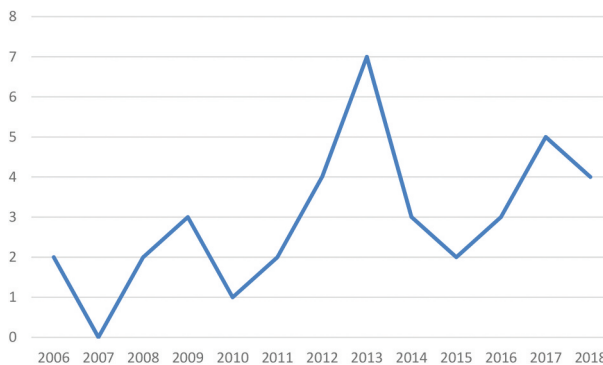


Figure 3. Evolution of doctoral theses on ALE in Portugal (2006–2018).

in those research studies opted to use mixed qualitative and quantitative tools such as interviews and questionnaires.

Regarding the major themes selected for doctoral research on ALE, the key interest was in studying different aspects observed in the contexts of practice by looking at the panorama of public adult education offered nationally. Both evaluations of the process of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) (5) and the organisational structures of national centres (New Opportunities Programme) where ALE public offers are located (5) attracted doctoral students' attention equally. The latter were somehow attractive to doctoral students in Portugal but only one thesis examined the Centres for New Opportunities from a sociological school organisation and administration point-of-view. Notably, a few theses were aimed at investigating the political agendas behind the Portuguese model of ALE (5). They looked at issues such as public policy, governance and regulation.

Indeed, several theses have focused on the educational processes available for low-qualified adults, considering learning procedures and methodologies used for the recognition of prior learning. Actually, this was not surprising as, since 2001, those programs were the main paths through which adults could obtain a basic or secondary school certification in Portugal.

In the context of the main interests in doctoral research, some theses provided a discussion on experimental learning and portfolio construction, and several focused on the learning of a foreign language, as well as training in technologies and e-learning. Interest in the impact of information and communication technologies on adult education motivated studies on virtual learning, information technology, online, distance learning and e-learning (6). They focused on technological specialisation, new models of post-secondary qualification in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), professional development for secondary school teachers and intergenerational learning via ICT as well as gamified instructional design in online higher education. Studies on literacy (broad sense), linguistic training and Portuguese language teaching (6) were prominent. Fewer theses covered the study of ethnic and cultural identities of adult learners (3) or the training of educators (3).

Given the above panorama, one could map a variety of perspectives receiving significant attention regarding ALE practices. The tentative cartography for Portugal also indicated the inexistence of a significant interest in researching the supranational dimension of the ALE policy and the impacts of International Organisations in the field. Only one thesis highlighted the need to study the influence of international organisations on Portugal's ALE strategies through comparative studies with some Western European countries. Yet the historical connections between Portugal, Brasil and Africa marked doctoral work (2) in the environment of virtual platforms for mathematics learning and vocational education for adults in Brasil. Other doctoral outputs (2) focused on the learning of languages by afrodescendants and social partnerships between government organisations and others of the second and third sectors in the domain of adult education in Angola.

The state of the art of ALE research, captured via the grid, indicated that there is a panoplia of values, principles and aims justifying doctoral research on ALE. Nonetheless, one can observe a tension between the understanding of the role of ALE as a vehicle for adaptation of adults to society vs the conscientization of adults to transform society, which has a clear presence as a meta-paradigmatic issue. Data indicated that this tension present in the cartography of doctoral research remained unresolved, as there were 15 theses expressing a tendency to adopt a transformational *ethos*, against 20 defending the adaptation role of ALE. The remaining theses (3) did not take a stance on this matter. (View [Figure 4](#))

Finally, conceptual characterisation exposed a significative presence in the abstracts of 38 theses on a variety of concepts with prevalence of the following: concerning the classification and modalities of learning and education; the present analysis indicated considerable focus on formal learning (28) over informal (19) and non-formal learning and education (16). Looking at the preferred range of intervention, most ALE theses under review focused on a local level (34) which prevailed over debates focusing on global/international issues (4). With respect to scope,

