


Europeanisation of adult education – Prospects and challenges?

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Two decades since the Lisbon Agenda, Europeanisation keeps appeal and relevance and has dramatically changed the way public policy is made. Competitive globalisation keeps accelerating the ways the political arena develops in Europe, with a set of impacts and shifts in domestic agendas. Several generations of governance processes, implemented as ‘soft power’ exercises, first based on ‘shared responsibility’ and then on ‘integrated surveillance’, have created the conditions to significantly expand the EU’s sphere of intervention in education, enabling the establishment of the European Education Area (EEA).

As a powerful symbolic construction, the EEA represents the anchor to put education and training (ET) ‘at the heart of the European political agenda’ (CEU, 2021, p. 3).¹ Therefore, the contemporary relevance achieved by lifelong learning and adult education is based on several mechanisms, rules, norms, laws, procedures, indicators, and policy documents (particularly follow-up reports), that together enable for a dynamic flow among decision centres and their peripheries. To understand how this new and constantly renewed, multilevel architecture of educational governance develops, keeping an eye on its tensions and dilemmas is the overarching object of policy studies in adult education.

Indeed, the Maastricht Treaty signed in 1992 and consolidated in 2002 defines the tasks concerning education in Article 149. Furthermore, in the Lisbon Treaty (2007, Article 2E), the EU is the entity which will have competence to carry out actions to support, coordinate, or supplement the actions of the Member States in certain areas. Among these are also education, vocational training, youth, and sport. To this extent, phrases like *may take initiative to ensure coordination*, *shall take measures to ensure coordination*, and *may adopt directives establishing coordination* are to be found in Lisbon Treaty, thus

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ensuring the open method of coordination (OMC), which is an arrangement of inter-governmental policy making, without resulting in any binding legislative measures. This method has provided the basis for convergence allowing European countries to be evaluated (peer pressure) in areas such as employment, social protection, education, youth, and vocational training.

Developing exchange of information and experience among Member States was in the very core interest of the EU, especially in the most extensive enlargement of 2004.² Indeed, bringing together ten different countries, attaining various levels of economic and social development (regarded from, e.g., EU point of view) in early 2000s was a very demanding and delicate task. Therefore, preparation of the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (2000) paved the way for bringing together different perceptions of education and learning, giving it an agreed common basis of understanding. Creating a working group to find sets of indicators which would render possible ET comparison among Member States was another logical step. Subsequent years saw the emergence of key policy documents, like *Education and Training 2010* (2004) setting goals to reach in a decade; *Action Plan on Adult Learning – It is never too late to learn* (2006) designating the area of adult education in the long-term period; or the *Education and Training 2020* (2009), to name but a few which laid the basis towards the joint EEA by 2025, making ET comparable across the EU.

In this context, if the pandemic years have shown the global vulnerabilities of the actual human societies, the year 2022 has reminded us how very fragile peace is. Those recent events represent extreme challenges for the EU, particularly since February's attack on an independent state and war threat which brings a renewed risk of nuclear conflict. However, it has also shown prospects for connectedness, empathy, solidarity, and goodwill for policy cooperation in European countries, though all these feelings are maybe stronger in some countries than in others. But they are there binding us together and emerging as a new discursive ethos in educational governance and each subfield of policy agendas.

Keeping this in mind, the purpose of this Special Issue (SI) is to present updated research and documented analysis dealing with the impacts of the most recent European Commission's priorities for 2019–24 on the Europeanisation of adult education considering its specificities and contradictions and aiming at developing the existing knowledge on this subject as the authors in this SI offer a refreshed critical lens to problematise what has happened recently that raises the importance of Europeanisation in the field of adult education and policy studies. The ensemble of papers reflects the current situation in today's European multilevel and multistakeholder governance concerning adult education and learning.

Along these lines, the articles deal with a variety of questions regarding continuity or discontinuity of the European policy agenda for adult learning, if actually there is one; reflection on implications of critical theory for adult education policy and the addressing of societal issues; or the critical dilemmas of mobilising resource to achieve the proposed EEA. The papers do not avoid the power relations between EU centres and its peripheries, showing the tensions and hybridisation of some national adult education policy. In a complementary way, the essays also focus on the invisible hand of governance, embedded

in a 'learning exclusion equilibrium' to address practice, for example, unpredictability in municipal environments of leadership, participation issues in adult continuing education, and non-profit organisations dealing with the expansion of work scenarios for low-skilled and low-paid adults in Europe. Neither do they forget of reflecting on the role of soft power exercised through ET governance, made clear on the European Commission's Country-Specific Recommendations for this particular educational field.

Contributions in this SI show how common EU goals have developed over the years in the field of adult education and learning, what the obstacles were and what are the challenges awaiting the policy makers. There is nothing linear on it as the pace of development is, as everywhere else, marked by economic and political situation in each country of the Union and its priorities. It can be said that the period after the 2004 enlargement, targeting eastern Europe, was a period of intense consideration and adaptation but also of drawbacks, particularly due to the economic crisis in 2008, followed by renewed energies and considerable efforts envisaging to make the EEA a reality. However, there are still aims to be achieved and challenges to be met.

