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Europeanisation and adult education: between political centrality and fragility

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ABSTRACT

The paper offers new insights into the Europeanisation of adult education, as an area of intervention and a component of the European education policy and sector, by tracing routes and processes that underpinned this pathway. The analysis provides some original findings, by pointing to four moments (thematisation; lifelong learning dimension; European agenda; political centrality/absence of policies; a new opportunity?) and two trends: on the one hand, one points out the creation of a European Education Area which has regulatory processes and instruments typical of a market; on the other hand, it is against this backdrop the European Agenda for Adult Learning set out action lines around *quality* and *participation*. The 2015 mid-term review states it is unlikely that pursuing the political choices made thus far will lead to the achievement of such a goal. Some recent developments, *New skills agenda for Europe* or *Upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults*, may become associated with significant steps to stronger commitment and sustainable policies to increase adult participation in education or, in contrast, and underlining one of the main arguments here advanced, with the continuity of the dual condition of political centrality and fragility of Adult Education, which goes back a long way.

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Adult education and learning; Europeanisation; European adult education policy; lifelong learning; European agenda for adult learning

1. Introduction

The issue of the Europeanisation of education has various facets, as demonstrated, on the one hand, by the apparent common understanding of the concept, which at times is deemed as not requiring an explicit definition, and by the multiple meanings which have often been ascribed to it (cf. Radaelli 2000; Lawn and Lingard 2002; Dale and Robertson 2009), on the other. It is my understanding that in education, as in other fields, it is important to analyse the implications not only of the interconnections between European and national priorities, options, guidelines and political institutions (Andersen and Eliassen 1993), but also of the creation of a European education sector and a European education policy (Dale and Robertson 2009). The concept of *Europeanisation* has been invoked in the literature to describe either set of processes. However, both from an analytical and empirical standpoint, we are dealing with distinct, albeit connected, socio-political

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phenomena and relations. Today, they are two inseparable processes, suggesting a relational and multidimensional approach, allowing for an understanding of education policies as dynamic realities that comprise multiple scales and dimensions, and considering the European and national spaces as interdependent processes, relations and dimensions that are mutually constitutive. Nonetheless, and from a chronological point of view, it is possible to determine the routes and metamorphoses of socio-political relations pertaining to the *Europeanisation* of education; it is also possible, using a two-way approach, to understand the features and the dynamics of creation of a European education sector and a European education policy, as well as to analyse the options and priorities of the national education policies within that framework (Antunes 2006).

In the field of education, it has become a matter of consensus among researchers that: (i) the 1970s marked the dawning of European Economic Community (EEC) (as it was then called) intervention; (ii) since the mid-1980s this intervention was further fostered by the Single European Act and the preparation process for the European Single Market, namely through the Community Action Programmes; (iii) in 1992 the Maastricht/European Union Treaty, with the inclusion of article 126, was the landmark that formally granted the EU its own powers in the field of education, which have not ceased to broaden and deepen. In this second stage of the Europeanisation of education process (since 1992), one has witnessed 'the development of a Community agenda and a Community policy (i.e. defined and developed under the aegis of Community institutions) on education and training' that, since 1999/2000, has been based on the Bologna and the Copenhagen Processes and the Education and Training 2010 Programme, with the open method of coordination under the framework of the Lisbon Strategy (Antunes 2006, 50; Rasmussen 2014b).

It has been argued that the process of Europeanisation of education, which, as mentioned above, has been visible for over two decades, has resulted in two increasing trends. On the one hand, the political and economic centrality of education, training and learning has been reinforced (i.e. there has been a repositioning of education in relation to the economy, politics and culture); this is shown by the adoption of *lifelong learning* as a flagship project and by the development of the Education and Training 2010 and Education and Training 2020 Programmes within the scope of the Lisbon Strategy and of the EU 2020 Strategy. Simultaneously, and with a strong input from the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes, a European Education Area has been gradually set up with (European) regulatory processes and instruments that are consistent with a market: a degree structure; a credit system; a European Qualifications Framework; quality assurance systems (Antunes 2016).[1] From this perspective, these processes of Europeanisation of education contribute to, and are feed by, a *globally structured agenda for education* (Dale 2000; Antunes 2006), stemming from the actors, historical pathways and other institutional and material resources required and at disposal, particularly in EU instances. Consequently, the greater centrality of education (formulated essentially as lifelong learning and as the provision of the qualifications and skills required by the economy) has resulted in the high priority given to *participation,* and in a path leading towards the (quantitative) *democratisation* of education, both of which have long been sought by those aspiring to realise the right to education as a public good anchored in the public sector.

These decades of Europeanisation constitute, thus, a process and a project of development of the above-mentioned trends, but also of dispute and tensions for the affirmation

of education as a fundamental social and human right, on the one hand, and, conversely, as a marketable commodity, as an economic and employment policy and as a policy for the creation of 'Europe', on the other (see Lawn and Nóvoa 2005; Antunes 2006, 2016).