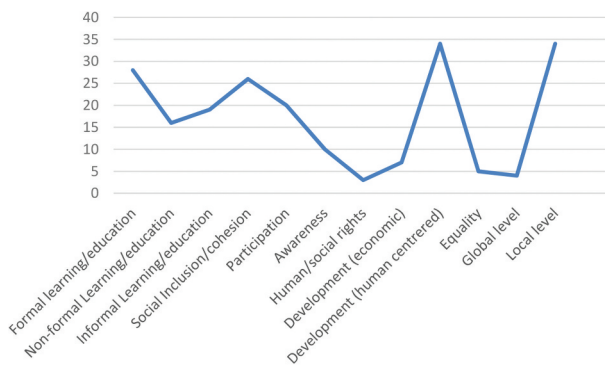


Figure 4. Conceptual description of doctoral theses on ALE in Portugal.

objects and targets prioritised in ALE theses, there is evidence of a greater interest in human-centred development (34), than in social inclusion (26), participation (20), awareness (10) and very limited interest in human/social rights (3). This level of cartographed data was in accordance with a policy tension around the adaptation of adults to society through ALE and an opposite view that stood for the conscientization of adults by ALE to transform society. Such tensions expressed the mobilisation of concepts with a contradictory paradigmatic inscription (Barros, 2011, 2012), showing that there is not a single paradigm pervading ALE doctoral research. As seen above, all 12 keywords of the grid related to concepts, frameworks, and paradigms (listed as relevant after a literature review) were present in the doctoral theses produced in Portugal between 2006 and 2018. Even so, the reading of such theses revealed that human-centred development, at a local level, was the main object of consideration in adult learning and education. The concept of human development included the development of competences/skills in relation to a broad sense of literacy, particularly digital literacy.

Discussion and some concluding remarks

The study indicated that there is a significant difference between the total number of doctoral theses produced (in all scientific domains) in each country, 17,286 in 2017 in Spain³ and 2,001 in 2017 in Portugal.⁴ Yet, there is no significant disparity in the total number of doctoral theses in ALE in each country, 89 in Spain and 38 in Portugal (between 2006 and 2018). Data discussed in this research article revealed that the field of ALE is more attractive for doctoral researchers in Portugal than in Spain. The geographical distribution of HEIs offering ALE doctoral programs could be one explanation of this finding regarding the attractiveness of ALE studies in Portugal. As mentioned earlier on, the production of doctoral theses in this field was uneven across Spain (it represented only 13 of the 17 autonomous communities). Moreover, of the 32 universities with ALE theses defended, in 23 of them students only submitted one or two theses in the analysed period. In contrast, production was more homogeneous in Portugal. However, it is noteworthy that in both countries there is evidence of delayed HEI offering ALE doctoral programmes in the archipelagos. Until 2013, students did not produce theses on ALE in the islands around the Iberian Peninsula. In 2013, one student defended a doctoral thesis on ALE in the University of the Balearic Islands, and in 2016, two in the Canary Islands (at the University of La Laguna and the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria). It is worth mentioning that, in 2013, a PhD candidate produced one thesis at the New University Lisbon with a focus on ALE and RPL (recognition of prior learning) in the Autonomous Region of Madeira Island.

In both countries, the interest in ALE doctoral research was relatively low when compared with the number of doctoral works dedicated to education in the early stages of life. The fact that HEIs