The SI highlights some important topics for extending the scholarly debate. For instance, **Palle Rasmussen** while considering critical theory for adult education policy research states that there is a role for adult education 'in confronting the past and the present of Western societies'. Even if adult education is not a major topic of interest in educational research at large, there is consensus that it does require a certain amount of state responsibility. This is relevant because adult education covers a range of fields concerning personal or working life and is provided at many different and varied sites. It must therefore be 'combined with policy analysis concepts and systematic empirical work'.

While researching the prospects and challenges of European policy in adult education and learning, **Paula Guimarães** and **Rosanna Barros** suggest that 'the "new" in the New European agenda of adult learning reflects' rather previous 'trends in policy priorities, governance and educational values and principles following human resources management rationale' in detriment of other rationales, as the one aiming to liberate and empower European people, particularly in a moment when we have a severe increase of European working-poor and a correlated increase of poor families and child poverty. This is relevant for a public debate about decisions concerning where we want to go.

The OMC is recognised among the EU countries as a policy mechanism which is democratic enough and brings results. Some call this method 'soft laws' because what is agreed upon is carried out as well. **Shalini Singh** sees this kind of communication in coordination as 'norms' developed by EU Member States over the years and investigates how EU Member States do or do not change their resource mobilisation strategies in adult education policy to achieve common European goals. Based on results, the author is actually quite sceptic about whether all targeted groups are reached. This is relevant to critically reflect on the possibilities from where we are now.

Leadership is one of the major factors enabling successful management of adult education and adult education centres. In the new and ever-changing environments, as **Fred Carlo Andersen**, **Gunn Vedøy**, and **Erlend Dehlin** show, principals facing these

challenges need help in stimulation and professional development. Additionally, as **Paolo Di Rienzo, Giovanni Serra, and Maria Caterina De Blasis** state, one of the top tasks in European adult education agenda has been for a long time the recognition and validation of prior learning experience which can, in the context of lifelong and lifewide learning, offer significant benefits to adults, ‘fostering personal, social, civic, and occupational development’.

Katarina Popović, Maja Maksimović, and Sanja Djerasimović remind us that EU does not cover the whole European geographical map. Some countries are not part of it either by their own choice or because they are preparing to become a part of the EU community. Their article explores adult education in such a country where ‘its hybrid political regime may lead to the hybridization of its adult education system’ showing how ‘EU’s policies, institutions, and funding mechanisms shape this relationship’ while at the same time the ‘EU, as the center of the system, plays a critical role in shaping the adult education policies’ in the country ‘characterized by a combination of authoritarian and non-democratic practices’ significantly affecting adult education policy.

Paolo Federighi, Francesca Torlone, and Francesco De Maria show us that empowering low-skilled population through lifelong learning and adult education is also on the EU agenda. In a knowledge society, the educational level of the employed labour force is relatively high, although the demand from the business sector for unskilled labourers is still substantial. While the businesses and the State are focussed on the highly skilled people, there seems to be a status quo which includes a high number of low-skilled and low-paid adults. This article ‘identifies a package of policies’ based on research in seven European countries, that shows there might be a way out of such a situation.

The last article in this SI comes from **Ellen Boeren**, and deals with the results of a comparative analysis of Country-Specific Recommendations made by the European Commission and published in 2020 and 2022. They are embedded in the literature on welfare state typologies and do not stay solely on a country-by-country basis but are discussed ‘in light of the differences and similarities between them’ and give new insights into how countries implemented mechanisms to cope with the consequences of the pandemic years.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that this SI brings together several contributions presented at the latest triennial conference of the European Society for Research in Education of Adults (ESREA) on ‘New Seeds for a World to Come. Policies, Practices and Lives in Adult education and Learning’, held in 2022 (at the University of Milano Bicocca, Italy, from September 29 to October 1), as well as from the latest Policy Studies in Adult Education (PSAE), ESREA Network, conference on ‘Problematisming the Futures of Adult Education: Between Global, National, Regional and Local Policies and Actors’, held in 2024 (at Funchal, Madeira, Portugal, from February 29 to March 2). The majority of authors of this SI have made policy studies in adult education their core field of research, allowing them to raise and answer several questions that illuminate the mechanisms, process, and trends at work supporting the continuous development of Europeanisation and the EEA governance.

In this respect, it is relevant to ask oneself what is new in the new EU's agenda for adult learning and to see how and why the EU Member States are changing or keeping their own strategies for the education of adults to achieve the EEA. Are the underprivileged (low-paid, low-skilled, and the unemployed) really the targets or are they left behind? It is essential for different kind of educational actors, including stakeholders, to know the effects and the role of soft power in ET governance both in relation to different adult ET initiatives in Member States and in relation to the recommended policy instruments. These are the prospects and challenges the authors in this issue are tackling with.

Notes

1. CEU (2021), *Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021–2030*.
2. Seven enlargements have taken place (1973, 1981, 1986, 1995, 2004, 2007, and 2013).