It is largely acknowledge that *Europeanisation* by no means implies *convergence* of education national policies and that policy options and guidelines are far from being implemented under the control of political authorities (Holford and Milana 2014); on the contrary, in tracing the pathway of education policies, national, institutional or practices *mediations* seem to be so effective as the framework of European policies (Rasmussen 2014a; Cavaco, Lafont, and Pariat 2014). In the adult education sector, as elsewhere, this means that understanding the educational practices and experiences build and lived by adults and educators requires a specific research on its own (Lima and Guimarães 2012; Abrantes 2013). And the adult education and learning landscape is on the crossroads of multiple debates about its contours as an existential transformative experience and a praxis of social change, a collective practice or social project of building subjects (citizens) and (democratic) communities, an upskilling or empowering pathway in order to confront socioeconomic uncertainties and risks (Fejes 2010; Fragoso and Guimarães 2010; Jarvis, Rabušicová, and Nehyba 2015).

This paper will now address the *Europeanisation* of (education) public policies in the EU with the purpose of pointing out, following on from previous studies, routes and processes leading to the constitution of adult education both as an intervention area and as component of the European education sector and policy. Namely, some research questions unexplored in the field of adult education and learning have been addressed: (i) which steps and landmarks have advanced this pathway? (ii) which policy orientations, goals and outcomes underpin this process? (iii) what can we learn about Europeanisation from a roadmap of this process, in the sense above referred, in the domain of adult education?

The answers to these research questions can contribute to building a better understanding of some chronological references and the agenda of the Europeanisation of adult education. So the paper argues and documents two trends (about the centrality of adult education/enlarging the participation in adult education; developing political instruments of regulation/constituting adult education as a market) and goes further with a new understanding of this pathway of Europeanisation of adult education, by tracing four moments (suggesting that eventually a fifth moment could now be underway) on this roadmap: (1) the *thematisation* of adult education as a Community intervention area; (2) Adult education as a *dimension of lifelong learning*: the Education & Training 2010 Programme; (3)The *European agenda* for adult education – quality and participation; (4) Between *political centrality and absence of policies*? (5) A *new opportunity* for Adult Education? In the next sections a broad stocktaking of important developments in this pathway of more than twenty years is carried out and it is suggested that some connections can be built between EU adult education initiatives and EU education policy at large.

The analysis here discussed is built on the basis of a corpus of documents selected in order to cover the main European Commission (EC) and Council of the European Union (CEU) initiatives in the adult education domain.[2] This selection was done by learning from the research, by consulting, since 2004, the Education and Training 2010 Progress Reports and, since 2012, the Education and Training Monitor. These documents, among other documents analysed, are important because they summarise the main

developments in the sector, they constitute the official stocktaking reports and they deliver policy guidelines to member states and other stakeholders. The analytical strategy of the documental corpus, according with the goals of this research, has been geared to: (i) systematically identify the chronological *moments* and the *developments* that define new *directions* to the European intervention in adult education; (ii) apprehend some main *contents* and some important *meanings* of this European intervention; (iii) relate those developments with landmarks provided by existing literature about Europeanisation of education (see Table 1 below). This corpus of more than twenty European education policy documents is referred in footnotes and bibliography and serves both to identify and document the proposed chronological factual developments and milestones and to grasp goals, orientations and outcomes of this political process. So, the documental source is always indicated, and frequently there are citations from these documental sources in order to consistently root the discussion underway; this happens every time a milestone is proposed indicating a new moment of the pathway under study or when some trends, guidelines or outcomes of the EC or the CEU initiatives in the adult education domain are discussed. As documented in the paper, the outcomes of this analysis are consistent with existing specialised literature, both in adult education developments and in routes and processes of Europeanisation of education (see Table 1 below; Lawn and Nóvoa, 2005; Dale and Robertson 2009; Rasmussen 2014b; Milana and Holford 2014; Antunes 2006, 2016).

2. The EU and adult education: a roadmap

2.1. 1995–1999: the Grundtvig action and the thematisation of adult education as a community intervention area

According to some researchers, in the mid-1990s the EU became one of the main actors of the so-called 'return' to *lifelong education* within a new economic, political and cultural context (the reform of the *managerial* State and globalisation), with other protagonists (such as the EU) and adopting a new register (through public policies and professional practices) (Clarke and Newman 1997; Field 2001). Canário (2013, 562), in turn, argues that