did not offer specialised first cycle courses on ALE (Loureiro et al., 2012) while there was ample offer in the field of childhood and primary education. In a nutshell, those circumstances could elucidate the findings as ‘the claim to be a profession traditionally assumes the need for a University level qualification’ (Ackland, 2011, p. 57). Simultaneously, the low status of professionalisation (Guimarães & Barros, 2015) and prevalence of precarious jobs in this area of education provision could explain the lack of interest in ALE studies, since ‘nowadays professional careers are marked by a big instability and, in adult education, it is no different. Adult educators have to cope with a big instability in their professional lives, and flexibility has become a very common word’ (Paulos, 2018, p. 169). Indeed, 212 theses in Spain and 160 theses in Portugal targeted early childhood education, while 436 theses in Spain and 37 theses in Portugal studied primary education. The financing of projects and academic publications in both countries could also explain this considerable difference in educational research prioritising early stages of life. A missrecognition of the ALE field by society, as well by scientific and educational policy agendas, could also be an expression of the situation affecting academic interest in ALE studies, because there are complex ‘structural influences on the professional development of adult educators and their relation to education policy’ (Lassnigg, 2011, p. 37). Interestingly enough, there was a lack of enthusiasm about researching the supranational dimension of ALE policy and lifelong learning programs as well as the impacts of International Organisations in the field, even if this could kindle the rethinking of the status of ALE in the national policy agendas of continuing education (Zukas & Malcolm, 2018).

With regard to the authorship of the doctoral theses on ALE, in Spain they tended to be produced by women (53 theses written by females and 36 by males), although gender bias in Spain was not as pronounced as it was in Portugal where 30 theses were written by females and 8 by males. These results confirmed the main panorama of students in the field of education in Portuguese HEIs, which tends to receive uneven enrolments across sexes, with the majority being women (Dias et al., 2013). Also, in other settings, such as the North American, the female authorship is greater than the masculine, for example, in the papers presented to the Adult Education Research Conference (Troy, 2006). In terms of the departments in HEIs where students produced ALE doctoral theses, the predominance of Education departments was notorious in both countries, an ongoing fact that maintains some lack of visibility for the field in the Academia (Olesen, 2003).

Looking upon the methodology used in the 127 doctoral theses, the findings show they differed considerably in each country, and, as Fejes and Nicoll pointed out, ‘it is then only tentatively and with caution that any partial picture regarding change in the approaches to research and scholarship in a field of the education and learning of adults over time can be painted’ (2013, p. 7). Even so, it is possible to observe that, in the case of Spain, the comparative methodology was predominant, whereas in Portugal the single case study was preferred as method of research. In both contexts, methodological designs benefitted from the use of mixed qualitative and quantitative tools such as interviews and questionnaires. Partly coincides with what was found by K apflinger (2015) in his analysis of the research conferences of the European Society for the Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA). In the papers presented, the qualitative method is preferred over the quantitative and they give prevalence to interviews with students.

The findings did not allow a unique profile to be drawn on mapping priorities and absences concerning political thinking in doctoral abstracts research at HEIs, although facilitated the identification of tendencies. In the case of Spain, there was a more obvious tendency to present the role of ALE closely related to helping individuals and groups to adapt to the educational system, to society and to labour market demands than in Portugal, where such tendency is present but only marginal. This could reflect national effects of a major panorama in the global governance of ALE (Barros, 2020), through which several policy researchers manifest a perception that ‘there is a dominant technocratic thinking in adult learning education, a thinking difficult to challenge in particular, is a thinking that claiming not to be political, is particularly insidiously political’ (Torres, 2015, p. 23), at the same time an ‘increasing attention is paid to the usefulness of adult education in relation to economic development and human resource management’ (Guimarães, 2017).

Still, what goes on in the Portuguese panorama looks more like an unresolved tension, concerning the priorities and role of ALE, between the adaptation of adults to society and the conscientization of adults to transform society. Indeed, according to the evidence, 15 theses expressed a tendency to embrace a transformational *ethos*, against 20 that tended to defend the adaptation role, with 3 being somehow neutral. Therefore, amongst the selected sample of doctoral theses for Portugal, we can highlight ambiguities and tensions about crucial aspects undermining the role of ALE, particularly its values, principles and aims. Whereas a large bulk of research on ALE in Spain scrutinised public providers and the system of formal education, usually involved with reproductive functions in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), the models dealt with in the Portuguese studies suggested contradictory paradigmatic conceptions, indicating that there is not a single paradigm pervading ALE doctoral research. Finally, in the case of Spain, the theses seemed to dismiss the areas of non-formal and informal learning, which were very relevant in the case of Portugal.