> [we] moved from a concept of "Permanent Education" to a concept of "Lifelong Learning". This transition, achieved by eroding the ideals of Permanent Education, represents a break and not a continuity. It is part of, and only understandable as such, a wider range of social transformations that affected the *economy, work and education/training* in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Also known as the 'discursive turn' from lifelong 'education' to lifelong 'learning', it appears to have brought changes both to societal projects and educational concepts, which, two decades down the line, are still a matter of controversy and of disagreement about meanings. The designation of 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning[3] happened at a time when adult education had become an EU intervention area through the first edition of the Grundtvig action line (within the Community action programme 'Socrates'[4]), which ran from 1995 to 1999 and was the inaugural step into this area. As it was a very small-scale programme, focusing, essentially, on the mobility of training staff and the undertaking of joint studies and actions, the outcome of its initiatives was

modest; nevertheless, it means that the first steps were taken to raise the profile of this intervention area and some networks and interactions between institutions, professionals and academics were set up (see Commission of the European Communities 2001a, 13).

2.2. 2000–2006: adult education as a dimension of lifelong learning: the education and training 2010 programme

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Grundtvig Action, while still mobilising modest resources, had another edition within the Socrates II Programme (2000–2006); a Grundtvig sub-programme would later be included in the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007–2013), coexisting, as will be discussed further on, with another EU instrument within the area of Adult Education: The Action Plan for Adult Learning, *It Is Always a Good Time to Learn*.

As of the year 2000, a European education (and training) policy was being developed within the framework of the Lisbon Strategy (2000–2010) (and the European Employment Strategy 1997) which placed education and training at the top of the political priorities and at the centre of the economy. The Presidency Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council in 2000 repeatedly state the direction to be taken for the following decade: 'The Union has today set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Council 2000, 2). It is within this context that the adoption of the *lifelong learning* strategy by European decision-makers, based on a rationale of valorisation of *human capital* as a 'EU competitive advantage' in the competition for world markets (Hozjan 2009), is set out in various documents. What kind of education and training gains this political centrality? Among the decision-makers, the documents and the European policy options what stands out is an understanding of education and training which tends to be unbalanced: aspects regarded as economically relevant or that are of a substitutive-palliative nature (with regard to employment or poverty, for example) are favoured, whilst the cultural or civic dimensions (or indeed those of social promotion) tend to be minimised or downplayed. As underlined by Lima and Guimarães (2015, 250), 'Basically, education in all its forms (formal, non-formal and informal) is gaining market value since learning by adults can be translated into investment with an economic return'.

In the words of Vivianne Reding, the European Commissioner for Education and Culture at the time, a *silent revolution* (Reding 2001) in the field of education took place, one which was mainly brought about through the Copenhagen and Bologna processes and the Education and Training 2010 programme (ET 2010); particular emphasis was placed on the open method of coordination (OMC), which played a powerful role in setting up the systematic policy articulation that founded the European education policy in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The OMC, a *soft policy* (Hozjan 2009) which rests on political agreements and *cognitive and normative* processes, includes: the formulation of *common objectives* for the education and training systems of the Member States; the establishment of *European indicators and benchmarks*; and the adoption of measures and targets by each Member State to contribute to and meet the common European objectives and benchmarks. One of the European benchmarks in the ET 2010 programme points to: 'by 2010, the European Union average level of

participation in Lifelong Learning, should be at least 12,5% of the adult working age population (25 to 64 age group)' (Council of the European Union 2003, C 134/4).[5] That benchmark seems to represent both the definition, at European Union level, of adult education as a dimension of the adopted lifelong learning strategy as well as a common goal of policies to be developed by the member states in the field and the *ex-post* control of the whole process. Through the integration in the Education and Training 2010 Programme, under the OMC, adult education turns to become part of the European education sector and policy.

2.3. 2006–2010: the European agenda for adult education – quality and participation

Following rather pessimistic assessments regarding the progress of the ET 2010 programme (including this benchmark) in 2004 and 2006, the European Commission puts forward an 'Action Plan for Adult Learning *It is always a good time to learn*' (2008–2010), which is adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

This Action Plan is meaningful in that it formulates a European adult education policy (2008–2010) around five priorities:

> [to] analyse the effects of reforms in all sectors of education and training in Member States on adult learning [European and National Qualifications Frameworks; credit transfer and quality assurance systems]; [to]improve the quality of provisions in the adult learning sector [initial and continuing training of adult learning staff, quality standards and the accreditation of providers]; [to] increase the possibilities for adults to go "one step up" - to achieve a qualification at least one level higher than before; speed up the process of assessment of skills and social competences and have them validated and recognised in terms of learning outcomes; [to] improve the monitoring of adult learning sector [need for: a common language; indicators and benchmarks; comparable core data] (EC 2007, 9–11).

It appears that this European Agenda is consigned to giving shape to a goal for the adult education sector similar to the one which, a decade earlier, was pursued with the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, among other developments: establishing regulatory instruments and processes for higher and vocational education compatible with a European education area/market — quality assurance systems, credit transfer systems, a degree structure, a European qualifications framework.

A close reading of the policy and guidance documents reveals a set of priorities and proposals bound to the concepts of *quality and participation* and associated to concerns with strengthening 'the place of adult learning within the context of national lifelong learning strategies' (CEU 2008, C140/12). If this Action Plan was an attempt by the European decision-makers and the European executive to promote measures aimed at widening adult participation, the strategy was apparently not successful enough since, in 2011, the Council of the European Union itself dramatically stated that

> there is a growing consensus that adult learning is currently the weakest link in developing national lifelong-learning systems. Participation in adult learning has continued to fall, from 9,8% of the 25–64 year-old population in 2005 to only 9,1% in 2010, thus making the increased 'ET2020' target of 15% by 2020 an even greater challenge (CEU 2011, 2).[6]

The significance of this Action Plan is that it means the development of an EU agenda and policy (i.e. defined and developed under the auspices of EU institutions) for adult education, pointing to increased attention, visibility and organisational work in the context of Community guidelines and institutions.

2.4. 2011–2015: adult education: between political centrality and absence of policies?

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the official stocktaking reports on the Bologna and Copenhagen processes registered significant progress in the coordination of policy decisions by the national bodies to adopt and implement the agreed-upon technical and policy instruments, and even modest developments in the field of curriculum design and educational action; the Education and Training 2010 Programme, however, had, by 2010, reached only one of the five benchmarks of European average performance (an increase of 15% in the total number of graduates in mathematics, science and technology while at the same time decreasing the gender imbalance).

On the other hand, the European Union 2020 (EU2020) Strategy, the new EU reform programme arising from the Lisbon Strategy, adopted a priority goal in education, that includes two of the ET2020 benchmarks: the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10% and the share of 30–34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%. Thanks to its inclusion in the EU2020 Strategy targets, the previously achieved political centrality of education is reinforced and, as underlined in various documents, is considered not only in terms of an economic policy for competitiveness and of an employment policy but also in terms of enhancement of social cohesion. *The long shadow of the economy and of work* clearly leaves its imprints on the language used to formulate education policy and on the proposals that give it shape:

> Smart growth – an economy based on knowledge and innovation Smart growth means strengthening knowledge and innovation as drivers of our future growth. This requires improving the quality of our education, strengthening our research performance, promoting innovation and knowledge transfer throughout the Union, making full use of information and communication technologies. (EC, 2010, 11, 12).

As seen above, at the end of the first adult education and learning action programme in 2011, there was a pessimistic outlook regarding the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning. It is against this backdrop that, within the framework of the EU2020 Strategy and the Education and Training 2020 Programme, the Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (2011/C 372/01) is approved for the 2012–2014 period.

This document, a follow-up to the 2008–2010 Action Plan, calls for the adoption of 'a European Agenda for Adult Learning', focusing on: stimulating demand and raising motivation for participation; information and guidance systems; second–chance opportunities; flexible learning pathways; quality assurance systems and accreditation systems; adult education staff training systems; funding systems; enhancing opportunities for inter-generational learning, for learning by older adults and by people with disabilities and/or by those who are institutionalised; enhancing the role of cultural, civic, sports and other civil society organisations as well as of information and communication technologies; improving the knowledge base on the adult learning sector (international

studies, research) and promoting its monitoring, namely within the scope of the ET2020 Programme (see CEU 2011, 5, 6).

Between 2011 and 2013, within the framework of this European Agenda and the ET2020 Programme, two thematic working groups (TWG) on 'quality in adult learning' (comprising 19 Member States and 2 non-EU states) and on 'financing adult learning' (consisting of 13 Member States and 3 non-EU countries) were set up. These groups are a mechanism to support the development of European policies by the Member States under the open method of coordination. They are given a mandate and objectives and carry out a work programme to produce a number of outputs. At the end of 2013, both TWG on Adult Education presented their recommendations to the European Commission and the Member States with a view to drawing up, developing and adopting quality assurance systems and instruments as well as funding and investment mechanisms for the adult education/learning sector.[7]

As was suggested above, the groundwork is being laid for the introduction of regulatory instruments and processes in the adult education field that are compatible with a European area/market, mirroring what has been happening in other sectors. As some researchers have argued: 'here, AE and knowledge are seen as market commodities that can be produced and sold for market purposes without any intrinsic value' (Mikulec and Krašovec 2016, 152). According to other authors, an examination of the main policy documents pertaining to *quality* in adult education and learning reveals that there has been a departure from an initial conception, in 2000, that underlined the equity dimension (education accessible to all) and focused, first of all, on the level of the system considered from the perspective of the adult. This understanding was followed by one orientation that underlines the continuing training of staff and the quality of provision (in 2006/2008), and later still (in 2011) by another in which quality is equated with the efficiency and relevance of the outcomes for the needs of the labour market (see Buiskool and Broek 2014, 198 ff.)

On the other hand, despite the fact that the benchmark pertaining to the participation (of 15%) of adults in lifelong learning in 2020 was not included in the EU2020 strategy and the fact that it has not been the object of a high-visibility intergovernmental political process, adult education has enjoyed an unprecedented centrality in European education policy documents:

> In the process of learning throughout one's life, adult education and training covers the longest span. (EC 2012a, 48). Continued learning after initial education is crucial for raising productivity levels of the working-age population and tackling skill mismatches and bottlenecks on the labour market. It was the topic of eleven Country Specific Recommendations in 2014 (BG, EE, ES, FR, IE, LT, LU, PL, RO, SE, SK). However, those most in need of up-skilling are barely participating in continued learning at all. Non-formal learning for early school leavers is almost non-existent and adult participation in lifelong learning is negligible amongst the low-skilled or unemployed. The lack of lifelong learning creates a low skills trap for the seventy million adults without upper secondary education attainment that are most in need of up-skilling (EC 2014, 10).

It emerges then that the recommendations, objectives and strategies adopted in the EU in the past decade to foster the involvement of adults in lifelong education have repeatedly failed; this was so particularly for the segments of the population that have been more penalised by old and new inequalities associated with rewards and opportunities that mostly benefit categories with higher levels of education (see Kilpi-Jakonen, Vono de

Vilhena, and Blossfeld 2015). In order to foster participation, it seems critical to question what balance have been build (and could be built) between the economic, personal and democratic dimensions of the adult education political options (Biesta 2006). As underlined by several researchers, even if 'issues of access, social exclusion and widening participation dominate educational policy agendas and are a shared global challenge', we still need to 'achieve more nuanced understandings of the widening participation problem', particularly in what respects to under-represented groups (Boeren and James 2017; Webb et al. 2017; Boeren 2017).

In any event, as was mentioned before, this increased centrality is clearly defined by the perspective that education, training and learning are processes for the acquisition of labour market competences and skills and for the provision of human capital for the economy (besides being a marketable service capable of fuelling new businesses). This barefaced instrumentalisation, conceding a diminished value to the personal and democratic dimensions of lifelong learning (Biesta 2006) and which, as a rule, informs the texts, the proposals and the invoked good practices has become the official policy discourse since the Communication from the Commission, *Rethinking Education – Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* (EC 2012b). This document marks *a turning point* (Nóvoa 2013) in European education policy also because the project to *economise* education (instrumentalising it as part of the economy and as a marketable commodity) has asserted itself discursively in an explicit and hegemonic manner (see EC 2012b; Bagnall and Hodge 2018).

Today, practically all the documents and initiatives that contribute to the European education policy are either authored or coordinated by the European Commission services and many of them are produced within the framework of, and in support of, the EU2020 Strategy, which is an openly economic agenda and geared towards boosting EU competitiveness in the world markets. As a result of this centralisation of processes, the conceptions, discourses, concepts and proposals about education, training and learning tend to fall in line with that sole project by focusing on the dimensions regarded as economically relevant to the exclusion of other cultural, political, ethical, anthropological or sociological references. This is visible in documents published annually to support the European Semester of economic policy coordination, such as the *Education and Training Monitor* or the *European semester thematic fiche. Skills for the labour market* (EC 2015b) which states:

> Initial Vocational Education and Training is a key source of skills and competencies for EU economies and can facilitate a smooth school-to-work transition. Initial VET systems must provide adequate basic, transversal, and vocational skills that fit the needs of employers, but also equip learners to engage in Lifelong Learning (LLL), and to manage transitions from education to employment as well as from one job to another or from unemployment to employment (EC 2015b, 7).

In all stocktaking reports on the ET2020 Programme, there has been an evident emphasis on the stagnation, and even drop, in the participation rate of adults in education and learning since the mid-2000s.[8] Equally visible has been the attention European authorities have given to the issue, as well as the significant increase in information about the adult education sector. In the *Education and Training Monitor 2015* it is stated:

> The lack of concrete, measurable commitments by the Member States in their policy documents, combined with an overall adult learning rate that has been stagnant during the last

> decade, raises the question as to what extent Member States' policies are making an actual impact on adults' access to and participation in education and training (EC 2015a, 79).

This document suggests 're-thinking' the design and implementation of policies, including 'a more careful selection of policy levers, explicit targets and more rigorous frameworks for policy evaluation' and provides some examples of such strong policy levers: co-financing schemes to support employers' investment in adult learning provision, funding of learning programmes for disadvantaged groups, and 'the alignment of training provision with the identified future skills needs of employers' (EC 2015a, 81). When recommending on establishing a Skills Guarantee, the European Commission insists that:

> To make a tangible impact, considerable political and financial effort will need to be made. In keeping with the Stability and Growth Pact, Member States will have to mobilise sufficient public investments in people's skills. However, Member States stand to benefit from these investments as they will help bring more people into jobs and strengthen the productivity of the workforce (EC, 2016, 5).

2.5. 2016- … : a new opportunity for adult education?

Throughout 2016 the tone of certain Portuguese and European actors with a stake in European Adult Education policies, such as the Portuguese Association for Lifelong Culture and Education (*Associação Portuguesa para a Cultura e Educação Permanente*, APCEP) or the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), suggested there were expectations about measures such as the N*ew Skills Agenda for Europe*[9] or the Council of the European Union Recommendation on *Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults* (19 December 2016).[10] On their official websites and in position statements, these actors sent out encouraging signs that changes were possibly underway: these initiatives suggested there were efforts and guidelines by the European decision-makers to give more political and socio-educational substance to the discursive centrality that had been assigned to Adult Education in European policies. What was initially, in June 2016, meant to be a *Skills Guarantee*, would be adopted, without any significant change in terms of content, the following December as the abovementioned European Union Recommendation. This document made provision for a three-step mechanism ('skills assessment; provision of a tailored, flexible and quality learning offer; and validation and recognition of skills acquired') (*Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults*, 2016, 4) to be in place in the Member States by 31st December 2018, taking the shape of a European policy subject to a stocktaking report. Also, in the words of Portuguese members of the ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning, Luís Alcoforado and Francisca Simões, it would be a matter of great significance for the documents to express

> an awareness of the need for a strong investment in this area, which is at odds with the implementation of one-off programme contracts that are overwhelmingly one-dimensional in nature, linked to the economy and almost exclusively focused on vocational qualifications/training. (Alcoforado and Simões 2017, 15)

Both this document, *Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults*, and the EAEA position statements are illustrative of the Janus-faced nature of the European Adult Education policy and Adult Education in the European Union: there is an unprecedented

political centrality, which is mostly rhetorical and discursive rather than expressed through the development of proactive policies to enhance adult participation (and even less so when it comes to its democratisation); guidelines meant to launch and consolidate *effective participation* policies have been adopted; Adult Education has been continuously subordinated, if not reduced, to *the training of human capital* to meet the purported needs of the economy or to address divides and breakdowns brought about by the way the economy operates and that threaten social cohesion; there are proposals which appear to consign Adult Education to privatisation processes in response to public funding shortfalls or to market-style regulatory processes.

Any of these options can feature in upcoming European Adult Education policy development, which means that the following view expressed by a researcher in the field of European social policies could, to a greater or lesser extent, take hold:

> It is very clear then the EU fully embraces and shapes the new social paradigm: social protection is at the service of EMU [Economic Monetary Union], at the service of economic policies. One may welcome the focus on social issues in the 'semester' approach, but it is clear this will only serve to streamline and cut social expenditures. It is only for countries where social policies are insufficient that it may serve to improve them. The pillar of social rights lacks ambition and will not contribute to achieve a "social triple A" (Mestrum 2016, 15).

This is so because as argued by European social policy researchers:

> The social dimension must be horizontal, meaning that it must be incorporated into all European initiatives, as social policies are inevitably affected by policies implemented in other fields such as fiscal policy and market liberalisation policy, as well as initiatives relating to the establishment of a single market for digital services or energy (Fernandes and Rinaldi 2016, 3).

On the other hand, a former official of ANQ, the Portuguese agency responsible for education and vocational training policies, including those pertaining to Adult Education and Training, such as the New Opportunities Initiative (*Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades)* from 2005 to 2012, states:

> It can be said that there is little that is "new" in this "new agenda" and a lot that is short-term intervention at the expense of medium-long term solutions to social, demographic, economic and cultural problems which the European Union is facing. (Gomes 2017, 32)

Yet, the last data known about adult participation in lifelong learning, in 2016, as measured and registered in the *Education and Training Monitor 2016*, seem to point more according to this expectation than otherwise: 'rates by level of education practically unchanged: 4.2% (4.5% in 2013) among the low-qualified, 8.8% (8.8% in 2013) among the medium-qualified and 18.6% (19.0% in 2013) among the highly qualified' (EC 2017, 73).

3. Final remarks

The following table is an attempt to render visible linkages between the route taken towards the setting up of a European adult education and learning agenda and European education policies in recent decades.

(Table 1)

Table 1. The setting up of a European adult education and learning agenda and European education policies in recent decades.

Adult Education and Learning (EU initiatives)	(Building a) European Education Policy
1995–99: Socrates I Programme (Grundtvig action)	1996: European Year of Lifelong Learning
2000–06: Socrates II Programme (Grundtvig subprogramme)	1999/2000/2001: Lisbon Strategy: launch of the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes
2002/2003: Education and Training 2010 Programme (ET2010) (target for adult participation in Lifelong Learning in 2010: 12.5%)	2002/2003: Education and Training 2010 Programme (ET2010)
2006: Communication from the Commission on Action Plan on Adult Learning	
	2004; 2006: ET2010 interim reports
2007: Action Plan on Adult Learning (2008–2010) (a European policy on adult learning)	2009: Education and Training 2020 Programme (ET2020)
2009: Education and Training 2020 Programme (ET2020) (target for adult participation in Lifelong Learning in 2020: 15%)	
2011: European Agenda for Adult Learning (2012–2014)	2010: EU2020 Strategy (includes an education target)
2011–2013: ET2020 Thematic Working Groups on Adult Learning (Quality; Financing)	
	2011: European Semester (for economic policy coordination) Country Specific Recommendations (CSR) involving education issued by the European Commission and the European Council
	2012: Communication by the European Commission – *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes*
	2012: Publication of *Education and Training Monitor* in November (*European Semester*) to support policy making by the Member States
2014–2015: ET2020 Working Group on Adult Learning;	2015: Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on ET 2020, *New priorities for European cooperation in education and training*
2016: *New Skills Agenda for Europe*	
2017: *Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults*	
2016–2018: ET2020 Working Group on Adult Learning	

(Author's elaboration).

This research addressed a number of questions allowing one to chart a roadmap on Europeanisation of adult education and advancing our knowledge about this issue. One has analysed the initial movements stimulating interactions of professionals, institutions and projects, under the Grundtvig Action (1995), building the *thematisation* of adult education as a Community intervention area, and the official definition of the area as *a dimension of lifelong learning* (2003) under the adult participation benchmark (12,5%) of the Education and Training 2010 Programme. Next, in 2006/2007, the most important development was the formal launching of a *European agenda for adult education* under the quality and participation banners; this was later followed by the 2011 consolidation of this Agenda — between political centrality and absence of policies? —, including the ET2020 Thematic Working Groups (Quality and Financing), under the open method of coordination of education policies. These developments made a significant contribution both to the visibility and to the amount of political and organisational work around the area. More recently, the 2016/2017 policy initiatives brought questions and controversy about their meanings and capacity.

In sum, and this assertion is a main outcome of this research, these developments seem to have established, step by step, adult education as an official domain of the European education sector and policy. This has been done through some processes of

Europeanisation already observed in the framework of education and training in general: (i) the definition, at European Union level, of policies to be developed by the states in the field and the *ex-post* monitoring of procedures and outcomes; (ii) the development of a Community agenda and policy (i.e. defined and developed under the auspices of Community institutions) (see Antunes 2006; Dale and Robertson 2009; Hozjan 2009).

As was mentioned above, the last twenty years witnessed the 'return' of lifelong learning in a new socio-political context, with other protagonists (such as the EU) and taking on a new register stemming from policies and professional practices. In this framework, the profile of Adult Education gradually rose, with education and training also taking on a greater centrality within European policies, while its mandate and scope appeared to be mostly associated to the economic sphere. As stated by Rasmussen (2014b, 25), 'The promotion of lifelong learning to key concept in EU education policy improved the status of adult education; but the broad and inclusive concept of learning also tended to obscure the more specific features and conditions of adult education'.

Between 2010 and 2012, there were developments in European education policy, with a priority target for education being included in the EU2020 Strategy and policy decision-making recentralised in the European Commission and the European Council: the monitoring of policy development, within the Education and Training 2020 Programme, was linked to the European Semester for economic policy coordination and the open method of coordination comprised Thematic Working Groups, made up of Member States and operating within the framework of the European Commission. The European Commission Communication *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* (EC 2012b) was regarded as marking this turning point since it enshrines a unidimensional view of education programmes focusing on their economic functionality. In this framework, education is therein considered, on the one hand, as infrastructure and an instrument for the economy, for managing unemployment and for the enhancement of social cohesion — with diminished space for a personal and a democratic dimensions. On the other hand, is clearly asserted the view of education as a good which is provided and funded indiscriminately by the public sector, the private sector or by partnerships in what are typical market exchanges.

Accordingly, for almost twenty years the adoption of a *lifelong learning* strategy by the European decision-makers has taken place within a framework that has reinforced two trends to the point that they now constitute what appears to be a hegemonic project in the EU: the political and economic centrality of education, training and learning in parallel with the creation of a European Education Area which has the regulatory processes and instruments typical of a market. If these political options and actions can be theoretically understood as a *globally structured agenda for education* (Dale 2000; Antunes 2006), the adult education route underlined points to some pitfalls, ambiguities and contradictions asking for closer attention to developments at European and national contexts in order to understand education as a political action site (Antunes 2016). This perspective could uncover perhaps the diversity of pathways, understandings, guidelines or practices about the ends, the priorities, the policies, or even the experiences and meanings, developed under the umbrella of adult education and learning.

It is against this backdrop that the European Agenda for Adult Learning set out action lines for the Member States and the European authorities meant to focus on the central role that the adult population now plays at a time when there is an unprecedented drop in the share of the younger segment of the population, as well as a sharp acceleration of

the pace of social change in all areas of life. Among those guidelines, there is a clear emphasis on the need to raise the participation rate of adults in lifelong education, seeking to improve their level of certification, on the one hand, and on developing and adopting common European instruments and processes pertaining to quality assurance, accreditation and even mutual learning as far as financing is concerned, on the other.

According to the 2015 stocktaking report on the Education and Training 2020 Programme, it is unlikely that pursuing the political choices made thus far will in the short term lead to a significant increase in adult participation in lifelong learning, all the more so because the range, scope and duration of the public structures that underpin the policies have diminished and so has the financial, material and human resources support provided by the public sector and the state. This combines with a severe imbalance between the multiple dimensions (functions) of lifelong learning. These are important factors in overcoming the obstacles to adult participation in education and training (see Roosmaa and Saar 2017). If the course taken so far is maintained, it is more likely that further measures will be taken towards setting up adult learning regulatory processes, structures and instruments that are consistent with those of a market.

So, looking through the pathway followed, this research highlighted some developments: adult education has now unprecedented political visibility and priority; we have a deeper knowledge of the reality of the sector in each Member State and in the Union; there is little progress of adult participation in education and cleavages and inequalities are still there. And it offered a relevant argument: adult education remains a fragile priority, without the political weight to confront the precariousness and fragmentation of policies, structures and educational responses as the most instrumental dimensions of the production of qualifications and skills for the economy still carry considerable clout.

From the national to the European level, some have, since 2015, voiced their expectations that the political centrality taken on by Adult Education will correspond to a stronger commitment with the development of effective policy action, in the Member States, to increase adult participation in education. The documents which gave rise to such optimistic views, *New skills agenda for Europe* (June 2016) or *Upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults* (December 2016), may become associated with important steps taken to achieve such a goal. In contrast, those policies can yet foster the continuity of a condition of fabricated duality of political centrality and fragility that Adult Education (and education in general) has been in and which goes back a long way.

Notes

1. There's a debate in academic literature about the meaning of building the 'European educational space' and/or the 'European Education Area' (Berggreen-Merkel 1999; Nóvoa 2000; Antunes 2006; Dale 2009; Holford and Milana 2014). The Bologna and the Copenhagen Processes Declarations (1999 and 2002), as well as the European Commission Communication *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality* (CEC 2001b) and the *Education and Training 2010* Programme (CEU 2002), refer to building these European entities (Higher Education *Area*, Education and Training *Area*, Lifelong Learning *Area*). Here I mention those European political projects and processes for education, of building people mobility, common policy objectives, instruments, procedures and results, using the same flagship — 'European Education Area' — named by the official and programmatic documents (see https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en).

2. Even if the European Parliament has an active voice and influence, can alter, approve or disapprove the Council of the European Union initiatives, its documents were not considered in this analysis, due to operative motives of constituting and limiting the analysis corpus. The theme of the policy protagonists is obviously relevant, but the accuracy of the analysis here discussed has not been diminished, because the 'who' of some adult education policy options is not one of the research questions driving this study.
3. Decision No. 2493/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 1995, establishing 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning. In http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PT/TXT/?uri=celex:31995D2493, accessed 23 December 2015.
4. Decision No 819/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 March 1995 establishing the Community action programme 'Socrates'. In http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:31995D0819, accessed 23 December 2015.
5. Percentage of population aged 25–64 participating in education and training in four weeks prior to the survey – Source: «Labour Force Survey», Eurostat. (The Council of the European Union 2003, C 134/4) (hereinafter, the acronym CEU will be used to refer to the Council of the European Union).
6. As early as 2004 it was noted that 'The rate of participation in 2002 has been estimated at 8.5% in the EU, i.e. a mere 0.1% higher than in 2001 and at only 5.0% in the acceding countries' (CEU 2004, 20).
7. See http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/index_en.htm, accessed 23 December 2015.
8. According to official data, the rate of adult participation in formal and non-formal education and training (as defined in note 4) in the EU stood at 9.8% in 2005 (as mentioned before) having dropped to 8.9% in 2011 and then increased gradually to 10.7% in 2014 and 10.8 in 2016 (EC 2017, 73).
9. See, for example, http://www.apcep.pt/noticias.php?noticia=1797 or http://www.eaea.org/en/home/in-focus/eaea-welcomes-the-skills-agenda-a-huge-opportunity-for-europe.html?p666=2.
10. In http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001.

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