To conclude, it is important to concede that the present analysis has both strengths and limitations. On one hand, this work shared a new methodological instrument – the constructed grid with general and specific categories, which has allowed the authors to identify, in a concise and coherent way, the main aspects of the 127 doctoral abstracts at hand in order to respond to the five research questions raised in this article. On the other hand, the analytical method is not statistically minded. When the contents of doctoral abstracts were converted to codes and codes to numbers (referring to presence/absence) the methodology did not include statistical procedures such as structural equation modelling (a possibility amongst others). Yet, if the full text of doctoral theses were codified using a suitable software, then it would make more sense to give a statistical treatment to data.

A further limitation in the present work resulted from the impossibility of access to the complete text of most doctoral theses in Spain and some in Portugal. If we had been given access to the full texts submitted, more details on the different questions under scrutiny could have been offered. Consequently, future studies could benefit from closer collaboration with those responsible for running postgraduation courses on ALE in Spanish and Portuguese universities so that they can offer not only access to full text theses but also clues about new developments affecting the status of ALE in Spanish and Portuguese Higher Education Institutions. It would also be interesting to interview the authors of doctoral theses in the study on their perception of the consequences and impacts of their research for policy and practice in ALE. Some other suggested lines for future research might be: (i) a validation exercise of the elements included in the Analysis sheet; (ii) an extension of the study to encompass other countries. The latter would allow us to establish whether tendencies in this research field are similar in other European regions and, if so, discuss what strategies would permit a greater European recognition of ALE as a key subject of academic inquiry.

Notes

1. The recent creation of a specialised research centre in Portugal: The Adult Education and Community Intervention Research Centre (CEAD) at the University of Algarve could have an future impact on the current ALE research scenario.
 2. The Spanish National Repositoires used were: RECYT-Repositorio Español de Ciencia y Tecnología (<https://recyt.fecyt.es>) and TESEO-Base de datos del Ministerio de Educación de Tesis Doctorales (<https://www.educacion.gob.es/teseo/irGestionarConsulta.do>).
- The Portuguese National Repositoires used were: RCAAP-Repositórios Científicos de Acesso Aberto de Portugal (<https://www.rcaap.pt/>) and RENATES-Registo Nacional de Temas de Tese de Doutoramento em Curso e de Doutoramentos Concluídos (www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/renates/).
3. Source: Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades, <http://estadisticas.mecd.gob.es/EducaDynPx/educabase/index.htm?type=pcaxis&path=/Universitaria/Tesis/2017/&file=pcaxis>
 4. Source: General Directorate for Education and Science Statistics, (Direcção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, DGEEC), website www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/245.html. Table: Number of doctoral theses conducted, recognised or registered in Portugal, in years 2000, 2006, 2011 e 2018.

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Compliance with ethical standards

We warrant that our manuscript is original work and has not been accepted for publication by another periodical. We further warrant that our work does not infringe on the copyright or statutory rights of others and does not contain libelous statements.

Our research do not involves Human Participants and/or Animals.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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APPENDIX 1.

The template for comparative analysis grid in the field of ALE

Doctoral theses on adult education (2006–2018)

Analysis sheet

I. Characterisation of the thesis (generic categories to be highlighted).

Title:	
University:	Department:
Authorship female/male:	Year:
Keywords:	
Methodology:	

II. Characterisation of the thesis (specific categories to be highlighted).

1. General overview, general values/principles
 2. Aims of adult education/learning/lifelong learning
 3. Role of adult education/learning/lifelong learning in achieving education for adaptation
 4. Role of adult education/learning/lifelong learning in achieving education for transformation
 5. Exploration of the political role of the international organisation (such as UNESCO, EU, the World Bank, etc.) in adult education/learning/lifelong learning
 6. Other relevant issues (like professionalisation and employment, etc.)
-

III. Conceptual characterisation.

Presence/Absence Registry:

Informal Learning/education	Formal learning/education	Non-formal Learning/education	Participation
Social Inclusion/cohesion	Awareness	Human/social rights	Equality
Development (human centred)	Development (economic)	Global level	Local level

Observations:
