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Erwachsenenbildung und Lebensbegleitendes Lernen

Lisa Breitschwerdt,
Jörg Schwarz,
Sabine Schmidt-Lauff (Eds.)

Comparative Research in Adult Education

Global Perspectives on Participation, Sustainability and Digitalisation

wbv

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Lisa Breitschwerdt,
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Reihe: „Erwachsenenbildung und lebensbegleitendes Lernen“

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Diese Publikation wurde im Rahmen des Fördervorhabens **16TOA043** mit Mitteln des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung im Open Access bereitgestellt.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Gesamtherstellung:
wbv Media GmbH & Co. KG, Bielefeld
wbv.de

Umschlaggestaltung:
Christiane Zay, Passau

ISBN 978-3-7639-7132-9 (Print)
DOI: 10.3278/9783763971336

Printed in Germany

Die freie Verfügbarkeit der E-Book-Ausgabe dieser Publikation wurde ermöglicht durch ein Netzwerk wissenschaftlicher Bibliotheken und Institutionen zur Förderung von Open Access in den Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften im Rahmen der *wbv Open-Library 2022*.

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https://www.wbv.de/fileadmin/webshop/pdf/Qualitaetsstandards_wbvOpenAccess.pdf

Großer Dank gebührt dem Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung für die Förderung des zugrunde liegenden Projekts OAdine (FKZ: 16TOA043) und insbesondere den Förderern der OpenLibrary 2022 in den Fachbereichen Erwachsenenbildung sowie Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik:

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Contents

Foreword

Comparison as a methodological approach in the social and cultural sciences is the central point of reference of this volume. Comparisons make it possible to anticipate and relate the differences and commonalities of different phenomena in their complexity. Thus, it is not surprising that comparison plays an important role in various methodological approaches. It is true that comparisons are not only relevant for international research, but for all research contexts in adult education. However, it is above all in this context that a metacommunicative and methodological debate on comparison can be observed, which the editors take up in their introduction. In doing so, they consciously go beyond the general common sense by arguing that a comparative perspective is indispensable and perhaps even unavoidable in order to arrive at a deeper, more diverse and qualitatively better understanding of the complexity of global processes.

The background of the argument is the current dynamics of globalisation and the challenges this poses for adult education. The focus is placed on three essential global issues: Participation, sustainability and digitalisation. In relation to this thematic triad, the introduction under the slogan "Global Challenges need Global Perspectives" outlines a theoretically and methodologically sound concept for comparison, on which the individual contributions are oriented.

The context in which the seven contributions were written should be emphasised: They were written in 2022 within the framework of the international Adult Education Academy at the University of Würzburg. The Academy, which takes place annually, sees itself as a place of academic socialisation in order to sensitise young academics to international-comparative approaches and to enable them to build international relationships. Furthermore, the Academy has set itself the goal of developing and practising international comparison as an elementary research method in order to understand global phenomena. These goals of the Academy are reflected in a remarkable way in the contributions, in which a total of 31 authors from nine countries have produced comparative studies on various national constellations.

The thematic spectrum ranges from didactic questions of online learning, the acquisition of digital competences of certain addressees to the role of global actors and their sustainability and digitalisation policies. The overall picture shows that the comparative approach has been methodically elaborated by the authors and has become anchored in them as a "way of thinking" and "attitude". The editors emphasise that this is a central prerequisite for developing a better understanding of the global challenge for adult education.

The programmatic orientation of the volume also contains a call to adopt a comparative research perspective in view of the current and expected global transformation processes. The contributions collected in this volume offer a variety of methodological and discursive points of departure. In addition, they are the result of a successful, inter-

nationally oriented promotion of young researchers and in this respect also offer suggestions for the future academic professionalisation of young researchers.

The present volume is the first English-language edition in the series Adult Education and Lifelong Learning, which addresses a broad audience that goes beyond the German-speaking community. This also creates the prerequisite for further advancing a transnational discourse of comparison in adult education.

Tübingen, March 2023
Prof. Dr. Matthias Alke

Global Challenges Need Global Perspectives – Comparative Research on Adult Education

Sabine Schmidt-Lauff, Lisa Breitschwerdt, Jörg Schwarz

> "We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant." (Sadler, 1900/1964, p. 310).

Abstract

Comparison creates the possibility of better seeing, comprehending, and understanding the complexity of a world undergoing sweeping change because of globalisation – understood as growth of transactions, interrelationships, and interweaving in all dimensions. Globalisation means that our actions today not only have manageable, foreseeable, and local consequences but also comprehensive, contingent, and global effects. To us, therefore, globalisation represents an entry point for comparative observations. In this introductory paper, we first explore the connection between globalisation (1) and comparison (2) in terms of basic conceptualisation. In a second step, we introduce a specific academic programme to illustrate how comparative perspectives can be adopted in a professional development context for emerging researchers (3), the output of which is collected in this volume. Against this background, we discuss the specific methodological and practical conditions (4) under which these contributions were produced. This discussion shows that comparison not only relies on a set of rules and techniques but also on an inner attitude and sensitivity with which we look at the world and its global needs when trying to understand. Some of the most critical of these needs in relation to adult education – participation, sustainability, and digitalisation – are the subject of this book.

Keywords: Comparative Research, Comparative Theory, Comparative Methodology, Globalisation, Exchange Programmes

1 Globalization: Challenges, dynamics, and (new) comparative relations

In recent decades, few words have had a greater impact on our perception of the world we live in than the word *globalisation* – whether it refers to a dramatic, problematic vision of atomised societies in crisis or to a flourishing vision of future growth. There is nothing today, from climate change, migration, war, economic or ecological crisis to digitali-

sation, unemployment, and social cutbacks, for which globalisation is not seen as a promise of a paradisiacal future solution, sometimes in an obscure manner. Globalisation is always a matter of the dramatic consequences of a new or newly imagined socio-spatial order, which presents itself as a "world society", a "global village", the world as "a single place" (Robertson 1992, p. 6) or as "cosmopolitan society" (Beck, 1999). Globalisation is on everyone's lips and an unredeemed intellectual challenge at the same time (Berking, 2008). Many turns in transdisciplinary discourses point out facets towards and even beyond globalisation: deterritorialisation, dissolving boundaries, translocalities, glocalisation, time-space compression, virtualisation, and many more. We believe that coming to a better understanding of global challenges in adult education with its multiple phenomena requires a comparative perspective. Not only because scientific research is generally "penetrated" by comparison and "our reasoning is always guided by comparison, whether we intend it to be or not" (Palmberger & Gingrich, 2013, p. 94; see also Strauss & Quinn, 1997), but also because the idea of transgressing (Albrow, 2002) the boundaries of societies and their dynamic phenomena requires us to infinitely rethink (educational) relations generally. As pointed out in a first definition provided by Charters and Hilton (1989, p.3), "[c]omparative study is not the mere placing of data side by side [...] such juxtaposition is only the prior requisite for comparison. At the next stage one attempts to identify the similarities and differences between the aspects under study [...] the real value of comparative study emerges only from [...] the attempts to understand why the differences and similarities occur and what their significance is for adult education and the countries under examination."

In a global, rapidly changing world of increasing risk, instability, and uncertainty, the role of comparative education research must be both reconsidered and widened to come to a more complex understanding and elaboration of observed phenomena by putting a special focus on the *relations in between* (Schriewer, 2000) and their *contextualisations* (Egetenmeyer, 2016). On the one hand, comparison provides opportunities, such as learning from experiences abroad, transferring knowledge and procedures, identifying benchmarks, knowing better our own history and place, fostering cooperation, and, finally, stabilising peace. On the other hand, limitations, such as social constructions, errors of understanding and prediction, implicit categorisation, and the like, should be kept in mind: "[...] while there is the possibility that we may 'become wiser' [...] comparisons must be used with caution and, ultimately, 'the force of sound judgement is with the user'" (Slowey, 2016, 7).

Comparisons create the possibility to see more in a world undergoing sweeping change through "the intensification of globalization upon all dimensions of society and social policy worldwide" (Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2014a, p. 6) and especially through the impact of computerised communication, information technologies, and digitalised data (re)sources. The role of global actors (OECD, UNESCO, EU) with their political strategies "linked to the availability of international datasets" (Egetenmeyer, 2016, p. 79) is widening and changing (see also Boucouvalas, Popovic, and Reischmann (2021) for an overview and critical discussion). Despite the potential of comparing systems by "meeting and seeing" the global dimension, enduring threats occur. Some of the old

ties have remained during postcolonial eras while new ties have developed (Bray, 2014a, pp. 23–24). The wealth of statistical and other data available around the world, widening access to such data, the quality and use of data and models in-between quantitative and qualitative statistics have increased tremendously, mostly through digitalisation. However, "such data, information and knowledge are 'not easily understood or analysed'" (Bray, Adamson & Mason 2014b, p. 431).

Comparative research in (adult) education is not only complex because of its interdisciplinary nature and multiple perspectives; it is also highly demanding because of its conceptual vision as infinite processes of trying to understand (Singh, 2017). It offers *one* possible methodology of educational research in a globalised world, where old certainties are questioned, leading to uncertainty. Comparative approaches provide us with a mindset to investigate (adult) education in dynamic movements and global developments through a "deconstruction of the context as basis of comparison" (Singh, 2017, p. 115) and a re-construction in patterns of understanding (categories). Accordingly, comparative research accepts a type of co-existence that appreciates diversity and diversification as an essential paradigm of lifelong and lifewide learning, which opens to the heart of adult teaching and learning. Given its variety of foci and topics, comparative education is "by nature interdisciplinary" (Bray, 2014b, p. 47).

2 Comparison is inherent in global research

Globalisation provides adult education, its academic discipline, education policies and practices, institutions, and professional actors around the world with a unique concept to integrate intercultural, transnational, and global dimensions (Jean-Francis & Schmidt-Lauff, 2020). The space for "comparative action" has been growing enormously. It is a "continuously expanding field," as pointed out ten years ago in the review regarding the celebration of the 40th year of publication of *Compare* (2010[1]). The editors at that time (Karen Evans and Anne Robinson-Pant) not only found that comparative research is a "continuously expanding field" marked by interdisciplinary openness, as seen in the growing number of books, journals, conferences, networks, and so forth[2]; they also stated that it has "recurrent" themes and topics, including professionalisation, ethics, and institutionalisation. These themes establish a form of continuity and tradition in relation to nations, policies, and benchmarks as development over time (historicity).

In the words of Maria Slowey (2016, p. 5), "Does not all social inquiry involve some element of comparison (...)?" Furthermore, "scientific research is penetrated by comparison, even if in an implicit manner. Comparing is an elementary cognitive activity." (Egetenmeyer, 2016, p.94) Yet it comes with current limitations, such as blind spots, emotive and emotional assessments or valuations, resource limitations (personal, eco-

1 The *Compare* journal series (https://baice.ac.uk/compare/) is the British journal version (British Association for International & Comparative Education) of the American Comparative and International Society CIES with its publication series (https://www.cies.us/).

2 For more information about global platforms, networks (like LinkedIn), and publication tools, see the information tool https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/adult-education-academies/information-tool/.

nomic, etc.). "Our reasoning is always guided by comparison, whether we intend it to be or not. (...) It occurs in simple and routinized ways in everyday lives by comparing aspects between phenomena," and "it regularly occurs in more complex ways as a set of standardized practices focusing on the relations between phenomena" (Palmberger & Gingrich 2013, p. 94).

Else Oyen (1990) stresses the function and *role of researchers*: "Social researchers engage actively in the process of comparative work whenever concepts [S-L: categories, parts of observation, selected phenomena] are chosen, operationalized, or fitted into theoretical structures. Trying to understand and explain variations is a process which cannot be accomplished without previous reflections on similarities and dissimilarities underlying the variation." (Oyen 1990, p. 299). This is neither a simple nor an easy way and process. Comparative (educational) research confronts us all the time with our own confirmation bias (Scott, 1993), the limitation of understanding or not seeing the unknown, or, even better, the not-yet-known. Comparative research in a globalised world must be undertaken in a framework of critical inquiry. Maybe it is possible to "become wiser" (Holm, 2014) by comparing ourselves with each other, or, as Sadler said as early as 1900, "The practical value of studying, in a right spirit and with scholarly accuracy, the working of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and understand our own" (Sadler, 1900/1964, p. 310).

We are convinced that a comparative perspective is essential, and maybe inevitable, for coming to a deeper, more diverse, and better qualitative understanding of global processes and complex phenomena in global transformation as challenges, as indicated by our book title and the papers collected here. A classical remark reminds us that the "very nature of social research is considered comparative, and thinking in comparative terms is inherent in social research" (Else Oyen 1990, p. 299). As a growing sector in a world with growing global needs, comparative education research "is a field which welcomes scholars who are equipped with tools and perspectives from other arenas and who choose to focus on educational issues in a comparative context" (Bray 2014b, p. 49).

2.1 Comparative action in an era of growing risk

Doing comparisons in a world in global crisis and an era of growing risk in the last two decades deserves recognition and elaboration. It seems meaningful for us to also consider and point out the larger destabilising contexts: climate change, natural disasters, migration, armed conflicts, and war (which has also returned to Europe), attention to human rights, diversity, sustainability (environmental, economic, and social justice), acceleration (in social, individual, and especially technological innovations, datafication) and in 2020 the COVID pandemic, which dramatically changed the world of education. As Boucouvalas, Popovic, and Reischmann (2021) point out in their "Epilogue (2000–2020)" on international and comparative adult education: These observations provide increasing complex base and starting points for both understanding and further advancing comparative adult education and research. "[...] [E]ntirely different from the situation a few short decades before" (Boucouvalas et al., 2021, p. 304), comparative

action takes place in a growing world and increasing sector of an era of risk (title of the ECER conference 2019[3]).

One of the frequently cited "Frameworks for Comparative Educational Analysis" is the "Cube", developed by Mark Bray and R. Murray Thomas (1995). The cube model distinguishes between geographical/locational levels, non-locational demographic groups, and aspects of education and society (e. g. political changes, curricula). Bray and Thomas point out that the combination of these three dimensions must always be considered for the definition or purpose of comparison. According to one of their first rationales in the 1990s, a comparison only between nations is too limited and narrows phenomena like globalisation, which have created new educational spaces that do not exclusively belong to nations. *Post-national definitions* talk about *globality* as "obligations toward the world as a whole, where (humans) expose values which take the globe as their frame or reference point" (Albrow, 1996, p. 83).

2.2 Comparison means building global relationships

Researchers have defined and elaborated (and criticised) several "stages" (Bray, 2014b) or "periods" of comparison (Bereday, 1964) or "generations" over different historical phases (Noah & Eckstein, 1996; Field, Künzel & Schemmann, 2016; Käpplinger, 2017; Schreiber-Barsch, 2010)[4]. All authors agree that comparison, today more than ever, must be used with caution (s. a.). More dialectic than dichotomic, comparison may work as a bridge to build relationships and a bridge between perspectives. There is something foreign (Sadler, 1900/1964), unknown, or strange, which gives us *reason* to compare. Comparison provides us with *opportunities* (chances and "a set of tools"), such as seeing patterns abroad, transferring knowledge and procedures of understanding, identifying and critically reflecting benchmarks, knowing better our own history and place, fostering cooperation, and, finally, stabilising *peace*. But *limitations* such as social constructions, errors of understanding, the myth of prediction, implicit categorisation, or rankings without clear contextualisation, should be kept in mind. As "dilemmas" and "antinomies," they cannot be properly solved – and must hence be explicitly carried out and named.

Building relationships combines inter- and transdisciplinary approaches based on the inquiry of "relationship networks" (Schriewer, 2000). In terms of relational thinking, reciprocal interrelations (interfered and resonant developments in interaction and practice) are of much more interest than the observation of the so called "objective" or "substantial facets." In other words, the idea of relational approaches is that "concepts, words, symbols etc. derive their meaning only from their location within concrete utterances, but these in turn only make sense in relation to other utterances within *ongoing*

3 For more details, see https://eera-ecer.de/previous-ecers/ecer-2019-hamburg/.

4 Bereday (1964) identified three phases (19th century; the first phase with Marc-Antoine Jullien de Paris as a "period of borrowing", the second phase, which occupied the first half of the 20th century (cf. Sadler, 1900), as a "period of adaption," because all (comparators) paid much attention to the social and economic causes behind educational phenomena, and the third phase as the "period of analysis" ("before prediction and eventual borrowing is attempted there must be a systematisation of the field in order to expose the whole panorama of national practices of education", Bereday, 1964, 9). Field/Künzel and Schemmann talk about an additional "period of institutionalisation." We increasingly see the emergence of what we would call a *period of relationing*.

flows of transaction" (Emirbayr, 1997, p. 301). In "comparative" terms and reconnected to the classic definition of comparative research in education given by Charters and Hilton (1989, p. 3): Comparative research is not merely "side by side" placing of data, but also involves an attempt and the will (and wish, too) to understand why differences and similarities occur and what their significance (consequence) in the different contexts might be. Of course, "juxtaposition is only the prerequisite for comparison" (Charters & Hilton, 1989, p. 3). The aim is a relational-context perspective.

2.3 Beyond theoretical and methodological "fashions" in comparison

There is huge potential in relational thinking and (re)construction by global comparison to help us become familiar with formerly strange patterns and to better honour and value our own situation. On the other side, the "growing isomorphism" (Slowey, 2016, p. 14) within comparative research – marked, for example, by temporal semantics lead by progression and future orientation – takes place concurrently and is mostly implicit. Moutsios (2010) also points out the deep political underpinnings in the use of semantics and categories – "progression" is neutral only on the surface.

While from a comparative education research perspective, this openness is essential, and the "expansion of interest is surely something to be welcomed" (Slowey, 2016, p. 5), it is not without challenges. Maria Slowey states studies may be undertaken by "non-specialists (for example, consultants and politicians)," but what is even more problematic in our accelerating world is the "danger of seeking 'quick-fix' solutions" (Slowey, 2016, p. 5). For example, the temptation of using (past) data to predict the unknown future may lead to temporal-linear constructions. On top, the issue of "decontextualization of data and findings," especially in quantitative comparison, is a "risky" aspect (Slowey, 2016, p. 5). There is an (over)emphasis on large-scale and representative surveys and an underestimation of small-scale, in-depth comparative analysis. Nowadays, we can often observe that comparative studies are "conducted by transnational actors using indicators and big data reports for quantifying performance of states referring to certain 'floating signifiers'", a practice "characteristic of the contemporary era where policies are 'evidence-based'. Different transnational organizations conduct comparative studies, collect big data, prepare elaborate reports and formulate policies on the basis of 'evidence' to categorize and rank nation states and other actors. […] As a result, policy interventions also play a decisive role in research and influence the results of comparative studies" (Singh, 2017, p. 113). The more the "big players", such as the OECD or World Bank, cover the world with a "single story" (Addey, 2018) of definitions and test instruments, of paradigms and epistemological interests, the more this story influences national, regional, and local strategies and instruments, and the more it influences resources, interests, and finally, our range and vision of inquiry and habit of (global) comparison.

The dichotomy between quantitative methods as being especially appropriate for answering macro sociological questions and qualitative methods as being best suited for answering micro sociological questions (Cicourel, 1981) is outdated. Nevertheless, the outdated dichotomy persists, reducing one approach to being inferior or defining

the other as the real research (for critical comments, see Flick, 2010). On top, comparative educational research must have a wide scope beyond immediate needs, although the actions and decisions of political and economic leaders are often short-sighted. There is ambiguity in comparative research in a globalised world: "[...] [T]here is little doubt that comparative education research has led to a substantial increase in our understanding of, and awareness of, educational systems and processes in different parts of the world; of the infinite variety of aims, purposes, philosophies and structures and of the growing similarities of the issues facing educational policy-makers across the world." (Watson 1996, p. 387 cited in Bray, Adamson & Mason 2014b, p. 431).

3 International and global perspectives as important elements of adult education work and training – an example

International and global perspectives on adult education and learning are important topics to be part of the (academic) education and training of (former) professional adult educators (Breitschwerdt & Egetenmeyer, forthcoming). The Adult Education Academy "International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning", hosted every year since 2014 at the University of Würzburg (Germany), is an academic programme supporting this demand. It enables participants to develop and practice international comparisons as an elementary research activity to understand global phenomena. Moreover, the Academy improves participants' ability to critically reflect on their own actions and their subjective perspective on social as well as adult educational perspectives. Furthermore, it is a place for building international, long-standing relationships that form the basis for joint work on global adult education issues.

3.1 Development and network of the Adult Education Academy

The first version of the Adult Education Academy (at that time called Winter School) was created in the context of the ERASMUS Intensive Programme *Comparative Studies in International and European Strategies in Lifelong Learning* in 2014. The Academy was advanced and established during the strategic ERASMUS+ partnership *Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning (COMPALL)*[5] between 2016 and 2018. During the subsequent ERASMUS+ partnership *International and Comparative Studies for Students and Practitioners in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* (*INTALL)*[6], several changes and additions were made to the Academy between 2018 and 2021[7]. In the

5 More information about the ERASMUS+ partnership COMPALL is available online at https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/compall/startseite/

6 More information about the ERASMUS+ partnership INTALL is available online at https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/home/

7 A detailed description of the individual steps of developing the Adult Education Academy over the years and the actors involved can be found in Beu et al. (forthcoming).

context of the general partnership, a network of international partners and associated partners has developed over the past years. On the one hand, these include international institutions from adult education practice and universities involved in the COMPALL (partly) and INTALL project, working together on various issues, most importantly the further development of the Adult Education Academy: DVV International, European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), University of Florence (Italy), University of Lisbon (Portugal), Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg (Germany), University of Pécs (Hungary), University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), University of Padua (Italy), Dublin City University (Ireland), and Julius-Maximilian University Würzburg (Germany) as the project coordinator. On the other hand, the extended network includes associated partners sending participants and moderators to shape the programme together every year: University of Belgrade (Serbia), International Institute of Adult and Lifelong Learning in Delhi (India), Bayero University Kano (Nigeria), Tallin University (Estonia), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece), Open University of Cyprus (Cyprus), European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN), Higher Education and Lifelong Learning in Ireland Network (HELLIN), the Irish National Learning Organization (AONTAS), University of Bielefeld (Germany), United Evangelical Mission (Department Germany), University of Eastern Finland (Finland), West Liberty University (United States), Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife (Nigeria), University of Lagos (Nigeria), Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun (Poland), and University of Delhi (India).

3.2 Objectives and structure of the Adult Education Academy

The Adult Education Academy is conceptualised as a joint module, supporting exchange and learning about international perspectives between students and persons working in the adult education field. The underlying idea is to foster the connection between academic learning and adult education practice (Danquah et.al., forthcoming) and to strengthen international and global perspectives for a general and deeper mutual understanding of adult education worldwide. Also, one main goal of the Academy is to give emerging researchers the opportunity to adopt and embrace the method of comparative research on adult education topics. To achieve these objectives, the Adult Education Academy is divided into an asynchronous and synchronous three-month online preparation phase and a synchronous two-week face-to-face event, which takes place in February each year at Julius-Maximilian University of Würzburg, Germany[8]. Participants of the Adult Education Academy are master's and doctoral students in adult education from all around the world. Likewise, the programme enrols practitioners from the field of adult education and lifelong learning who are affiliated with DVV International or the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA). More than 500 participants from more than 20 countries have attended the Adult Education Academy since 2014 (INTALL, 2021). Throughout the whole programme, participants

8 Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2021 and 2022 Adult Education Academies took place in a fully virtual format.

are accompanied by a team of experienced moderators and learning facilitators who are professors and advanced doctoral students in adult education.

Especially for the asynchronous preparation phase, a preparatory online tutorial featuring diverse materials (texts, tutorials, videos, etc.) was developed in the context of the COMPALL and INTALL projects. These materials are available as open educational resources on the project website[9]. The online tutorial first introduces the structures of the Academy and gives an overview of relevant international policies, structures, and strategies of adult education. Another important part of the online tutorial is the introduction to comparative research in adult education. Participants are introduced to the theoretical and methodological foundations of comparative research and learn how comparisons can be carried out. In a final step, with the help of the online tutorial, they prepare a *transnational essay* in which they address a question on a specific topic in adult education from the perspective of their home country. This serves as the basis for the later implementation of an international comparison during the synchronous two-week phase of the Adult Education Academy.

3.3 The Adult Education Academy as context of the papers in this volume

The contributions gathered in this volume emerged in the context of the 2022 Adult Education Academy[10]. At the core of the Academy is an international comparison of different topics in adult education. In 2022 these topics were: "Resource mobilisation for adult education, adult learning and lifelong learning under the sustainability framework", "Acquisition of digital competences through study programmes in adult education", "Adult education and lifelong learning policies - historical trends, political priorities, and conceptual elements", "Adult education for active democratic citizenship", "Policies and online learning environment for adult and higher education's emerging needs", "Adult learning and education for all?! Issues of inclusion in the limelight", "Adult education and gender - mature women in higher education", "Social entrepreneurship education in higher education for the development of creativity and social innovation", and "The roles of adult educators in the development of learning cities and learning communities".

For the international comparison, participants work together in small groups of six to eight persons (*comparative groups*) during the second week of the intensive phase. The basis for their collaboration is the *transnational essay* they wrote in advance, in which they address the topic from a national perspective. Based on this information, participants in the *comparative groups* develop a concrete research question they wish to pursue in the international comparison. Guided by the methodological procedure of comparison, they juxtapose their country cases and identify differences and similarities on the common topic. In a last step, they reflect on the differences and similarities regarding the respective context and draw conclusions from them. At the end of the collaboration, the process and its results are presented to all other participants of the Academy. The whole process is accompanied by experienced moderators. After the

9 https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/adult-education-academies/online-tutorial/
10 https://www.paedagogik.uni-wuerzburg.de/lifelonglearning/past-programmes/

Academy, doctoral students and practitioners get the opportunity to write an article on their approach and results (see publications of previous years: Despotovic & Popovic, 2020a, 2020b; Egetenmeyer, Boffo & Kröner, 2020; Neméth, 2020; Egetenmeyer & Mikulec, 2019; Egetenmeyer & Fedeli, 2017; Egetenmeyer, Schmidt-Lauff & Boffo, 2017; Egetenmeyer, 2016). This is relevant not only because young researchers are supported in their professional development by being able to write and publish a paper under the guidance of experienced academics; the publication also serves to further deepen their empirical work, to derive a theory from it, and to systematise their overall findings obtained in the context of the Adult Education Academy. For the academic discourse, this may serve as an impulse for discussing internationally comparative topics in adult education and for collaborating on and discussing globally relevant current topics. However, the Adult Education Academy does not only enter professional discourse with its subject-related findings and the general interest in comparative research; reflection on the methodology of comparative adult education research is also stimulated by its publications. For this purpose, deeper reflection on methodological approaches and dimensions, as well as practices, is needed.

4 Methodology and research practices

Comparing is a basic operation we regularly perform in our everyday ways of perceiving and thinking, but the endeavour to expose and thus possibly overcome the errors and shortcomings that usually accompany our comparisons is a characteristic that distinguishes scientific from everyday comparison. The three most important instruments available to us for this purpose are self-assurance about the aims of the comparison, a methodically controlled procedure in comparing, and comprehensive reflection on the comparison's socio-material conditions.

To engage in such reflection, we must first define the aims we try to achieve by comparing. Although this question has been discussed before for adult education (e. g. Field, Künzel, & Schemmann, 2016; Käpplinger, 2017; Schreiber-Barsch, 2010), the arguments often focus on specific pedagogical relevance. A more general view on general functions shall be employed here to widen the view. Esser and Vliegenthart (2017, p. 2) identify five basic functions, two of which are epistemologically relevant in a narrower sense and address a predominantly scientific benefit. First, comparing serves the purpose of *generalisation* – even beyond a statistical or probabilistic foundation of the comparison, for instance in the field of qualitative research. Second, and directly related to this, comparison serves *relativisation*, that is, the purposeful narrowing of the scope of findings. Both functions go hand in hand, they interact with each other in the form of a productive struggle and directly influence the scientific findings thus obtained. These basic functions are therefore not only relevant in international comparative research but also in qualitative research, where the comparison forms the basis for abstraction and theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Three further functions follow by dimensioning the outcome of such comparative research: first, the function of a better *under-*

standing of other cultures, educational systems, and so on; second, the general increase in *awareness* of different social realities; and third, a sense of the possibility of *alternatives* for the design of the social world. This addresses functions of comparative research that gain socio-political relevance by making it possible to take a broader perspective on "the self" and "the other". This broadening of perspectives, however, does not only apply to the readers of such research results but first and foremost to the researchers themselves. If – as in the present context of the Adult Education Academy – they are still emerging researchers, such an experience can have a lasting impact on their scientific work and their overall attitude throughout their entire career and thus systemically contribute to more reflective research in adult education globally. The fact that not only researchers but also practitioners participate in the Adult Education Academy and bring their perspectives into the comparative groupwork on an equal basis complements the international comparative with sector-crossing research approach.

The realisation of these basic functions of comparative research is facilitated through the specific methodological approach cultivated within the Adult Education Academy. It is based on a tradition that goes beyond a descriptive identification of similarities and differences and focuses rather on the question of how these can be explained (Charters & Hilton, 1989, p. 3). The concrete procedure begins with juxtaposing the cases to be compared, which first requires the definition of comparative categories and the relevant contexts of comparison. For this purpose, the analytical cube adopted and further developed by Regina Egetenmeyer (2014; 2016) for comparative adult education research based on Bray and Thomas (1995) is essential: To take account of "globality" as the transnational context, the level of "provision and effects" was added, being particularly relevant to adult education, as well as the distinction between "learners" and "non-participants". We believe the addition of the new level deserves special mentioning, as it creates a new relational indicator: the three *temporal* dimensions "past – present – future".

Based on the definitions of categories and contexts of the comparison, data can be gathered and the analytical juxtapositioning of the cases can take place. But only after this category-guided comparison of the similarities and differences of the comparative cases has taken place can the central question be addressed: How can these findings be explained in the light of the comparative contexts?

To genuinely and honestly reflect on the production of the research collected in this volume, we need to look even further and consider not only the aims and methodology consciously employed by the researchers but also, in a broader sense, the specific practical conditions of scientific production (Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). The contributions in this volume share the specific socio-material situation of an intense global collaboration within the Adult Education Academy's comparative groupwork (Jean-Francois & Schmidt-Lauff, 2020), which is crucial for the outcomes and can be unfolded along three methodological peculiarities.

First, it is a sort of involvement and a truly peculiar position of the researchers. In general, a certain personal relationship to the international comparative horizon often characterises comparative research anyway (Bray, 2005). But in the comparative groups

realised in the context of the Adult Education Academy, a special relation between the different researchers and their research evolves: Within the comparative groupwork and in the ongoing process of researching and crafting an article together with researchers from around the globe, the (well-known but often unreflected) context of researchers' own scientific work becomes relevant as an object of research. In the social situation of the comparative group, a researcher will naturally often be identified with the respective country case by the others. At the same time, the researcher is often the one who knows his respective education system best and thus is often forced to act not only as an expert but also as an advocate against hasty misconceptions.

Second, the Adult Education Academy frequently brings together master's students, PhD students, postdoc researchers, practitioners, and professors. The Adult Education Academy is a learning environment, and as such it uses comparative research as a pedagogical tool. The comparative groupwork, but especially the later process of research for the articles at hand (reserved for PhD students, practitioners, and moderators), thus has much in common with research workshops where emerging and experienced researchers come together in practically doing interpretative work on qualitative data: The artisan dimension of everyday scientific work has to be appropriated through practical work with more experienced people and is as such to be characterised as an important aspect of professional socialisation in the social sciences.

Third, there is a specific temporality about the research work in the context of the Adult Education Academy: Within the comparative groupwork, there is a very intensive research phase over the course of one week. The articles in this volume are written afterwards over the course of multiple months. The comparative groupwork thus serves as a design test for the comparative research question: In the intensive phase, the group has to work with limited resources, but nonetheless has to come to findings. This forms a basis for the following phase of a not-so-involved research process, where everything can be refined and refocused.

5 Global perspectives: The contributions of this volume

These three elements of how the research process is organised in the context of the Adult Education Academy shed some light on the special nature of the circumstances under which the articles in this volume have grown. Against this background, this book brings together contributions from the 2022 Adult Education Academy on global issues in adult education from an international comparative perspective. The book is divided into three chapters, which consider comparative perspectives on current, globally relevant phenomena of transformation.

Part I: Global perspectives on participation

The first contribution in this volume discusses *"Adult education and citizenship education in global times: A multi-level comparison of policy provisions and programme deliveries in Italy and Nigeria"*. In their paper, *Bilyaminu Bello Inuwa, Dino Mancarella, Paola Rig-*

oni, Taiwo Isaac Olatunj, Lisa Breitschwerdt, and *Borut Mikulec* construct a complex theoretical framework as a basis for their comparison of Italian and Nigerian policies and programmes that aim at fostering citizenship education. Their empirical investigation shows the differences in how the issue is addressed: While Italy focuses on the concept of global citizenship and the topic of sustainability, Nigeria addresses human rights from an empowerment perspective.

In their contribution *"Mature women in higher education: A comparative study in Germany, Palestine, and Portugal"*, *Ana Guimarães Duarte, Asma Abusamra, Natália Alves,* and *Therese Rosemann* focus on the experiences of mature women as non-traditional students in the higher education system in the three countries. Based on interviews with nine female mature students attending undergraduate courses at university, they analyse motivations, barriers, and support mechanisms in each country. Their analysis shows that so far there are too few, or in one case no, structures in the higher education system that consider the special needs of non-traditional students, in this case mature women.

Part II: Global perspectives on sustainability

Shalini Singh, Jan Schiller, Nitish Anand, Søren Ehlers, and *Asif Moiz* open the second part of the volume by investigating *"The World Bank's role in shaping the education of adults: Comparing the policy choices of the World Bank and India"*. While both international development policy and research feature manifold contributions that are highly critical of the role of the World Bank, the contribution printed here tries to take a slightly different perspective by contrasting the negative effects of national education governance. In this way, it becomes apparent that the influence of the World Bank – even if it is not always ideal – at least follows a universal rationale and can offer realistic, evidence-informed, long-term, and diversified policy solutions.

The comparative study on *"Resource mobilization for lifelong learning and the sustainability framework: Strategies and stakeholders under international influence in India and Nigeria"*, provided by *Jan Schiller, Shalini Singh, Jyoti Tiwari,* and *Moshood Moses Mamudu* struggles with the non-availability of exact data for the state and private expenditure on adult education in Nigeria and India, especially during the pandemic crisis. But this is how comparative research has to work and the conclusions can shed much more light and support a deeper understanding of global phenomenon such as widespread inequalities, unequal opportunities of access to adult education and increasing knowledge gaps by reading about the national contexts in both countries. However, the question remains as to how relevant and sustainable such recommendations such as the SGDs (Sustainable Development Goals) are in national contexts for the existence, expansion, and scope of the education for adults in various contexts.

Part III: Global perspectives on digitalisation

The global development towards a digitalised society and the ways in which adult education deals with and acts in this development is the subject of the third part of this anthology. The first contribution, "*Digital transformation and adult learning and educa-*

tion policies: The cases of Germany and Portugal", focuses on how education policies in Germany and Portugal differ in tackling digital transformation. *Marie Rathmann, Paula Guimarães,* and *Tadej Košmerl* come from the EU's policy agenda and ask for its influence on national policies in the two contexts compared. By using qualitative content analysis, they can show that EU policy has a strong influence on national efforts in establishing education on digital competences, as they are strongly conceptualised on an idea of modernisation with the expansion of human capital as the main goal.

A slightly different emphasis is set by *Oluwatoyin Bolanle Akinola, Funmilayo Aduke Adewole, Marianne Grace Araneta, Concetta Tino,* and *Monica Fedeli* in their contribution *"Policies and online learning environment for adult education and higher education's emerging needs"*. Based on the concept of eLearning readiness, the authors examine how digital transformation can be shaped in the field of adult education in Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines. To this end, they examine the respective national education policies and programmes and relate these to infrastructural and practical measures, from which they ultimately derive specific challenges for the further process in the countries compared.

In their paper *"Digital competence development in higher education: A comparative study of political influence and student experiences in Portugal and Italy", Marica Liotino, João Paulo Costa, Daniela Rocha Bicalho, Lívia da Cruz,* and *Hannah Hassinger* analyse strategies for digital competence development in higher education on different levels. In addition to exploring the mega-level of European guidelines, they compare findings of the analysis of government strategies and analyses of interviews with adult education students focusing on their individual competence development in Portugal and Italy. With this cross-level analysis they are able to show that it might be helpful to strengthen initiatives at the institutional level to link individual competence development with digital competence requirements at a broader level.

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Part I: Global Perspectives on Participation

Adult Education and Citizenship Education in Global Times – Policy Provisions and Programme Deliveries in Italy and Nigeria

Bilyaminu Bello Inuwa, Dino Mancarella, Paola Rigoni, Taiwo Isaac Olatunji, Lisa Breitschwerdt and Borut Mikulec

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show how extant policies at global, regional, national, and local levels frame adult education (AE) programmes for citizenship education (CE) in Italy and Nigeria. In our theoretical framework, we combine Biesta's conceptualisation of public pedagogy with Schugurensky's multidimensional conceptualisation of citizenship as status, identity, civic virtues, and agency. For the comparative empirical analysis, we compared two country cases – Italy and Nigeria – by examining policies and programmes that frame CE. Our findings show that in both countries, international and regional policies influence CE programmes. However, whereas Italy's CE policies and programmes promote global citizenship (GC) and sustainability, policies and programmes in Nigeria focus more on social empowerment and human rights awareness raising.

Keywords: adult education, citizenship education, Italy, Nigeria

1 Introduction

Efforts for citizenship education (CE) are one of the "classic" themes in adult education (AE) theory and practice. Many adult educators, especially those who associated AE with social movements, recognised AE as a major force for social change that can make a significant contribution to establishing and maintaining democracy and lead to emancipation by adults learning the principles of democratic reasoning, active citizenship, civic competence, and communicative action (Johnston, 2007; Mikulec, 2017). In this sense, a democratic society represents a learning society. However, many authors and researchers define and conceptualise CE in different terms – some see it as "citizenship as status" or "citizenship as practice", others differentiate between citizenship practices that are either socialising or transformative (Wildemeersch & Fejes, 2018) – as citizenship is a dynamic, contextual, contested, and multidimensional concept (Schugurensky, 2010).

Therefore, AE related to CE can be described from different perspectives. In many countries, CE initiatives focus mostly on the teaching of citizens' rights and duties, as

well as the legal system and the functioning of government institutions (Schugurensky, 2010). However, CE may also be considered part of an educational-formative curriculum initiative, identifying approaches that increase critical and transformative citizenship (Wood, Taylor, Atkins & Johnston, 2018).

There are three main traditions of citizenship: a *republican* tradition, where "real or true citizenship requires a commitment to the common good and active participation in public affairs and requires civic virtue" (Dagger, 2002, p. 149), a *liberal* tradition, which is associated with rights and duties, and a *communitarian* tradition, which relates citizenship with common values, norms, and shared traditions (Wildemeersch, 2017). The research by think tank Demos (Birdwell, Feve, Tryhorn & Vibla, 2013) suggests that citizenship relates to questions of identity and the issues surrounding multiculturalism and the increasing diversity of modern society. Other authors emphasise how important it is to remain alert and vigilant concerning the elements that make up democracy (Klaas, 2017; Kurlantzick, 2011), and to try to investigate how the meaning of citizenship is changing, for instance how "the way new media (including mobile accessibility, the internet, and social media) is reshaping our understandings of public participation in democracy, especially the way that we conceive of the public sphere" (Heggart & Flowers, 2019, p. 1).

Critical theorists, especially the Frankfurt School and critical pedagogy (Biesta, 1998), lean toward CE that entitles a partnership between learners and facilitators and the development of critical consciousness, wherein learners can recognise themselves as a critical part of the system and gain knowledge about how to dialogue with it. This school criticises class-based society and assumes that citizens from privileged backgrounds are more inclined to engage in democratic politics than people from disadvantaged ones (Liu, Donbavand, Hoskins, Janmaat & Kavadias, 2021). At the same time the pathway along critical awareness might be undermined by race and gender (Hooks, 2003).

Governments and international organisations (IOs), such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU), in their policies, strive for "active", "democratic", "European", and/or "global" citizenship with which they promote values of democracy, human rights, rule of law, and the fight against extremism, violence, racism, discrimination, and xenophobia (Ryen & Jøsok, 2021). However, conceptualising CE as active, democratic, or global citizenship comes with its own meanings and connotations. For example, *active citizenship education* emphasises active civic participation in matters of public concern and is known as "community, popular, or liberal education" that "empowers people to actively engage with social issues such as poverty, gender, intergenerational solidarity, social mobility, justice, equity, exclusion, violence, unemployment, environmental protection, and climate change" (UNESCO, 2022, p. 120). *Democratic citizenship education* emphasises democratic values and attitudes enabling learners to "exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities" (UNESCO, 2022, p. 119), while *global citizenship education*, the most recent concept of the three promoted by UNESCO, "refers to a sense of

belonging to a broader community and common humanity" and "emphasises political, economic, social and cultural interdependency and interconnectedness between the local, the national, and the global" (UNESCO, 2022, p. 122).

This paper aims to explore the following research question: How do international, regional, national, and local policies support and frame AE programmes for CE in Italy and Nigeria? In the following, we first briefly introduce theoretical insights, outline our methodological approach, and provide an analysis of country cases. In the final section, we discuss the identified similarities and differences. We argue that in both countries, international and regional policies influence CE programmes, and although different conceptualisations of CE can be found in both countries, policies and programmes framing CE in both countries are also predominantly based on the form of pedagogy *for* the public.

2 Theoretical framework

In Biesta's (2012) theorisation, the public space and sphere have been slowly privatised in recent decades, which is why he embraces a concept of citizenship that is not based only on understanding citizens as consumers but also on the quality of living citizenship. The author distinguishes three different interpretations of public pedagogy that address educational interventions about citizenship, democracy, and the public sphere: (1) pedagogy *for* the public, where the role of education is to instruct citizens about citizenship and democracy; (2) pedagogy *of* the public, where the role of education is related with raising critical consciousness related to issues of public concern; and (3) *pedagogy for publicness*, where the role of education is to set activities that help citizens become public actors. He suggests acting out a concern for publicness that "is not about teaching individuals what they should be, nor about demanding from them that they learn, but is about forms of interruption that keep the opportunities for 'becoming public' open" (Biesta, 2012, p. 685). Therefore, among these three interpretations of public pedagogy, the author advocates pedagogy for publicness, because this is a domain where "action is possible and freedom can appear" (Biesta, 2012, p. 693; cf. Wildemeersch, 2017, pp. 118–119). If we relate these three approaches to public pedagogy with his three purposes or domains of education – *qualification*, which aims at providing people with knowledge and competencies, *socialisation*, which aims at helping people become members of a particular social, cultural, and political "order", and *subjectification*, which aims at helping people become autonomous singular subjects (Biesta, 2020) – then we can argue that pedagogy for publicness is oriented toward the subjectification purpose of education.

Furthermore, as citizenship is a dynamic, contextual, contested, and multidimensional concept, it is necessary to identify different analytical dimensions of citizenship. This is done, for example, by Schugurensky (2010), who identifies four dimensions of citizenship: identity, status, civic virtues, and agency. *Citizenship as status* relates to the legal membership of a nation-state. AE programmes focusing on the status dimension

of citizenship concentrate on facilitating formal membership in the political community. This is done through instruction about facts on national history, geography, government institutions, and law, meaning that, in Biesta terms, pedagogy *for* the public is stressed based on the qualification and socialisation purpose of CE. *Citizenship as identity* relates to adults belonging to a political community. AE programmes focusing on the identity dimension of citizenship emphasise nation-building, assimilation of minorities and migrants, and attitudes of loyalty to the host country. This means, in line with Biesta, pedagogy *for* the public is highlighted based mainly on the socialisation purpose of CE. *Citizenship as civic virtues* relates to the values and attitudes of "good citizens". AE programmes focusing on the civic virtues dimension of citizenship are either trying to install a particular set of values to adults (in Biesta terms, pedagogy *for* the public is emphasised based on the qualification and socialisation purpose of CE) or try to help learners develop their "own values by examining ethical dilemmas and examining different perspectives in a democratic environment" (Schugurensky, 2010, p. 117). This means, in line with Biesta, pedagogy *of* the public and/or *pedagogy for publicness* are stressed based on the qualification and subjectification purpose of CE. Finally, *citizenship as agency* "refers to the state of being in action or affecting change" (Schugurensky, 2010, p. 115). AE programmes focusing on the agency dimension of citizenship promote an active citizenry, but this could take different directions, by focusing on (a) "responsible citizens", that is, citizens who volunteer, recycle, pay taxes, etc. (in Biesta's terms, pedagogy *for* the public is highlighted based on the qualification and socialisation purpose of CE), (b) "participatory citizens", that is, citizens who are active in civic affairs and social life in the community (in Biesta's terms, *pedagogy for publicness* is stressed based on the subjectification purpose of CE), and (c) "justice-oriented citizens", that is, citizens who take collective action to challenge social injustice (Schugurensky, 2010, p. 117) (in Biesta's terms, pedagogy *of* the public is emphasised based on the qualification and socialisation purpose of CE).

3 Methodology

For a comparative empirical analysis of CE policies, we selected Italy and Nigeria: one European country (also an EU member state) and one African country, one from the Global North and one from the Global South, but both member states of UNESCO and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). These countries have different histories, welfare regimes, governance structures, and adult education "systems". Overall, adult education is less regulated than other parts of the education system in both countries. The responsibilities for its legal regulation, the public recognition of its providers, and their basic funding in Italy rest mainly with the regions, whereas in Nigeria it is shared between the central government and the states.

We carried out a multilevel comparative analysis of data relating to policy provisions and programme deliveries for facilitating the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values for CE in Italy and Nigeria. The multilevel analysis approach is suitable for

analysing AE policies because it explains causal processes (Lima & Guimaraes, 2011). For this study, we adopted a four-level analysis: (1) *mega level*, referring to the policies of global IOs, such as UNESCO, OECD, and ILO; (2) *macro level*, referring to policies of regional/continental or sub-continental IOs such as the EU, African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); (3) *meso level*, involving policies and programmes of nation state's ministerial institutions such as the national ministry of education in Italy or Nigeria and; (4) *micro level*, including policies and programmes of sub-national institutions and agencies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These four levels represent our comparative categories that frame CE policies and programmes. Policy processes and strategies at various levels are sometimes interwoven. It is important to understand the micro level vis-à-vis the tiers of government in Italy and Nigeria. We use the meso level to refer to the totality of the countries' sub-national administrative divisions because they closely work together, especially for policy domestication and implementation. The Italian Republic's administrative divisions comprise 20 regions, 107 provinces or metropolitan cities, and 7,904 municipalities. Nigeria is a federation sub-divided into 36 states and one federal capital territory, which are divided into 774 local government areas (LGAs). Focusing on the mega, macro, meso, and micro levels enabled us to grasp an eclectic manifestation of policies and programmes of citizenship education in Italy and Nigeria.

In our comparative analysis, we compare two national cases following Egetenmeyer's (2016) steps of descriptive and analytical juxtaposition involving data collection, searching for common features, and analytical interpretation. Data were generated from policy documents and research reports of IOs, national bodies of Italy and Nigeria, local organisations, NGOs and the "third sector" (private non-profit organisations and entities committed to charity, civic and solidarity goals in Italy), academic researchers, and documents that provide indices about programme deliveries. The variety of documents gathered were needed to conduct an analysis on four different levels; they were sourced from official websites of the IOs, from governmental and non-governmental organisations, and from academic databases.

4 Italy

In Italy, educational laws and policies are formulated at the meso (national) level and take as reference the recommendations of the European Union (macro level) and international bodies such as UNESCO (mega level). Italy consists of 20 regions, which may in turn promulgate regional laws (micro level).

4.1 Mega-level policies

In 1948, Italy was one of the 50 members of the United Nations (UN) that ratified the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This declaration inspired the principles of the Italian constitution. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (Assemblée Nationale Constituante Française, 1789) was a model and source of inspiration for the

drafting of its fundamental principles. The text of Article 3 of the Italian Constitutional Charter, dedicated to the principle of equality, says that: "it is the duty of the republic to remove obstacles to an economic and social order that by effectively limiting the freedom and equality of citizens prevent the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all in the political, economic, and social organisation of the country" (Capo Provvisorio dello Stato, 1947, our translation).

UNESCO is the other IO recognised in Italy and a source of inspiration for several CE programmes included in AE, such as the introduction of "Civic Education" as a subject of study in school in 1958, which in the school year 2010/2011 became "Citizenship and Constitution". Furthermore, the Italian commission for UNESCO promotes CE and the UN 2030 *Sustainable Agenda* with different projects realised at the meso and micro levels. In the key document titled "At School – competence and learning environments" (2014–2020 National Operational Programme), the Ministry of Instruction, University and Research promotes GC competences through interventions aimed at forming citizens of the world. "A citizen of the world knows how to relate, can decentralise and decolonise his or her way of thinking, can move from the local to the universal by developing a holistic dimension, can grasp interdependence and thinks with a critical mind, can imagine, plan and act responsibly for the common good" (Surian, 2019, p. 132, our translation). Moreover, Law 125/2014 (L. n. 125/2014) provides *International Cooperation for Sustainable Development, Human Rights and Peace* as an integral part of Italy's foreign policy. The law is inspired by the principles of the UN and EU charters on fundamental rights and contributes to the promotion of peace, justice, solidarity, and equal relations between people based on the principles of interdependence and partnership to promote education of all citizens in international solidarity, international cooperation, and sustainable development.

The expression of these policies can be found in projects at the micro level (e. g. "The EGC between Trentino and the Balkans", see https://www.cci.tn.it/), where especially in university faculties courses are organised to develop an active and global CE. Within this context, schools play a crucial role. In the field of formal education, UNESCO has promoted the empowerment and training also of teachers in Educational Global Citizenship (EGC), through different tools (policy documents, guidelines, pedagogical guides, teaching kits), leading to the publication of the report *Progress on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education* (UNESCO, 2018).

4.2 Macro-level policies

The Council of Europe, in cooperation with the EU, promotes, prepares, and facilitates the conclusion of international agreements or conventions among member states and often among third party states as well. Over the years, the Council has also made recommendations to promote *Education for Democratic Citizenship* (Council of Europe, 1997, 2002, 2004, 2010), launching initiatives to promote citizens' awareness of their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society. In the document of the European Convention on Human Rights, Council of the EU on 27 June 2002, it is possible to trace the guidelines for lifelong learning (LLL) and mobility; two elements that are

essential to promote employability, active citizenship, social inclusion, and personal development. In the Paris Declaration of March 2015, on the other hand, the Heads of State and Government of the EU stated that education should aim not only at developing knowledge, skills, and competencies and transmitting values but should also help the younger generation to become active and responsible members of society, equipped with critical thinking skills and an open mind (Council of Europe, 2015). In Italy, the following objectives of the Paris Declaration have been addressed by education policy: "ensuring that children and young people acquire social, civic, and intercultural competences", "promoting intercultural dialogue", "enhancing critical thinking and media literacy", and "fostering the education and training of disadvantaged children and young people" (European Commission et al., 2016, p. 3). The 2018 Recommendation reiterates the importance of pursuing active citizenship as a 2020 goal (Council of Europe, 2018).

Italy is a founding member of the Council of Europe and is dedicated to protecting and promoting human rights and to ensuring social rights. The Council's actions in Italy focus, among other things, on fighting racism and intolerance and on protecting minorities and social rights (Council of Europe, 2022; European Commission, 2022, p. 10).

4.3 Meso-level policies and programmes

Among the national laws that promote CE, the first one is the 1958 law that introduced civic education in schools (D. P. R. n. 585, 1958). In 2015, Law 107 (L. n. 107, 2015) was adopted, emphasising the importance of CE and the acquisition of social and civic competences throughout education in terms of knowledge acquisition, but also values and attitude development. From September 2020, CE is a cross-curricular topic that affects all school grades, starting from kindergarten through upper-secondary school. From the beginning, the legislative purpose has been to link the education system and politics to make citizens more aware of the political system and their rights and duties. Over the years, different legislative decrees have stressed the importance of participation in public life and citizenship in line with the objectives set at the EU level and through the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (D. Lgs. N. 226, 2005).

2012 was an important year for CE because Decree 263 of the President of the Republic of 29 October (D. P. R. n. 263, 2012) established that AE is promoted by the Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA). The CPIA carry out the following activities: pathways of AE, initiatives to expand the range of training, research, experimentation, and development in AE. Law n. 92, 20 August 2019 (L. n. 92, 2019) supports the introduction of CE teaching in schools, specifically the sharing and promotion of the principles of legality, active and digital citizenship, environmental sustainability, and the right to personal health and wellbeing. The Ministerial Decree n. 35, 22 June 2020 (D. M. n. 35, 2020) stresses the importance of knowing the Constitution and its values but also being aware of the inalienable rights of man and citizen, their historical development, and the philosophical and literary debate. The programme "Educating for global citizenship: Training critical thinking to understand the complexity of the

present" (Ufficio Regionale UNESCO per la Scienza e la Cultura in Europa, 2020, p. 76, our translation), which aims at students enrolled in the University of the Third Age, is a good example of a CE programme (addresses various topics, for example recognition of prejudices and stereotypes). Another example are the "National Operational Programmes" (*Programmi Operativi Nazionali*; https://www.istruzione.it/pon/avviso_cittadinanza-globale.html), financed by the EU, which promote the development of civic-mindedness, respect for diversity, and active citizenship. Also, in formal education, it is important to mention the project of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), offered by a network of Italian universities, such as "Teaching Human Rights" (https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/it/attivita/Insegnare-i-diritti-umani/1274). Other examples include the University of Padua's formal curriculum or the short-term summer programmes in international relations offered by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Brescia; the Human Right Centre's Summer School "Normativity and Reality of Human Rights" (2019) (https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/en/attivita/Summer-School-2019/1430); and the MOOC "Human Rights and International Criminal Law: An Introduction" (https://learn.eduopen.org/eduopenv2/course_details.php?courseid=463).

4.4 Micro-level policies and programmes

The effect of local (regional) laws is limited to the territory of the region that promulgates them. The *Conferenza delle Regioni e delle Province Autonome* 2016 is a law that refers to each person's sense of belonging to a broad community, to the whole of humanity, and planet Earth. The document stresses the importance of education, culture, and international cooperation policies moving in the same direction, namely the promotion of modern, intercultural, and inclusive education. In order to achieve this goal, there is a need for strong coherence between the different activities implemented in the field of global citizenship education, both at local and national level, in a coordinated framework involving all actors (governments, schools, civil society). Based on these considerations, some Italian regions and local authorities have implemented or are implementing, with their own resources and with European funding, projects on education for global citizenship in their territories, involving different actors from the world of schools, civil society, universities, the private social sector, etc. The 2018 *National Strategy for Global Citizenship Education* (Provincia Autonoma di Trento, AOI, & Concord Italia, 2018) is the result of trans-sectoral and multi-level cooperation between national and local institutions, universities, and civil society organisations.

At the micro level, CPIAs are organised in each region and implemented at the provincial and municipality levels. 130 centres are distributed over all regions of the national territory. Their activities are aimed at Italian citizens aged 16 and above, job seekers, professionals, and foreigners (immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers). Other activities related to non-formal educational programmes include projects offered by the FONDACA association (https://www.fondaca.org/index.php/it/) – which pursues several activities aimed at non-EU immigrants, public employee groups, trainers, and refugees – and projects related to the Sustainable Development Education pro-

moted by CIVICUS (https://www.civicus.org/index.php/fr/component/tags/tag/sdgs), a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world, of which several Italian associations are members. Another example is the CIVIS Project (https://www.cpiaverona.edu.it/wp/uda/), an initiative implemented by a CPIA, which aims at facilitating the integration of immigrants (non-EU foreigners) in the Veneto region through the pathway of Italian language and CE.

At the informal education level, two activities are especially worth mentioning: the "Facebook tandem" and the "Umanità al confine". The first aims to pair immigrants with native speakers to exchange experiences and traditions in an informal setting. The second aims to facilitate dialogue between people for the protection of human and civil rights, for socialisation and integration through the creation of an "urban garden" in the municipality of Roma, which is the focus of many activities and the place where solidarity and mutuality can be rebuilt.

5 Nigeria

In Nigeria, most education policies are formulated at the meso (national) level while authorities at the micro level (the 36 States and the 774 LGAs) adapt or domesticate the policies for implementation. There are macro- and mega-level policies and programmes initiated by various IOs to influence and support CE in the country.

5.1 Mega-level policies

The UN and its organisations, such as UNESCO, are the leading global IOs that make policies and initiate programmes for CE in Nigeria. At this level, Nigeria has been a part of most policies that promote literacy acquisition, girl child education, and human rights protection. *Education For All* (EFA) was a global framework that aimed to meet the learning needs of all children, youth, and adults by 2015 (UNESCO, 2000). The fourth of the six EFA goals recognises and encourages AE for active citizenship. The framework states that "education for democratic citizenship concerns not only the teaching of democratic norms but essentially the development of reflective and creative persons", suggesting that CE is multidimensional (UNESCO, 2000, p. 65). The EFA was instrumental to the review of education policy in Nigeria and the introduction of Civic Education as a subject in primary and secondary schools' curricula in 2009. In 2015, the global community went a step further by pledging to foster GC and making this a focus of Target 7 of Goal 4 (quality education) of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (United Nations, 2015). This initiative aligns with the provision of UNESCO on CE in the same year. In the *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education,* UNESCO (2015, p. 7) defines active citizenship as "variously known as community, popular, or liberal education". Furthermore, UNESCO (2015) developed policy-programme guidance for designing and facilitating GC education. It appears that these recent policies have not significantly trans-

lated to CE education programmes in Nigeria. Thus, there is a need to domesticate GC education policy at the national level in Nigeria (Ojokheta & Omokhabi, 2020).

5.2 Macro-level policies

Macro-level policies formulated at the AU and the ECOWAS levels may have a direct bearing on CE in Nigeria. The AU was established in 1963 to promote unity, solidarity, and international cooperation among the newly independent African states. The organisation aims at creating "a better life for the people of Africa" through the establishment of charters and systems that could achieve the desired goal (Icelandic Human Rights Centre [IHRC], 2022). The current AU's principal education policy is the *Continental Education Strategy in Africa 2016–2015* (CESA 16–25). CESA 16–25 was motivated by the Africa Agenda 2063, the Kigali Statement, the Incheon Declaration, and the adoption of SDG (Africa Union Commission [AUC], 2016). Thus, education for sustainable development and GC education were two of the ten priority areas identified for the continent, and CESA 16–25 set "its own benchmarks that takes stock of the global goals" (AUC, 2016, p. 12). Yet, the Strategy fails to articulate any course of action for (global) CE. A recent evidence-based analysis of education in Africa (AUC & UNICEF, 2021) is also worth considering. While the report is grounded in the global perspective of SDG and the objectives of CESA 16–25, it merely mentions the continent's commitment to CE. Due to the impact of the Boko Haram jihadists' threat in the Chad Basin, CE in the West Africa sub-region focuses on ending violent extremism and building peace (Sagayar, 2020). Nevertheless, a key document at the macro level is the *ECOWAS Reference Manual*, which contains six modules on themes surrounding education for peace and strategies for regional integration (UNESCO & ECOWAS, 2013). The manual corroborates the fact that CE in the sub-region to which Nigeria belongs focuses on fostering democracy, cohesion, peace, security, and integration within the space.

5.3 Meso-level policies and programmes

Most CE policies in Nigeria are enforced at the meso level, that is, through the federal government level. The *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (1999) spells out the conditions for acquiring Nigerian citizenship as well as the rights and duties of citizens. National education policies designed to empower the people through CE programmes include the *National Policy on Education* (NPE) (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2014) and the *Policy Guidelines for Mass Literacy, Adult & Non-Formal Education in Nigeria* (National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education [NMEC], 2017). The NPE promotes mass literacy, adult, and non-formal education in Nigeria. The policy provides guidelines related to CE through aesthetic, cultural, and civic education for public enlightenment (FRN, 2014). In line with the observation in CESA 16–25, literacy is still the principal component of AE in Nigeria, but the country's AE policy has a goal to "give the adult citizens of the country aesthetic, cultural, and civic education for public enlightenment" (NMEC, 2017, Section 2.4(e)).

Other policies and programmes that indirectly contribute to CE include the National Health Promotion Policy, the Voters Education Department of the Independent

National Electoral Commission (INEC), and the National Orientation Agency (NOA). The health policy recognises the use of mobilisation strategies and campaigns to promote health literacy against communicable diseases, drug abuse, poor sanitation, and inadequate attention to key social determinants of health, culminating in raising responsible citizens (Federal Ministry of Health, Nigeria, 2019). The functions of INEC include voter education. Voter education covers how to vote, registration processes, guidelines on the transfer of registered voters, rights and responsibilities of voters, and election offenses and penalties (Ibeanu, 2014; Independence National Electoral Commission, Nigeria [INEC], 2022). NOA has the mandate to serve as a driver for continuous orientation, sensitisation, and mobilisation, as well as facilitating political and CE for the vast population of Nigeria (Ugwuja, Rotimi & Onwuasoanya, 2015). The agency has developed many mass orientation programmes through various media for the promotion of good governance and sustainable social engineering to bring about positive values and attitudes of the citizenry in the country.

5.4 Micro-level policies and programmes

Most policies and programmes at the state and local government levels are derived from national policies and international initiatives and adapted to specific state/local peculiarities. For example, Kano State was the first state to formulate a policy and establish a state agency for mass education in 1980 (Muhammad, Omale & Idris Nuhu, 2015) in response to the prevailing level of illiteracy in the Northern part of the country. All states of the federation have since established a *State Agency for Mass Education* (SAME). The functions of the agencies are to eradicate illiteracy among adults, drop-out youths, and out-of-school children; to provide mass education including continuing education, vocational and functional literacy training programmes (Muhammad, Omale & Idris Nuhu, 2015). The local government councils also complement the efforts of the agencies by establishing adult literacy classes through the *Departments of Adult Education* under the social development units. Within the framework of the CE subject, the AE centres facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to raise responsible and active citizens. This is possible because AE is the equivalent of basic education in the formal school system (FRN, 2014). Each SAME (through AE centres) is responsible for developing strategies and material to ensure that programmes sponsored by national and international bodies are delivered to participants in manners that meet their individual and immediate community needs, including using the language of the community. Furthermore, the *Power Politics* project has been cited as an example of a GC education initiative in Nigeria. It was a collaborative project, involving schools in Nigeria and Scotland, to raise awareness of global development issues and promote relations between countries (UNESCO, 2015; Ojokheta & Omokhabi, 2020).

6 Discussion, comparison, and interpretation

Citizenship education relates to several international, regional, national, and local policies and programmes, especially in terms of aims and finance, although they appear under different naming and with slightly different meanings (e. g. active citizenship, democratic citizenship, and GC). Based on our analysis, we can present the following findings.

At the *mega level*, we conclude that international policies are important and that they shape policies at the lower levels (national, regional, or local) in both Italy and Nigeria. These policies issued by IOs influence both country cases, indicating the interconnectedness of sovereign territories in a globalised world. UNESCO is the leading IO that facilitates global CE policies, most recently focusing on GC (UCL Institute of Education, 2017). Italy and Nigeria are connected by these policies, which are spread globally through the instruments of dissemination of ideas (publications) and standard setting (recommendations) (Mikulec, 2021, p. 39). However, while in Italy the UNESCO concept of GC education has been adopted on the policy level – in terms of striving for planetary consciousness and an identity as world citizens – and implemented in some programmes, in Nigeria the UNESCO EFA movement had great influence on education policy and the implementation of CE as a subject in primary and secondary school curricula. Although GC is present on the discursive level, some authors (e. g. Lauwerier, 2020) see it as exogenous to West Africa, given the lack of commitment by local stakeholders. Meanwhile, migration in the EU has informed the growing attention given to GC in Italy (Tarozzi & Mallon, 2019). Another instrument that affects the influence of IOs on national policies is the funding through various EU projects in Italy and UNESCO projects in Nigeria. Furthermore, on the *macro level*, Italy as an EU member follows the conventions, agreements, and different policies of the Council of Europe, which seek to protect and promote human rights, rule of law, democracy, and the fight against racism, xenophobia, and discrimination through education. However, the EU policies, as some authors pointed out (Lee, Thayer & Madyun, 2008), also stress the importance of CE for employability and a competitive European economy. Meanwhile, Nigeria is a member of the AU, which through its educational policies supports UNESCO's global ideas of sustainable development and GC education. Nigeria is also a member of the ECOWAS, which promotes education for peace and focuses on fostering democracy, social cohesion, and security in the West Africa sub-region through its educational policies. Therefore, while in Nigeria macro-level policies promote CE to foster unity, integration, freedom, and security, clear-cut policies on CE are lacking in the AU unlike that which we could observe in the EU context, where the Council of Europe sets more clear-cut policies addressing CE.

At the *meso level*, both countries address CE in their policies and programmes. In Italy, the legislation calls for the acquisition of civic competences through education (knowledge acquisition and values and attitude development); CE is set as a cross-curricular topic, and the importance of citizens participating in public life is emphasised, with various CE programmes implemented through universities and universities of the

third age. In Nigeria, national education and literacy policies seek to foster civic education enabling public enlightenment (mainly through knowledge acquisition and mass orientation), but with the aim of "reproducing the social order rather than [being] transformative in provision and implementation" (Okoro, 2019, p. 11), with different CE programmes implemented as voter education and literacy programmes. Moreover, whereas policies and programmes in Italy promote GC and sustainability – and employability in the CE programmes for immigrants (by integrating immigrants in the labour market) –, policies and programmes in Nigeria focus more on social empowerment and human rights awareness raising. The GC dimension is also reflected in *micro-level* policies and programmes in Italy, as some regions address each person's sense of belonging to the whole humanity and planet Earth, with micro-level civil society organisations also playing an important role in CE, especially in relation to SDG and immigrant education. However, in Nigeria, state agencies for mass education primarily seek to eradicate illiteracy among adults and focus on the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to raise responsible citizens.

Therefore, although all dimensions of citizenship identified by Schugurensky – status, identity, civic virtues, and agency – can be found in the policies and programmes we analysed, most programmes in Italy refer to the dimensions of status, identity, and civic virtues (especially in the formal education system), with some programmes focusing on the agency dimension as well (i. e. programmes offered by the third sector). In Nigeria, there seems to be a manifestation of AE for citizenship that serves as a basis for human and national development with attention on using CE to tackle national and sub-regional challenges of illiteracy, insecurity, and extremism. Thus, CE pays attention to the dimensions of status, identity, and civic virtues. Therefore, by referring to Biesta's conceptualisation of public pedagogy and his three purposes of education, we can conclude that in both countries, policies and programmes framing CE are predominantly based on the form of pedagogy *for* the public, which mainly stresses the *qualification* and *socialisation* domains of CE.

Finally, factors that affect the focus and the delivery of CE programmes include the characteristics of participants, providers, and overall societal structures. For instance, in Italy, the situation regarding refugees/patterns of immigration (e. g. geographical location), society structures (e. g. socioeconomic status), and education development possibilities (e. g. number of people who can attend education institutions) affect the trajectory of CE in the country.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed and addressed citizenship education (CE), one of the "classic" themes in AE theory, policy, and practice. By referring to Biesta's conceptualisation of public pedagogy, which addresses educational interventions concerning citizenship, democracy, and the public sphere, we elaborated on three different educational interventions – pedagogy *for* the public, pedagogy *of* the public, and *pedagogy for publicness* – and

their relationship to three purposes of education: *qualification, socialisation,* and *subjectification*. Furthermore, as citizenship is a dynamic, contextual, contested, and multidimensional concept, we used four dimensions of citizenship identified by Schugurensky – status, identity, civic virtues, and agency – and related these to Biesta's conceptualisation of public pedagogy and the domains of education. In line with these theoretical insights, we emphasised, among other things, that pedagogy for publicness stimulates the subjectification domain of CE and the agency dimension of citizenship.

By analysing how international, regional, national, and local policies support and frame AE programmes for CE in Italy and Nigeria, we showed that international policies are important and that they shape policies at the national, regional, and local levels in both countries. Furthermore, in Italy, policies and programmes promote GC and sustainability, whereas policies and programmes in Nigeria focus on social empowerment and human rights awareness raising. Finally, we found that in both countries, policies and programmes framing CE are predominantly based on the form of pedagogy *for* the public, which mainly stresses the *qualification* and *socialisation* domains of CE, as well as status, identity, and civic virtues dimensions of citizenship. Nevertheless, some examples of NGOs in Nigeria and third sector organisations in Italy indicate that they can, through their various activities, promote CE in a form of *pedagogy for publicness* that fosters the *subjectification* domain of CE and the agency dimension of citizenship.

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Mature Women in Higher Education: A Comparative Study in Germany, Palestine, and Portugal[1]

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Abstract

Widened access is one of the main features of present-day higher education (HE) policies worldwide. International organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the European Union have advocated the need to increase the participation of other groups beyond the so-called traditional students. On the one hand, arguments of an economic, egalitarian, and social justice nature underlie international organisations' political guidelines. On the other hand, the aging of western societies and the spread of new public management policies have placed additional pressure on national HE systems and institutions. Under these circumstances, new groups of students, referred to as non-traditional students, are attending HE. This paper focuses on mature women students in Germany, Palestine, and Portugal whose HE experiences have remained underexplored in terms of motivations, barriers, and support mechanisms. The research follows the comparative method developed by Egetenmeyer (2012). The comparative analysis points to the existence of different types of HE systems and institutions in terms of the barriers with which non-traditional students in general and mature women in particular are confronted and the support mechanisms at their disposal. The results contribute to establishing the first recommendations for country specific HE system and institution policies to improve the conditions for mature women students.

Keywords: Higher education, mature women, Germany, Palestine, and Portugal

1 Introduction

Over the last decades, widening access to HE has become a major policy orientation worldwide. International organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the European Union have underlined the need to increase the participation of other groups beyond the so-called traditional students.

The concept of non-traditional students is polysemic and very seldom used as a HE policy category. The attempt to typify non-traditional students is a very difficult

1 This paper received national funding from the FCT – *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, IP* [Foundation for Science and Technology] within the scope of the UIDEF – *Unidade de Investigação e Desenvolvimento em Educação e Formação* [Unit for Research and Development in Education and Training]- UIDB/04107/2020".

task, since this category has different meanings depending on the national context and can include a wide variety of students: disabled, low-income, first-generation, ethnic minorities, and mature students (Fragoso & Valadas, 2018). However, there are features that are common to this group: non-traditional students are underrepresented in HE (Bamber, 2008), and their participation is highly conditioned by structural factors when attending an undergraduate course for the first time (Fragoso & Valadas, 2018).

This paper focuses on a particular group of non-traditional students – mature women – in Germany, Palestine, and Portugal, whose HE experiences have remained underexplored in these countries. Based on an international comparative analysis methodology, the chapter explores the following research question: What motivations, barriers and support mechanisms are identified by mature women attending HE in Germany, Palestine, and Portugal? This question is broken down into three parts: What are their motivations? What kind of situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers did they have to overcome to enter higher education? What kind of support do they receive?

The first section offers a brief description of Cross's typology of barriers (1984), Clayton and Smith's motivational typology of re-entry women (1987) and some of the support mechanisms at the students' disposal. This is followed by a description of the methodological approach before the presentation of the country-specific empirical data. The paper ends with an analysis of the similarities and differences.

2 Mature women in HE: motivations, barriers, and support

As is also the case with the concept of non-traditional students, it is very difficult to find a consensual definition of mature students, even if one attempts to limit the definition to age criteria. In some countries and for some scholars, mature students are those aged up to 21, 23, or 25 years when they enrol on undergraduate courses for the first time; in other countries, such as Palestine, there is no policy or academic category for mature students. This research adopted Schuetze and Slowey's (2002) definition of non-traditional students as those who did not follow a linear educational path; frequently access HE education through special programmes; attend undergraduate courses on a part-time basis, and who have to balance their learning with professional tasks and/or family responsibilities most of the time.

According to Mallia (2010), "there are several studies on the experience of mature students in higher education (Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003; Harris and Brooks, 1998; Hopper & Osbourne, 1975; Lea & West, 1995) but few concentrate on mature women, only on the issues that they feel are important" (Pascall & Cox, 1993a; Tittle & Denker, 1980, p.16). More recently, some academics have become interested in studying the identity transformations of mature women students (O'Shea &Stone, 2011; Webber, 2015) and their educational experiences and constraints (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

When focusing on the motives for attending HE, the literature on mature students distinguishes between an instrumental orientation towards education, usually attributed to men, and self-fulfilment, usually related to women (Britton & Baxter, 1999). In our opinion, this dichotomous approach has two problems. On the one hand, it oversimplifies the complexity of motives that underlie the decision to access HE; on the other hand, it may contribute to the reproduction of gender stereotypes. To overcome these analytical *limitations,* Clayton and Smith's (1987) motivational typology appears to be more appropriate. Their research with undergraduate re-entry women identified seven motives for studying: vocational, self-actualisation, knowledge, family, self-improvement, humanitarian, social and role.

The barriers and constraints faced by adults in order to participate in education are important research topics in adult education. Several pieces of research on female mature-age students have highlighted the challenges with which they are confronted (O'Sheaa & Stone, 2011; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Colvin, 2013). In this study, Cross's (1984, p.99) typology of barriers to accessing education is followed. According to her proposal, there are three different types of barriers: situational (related to structural factors), institutional (related to educational organisations) and dispositional (related to individual attitudes and motivations).

To overcome these barriers, some researchers have underlined the importance of offering support at both private (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011) and institutional levels (Brown, 2002). Private support mechanisms are related to family, friends, and peers while the institutional mechanisms emphasise the strategies implemented by HE institutions, such as counselling, tutoring, or workshops to meet the needs of this special group of students.

3 Methodology

The aim of this research is to analyse the similarities and differences of undergraduate mature women's experiences based on their motives for enroling in HE; the barriers with which they are confronted, and the types of support at their disposal. Given that individual experiences are framed by social structures, we searched for national legislation supporting the access and retention of this particular group of HE students. To accomplish these aims, two data collection techniques were used: (1) document analysis of legal regulations and (2) nine semi-structured interviews. The combination of the two methods in the form of a comparative analysis was based on the proposal of Egetenmeyer (2012).

Three female mature students who were attending undergraduate courses at university were interviewed in each country (Table 1). They were selected through a convenience sampling method (Guerra, 2006). The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and the object of content analysis (Bardin, 1988). The average duration of the audiotaped interviews was 30 minutes. All the interviewees gave their consent and were informed about confidentiality and anonymity procedures.

Table 1: Interviewees' sociodemographic characteristics

Country	Interviewee	Age	Marital status	Profession
Germany	A	57	Married	Blogger
	B	65	Married	High school teacher
	C	28	Married	Female soldier
Palestine	M	45	Married	Employee
	F	32	Divorced	Unemployed
	S	22	Single	Unemployed
Portugal	E	33	Single	Quality Analyst
	P	27	Single	Office Manager
	Z	25	Single	Unemployed

The content analysis focused on three main categories: motives; barriers (broken down into situational, institutional, and dispositional) and support (divided into personal and institutional).

Following Egetenmeyer's proposal (2012), the comparison consisted of four steps: descriptive juxtaposition; analytical juxtaposition; descriptive comparison; and analytical comparison, based on the interpretation of the similarities and differences of the three countries. Against this background, a multi-perspective differentiation of the categories was conducted: Macro-level (National), related to the legal framework, Meso-level (Institutional), based on the mature women's perceptions of HE institutions' barriers and support mechanisms, and Micro-level (Individual), focused on their motivations, situational and dispositional barriers, and private support mechanisms. The following figure (Figure 1) synthesises the theoretical and analytical approach used in this research.

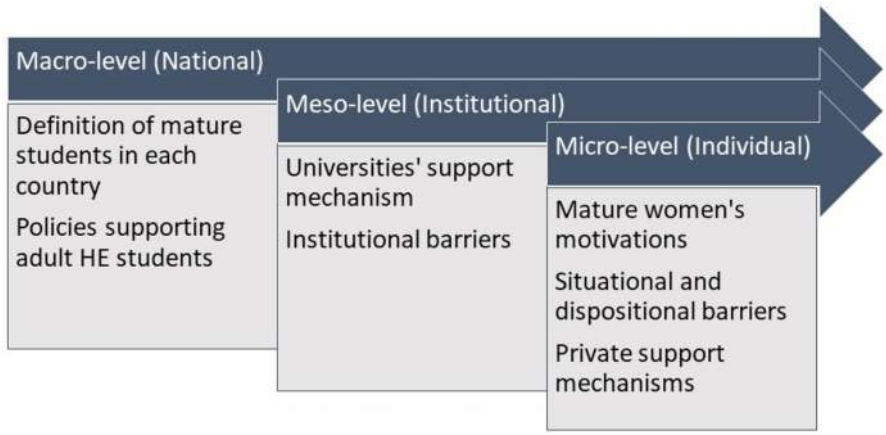

Figure 1: Categories and levels of analysis

4 Mature women in Higher Education in Germany

4.1 Legal Framework

In Germany, mature women are not a HE policy target group. Their situation is mainly discussed in the context of non-traditional students who are, in general, adult students classified by the "The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs in the Federal Republic of Germany" (KMK) as vocationally qualified applicants who do not have a school-based university entry qualification. The characteristic feature of this group is having "completed vocational training and a period of employment of varying length" (Wolter, Kamm & Otto, 2020, p. 104) prior to initiating HE studies. To date, there is no uniform definition of non-traditional students, thus making it difficult to compare different studies. Non-traditional students are usually those who have taken up a course of study via the second [2] or third [3] educational pathway (Freitag, 2012, p. 10). In this context, Wolter, Banscherus & Kamm refer to the existence of non-conventional, non-linear biographies (2016, p. 13) of such students who are already above the age of 25 years and begin their studies at a later stage.

An increased proportion of non-traditional students, mainly in distance-learning programmes at private and applied sciences' universities, has been observed. From an individual perspective, students may prefer flexible study models, which are more likely to be offered in distance-learning and in private universities (Wolter, Kamm & Otto, 2020, p. 116).

Under the Federal Framework Act for Higher Education, HE institutions can offer extra-occupational study programmes on a full-time or part-time basis. Part-time formats are characterised by a reduction in the amount of work per week to pursue sideline activities or to take on family care tasks (Schiller, 2022, p. 25). In addition to this nationwide federal regulation, various state higher education laws exist at the state level[4], defining the specific admission requirements (e. g. work experience, entrance examination) for part-time and extra-occupational study. In accordance with federal and state laws, there are also isolated cooperative ventures and institutional partnerships between universities and companies that promote extra-occupational studies for skilled workers and provide temporary leave of absence. Companies are the main source of financial support for some non-traditional students.

4.2 Institutional barriers and support mechanisms

None of the interviewees reported any major difficulties in the application process, however some highlighted examples of institutional barriers. A. referred to the *pandemic developments* and the conversion of face-to-face teaching to online teaching as challenging. These developments led to the interruption of her current degree: *"So many things crashed, so many things were cancelled and then you were supposed to read books and answer questions"*. She missed out on the possibility of exchange and discussion

2 Evening high school and college
3 Taking up a study programme without the entry qualification for a university of applied science
4 Germany consists of 16 federal states.

with her peers. C. reported "*difficulties with some subjects*", as she had to repeat the statistical exam several times. However, she tries to focus on the *"added value"* of such events and remains highly motivated to fulfil her goals.

Institutional support mechanisms were described in all the interviews. The design of A.'s part-time study programme is specially geared towards the needs of women and has been evaluated as positive. Accordingly, she reported: *"There was a fixed day when you had to come and of course, if you have work and family, you can coordinate that relatively well"*. B., on the other hand, perceived the organisation of study time as challenging and highlighted the openness of her employer: *"The school management was very open to new things and that helped"*. C. mentioned having used the "*university's psychological support"* during a particularly stressful period of her bachelor's degree.

4.3 Motivations, barriers, and support mechanisms

The participants described the personal and career-related motives that guided them in their decision to study, resulting mainly from their interest in the study-related topics. A. appreciated the atmosphere at the university and the exchanges with younger students. She admitted that she had *"also [...] missed out on the challenge"* and regretted not having continued her studies after school. Studying now enables her to engage in a more in-depth theoretical examination of various topics. Against this background, self-fulfilment was an overarching reason for her decision to study at a later stage: "*I increasingly lacked assertion and felt less and less like doing only the family chores"*. C. also referred to a lack of professional challenges. For all of them, career reasons were the main motives for embarking on their studies at a later stage. C. saw few opportunities for advancement in her first job: *"I need a job where I can rise and rise above"*. Like A., she mentioned missed opportunities in life and that she was only able to catch up on her school-leaving exams later. In contrast, B. described the beginning of her studies as a new "*feeling of freedom after the reunification of Germany"* because now she can make decisions regardless of the socio-political conditions.

In terms of career-related contexts, A. described her studies as having enriched her freelance work as a blogger. She appreciated the engagement with current socio-political and educational issues, giving the example of the role of women in the workplace. B. also benefited professionally from the decision to enrol in a part-time university programme, as she will be able to teach in high school upon completion of her degree. A determining factor that led to her return to education was her intention to progress from an elementary school teacher to a high school teacher. This change strengthened her decision to study in order to meet the requirements for teaching in high school. She considers the possibility of an immediate transfer of what she has learned from her in-service studies to the school to be particularly enriching.

Dispositional barriers appeared to differ somewhat according to the age of the interviewees. Two interviewees agreed that learning becomes more challenging with age. A. described the following experience: *"there were some women in my study group who had not learned for 20 years, and they first had to learn how to learn"*. Self-doubt was also a factor for the women. A. mentioned having become more confident when she began

her studies and reflected that this had also affected her own feelings: *"I felt comfortable among all the young people"*. C. reported some degree of self-doubt at the beginning, resulting from a lack of confidence. B. admitted having developed feelings of guilt towards her youngest daughter, due to the lack of time with her. She also referred to the need for self-discipline: *"I had to do a lot and I needed self-discipline that I did not have before in my life"*. C. also referred to her self-discipline in the study as a relevant factor. She used the following time management strategies: *"I always take a little bit more time when I want to finish something"*. In this context, she reported fixed periods in which she writes exam papers: "*from 11 am to 6 pm I always write my bachelor thesis"*.

Situational barriers, such as the lack of time, are a huge challenge for female mature students. B. reported having used the time on the train and in the evening since she had little time during the day. She described her daily routine as being more structured, as she created daily plans to organise the day. According to C., studying later in life is easier as she can now concentrate fully on her studies. She particularly appreciates her own professional experience, because during that period she was able to experiment with different learning strategies, which she now uses successfully in her studies. Two women reported experiences of discrimination during their university studies. B. felt disadvantaged because of her former GDR[5] origin and recalled a professor's statement: *"You come from the former GDR, so we will examine you all a little more intensively"*. On another occasion, she was made to take an additional exam, as her degree was not recognised due to her regional origin. She also emphasised that at an older age, *"you don't want to embarrass yourself"*. In this regard, she felt that higher demands were placed on her. C. felt disadvantaged due to language barriers, and she always needed a little more time to finish a written task. However, she compensated for this disadvantage by investing additional time in her studies and effectively scheduling her work. Two interviewees (B. and C.) in particular reported experiences of envy in their occupational and private contexts, where their development was resented by others. C. referred to cooperation difficulties in the workplace. She also mentioned the prejudices of male colleagues against female colleagues, stating that, as far as she was concerned, they were *an "incentive"* to continue with her studies.

The interviewees also reported some family support factors. B. stated that at the beginning of her studies, her husband would often get up at night to take care of her daughter and her eldest son would help her with computer issues. C. underlined her husband and parents' understanding and emotional support. She also emphasised the positive influence of her circle of friends. She had friends who were also studying, and she was able to engage in student life at an early age. C also referred to her employer's *financial support* which had enabled her to concentrate fully on her full-time study program. A. and B. highlighted the importance of their parents' commitment to their higher education degree.

5 The German states of the former GDR were assigned to the Soviet occupation zone until 1990. The Federal Republic of Germany emerged after the reunification of Germany in 1990.

5 Mature women in Higher Education in Palestine

5.1 Legal framework

When addressing adult education in the context of higher education in Palestine, in general, and specifically in relation to mature women, there is a clear absence of related legal framework both in Higher Education Law 11 and on the official website of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR). Nevertheless, two points should be clarified as regards the meaning of adult women in the Palestinian context and their status in higher education.

First, when referring to adult women, the word *adult* itself is used interchangeably and synonymously with words like *alkebar* or *mature* in most Arab contexts, Palestine included. The word mature refers to those adults who are fully developed and have reached the age where they are legally responsible for their actions. Therefore, in the Arabic language, there are words such as *girl* for a non-adult and *woman* for a mature adult. The words *adult* and *mature* in education are always associated with those who have not completed their education or who have dropped out of school. In 2016, the Palestinian strategic plan for adult learning was issued, and the word adult or *alkebar* was integrated into the 2017–2022 Palestinian higher education strategic plan.

Women's rights or status in education in Palestine is always associated with equality. Consequently, there is no gender differentiation in terms of higher education's enrolment requirements, procedures, rules, and programmes. Respectively, there is always a reference to education as a right for all, as cited in Palestinian higher education Law 11, which (2) states "Higher education is a right for every citizen who fulfils the scientific and objective conditions specified in this law and the regulations issued according thereto".

Palestinian women, like their counterparts in regional Arab countries, suffer from policies that are woven into the dominant culture. According to Said-Foqahaa & Maziad (2011),

Within this mix, where the patriarchal intersects with the economic, the institutional and the cultural, 'social religiosity' plays a decisive role in rationalising and normalising the process of discrimination against women, and in providing cognitive and mental justifications for the discriminatory reality (p. 235).

These policies reinforce the existing social roles such as gender segregation and women's deprivation of decision-making. Consequently, there are different academic institutions that separate males and females on campus and in the lecture halls. Furthermore, it is the parents' responsibility to select their daughters' specialisation at university, based on their own family's interests.

In short, in Palestine the non-traditional student is neither an academic nor a policy category. Therefore, there are no legal regulations to facilitate access to HE for those who do not follow a traditional educational path.

5.2 Institutional barriers and support mechanisms

Based on the interviews, adult women enroled in higher education in Palestine are confronted with institutional barriers related to the higher education institutions' roles and enrolment procedures, in addition to the imposition of social restrictions.

The interviewees stated that there is no distinction between students' enrolment procedures, and the only requirement is the high school examination certificate which is an obligatory admission condition. At a later stage, there is a minimum requirement for certain specialisations based on the students' high school GPA, however this is established by the MOHESR itself and is subject to alteration each year. M. and F. did not refer to problems concerning enrolment. M. said, "*the university requested the official certified copy, stamped and authorized by the Ministry of Higher Education*". In contrast, S. mentioned few institutional barriers, however her inadequate GPA at high school had restricted her enrolment in the desired specialisation. She stated "*I had the option to repeat my high school exams, but repeating such an experience where there is no guarantee of achieving better results is a disappointing matter in itself. Therefore, I enrolled in a different specialisation which I am not interested in"*.

Providing equal opportunities for Palestinian males and females and the younger and older students sometimes leads to difficulties related, for example, to the fact that the lecture timetable ends at 4 p. m., which is not always suitable for the female students who live on border areas and take longer to arrive home. M. referred to "*no tolerance on the part of her husband for returning home late on workdays*". She mentioned an unofficial type of support she had received from her academic department head: *"I was given permission to miss some late classes but with the condition of assigning me extra tasks and projects"*. Even though university departments work hard to avoid scheduling late lectures for female students, this creates stress when female students try to change their schedules to avoid social disturbance. Nevertheless, some interviewees referred to the support of some universities for their female students by providing a kindergarten on the campus allowing those females who are mothers to ensure their children's care while studying, especially those spending late hours at the university.

Another struggle faced by Palestinian adult women is the financial disruption caused by the payment of fees every semester. This is also a major situational barrier with which female mature students are confronted. Palestinian families aspire to empower their daughters with education to enhance their identity, gain a new breadwinner for the family and to ensure they are able to support themselves in the future. M. stated that "*the disruption caused by financial hardship is a major challenge, namely the enrolment fees, especially for the first-year students it's a must. I had to pay all the semester fees, and this brought financial pressure*". In this regard, S. stated that "*the university offers fee instalment and loan facilities to ease the burden of the financial difficulties"*. She also added that "*in cooperation with some projects and generous donors, and under the supervision of the university, the university engaged me in programmes and temporary work opportunities to cover my semester fees"*. The universities are, indeed, tolerant of the financial issue, even though some universities prevent indebted students from attending university exams. Other institutional challenges are related to governing procedures within

these universities where rigid timetables are forced upon students. Therefore, a full-time schedule might not be possible for mothers seeking part-time studies.

In terms of gender equality, Palestinian universities compete to offer qualified and equal education opportunities. These universities offer fee instalment and loan facilities to ease the burden of financial difficulties. Therefore, as stated by S., "*equal programs and procedures target all the student segments in my university whether male or female*".

5.3 Motivation, barriers, and support mechanisms

In terms of motivation, adult women in Palestinian higher education pursue the education opportunity as part of an identity struggle. This is not limited to age since it affects those who are fresh graduates and those who have returned to campus after marriage and having children. It is true that female struggles increase with age, however, this situation is also connected to self-persistence. For instance, M. expressed that at the age of 45, "*studying at this age is a challenge for me, however, it is the only possibility of opening new opportunities for my ambition and enhancing my family's financial status*".

Another motivation is to overcome the financial struggle and to search for employment, the motivations for which may be self-empowerment and financial stability. These motivations show persistence in the face of hardships. According to S. "*despite my family's poor financial status, my father is willing to give me the opportunity to complete my education, therefore, my motivation is to take the responsibility and help my family after graduation*". M. expressed that *"the social norms imposed on me as a divorced woman have prevented me from exercising my normal life rights. As a divorced woman, I suffer from family pressure pertaining to leaving home and going to university."* Therefore, she seeks self-empowerment and wishes to enhance her social identity.

The identity matter is further associated with the role model that female students who are mothers try to convey to their children. It is also a struggle where mothers and divorced students share the problem of imposed social barriers, therefore, working to overcome stigmatisation. M. said: *"As a mother and as an employee I am seeking promotion in my current position since the last certificate I obtained was a diploma and this affects my motivation at work*". According to M., "*studying at this age is a challenge and I do not want to feel embarrassed in front of my children and husband, however, it is the only possibility of opening new opportunities for my ambition and of enhancing my family's financial status"*.

F. highlighted the daily struggle when she reaches her neighbourhood which is in one of the broader areas: "my neighbours keep staring at me with curious eyes, even though they know I am a university student, but given their limited outlook, arriving home after sunset is suspicious for a girl". This problem is mainly related to social barriers, such as the conventional customs that compel issues such as women staying outdoors after sunset, which is not culturally tolerable.

6 Mature women in Higher Education in Portugal

6.1 Legal Framework

The Portuguese HE system has undergone several important changes. Some national educational policies have been launched to pursue the new transnational framework of political commitments. The "access of adults to higher education, who do not hold a traditional qualification for this purpose," (Moio, Alcoforado, & Vieira, 2017, p. 274) is one of these political commitments and has become a goal of HE policies in European countries.

A law dating back to 2006 altered the national education system regulation and highlighted the aim of enlarging HE access, establishing it "as one of the objectives to be pursued for the higher education policy, to promote equal opportunities in access to this level of education, attracting a new audience, in a logic of lifelong learning." (DRE, 2006). This law emphasised flexibility in facilitating the admission of students to HE who meet specific qualification requirements, thus increasing recruitment (Decree-law 64/2006). This policy opened universities to adults who were not enroled in HE and wished to obtain a HE degree but had non-traditional educational trajectories.

In Portuguese law, this flexible HE access is structured by a specific programme – M23 – targeting "those over the age of 23 years who, not holding a qualification for access to higher education, prove their ability to attend by taking specially designed tests, implemented by higher education institutions" (Law 49/2005, art. 12a).

Some Portuguese authors are of the opinion that this social group of "students over the age of 23 years" (M23) could be used to define the *non-traditional* students in Portugal, however this age delimitation for the categorisation of mature students has been questioned by Soares, Almeida & Ferreira (2010, p. 12).

In 1981, a Portuguese law was issued to support working mature students in HE, namely the "Estatuto do Trabalhador Estudante" (Working student law). More recently, Law 105/2009 was issued to provide specific rights to working-students related to a) flexibility in time management at work according to the course schedule and evaluation periods and b) flexibility in terms of minimum enrolment requirements, course duration and its completion, timetable, and evaluation processes at the educational institutions.

Neither mature women students nor non-traditional students are used as policy categories. However, two national laws aimed at widening access to HE to those aged over 23 years in one case, and at facilitating the completion of education courses for those who have regular jobs, referred to as working-students in the other, play a highly important role in the Portuguese context.

6.2 Institutional barriers and support mechanisms

The interviewees mentioned few institutional barriers in terms of accessing and studying in HE. They reported difficult communication with the universities when requesting information on the courses, enrolment process, fees, and the courses' employability.

After enrolment, they complained of the lack of financial support to pay the fees and the xenophobic attitudes of other students and professors towards them for being Brazilian women, such as teachers giving worse grades because of the Brazilian Portuguese. Writing about the challenges she faced, P. stated *"balance between work and study, in addition to complicated xenophobia relationship with colleagues and some teachers"*.

Unlike the interviewees of the other countries, the Portuguese participants emphasised their student experience. They highlighted changes in the methods of their studies compared to secondary education, such as more autonomous learning and group work, and the use of virtual tools for the learning activities as major challenges in their learning process.

When questioned about the HE institution's support, none of them appeared to be informed and none knew what was available. The only categorical answer was related to the lack of specific support for international mature students.

Despite their lack of knowledge regarding institutional support, all of them promptly suggested supportive practices that should be implemented to facilitate mature women's enrolment and attendance in higher education, such as accessible scholarships and an alternative evaluation to support M23 students with difficulties attending classes on a regular basis.

6.3 Motivations, barriers, and support

In order to understand their decision to enrol on a higher education course, it was important to learn about these women's motivations, dreams, and their reasons for not having previously pursued an undergraduate course. E. mentioned the *"difficulty in balancing work and studies and some personal issues"* while P. focused on *"financial issues and not being able to work and study to support myself"*.

When asked about their current decision to enter HE, distinct motivations were identifiable – having a profession; using HE enrolment as a strategy to obtain legal residency in Portugal (for a foreign woman); having an international education experience; having another student as inspiration and finally, personal, and intellectual development. Some of these motivations were evoked by Z. *"I always wanted to get into higher education, and my younger sister was already in college and was an inspiration to me. The other reason was to provide me with personal and intellectual growth"*.

The participants referred to the same dispositional and situational barriers. They stressed the fear of returning to their studies after an interruption from school. E. mentioned her concerns regarding her return to her studies because of *"years without studying, a lot of time away from school"*. Despite her initial fear, Z. stated that her perspective on studying had changed: *"it is not more complicated, on the contrary, I feel that I approach tertiary education, perhaps with more seriousness, focus and perseverance than when I was 18 years old"*.

A situational barrier with which they were all confronted was the lack of time and the consequent difficulties in balancing study-work-family and leisure. They complained about having less time for themselves, their families, and their friends, but they

also stressed their families' support. In the case of Z., the family's encouragement and support were crucial to her study period in an array of ways: *"my father gave me a new computer screen to make it more comfortable for me to study, and my family respects my space and time when I'm studying and doesn't disturb me*". Another example of family support was mentioned by P. in relation to her sister's help with homework, *"she often reviews small individual assignments, giving her feedback and adding more accurate lexicons to my writing."*

Attending HE has given rise to important personal transformations in these women. E. claimed to have broadened her life perspective and become more optimistic about her future. P. wrote about the impact of being completely independent from her family and M. stated "*I believe there is an intellectual and personal growth, I'm a more focused person with more routines*."

7 Comparative Analysis

At the macro level, two categories were identified as crucial to this comparative study. The first category seeks to understand how mature students (and women) are perceived by educational policies in Germany, Palestine, and Portugal. The second focuses on the legal framework aimed at widening access to students who have not followed traditional educational paths.

Concerning the *mature student definition*, none of the countries has a legal or academic definition for this population, despite Portugal having a special HE access policy for individuals over the age of 23 years. However, Germany and Portugal have issued laws creating alternative procedures to access HE, targeting individuals who have not followed a linear and 'traditional' educational path. These HE policies can be understood as national responses to both the Bologna Declaration commitments, which stimulated the development of regulations that have opened new channels of "access to higher education, for adults who do not hold a traditional qualification for this purpose" (Moio, Alcoforado, & Vieira, 2017, p. 274) and the European Commission's Education and Training work programmes' benchmarks. Conceived as important policy instruments to promote the European Union, these programmes pay particular attention to Adult Education Learning and aim to improve the participation rate of adults in education, namely in HE.

In the comparative analysis of the legal framework in Germany and Portugal it was not possible to identify specific legal instruments for mature women's needs. Contrary to the case in these countries, Palestine has no special regulations to support mature students in accessing HE or flexible conditions for working students.

Although some degree of investment in financial support for higher education students may be observed in all three countries, such as scholarships in Portugal and Germany and loans in Palestine, these mechanisms do not target mature students or mature women students. From this perspective, it may be said that this population is not adequately supported by educational policies.

Considering the comparative analysis at the Meso level, the women's perceptions of the *universities' support mechanisms* and *institutional barriers,* some similarities and differences were noted. University fees and timetables seem to be the most relevant institutional barriers for Palestinian and Portuguese students. They complain about the costs, the limited financial support, and the lack of more flexible timetables. Conversely, the German interviewees identify the offer of part-time studies as a relevant institutional support mechanism.

In Portugal and Germany, some interviewees reported discrimination based on their nationality or origin (Brazilian and East Germany respectively), whereas in Palestine prejudice and obstacles in relation to age were reported, particularly for divorced and older female students. The misunderstanding resulting from the miscommunication process was perceived as another hurdle, as in the case of Portugal, where respondents reported poor access to information on students' timetables, scholarships, and enrolment.

The results of the Meso level analysis highlight the absence of customised plans for working students in both Portugal and Palestine as regards flexible timetables, scholarships, and treating both traditional and non-traditional students equally, particularly mature women.

At the Micro level, the results of the comparison offer insights into motives, dispositional and situational barriers and private and public support. Following Clayton and Smith's motivation typology (1987), the interviews show that self-improvement, self-actualisation, and vocational reasons are relevant motives for the decision to enrol in HE in all the countries.

All the interviewees referred to situational and dispositional barriers. Scheduling problems were reported by Palestinian and Portuguese women, albeit for different reasons, while the difficulties in balancing study – work – and family were perceived as a barrier for Portuguese and German students. None of the interviewees complained about ageist attitudes. However, in Germany and Portugal, some of the women mentioned discriminatory attitudes on the part of teachers (xenophobic and due to origin), and in Palestine the social and cultural attitudes towards women. From a dispositional point of view, the women described the fear of failure in all the countries as a relevant dispositional barrier. They reported feelings of guilt towards the family, the experience of envy (Germany) and the struggle to succeed and overcome stigmatisation (Palestine).

The private support of family and friends (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011) is particularly relevant in Germany and Portugal. The women value the support of the husband and other members of the household. Financial support from the family and partner, on the contrary, is highlighted as a significant support measure only in Portugal and Palestine. Particularly in European countries, some support systems are offered by the employer. One woman mentioned the financial support of her employer, which had made it easier for her to complete her full-time study programme.

8 Final Remarks

The legal framework analysis and the interview results shed some light on the study conditions of mature women in higher education in Germany, Palestine, and Portugal. The small number of interviews and the absence of an analysis of university policies targeting mature students in general, and women in particular, call for some level of caution in the interpretation of the results and for further research.

In line with Clayton and Smith (1987), the interviews highlighted self-improvement, self-actualisation, and vocational reasons as the most relevant motives for enroling in HE, but the difficulties encountered during the study period may prevent successful completion of the program. It was possible to identify several institutional and dispositional barriers (Cross, 1984) and some support mechanisms (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Brown, 2002). As far as the institutional barriers are concerned, the main obstacles were the lack of financial support for working students and low flexible study schedules/pathways options. Concerning the interviewees' dispositional barriers, it was possible to observe difficulties in managing the time between study, work, and personal life and the struggle with the financial burden of continuing to study (full-time work needs).

The institutional support mechanisms were associated with the possibility of studying with flexible timetables, having a customised evaluation process (mainly for working students), the availability of some scholarships (for non-working-students) and loans for students in general.

However, the main observation stemming from this research seems to be the lack of adequate regulations geared towards mature women students' needs. The Portuguese and German legal frameworks seek to address the issue of non-traditional (access) and working students (schedules), while Palestine does not even have support mechanisms for these specific populations.

Nevertheless, it is unclear how the conditions for such women to study will develop over time. Comprehensive monitoring is needed, and women should be considered as a separate category. Longitudinal data would be suitable for recording the course and individual challenges, as well as institutional support measures for women during their studies and beyond. These supportive measures could involve customising their studies and offering counselling services to mature women; adapting study plans and timetables to their needs and providing them and working students with financial support. In this context, digital media and tools offer multiple opportunities to make studies more flexible. Against this background, choices for mature women in terms of different study formats (face-to-face or online), temporal organisation (short and long courses) and time of the day (afternoon, evening) could foster more openness and flexibility.

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Part II: Global Perspectives on Sustainability

The World Bank's Role in Shaping the Education of Adults. Comparing the Policy Choices of the World Bank and India.

Shalini Singh, Jan Schiller, Nitish Anand, Søren Ehlers, Asif Moiz

Abstract

This paper aims at understanding how international organisations such as the World Bank shape policies regarding the education of adults in low- and middle-income countries. Based on policy analysis and the comparative approach, the paper argues that the Bank's policies provide realistic, evidence-informed, long-term, and diversified policy solutions to low- and middle-income countries due to its immense resources. Furthermore, irrelevant national policy choices and implementation fidelity often lead to disastrous results for education, and the countries are responsible for such results to a large extent. The Bank's policy solutions and their intended or unintended consequences may not be ideal choices, but low- and middle-income countries often lack better alternatives. Furthermore, the impact of international organisations such as the World Bank is so significant in resource-scarce contexts like India that even with indirect influence, far-reaching policy changes might be induced. The paper includes methodological reflections on policy analysis as a method of research.

Keywords: Policy Choices, Education of Adults, Human Capital, Learning Poverty, Education Systems.

1 Introduction

Countries undergo *social pain* if their education systems do not adapt to the changing socio-economic needs (OECD, 2019). In today's world, this demands *lifelong learning for all* (OECD, 2019). However, most low- and middle-income countries often lack adequate resources for lifelong learning and avail themselves of foreign assistance (World Bank 2021).

The World Bank (hereafter the Bank) is the largest investor in education across the globe (World Bank, n. d.) and the strongest international player in shaping the education policies of low- and middle-income countries (Singh, 2022). The Bank produces more research than top-ranking research institutions (World Bank, 2011), and until 2022, it has engaged with 160 countries and 25 regional states, investing billions of dollars, and reaching out to millions of people, especially in poor parts of the world (World Bank, n. d.).

India is a typical case for studying the role of the Bank in shaping education policies in resource-scarce contexts because it not only has the world's largest (approximately 40 %) non-literate adult population (adults who lack even basic education) but also is one of the largest of the Bank's borrowers (UNESCO 2016; Nair, 2019). Furthermore, since India's engagement with the Bank has continued for more than 7 decades (a considerable period of time), it seems adequate to analyse the linkage between the two. This paper uses policy analysis and the comparative approach to answer the research question: *How has the World Bank shaped the policy of education of adults in India?*

The sources of research include policy documents from the Bank and India, including general policy guidelines, recommendations, project agreements, evaluation reports, statistical reports, and policy research documents. A vertical comparison[1] between the Bank and the Indian policies is performed to reflect upon the way in which the Bank has shaped Indian policy for the education of adults.

The paper argues that the Bank's policies provide realistic, evidence-informed, long-term, and diversified policy solutions to low- and middle-income countries due to its immense resources. Furthermore, irrelevant national policy choices and implementation fidelity often lead to disastrous results for education, and the countries are responsible for such results to a large extent. The Bank's policy solutions and their intended or unintended consequences may not be ideal choices, but low- and middle-income countries often lack better alternatives. In addition, the impact of international organisations such as the World Bank is so significant in resource-scarce contexts such as India that even with indirect influence, far-reaching policy changes might be induced.

2 Conceptual Framework

In the post-World War II period (period relevant for this paper), the point of departure for most international policies on education is the discussion about the aims of education amongst three approaches: the rights-based approach, the human capital approach, and the capabilities approach (Robyens, 2006).

The *rights-based approach* emphasises that every individual has a right to education, since it is crucial to human survival, development, and thus good life (Robyens, 2006). This approach inspires the agenda in the UN and its agencies, and it is common in OECD countries (Robertson, 2022; Singh, 2022).

The *human capital approach* argues that education is necessary for each individual to ensure their contribution to economic growth and development (Schultz, 1963). Highly productive individuals (human capital) lead to economic growth and hence more resources for overall development, which can then be distributed equitably by state regulation (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). This approach has predominated the policies of low- and middle-income countries because they do not have resources to

1 Comparison between two entities which are not at the same hierarchical level. In the paper, the World Bank is an international-level entity, whereas India is a state-level entity. For a methodological introduction to vertical comparisons in the field of adult education, see Egetenmeyer (2017).

provide education as a right to everyone (Singh, 2022). The calculation of the *rate of returns on investment in education* is a core component of this approach. The concept establishes a link between the amount of investment (private and/or social) in proportion to the income generated due to education (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

The *capabilities approach,* which has been relevant in international education policy discussions since 1989, is built upon a critique of the rights-based and human capital approaches (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2006). It argues that the human capital approach is instrumental and reduces the individual to a form of capital. Furthermore, it is difficult to calculate all costs and benefits of education and thus also the accurate rate of return, because several non-economic factors may not be quantifiable. Therefore, despite rights, individuals may not be able to exercise *free will.* Education should consequently aim at developing individuals' capability to exercise their free will for their well-being (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2006).

The Bank's policies have adhered to the rate of returns on investment for decades, anchoring the arguments primarily in resource scarcity (Singh, 2022). In contexts (of low- and middle-income countries) where the Bank is predominantly engaged, the rights-based approach and the capabilities approach appear to be utopian. G. Psacharopoulos and H. Patrinos have developed and elaborated on the concept of *returns on investment in education,* based on 139 countries between 1950 and 2014 (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). They argue that the rate of returns is highest for primary education, especially for females, for countries with low per capita income, and for both private and social investment (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). As the per capita income increases, this rate decreases slightly (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Furthermore, general education has a higher rate of return than vocational education due to the high costs involved in vocational education (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Moreover, private sector employment leads to higher rate of returns as compared to public sector employment (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). In the current context (knowledge economies with knowledge as the most relevant form of capital), the rate of returns on investment in higher education also shows a considerable increase (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). However, to ensure equity in society, the investment must match the increasing demands of education, or it may lead to an increase in inequality due to knowledge gaps (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

Thus, according to the *rate of returns on investment in education,* education of adults should not be funded by the state (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). The state should only regulate the unintended consequences of the market mechanism and provide opportunities to achieve development where necessary and when not offered by other providers (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Psacharopoulos and Patrinos' arguments reflect the Bank's policy,[2] as evident from the review of its documents later in the article.

2 Both have worked with the World Bank as employees for many years.

3 Review of Literature

Investments in human resources are crucial, especially for low- and middle-income countries with large populations, widespread inequalities, and a high dependency ratio (Haq, 1996 and Lin, 2008 in Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). With their limited resources, these countries often need assistance to ensure that their populations become an asset rather than a liability. The Bank provides both direct and indirect assistance to such countries in various forms. Its modalities include, inter alia, substantial loans with conditionalities, pilot projects, advice and recommendations (technical assistance), loan-related reports and studies, high-end research, general publications, certification regarding whether a country is credible for loans from other lending entities, coordination of foreign aid, events, recruitment of individuals and actors to promote its agenda, and socialisation (Edwards Jr., Rapperport, Sperduti & Caravaca, 2021).

In scholarly publications, the Bank has been accused of compelling countries to privatise education for the benefit of the market but with disastrous consequences for the poor (Mundy & Menashy, 2012; Edwards, Victoria & Martin, 2015; Edwards Jr. et al, 2021). The Bank provides guidelines for policy implementation and evaluates the *implementation fidelity*[3] (Ginsburg, Megahed, Elmeski & Tanaka, 2010; Edwards Jr. et al, 2021). Its conditionalities , requirements for integrated plans aiming at overall poverty reduction and development (according to its own criteria) irrespective of the objective of the loan request, impact assessment (aligned with its own impact assessment criteria) of previous loans granted, and Systematic Country Diagnostic reports (comprising various policy areas) for availing assistance *force* countries to align with its policies irrespective of their own interests (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Edwards Jr. et al, 2021). Through high-end research, publications, data, and influence, the Bank often creates frameworks (e. g. the *Global Partnership for Education*) that stand out as undisputed due to the lack of competition for several reasons (Heyneman, 2003; 2012; Edwards Jr. et al., 2021). Such frameworks are considered relevant by other donors, and they automatically enable the Bank to shape and coordinate the flow of development aid and other assistance to countries requiring assistance (Heyneman, 2003; 2012; Edwards Jr. et al., 2021).

In many cases, the Bank does not consider the need to balance the interests of all *stakeholders* and compels countries to induce policy changes with severe long-term consequences for several stakeholders in the borrowing countries (Heyneman, 2012; Rappleye & Un, 2018; Edwards Jr. et al, 2021). Despite assistance, the Bank is hence held responsible for pushing poor countries to follow its policies against their interests, promoting the interests of the market (Verger, Steiner-Khamsi & Lubienski, 2017), and building up its policies on a narrow cost-benefit analysis (Ward, 2019).

Specific research regarding the role of the Bank in the education of adults is scarce. Unavailability of data and the indirect relationship between the Bank's policies

3 "Implementation fidelity refers to the degree to which an intervention or program is delivered as intended" (Carroll, Patterson, Wood, Booth, Rick & Balain, 2007, p. 2).

and the education of adults could have contributed to this lack of research. Research, especially policy analysis, regarding India and the Bank's engagement is also lacking.

4 The World Bank

The Bank aims to eradicate extreme poverty and increase shared prosperity through sustainable development (World Bank, n. d.). This goal is the most relevant yardstick in determining whether a particular initiative is worth investment (World Bank, n. d.). The Bank therefore has a *functionalist* view of education wherein education is a means to achieve its goals (Singh, 2022). Investment in education is supposed to develop *human capital*. The Bank offers diversified policy solutions according to the needs of each country (as decided by the Bank) in the form of conditionalities with assistance and, most recently, laid clearly under its *Country Partnership Frameworks* (World Bank, n. d.). These frameworks are evidence-based policy guidelines to eradicate poverty and achieve overall development specifically tailored to the needs and close monitoring of each country (World Bank, n. d.). The frameworks are aligned with the international development agenda (e. g. the Sustainable Development Goals since 2015) (World Bank, n. d.). Due to the lack of adequate data regarding inputs in education in most low- and middle-income countries, the Bank often aims at achieving global development targets (Singh, 2022). It supports countries by channelling various resources to them to fill the resource gaps for achieving the established targets, thereby streamlining most international assistance to them (World Bank, n. d.).

The Bank was established for the post-World War II reconstruction in Europe (World Bank, 1971). After the reconstruction, the Bank started assisting the newly independent countries in poverty eradication and the development of initiatives (World Bank, 1980). It aimed at ensuring its own survival and avoiding the potential markets, resources, and manufacturing hubs in these countries from falling 'prey' to the Soviet agenda (Mehrotra & Clawson, 1979). In some countries such as India, Soviet influence was significant in terms of investments in infrastructure and education, for instance, in steel plants and natural science studies (Mehrotra & Clawson, 1979). These post-colonial countries were open to foreign investments, which several Western countries made (World Bank, 1971). Such investments needed local *manpower* development for sustenance, as receiving foreign manpower that may once again compromise the interests of the recipient countries was neither feasible nor wanted (by the former colonised countries) (World Bank, 1971).

The initial projects focused on the modernisation of agriculture and the primary sector, since most countries had large populations living in poor rural areas (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). During colonisation, their raw material was used in industries of the imperial rulers, and their education systems were systematically destroyed (World Bank, 1980). Most countries consequently lacked the basic infrastructure for modern education, for instance, technical education institutions, curricula, and teachers (World Bank, 1980). The Bank offered not only financial assistance but also other crucial re-

sources such as technical expertise. Between 1962 and 1968, it provided loans to support the manpower needs in such countries, especially through infrastructure projects (World Bank, 1980).

Under the new President McNamara, the Bank changed its approach in favour of consistent, long-term support, based on evaluation of past projects and identification of needs, followed by diversified strategies for each country but based on certain fundamental policy choices (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974).

In urban areas, the Bank facilitated the development of formal secondary and best-in-class higher education institutions in natural sciences which could support the infrastructural base of the economy and sustain the introduction of new technology (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). In poverty-stricken rural areas that lacked even basic infrastructure but had vast populations, negligible access to education, and low-skill, low-paying jobs, the Bank facilitated the development of a low-cost, non-formal *adult education sector* which could be tailored according to local needs and capacity, provide access to the masses, and boost productivity (Singh, 2022). This non-formal education aimed at supporting the agrarian economy by boosting productivity, while formal vocational education aimed at supporting industrialisation. Such non-formal sectors were loosely structured; were dependent on civil society's assistance for implementation, and are still prevalent in many countries today, including India, due to *path dependency* (Singh, 2022).

The Bank identified that the states were using significant resources on education, but overall, the impact on poverty eradication and development was limited (World Bank, 1980; 1985). In many countries, the state spent on education such that most resources benefitted the privileged, while the poor masses received limited access to basic education (World Bank, 1980). Thus, despite enormous spending, socio-economic inequalities increased (World Bank, 1980). In 1985, the Bank's research concluded that investment in primary education yielded the highest returns and the fewer the resources were, the larger the *returns on investment in education* would be (Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1985). The Bank consequently recommended that the state should only invest in public education to ensure access to basic education for everyone. The remaining educational provisions were to be left to private actors, including individuals, the market, civil society, and international actors (World Bank, 1991). The state was advised to only *regulate* these actors and invest in other aspects of education for affirmative action, wherever necessary for development, and where private actors were unavailable.

In 1990, along with UNICEF and the UNDP, the Bank started the *Education For All* initiative, arguing that access to basic education for everyone would build the base for further education for all (World Bank, 1999). By the 2000s, the Bank added the focus on gender parity and streamlined all international aid for education under the *Education For All Fast Track Initiative*, 2002 (World Bank, 2011).

Later, in 2005, the initiative was renamed *Global Partnership for Education,* paralleled by a U-U-turn in the Bank's approach to investment in education (World Bank, 2011). Based on the realisation that the quality of education remained poor despite

access, the Bank suggested that countries should develop education *systems* by integrating education sectors and include possible target groups in 2005 (hence not keeping decisions limited to the state) (World Bank, 2005 in World Bank, 2011; Singh, 2022). In 2011, the Bank devised a more concrete policy on *quality education* and the development of *resilient and responsive* education systems (World Bank, 2011). The Bank thus introduced the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) to map the education systems and identify the implementation challenges (World Bank, 2011). Since then, it has been striving to implement the transition of education sectors to lifelong learning systems in all countries (Singh, 2022). It uses diverse policy tools such as information, research, evaluation, monitoring, ranking, conditionalities, and even stopping assistance (World Bank, 2011; 2019a; 2021a; 2021c).

In 2015, the Bank endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals and in 2016, it established a joint policy paper with the OECD, UNESCO, and the ILO, showing how its educational approach reflected sustainable education (Singh, 2020; Singh & Ehlers, 20202). Since 2017, the Bank has launched the Human Capital Project to further promote *investment in human capital* and informs countries about the benefits of investment as well as the consequences of not doing so (World Bank, 2018a). The World Development Report 2018 and several Bank publications highlighted that approximately 53 % of 10-year-olds suffered from *learning poverty* (i. e. they could not read or comprehend with or without school access) (World Bank, 2018b; 2019a). In 2021, the Bank launched the *Education Finance Watch* to map policy implementation, implementation fidelity, and control on the use of resources for education (World Bank, 2021a).

How closely does the Bank's policy reflect India's policy? The next section presents an overview of Indian *policy choices*.

5 India

India is a low- to middle-income country with a vast population (roughly 1.38 billion people) that has limited resources for education (Motkuri & Revathi, 2020). Its policies have been characterised by prioritising what is necessary for its overall economic growth and development. Despite introducing the Right to Education in 2002 and implementing it since 2010, India struggles to provide access to basic education for all its citizens (Press Information Bureau, 2022). The quality of basic education suffers, with approximately 55 % of children being learning-poor (Press Information Bureau, 2022). More than 181 million adults remain non-literate (Press Information Bureau, 2022). Moreover, the skill level is low (approximately 21.2 % of adults have formally/non-formally recognised skills), and about 33.5%–34.2 % of youth fall into the neither education, employment, nor training (NEET) category (UNDP, 2020; ILO, 2021).

The Indian education system includes public, semi-public, and non-public providers at all levels. In most cases (except higher education), public offers are predominantly poor in quality. Most private institutions provide better facilities but are unaffordable for the poor. Given that India has a high level of *graded inequality* and various

forms of *discrimination* based on *caste*, class, gender, and race, amongst other things (Chancel, 2022), knowledge gaps are obvious, which lead to further inequality and exploitation. India's situation, especially after COVID-19, when public institutions and the poor suffered the most, has stirred up the debate about an upcoming demographic disaster in the country. Adult education (official policy) implies basic non-formal, second-chance education for those above 15 years old; includes reading, writing, and arithmetic; and suffers severely from a lack of resources (Schiller et al., 2023/in this volume).

India has been availing itself of foreign assistance in various forms since independence, but its policy choices remained predominantly anchored in *five-year plans* (see Table 1) until 2017, when these plans were finally abolished.

Table 1: Five Year Plans in India (1951–2017) (Source: Created by authors based on Planning Commission of India (n. d.).)

Plan	Overall Focus	Educational Focus
1951–56	Post-partition rehabilitation, food self-sufficiency, and inflation control	Marginalised population, women, and remodelling of education system
1956–61	Focus on basic and heavy industrialisation with capital goods production	Focus on providing access to education along with best-in class institutions to support industrialisation and capital goods production
1961–66	Economic self-reliance	School education (up to secondary) with focus on gender
1966–69 (No Plan)	Modernisation of agriculture following food crisis	Agricultural education
1969–74	Economic growth and poverty eradication	Pre-school and school education, gender parity, and agricultural education
1974–79	Poverty eradication and economic self-reliance	Science & Technology
1980–85	Poverty eradication	Technical and higher education
1985–90	Agricultural productivity, food production, and employment	Building up institutional linkages between technical education and development, especially rural.
1989–91 (No Plan)	Liberalisation of the Indian economy facilitated by the Bank and the International Monetary Fund, opening it up for private and foreign investment due to financial crisis	Not Applicable
1992–97	Economic growth in all sectors of the economy for economic recovery	Universal basic education, vocational education, and gender parity

(Continuing table 1)

Plan	Overall Focus	Educational Focus
2002–07	Economic growth, poverty reduction, and increasing literacy rate	Universal primary education, skill education
2007–12	Alignment with Millennium Development Goals	Infrastructure for vocational training, skills education and inclusion.
2012–17	Alignment with Millennium Development Goals.	Skill education, *Education For All*, gender parity.

The planning period between 1947 and 1985 was characterised by a reliance on a vast rural, agricultural economy, where the largest part of the population was employed (Ahluwalia, 2020). The public sector primarily produced capital goods (Ahluwalia, 2020). In the late 1960s, India decided to modernise agriculture (*Green Revolution*) after droughts, food shortages, and an agricultural crisis (Ministry of Education, 1971). The Bank's engagement in education began in 1972 with the Development Credit Agreement for agricultural education (a low-interest loan) (World Bank, 1972). The Bank's intervention aimed at establishing links between knowledge institutions and the agricultural sector to orient the sector towards the use of modern technology (Ministry of Education, 1971). Prior education programmes did not achieve much, due to the lack of finance, infrastructure, and expertise, amongst other things (UNDP, 1976). Therefore, the Bank's support seemed crucial.

In 1996, India launched a primary education programme which attracted the Bank's investment (World Bank, 1996). The collaboration (under the *District Primary Education Project*) aimed at improving the country's infrastructure, enhancing the quality of education, and most important of all, increasing access to education (World Bank, 1996). The project was executed in 11 of the 28 federal states (World Bank, 1996).

In 2001, the Indian government decided to expand this programme to include all citizens in its plan for universal basic education (*Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*) and provide secondary education to those who had already received primary education (The World Bank Group, 2001). The idea was to provide better infrastructure, teaching, learning, and nutrition (*free mid-day meals in schools*). The Bank announced support for the programme in its Country Assistance Strategy, highlighting the programme's relevance for poverty eradication (The World Bank Group, 2001). It invested in the programme in 2003, 2007, and 2014 (World Bank, 2003; 2007a; 2014). The programme aligned with the Bank's international development agenda, which included universal elementary education for everyone, gender parity, the addressing of social disparities in the society, and the adoption of an approach based on *learning outcomes* (World Bank, 2003; 2007a; 2014).

The Bank noted that even though agriculture was a major contributor to India's GDP and crucial for eradicating rural poverty, it was not sustainable (environmentally, socially, and economically) (The World Bank Group, 2001). Furthermore, it did not align with international trade regulations (for agricultural liberalisation) negotiated at the World Trade Organisation and hence needed reforms (The World Bank Group,

2001). Reforms in turn required skilled professionals such as agricultural scientists, social scientists, managers, and economists to manage technologically advanced equipment and international competition (The World Bank Group, 2001). Thus, the *Agriculture Higher Education Reforms Project* commenced in 2003, aimed at the betterment of infrastructure, services, and credit systems (World Bank, 2003). It intended to promote knowledge-based agricultural practices for making the existing practices sustainable (World Bank, 2003). While the earlier initiative for agriculture was largely a public venture, the 2003 project depended on the public–private partnership model (World Bank, 2003). Deregulation, private competition, and preparation of human resources for research and innovation to promote these reforms were the highlights (World Bank, 2003). The project led to an improvement in the quality of agricultural higher education, closer links between education and industry, empowerment of the marginalised sections of society to some extent, and better productivity (World Bank, 2003).

India's industrial growth and hence private investment boomed after liberalisation in the 1990s. IT and other sectors experienced technological and economic growth, but India's education system was unprepared to meet the changing demands of the economy (Singh, 2016). The Indian labour market was marred by a skills gap and indicated that India needed vocational education to compete globally (Singh, 2016). In 2005, the government highlighted this issue and appointed the *National Knowledge Commission* to transform India into a *knowledge economy* (National Knowledge Commission, 2006). It availed itself of the Bank's support, including financial and technical assistance, under the Vocational Training Improvement Project (World Bank, 2007b). The Bank identified areas for short-, medium-, and long-term reforms in skills training and development and provided policy advice along with other assistance (World Bank, 2007b). The Bank also insisted that the Indian state should restrict itself to regulation and allow the private sector to provide offers relevant for the labour market (World Bank, 2007b). The Bank chose several knowledge institutions to implement its recommendations and promote competitiveness in skills and technical education through demand-driven systems (World Bank, 2007b). The Indian *National Qualifications Framework* was developed with the Bank's support to ensure quality, particularly in relation to vocational education and skills development, as many offers were non-formal and non-standardised and lacked quality parameters (Allais & Young 2011; Singh 2022). The Bank's involvement favoured labour market-oriented programmes, a focus on learning outcomes, and regulatory frameworks for private providers (World Bank, 2007b). The ILO and some other international entities were a part of the project, considering India's potential as a large market and a manufacturing hub (World Bank, 2007b).

Thus, by the late 2000s, the Bank invested in diverse programmes in India. Under the *Country Strategy 2009–12*, it extended support for school education from primary to secondary and tertiary (engineering and technical education) levels (IBRD, IDA & IFC, 2008). This was a step forward to ensure that those who benefitted from primary education could pursue further education (IBRD, IDA & IFC, 2008).

India received support for engineering and technical education under the *Technical Engineering Education Quality Improvement Program* as part of assistance with higher

education in 2009 (World Bank, 2009). The Bank provided technical expertise based on international evidence (World Bank, 2009). Most reforms included the upgrading of teaching and learning facilities, faculty development, management, constructive competition, quality standards, and labour market-responsive curricula (World Bank, 2009). Monitoring and evaluation of public-sector funding therefore constituted a significant component of the Bank's conditionalities (World Bank, 2009).

In 2016, India received the Bank's investment for providing non-formal vocational education and training to young women, aimed at increasing their participation in the labour market (*Tejasvini Scheme*) (World Bank, 2016). The project was executed primarily in the federal state of Jharkhand after the Bank identified serious issues of non-participation in the labour market (62 % of females as compared to 14 % of males from the same households did not participate) (World Bank, 2016).

Under the *Country Partnership Framework 2018–22*, India has been receiving support in carrying out reforms in favour of the *school-to-work transition* and skills development (World Bank, 2021b). In 2017–18, the Bank decided to support India's skills development programme (*Skill India Mission*) (World Bank, 2021b). The Bank's engagement during 2017–18 induced profound policy changes, as it insisted on *independent evaluation* and withheld its assistance due to unsatisfactory results according to the Bank's criteria (World Bank, 2018c). Apart from several other changes, India was compelled to merge the regulatory functions of skills and vocational education agencies and integrate them into the labour market policies (World Bank, 2018c). The Bank managed to induce more autonomy for federal initiatives, the decentralisation of skills programmes, and affirmative policies for the marginalised (World Bank, 2018c).

The Bank's insistence on strengthening federalism and decentralisation reflected in the *Higher Education Program for Excellence and Equity* in the federal state of Odisha (World Bank, 2017). The objective was to promote higher education in one of the poorest states, along with federalism and sustainability (World Bank, 2017). In 2019, the World Bank supported the Indian government's scheme for integration of school education from early childhood to the senior school level (*Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*) under its *Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States Program (STARS)* (World Bank, 2019). Current projects involve the merging of different sectors, and they are carried out with more autonomous involvement of the federal States (instead of the Union Government's engagement) *directly with the Bank*. Two such projects were operational in the States of Gujarat and Nagaland in 2020, while another project commenced in the State of Andhra Pradesh in 2022 (World Bank, 2020a; 2020b; 2021c).

India's recent education policy, introduced in 2020, focuses on the centralisation of education (instead of federal autonomy), standardised learning outcomes-based curricula, integrated education systems across disciplines and sectors, the pooling of educational resources, employability, privatisation, and nationalism, reflecting the agenda of the current regime (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Even though India has been investing much in vocational and higher education, contrary to what the Bank has suggested, the new policy appears to be moving closer to (but not completely aligning with) the Bank's suggestions, arguing in favour of efficiency and effective learning outcomes.

6 Discussion

It is evident that on several junctures, India aligned its policies with international policies, led and evaluated by the Bank. The channelling of resources towards access to basic education for fulfilling the criteria to get international assistance streamlined by the Bank has been a necessity, an excuse, or both. Consequently, India has an underfunded non-formal adult education sector, with public provisions limited to basic education where necessary and not provided by other actors. The Bank's role in shaping the same in the short-term appears to have both negative and positive consequences. On the one hand, it creates barriers to the upward mobility of those who are unable to avail or afford non-public offers, thereby creating further knowledge gaps and resultant socio-economic disparities and making the poor more vulnerable. On the other hand, it provides quality learning opportunities for those who are able to take advantage of and afford non-public offers. Despite inequality, this fuels the economic growth and overall development.

The dilemma is that without prosperity and abundance, there is nothing to divide equally but at the same time, the fact that unequal development leads to disparities which could not be addressed without strong political commitment, cannot be ignored. Due to its limited power to intervene (based on sovereignty considerations), the Bank is not expected to play a role in the distribution process unless specified otherwise through some agreement. The onus of distributing the benefits of development, thus rest with national policy choices.

In the long-term, the Bank's approach provides a sustainable and, in fact, the only *realistic* alternative. Providing quality basic education to all citizens is necessary to build up a base for lifelong learning *for all*. The basic education in childhood has a cumulative impact on the individual's learning throughout life. Those lacking quality basic education (i. e. those who are *learning-poor*) lack the capabilities to navigate learning environments and to participate actively in lifelong learning. Figure 1 illustrates the vicious cycle of learning poverty due to a lack of basic quality education, its linkage with lifelong learning, and its impact on the overall development of society.

The Indian approach is similar to the Bank's in terms of its *human capital orientation* and *functionalist* view. On several occasions, India has aligned its policy choices with international policies proposed by the Bank, but the content of its five-year plans suggests that the policies the country has adopted have suited the needs of the Bank. Apart from a few instances, the Bank has been supporting Indian initiatives rather than the other way around. Limited access to education in India despite the enforcement of the Right to Education since 2010 and learning poverty in high numbers despite school access show that the rights-based and capabilities approaches can be inspiring but often unrealistic in contexts such as India, which is marred by resource scarcity and implementation fidelity.

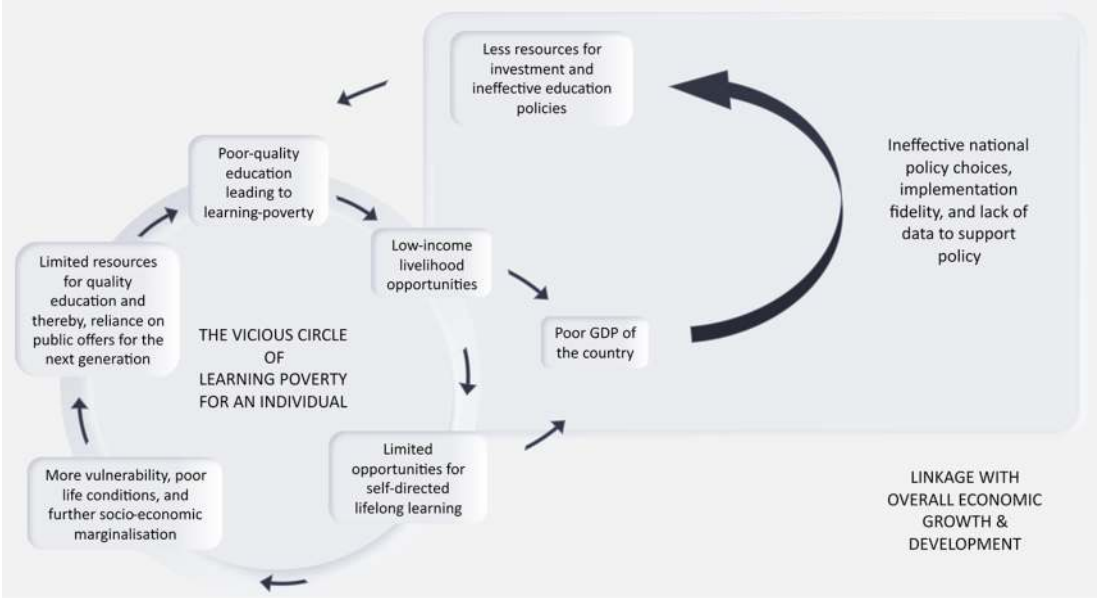

Figure 1: The vicious cycle of learning poverty and its consequences for lifelong learning and development. (Source: Created by authors.)

The Bank's authority is based on its *management* of international aid (from other sources such as the OECD countries), monitoring and evaluation, data, expertise, and vast resources, which may create barriers to foreign assistance for low- and middle-income countries. Its country-specific programmes and initiatives such as SABER make it authoritative by mapping the implementation fidelity and highlighting the problems in national policy choices. Once the countries accept the Bank's assistance, they must adhere to the conditionalities they have agreed to. The Bank may be unable to impose anything unless the countries themselves have not committed to do so.

Inspiration from the Bank's approach is evident in Indian policies, for instance in the development of the non-formal adult education sector in India or the channelling of funds to meet the Bank's evaluation criteria in primary education, but the same cannot be established too, at least with the publicly available data. In fact, the Indian approach is rather *selective* (e. g. in the case of equal distribution of development benefits in favour of affirmative action) and has favoured India by mobilising resources for achieving shared objectives. For example, the Bank's channelling of resources towards access to basic education for everyone has managed to break the barriers of several types of discrimination (e. g. *caste* and gender), which have marred the Indian society for centuries.

It might be argued that the privatisation of education leads to other types of inequalities and that channelling resources away from all other aspects of education may lead to barriers to upward social mobility and knowledge gaps; however, the Bank offers policy solutions to address these challenges. The resources move away from other provisions in the short run, but address the challenges systematically in the long run. The onus of the implementation largely lies on the countries themselves which is also in alignment with the idea of their *sovereignty*. The privatisation of education has of-

fered quality opportunities for those who can afford it. However, the state in India has repeatedly failed to provide quality offers and regulate effectively, leading to severe long-term consequences for the whole population. Furthermore, India has not followed the Bank's advice completely and has continued to support sectors of education other than primary education (e. g. higher education). It has chosen its own course and has used the Bank's assistance wherever its policies conform to the Bank's advice. Once the aid has been received, India has been bound to fulfil the conditionalities it has agreed to, which seems logical and justified.

The Bank is a major source of data, since many countries, including India, provide negligible data on education (World Bank, 2021d; Singh, 2022). A weak civil society and the absence of strong social partners further limit the possibility for voicing the concerns of the non-privileged. Thus, close mapping of policies, their implementation, and their impact assessment often highlights the weaknesses, areas of concern in Indian policies, and their *implementation fidelity* while promoting evidence-informed policies and transparency of public initiatives. On several occasions, the Bank's data has stirred up the political debate and public opinion. When policy packages are implemented selectively, as in India and other low- and middle-income countries (e. g. in the case of learning poverty despite access to education), the criticisms against the Bank in the scholarly debates could be partially invalid or misleading.

Methodologically, the paper shows that policy documents can serve as authentic sources to map policy changes irrespective of the availability of statistical evidence. However, in several research publications used in the paper, references indicate that arguments have been built upon the *opinions* of other researchers without referring to relevant policy documents. This highlights the relevance of policy analysis as an important method of research. It emphasises that while studying policies, the rationalities of stakeholders must also be considered to understand the underlying reasons.

7 Conclusion

Lifelong learning for all is not sustainable without quality basic education, which develops individuals' self-directed learning abilities. The Bank's approach adheres to this notion and is therefore relevant, sustainable, and realistic for resource-scarce countries such as India. The alignment of the Bank's approach with the OECD, UNESCO, and the ILO in terms of Sustainable Goal 4: *Lifelong Learning for All* since 2016 further strengthens this claim. Despite unintended consequences in the short-term, the long-term results of the Bank's approach appear to be promising for countries, such as India, which lack resources and are struggling with poor education systems. The Bank also provides solutions to curb the negative consequences of its policies, but the responsibility for implementation depends upon national policy choices. Contrary to the many results of existing research for other contexts, the Bank's engagement with India has remained largely constructive to date, and its intervention has managed to break social barriers of *caste* and gender that have existed for centuries. The findings of this

paper are relevant not only for other socio-economic contexts similar to that of India, (and thus for many low- and middle-income countries where the role of key international organisations is prominent; see Singh, 2020), but also for observing how the use of different research methods alters the findings in research. Methodologically, the paper demonstrates the relevance of policy analysis as a method of research and highlights the difference in research outcomes due to the use of original sources in research (policy documents in this case)

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Resource Mobilisation for Lifelong Learning and the Sustainability Framework: Strategies and Stakeholders Under International Influence in India and Nigeria

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Abstract

Several stakeholders complain about limited, insufficient and decreasing resources for the education of adults in general and during crisis situations (e. g. COVID-19) in particular. In contexts where such initiatives have a low priority and meagre resources, their continuity becomes a challenge, let alone the expansion of their scope and enhancement of their quality. The sustainability framework for policies and further recommendations by key international organizations have established sustainability standards for resource mobilisation, especially since 2015. However, the question remains as to how relevant and sustainable such recommendations are in national contexts for the existence, expansion, and scope of the education for adults in various contexts. This paper intends to employ comparative research on resource mobilisation for the education of adults in two contexts, namely India and Nigeria, using the conceptual framework by Schuetze (2009).

Keywords: Resource mobilisation, lifelong learning, sustainability goals, comparative research

1 Introduction

Stakeholders around the globe complain about limited, insufficient, and decreasing resources for the education of adults[1] in general, and during crisis situations in particular. In contexts where initiatives have a low priority and particularly the financial resources allocated to them are meagre, their very continuity becomes a challenge, let alone the expansion of their scope and enhancement of their quality. As countries around the world strive to adopt policies in favour of lifelong learning, the problem of mobilising resources to achieve this goal arises. The sustainability framework for policies and further recommendations by key international organisations established sus-

1 Although concepts of adult education, adult learning and lifelong learning exist in the country cases examined in this paper, the terms lack the common understanding they have in European or Western research in these contexts. Thus, we speak generally of the education of adults as a basic, common-ground term.

tainability standards for resource mobilisation partly with CONFINTEA VI in the 2009 Belém Framework for Action (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010) and with more conviction the UN's 2015 Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015) and the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO et al., 2016). However, the question arises as to how relevant and sustainable such recommendations are in national contexts, especially in low- and lower-middle-income countries[2] with poor literacy levels. With the shift in the global policy framework from the north–south divide to sustainability (Singh, 2020, p. 93), sustainability has become a relevant criterion for the mobilisation of various resources, including financial and non-financial resources in these countries. Many hopes were pinned on UNESCO's CONFINTEA VII conference in Morocco in June 2022 (Archer, 2022), and the resulting *Marrakech Framework for Action* accordingly underlines the importance of the increase of funding for adult learning and education (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022b, p. 7). The irony of proclaiming education as a human right and yet underfunding the education of adults is evident in the research literature (see Biao, 2022). The World Bank has been further facilitating this underfunding by pushing countries to channel various resources for primary education and gender parity, and away from the education of adults (Singh, 2022). In the current paper, the authors investigate this using empirical data from two low- and lower-middle-income countries: Nigeria and India.

The paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- What types of strategies are in place for the mobilisation of resources for the education of adults in Nigeria and India?
- Are these strategies sustainable in terms of mobilising resources?

The paper is divided into seven sections. Section 2 covers the methods used in and the selection of cases for the comparative analysis undertaken. The third section comprises an explanation of the conceptual framework, followed by empirical data from country cases in the fourth and fifth sections; the comparison of data as well as an interpretation and a discussion of the findings in the sixth section; and finally, the conclusion in the seventh section.

2 Methodology/Case Selection

2.1 Methodology

The paper uses policy documents and statistical data from policy sources (e. g. budget reports) for analysis, followed by a horizontal comparison between Indian and Nigerian policies based on descriptive and analytical juxtaposition proposed by Egetenmeyer (cf. Egetenmeyer, 2014, p. 17). Picking up the multidimensional concept of Bray and Thomas, Egetenmeyer elaborates it further into a relationship model for comparative re-

2 Systematisation of income levels as used in the Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022a).

search in adult education, stressing the importance of precise research questions and the individuals in relation to the spatial dimension of transnational contexts (Egetenmeyer, 2017, p. 83 f). Acknowledging this importance, the categories for comparison have to be inductively identified in a way to enable rich comparisons (Egetenmeyer, 2020, p. 23).

The point of departure for this paper is the selection of the research object *resource mobilisation in adult education*. The two country cases of Nigeria and India as fields of research have been selected along several methodological considerations (see 2.2). To analyse the types of strategies in place according to the first research question, the conceptual framework for resource mobilisation developed by Schuetze (2009) is applied. The answer to the second question is built upon the analysis of the sustainability framework by Singh (Singh, 2020). Both are described thoroughly in section 3. To avoid the pitfall of "descriptiveness" (Bron Jr., 2021, p. 257), to precisely look for similarities and differences and to reflect on possible explanations, the authors choose to follow the three-step-model described by Egetenmeyer starting from data gathering and descriptive juxtaposition (step 1), followed by an analytical juxtaposition (step 2), and finally an analytical interpretation (step 3) (Egetenmeyer, 2020, pp. 26–27). The data gathering for the two country cases is done while giving thorough attention to the local contexts as "country perspectives" (Egetenmeyer, 2020, pp. 21–22) in sections 4 and 5. The descriptive and the analytical juxtapositions are included in section 6.

2.2 Case selection

Nigeria and India are selected as comparative cases for several reasons. Both countries are located in the former global south, and their policies have been significantly influenced by their location.[3] They have received, and continue to receive, foreign financial assistance through key international intergovernmental organisations (IIOs). Both countries lack strong *social partners*, and the *civil society* plays a major role in providing education for adults. It is the third angle in the policy triangle, with the *state* and the *market* being the other two.[4] Both Nigeria and India are still striving to ensure access to basic adult education (literacy), and their policies focus on adult (basic) education (in a European understanding) rather than adult learning or lifelong learning. Comparative research on both countries' adult education systems is lacking. Most comparative studies include comparisons with European high-income countries and thus with different contexts (see Chauhan, Bak, Subbaswamy & Dixit, 2017; Simeon-Fayomi, Ajayi, Koruga, & Baswani, 2017; Cieslak, Ricardo, Fehrenbacher, Praveen, & Nierobisch, 2017; Ricardo et al., 2016; Singh, Silveira, & da Silva Castro, 2017). Furthermore, they are underrepresented in comparative research by international organisations such as DVV international (Duke, Hinzen, & Sarrazin, 2021) and the OECD (OECD, 2019) regarding

3 International Intergovernmental Organizations (IIOs) have shifted away from a global north–south divide towards an income-based distinction of countries in terms of their policies, abolishing the term "global south" in the process (Singh, 2020).

4 In contrast to Western, individualistic societies, the individual in collectivist societies of India and Nigeria is not understood as an independent entity (Hofstede, 2013). It is an implicit element of the state (subject), market (buyer) and civil society (beneficiary).

(public) financing of education for adults. Although both countries are examined in most GRALE reports by UNESCO, the coverage in the reports is not country-specific and is thus insufficient for a direct comparison (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022a). The period of analysis covers all education policies in the two countries from their gaining of independence (post-colonial period) until today (2022) to provide a clear overview of how their policies have developed and changed over time.

3 Conceptual framework: financing what and financing how

Schuetze proposes three principal models of lifelong learning, connecting them to four different financing schemes and thereby illustrating their impact in practice (Schuetze, 2009). The comparative categories to answer the first research question are built upon these models. Comparable to other ideal-type models of education systems, such as adaptations of Esping-Andersen's three worlds of welfare capitalism (Esping-Andersen, 1998; Graßl, 2008) or Lima and Guimaraes' policy analysis model (Lima & Guimarães, 2011), Schuetze's three models represent diverging political agendas. The three models are (a) an *emancipatory or social justice model*, emphasising equality of opportunities for egalitarian societies (as in the OECD's 1996 "lifelong learning for all"); (b) a *mixed state-market model* intended to support a knowledge economy and society; and (c) a *human capital model* that favours work-related training and skill development to meet the supposed economic needs for a flexible and adaptable workforce in expected volatile work environments (Schuetze, 2009, p. 377). The models differ in scope. While the emancipatory or social justice model focuses on a normative concept of lifelong learning for all, the mixed state-market model promotes learning for a variety of purposes and aims to lower institutional barriers to participation (ibid.). Moreover, the emancipatory or social justice model assigns the state the responsibility for resource provision, whereas the mixed state-market model shifts the responsibility for participation from the state to the individual (ibid.). Meanwhile, the human capital model is most specific about the learning activities (ibid.). In this model, individuals are responsible for participating in learning to foster and update their work-related skills (Schuetze, 2009, p. 378). Connected to the different scopes are specific ideas about who should cover the costs of education in lifelong systems. Schuetze observes a general policy shift from welfare state systems of "who can pay should pay" towards more benefit-oriented "who benefits should pay" systems, especially for adult and continuing education and aside from the exception of initial (school) education and special programmes for disadvantaged groups (Schuetze, 2009, p. 379). He differentiates this general observation into four financing schemes: learner financing/self-funded by learner, (single) employer funding, collective or parafiscal funding and state funding (Schuetze, 2009, p. 381). To align the country cases with the three models, empirical data from both Nigeria and India regarding the funding of education for adults is examined.

The categories of the second research question for this paper are derived from the OECD-led sustainability standards promoted by the UN and its agencies, such as UNESCO, through the sustainable development goals (Singh, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2016), and SDG4 in particular. While a continuing convergence among policies concerning the education of adults can be observed between international intergovernmental associations (Mikulec, Singh, & Schiller, 2022), and especially regarding sustainability as a leading concept, sustainability as a term within adult education/lifelong learning contexts remains a "floating signifier" (Singh, 2020, p. 92 f). This implies that its meaning changes according to the context in which it is used, just like many other policy terms which have no fixed meanings (Ehlers, 2019). Not only are the goal descriptors and indicators mainly aimed at primary, formal and compulsory education (systems) (UNESCO et al., 2016, pp. 24, 72 f), but the contextual needs of states are also highly diverse and generally exceed the narrow focus on employability embraced by IIOs in their policy documents (Singh, 2022). To compare the different, yet highly influential societal and political factors that influence resource mobilisation in both countries, an operational criterion for what a sustainable education system implies is therefore required. For this paper, the criterion for sustainable education systems is *whether the education systems are able to meet the socio-economic needs in their own context*. If so, they are sustainable, otherwise not.

4 Case 1: India

India's concept of the education of adults can best be described as a mélange of different international influences, catered to the specific context of India's highly diverse society in terms of education (Aggarwal, 2012, p. 2), with adult education as one central term and lifelong learning as an emerging one. As Mandal states, the idea of lifelong learning seems to be a viable step, considering India's aspirations to become a global superpower and a knowledge-based society in the near future (Mandal, 2015, p. 148). The UN's Hyderabad Declaration is a key document for the adoption of lifelong learning concepts in India. It was the result of a three-day policy dialogue on adult and lifelong learning held in 2002, aimed at bringing together the CONFINTEA V agenda, UNESCO's Education For All (EFA) goals and the lifelong learning perspective (UNESCO Institute for Education, 2002, p. 10). Originating in UNESCO's Delors era, the statement envisages the development of a multi sectoral policy framework specifying priorities, strategies, and institutional support similar to policy approaches by the OECD and the European Union (Aggarwal, 2012, p. 2). It is worth noting that "equity" is one of the country's primary concerns and is regarded as one of the most significant characteristics of progress, with "equality of opportunity" as a basic goal in the Constitution of India from 1950 (Aggarwal, 2012, p. 3). Hence, it is only natural that the themes of "equity" and "equality" are emphasised in the Hyderabad statement (also present in the Belém and Marrakech frameworks; see UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010, 2022b). India's concern with equity originates from the fact that it has traditionally been a "command and con-

trol" society, while at the same time still showing high rates of inequality, for example in the Power Distance Index (Aggarwal, 2012, p. 3), and vast economic inequalities (Chancel et al., 2022, pp. 11, 31 f). Out of approximately 1.34 billion people in the country, only 21.2 % of the total working population is skilled (UNDP, 2020). The inequality index of 38.7 in education is quite high compared to the world average of 22.1 (UNDP, 2020, p. 354). In 2017, 1 % of the population received 73 % of the total wealth generated that year (Oxfam International, 2017). In 2022, the World Inequality Report ranked India among the most unequal countries of the world with little transparency in terms of data and information (Chancel et al., 2022, pp. 197–198). The Indian economy is characterised by low-skilled, low-paid individuals working in the labour-intensive, unorganised sector, amounting to about 86–92 % of the whole economy (Murthy, 2019, pp. 2–3). Approximately 80 % of India's workforce is employed in the unorganised sector, and around 80 % of these workers belong to marginalised sections (DEFT Advisory and Research Private Limited, 2014). Most policies and programmes related to the education of adults in India aim to address these issues, especially mass literacy initiatives (e. g. in the National Education Policy from 2020). Nevertheless, resource mobilisation is limited.

In the case of India, even though the rise in total expenditure for education seems vast, the population has roughly tripled since 1960 (World Bank, 2022). The persisting illiteracy and low skill among the working population shown above illustrate the significant resource gaps for education in general and the education of adults in particular. Low investment (in different forms) in the education of adults leads to low productivity, low income and poverty in the long run, which traps the society in a vicious circle of learning poverty and hence disastrous socio-economic consequences (Singh, 2022). It is thus no wonder that the request for foreign assistance remains high to support sustainable development goals set out in the country (Mohanty, 2021, p. 369). Inequality persists as a major barrier to the education of adults in India. In the case of technical vocational education and training, age, gender and, to some degree, place of living are strong factors of disadvantage. Of the total 28.2 million unemployed people aged 15–59 years, 87 % are youth aged 15–30 years (Wadia & Dabir, 2020, p. 75). Furthermore, 90 % of these unemployed youth have no vocational training, while 2.74 % have been informally trained, and only 7.23 % have received formal training (ibid.). For over 2 million youth, vocational training has not resulted in employment (ibid.). Youth in the 15–30 age group also comprise over 42 % of the 257 million strong segment comprised of those neither in education, employment nor training (NEET). Women make up 96.2 % of the NEET segment, and only 1.14 % and 2.21 % of this segment have had formal and informal training, respectively (Wadia & Dabir, 2020, p. 88). In rural areas, 97.9 % of women have received no training at all (ibid.). In urban areas, this number decreases slightly to 96.3 % (ibid.). Because of a severe digital divide, with only 24 % of households having internet access and 11 % owning a computer, online education faces strong barriers as well (Wadia & Dabir, 2020, p. 84). Even though recent policy developments mention a learner-centred system for the education of adults by introducing a skills record system for non-formal and formal learning (Academic Bank of Credits), no visible substantial impact has yet been observed.

To analyse the alignment of India's financing system for the education of adults with the models by Schuetze, we investigate the specific funding schemes in existence by examining data from two main sources: (1) the Ministry of Education, Government of India, for public spending and (2) the Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) of the National Assembly for private spending. Concerning public funding for the education of adults, we first investigate all education funds. Various sub-sectors of education are funded by the education departments of the (federal) States and Union Territories (UTs), and the Centre (nation state). Next to these, other departments' spending includes training as well as research and development initiatives. The sheer vastness of India is illustrated in over 40 ministries contributing to education and training (Government of India, 2022, p. 25). According to official data, the States/UTs provide 77.03 % of the total revenue spending on education in the country, while the Centre contributes 22.97 % to the education sector. The overall revenue of Rs. 845,926.21 crore (USD 10.7 billion) accounted for 15.22 % of the Centre's and States'/UTs' total budget for 2019–20 (Government of India, 2022, p. 2). Elementary education accounted for 49.97 % of the total expenditure on education in 2019–20, followed by secondary education at 31.86 %. The share of university and higher education on the one hand and technical education on the other was 11.68 % and 4.92 %, respectively. Only 0.13 % of the budget was allocated to adult education, with another 0.43 % to language development and 1.02 % to general education, adding up to 1.58 % of the total percentage share of funds spent on education. The dedicated funding for the education of adults shows significant resource gaps in fulfilling the described needs. These gaps are filled by others: partly by resources from the private sector and partly by the individual learners themselves. It is important to note that India has no specific policy to regulate and monitor private provisions for the education of adults, as its policy only mentions regulations for publicly financed or publicly engaged (due to other obligations) entities. While all private providers require registration and must follow the necessary regulations (e. g. taxation), the regulations do not relate to specific quality standards on the education of adults. The social partners are neither organised nor strong enough to represent and negotiate, unlike in many OECD countries. Instead, civil society actors play a significant role, and most initiatives are voluntary (not necessarily publicly funded). This leaves the private sector to address the vast needs for education within the vocational system. The private sector includes two types of initiatives: first, profit-based initiatives taken up by the market and, second, non-profit initiatives taken up by the market under corporate social responsibility and initiatives of the civil society. The market offers corporate social responsibilities for tax waivers, local security for businesses, and brand-building (Bala, 2018).

The official government bodies unfortunately provide for few data sources to further inquire about resources. Historically, the system of public and private funding related to education has exceeded the general rise in GDP by far. Table 1 indicates a rise in public funds for education by a factor of ~13,065, while the rise in private funding is less than half as high, with a factor of ~5,985 (~2.18:1). In contrast to the general rise in GDP by a factor of 1,840, the total budget expenditure by all public institutions by a

factor of ~6,227 and private final consumption expenditure (PFCE) by a factor of ~1,189, one can observe a much larger increase in educational funding in relation to the total public budget, GDP development, and private spending in general.[5]

Table 1: Total private and public expenditure on education in India (Source: Motkuri & Revathi, 2020, p. 4)

Year	GDP	PFCE	TBE	*Expenditure on Education*	
				Public	Private
1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*
1951–52	11,054.0	10,397.0	814.1	64.5	86.3
1961–62	19,010.0	16,617.0	2,225.4	260.3	213.2
1971–72	50,999.0	41,496.0	10,610.9	1,011.1	619.3
1981–82	175,805.0	135,676.0	41,715.7	4,298.3	2,334.1
1991–92	673,875.0	457,735.0	170,370.4	22,393.7	9,667.1
2001–02	2,355,845.0	1,531,672.0	619,713.1	79,865.7	40,777.4
2011–12	8,736,239.0	4,910,447.0	2,249,526.5	333,930.4	182,378.0
2019–20	20,339,849.0	12,262,064.0	5,069,453.7	849,279.7	514,763.6

Notes: 1. Values are in Rs. In Crores and in Current Prices; 2. **GDP** – Gross Domestic Product of India; **PFCE** – Private Final Consumption Expenditure – Total; **TBE** – Total Budget Expenditure of all sectors and combined of all State Governments and Centre; 3. **Public** – Budget Expenditure on Education by both the Centre and State Governments, as is compiled by Min. of Education, GoI; 4. **Private** – PFCE on Education (i. e. households excluding the Government expenditure); 5. GDP up to 2001–02 is based on 2004–05 Series (i. e. base year), thereafter it is 2011–12 Series.

Sources: 1. National Accounts Statistics (NAS); 2. Reserve Bank of India (RBI); 3. Ministry of Education (MoE); Government of India (GoI).

The data illustrates that despite the large rise in educational funding, only the smallest fraction is dedicated to the education of adults. Further, during the last three decades, private expenditure on education has increased much faster (by a factor of ~53.24) than public expenditure (by a factor of ~37.29). The proportion of public to private education spending has thus decreased with an increasing relevance of private resource mobilisation. This pattern indicates not only India's growing privatisation of education in general but also that the private providers have great scope for initiatives concerning the education of adults.

5 Own calculations from Table 1.

5 Case 2: Nigeria

In Nigeria, the education of adults constitutes a significant part of educational policies and programmes. It is placed as a separate section in the National Policy on Education, referred to as mass literacy, adult education, and non-formal education, and it is understood as being equivalent to basic education delivered to adults, children, and youth of formal school age, outside the formal school system, defined in the National Policy on Education. In Nigeria, adult education and lifelong learning take place in two broad forms or categories: (a) basic and literacy education and (b) continuing and further education (Hassan, 2009). Continuing education refers to adult education aimed at actively linking individual needs and aspirations to educational activities, as Tahir argued (2000). Continuing education allows for further learning to occur at any stage or age of an adult. Osuji argued that continuing education is the provision of educational opportunities for adults after discontinuation of formal schooling. Furthermore, it comprises education and re-education as well as training and re-training opportunities for school leavers, the employed and the unemployed to cope with new life situations (Osuji, 2001). Continuing education may involve furthering academic education or vocational skill training, aimed at improving productivity and self-reliance. Presently, continuing education in Nigeria has been broadened to meet the needs of illiterates, school dropouts, the disadvantaged and different categories of professionals. Continuing education provides a wide range of training and education to meet the needs of the aforementioned groups (Hussain, Alhassan & Kamba, 2013). The National Policy on Education of 2014 prescribed that mass literacy, adult education, and non-formal education should aim at providing remedial and lifelong education for youth and adults who did not complete secondary education and provide in-service, vocational, and professional training for different categories of workers and professionals to improve their skills.

In Nigeria, the state is the most important stakeholder in resource mobilisation for the education of adults. Formal adult education is organised in universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. These public tertiary institutions are largely government owned and funded, and they are major stakeholders in adult education (NMEC, 2008, p. 17). They play a vital role through community outreach, training-the-trainer programmes, and their adult education departments. Through the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC), the Federal and state governments have implemented several literacy programmes across the states in the last five decades. Adult and non-formal education programmes are generally offered in non-formal education centres in Nigeria, focusing on literacy and numeracy education at the core, with life skills also included (NMEC, 2008, p. 16).

The widely recognised quality decrease in the tertiary education system and a deteriorating state of the infrastructure in learning facilities in tertiary institutions led to the establishment of the Education Tax Fund (ETF) in 1993 (Ugwuanyi, 2014). This Act imposes a 2 % tax on the assessable profits of all companies in Nigeria. In 1998, the ETF was replaced with the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), which imposes, manages, and disburses the tax to public tertiary institutions in Nigeria. TETFUND

provides funding for infrastructure development and renovation, research, and training of tertiary institution workers (Oraka, Ogbodo & Ezejiofor, 2017). Next to tax funds, international aid is a major source of funding for the education of adults. The key international agencies that support the Nigerian government's adult education and literacy programmes include UNESCO, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), ACTION AID, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Bank, the International Council for Adult Education, and DVV international. These international organisations support the Nigerian government by capacity building adult and non-formal education personnel and strengthening institutions, assist with logistics and funds for programmes and provide policy guidelines and benchmarks.

For 2022, the Federal Government of Nigeria had a N17,126,873,917,692 budget, or roughly $41.2 billion in USD. Of this amount, only approximately $2.2 billion, which amounts to roughly 5.39 %, was allocated to education (as shown in Table 2). The major government agencies responsible for administering adult education are the Mass Literacy Council and the Nomadic Education Commission, which had a budgetary allocation of $5.8 million and $4.9 million respectively. Both agencies combined had a budgetary allocation of $10.8 million, which amounts to 0.026 % of the total budget and 0.49 % of the education budget (Table 2).

Table 2: 2022 Adult education budget highlight, Nigeria (Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria (2022, p. 1111).)

SN	Agency/Body	Approved allocation (N)	USD Equivalent	% of total budget
1	Federal Government of Nigeria	17,126,873,917,692	41,2B	100
2	Federal Ministry Of Education	900,483,480,168	2.2B	5.26
3	Mass Literacy Council	2,438,062,250	5.8MM	
4	Nomadic Education Commission	2,293,699,493	5.5MM	
	Adult Education combined	4.731.761.743	11.3MM	0.027 (*0.51)

* *Percent of education budget*

Tertiary institutions (universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education) receive budgetary allocations from the Federal Government of Nigeria, included in the budgetary allocation of the Federal Ministry of Education. The 2022 budgetary allocation education tax for TETFUND is over $722,456 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022).

Significant resource gaps exist in Nigeria despite increases in international aid. The World Bank, through its International Development Association and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, has awarded grants for over 78 educational projects in Nigeria amounting to over $13.5 billion (World Bank, 2022). These foreign aids are for infrastructural development, development of human resources for learning and teacher development, information, and communication technologies

(ICT) in teaching and learning, science and technology, and EFA (Mukaddas, 2019). The Federal Government of Nigeria has also made efforts to create an enabling environment through regulatory incentives (e. g. tax breaks) to encourage private sector investment in education. Still, only small percentages of state funds are mobilised for the education of adults. Private providers (mostly funded by rich individuals) are present in Nigeria to only a small degree, limiting their impact on the education of adults in general.

6 Juxtapositions and Interpretation

6.1 Descriptive Juxtaposition

As observed, both India and Nigeria show highly problematic resource gaps for the education of adults, and their strategies for resource mobilisation differ greatly. State and international aid, followed by individuals, their families, and private actors mobilise most resources in Nigeria, while the market has the lowest share. In India, there is no mapping of who provides what and how, except for the state, which provides resources for the marginalised, although only for basic literacy and some elementary programmes. This implies that individuals/families and private actors (including the market and civil society) mobilise most resources for the education of adults as beneficiaries and pay for their education unless they can prove that they are *marginalised*.

Table 3: Descriptive Juxtaposition of country cases

Category of Comparison	Case 1: Nigeria	Case 2: India
Who pays for the education of adults?	1. State and international aid 2. Individuals/families and private actors (including civil society) 3. Market and public-private partnerships	1. Individuals/families and private actors (including civil society), market and public-private partnerships 2. State (only for the marginalised)
How sustainable are the strategies?	Partial	Partial

6.2 Analytical Juxtaposition

Regarding the framework developed by Schuetze, the Nigerian case reflects a predominantly *social emancipatory model* with education as a basic right, closely connected to the focus on mass literacy and basic education. This predominance is followed by a *mixed state-market model* and then the *human capital model*. The Indian case, by contrast, reflects a combination of the *human capital model* and the *state-market model*, with small aspects of the *social emancipatory model*.

Both countries face challenges regarding *sustainability*. The Nigerian model is highly dependent on international assistance and public financing, but neither form of aid is a sustainable source. While international assistance may gradually stop, the state

in Nigeria has limited resources. The sustainability of resource mobilisation is therefore considerably low in the country. Alternative models of funding are needed, but private market mobilisation has not shown substantial improvements to funding the education of adults until now.

6.3 Interpretation

In India, despite private providers, inequalities lead to problems of exclusion. Participation in learning greatly depends on the buying power of individuals. Without adequate regulation, the market might accentuate these inequalities, exploiting and excluding adults from education. While Nigeria is not becoming more self-dependent and robust in terms of public financing, India lacks regulation and concrete affirmative action in favour of those who may not be marginalised but are still unable to *afford* equal opportunities. The different orientation of the countries regarding Schuetze's models shows how the lack of resource mobilisation threatens educational opportunities regardless of a country's strategic orientation, and highlights the resultant challenges regarding equal opportunities in the cases of India and Nigeria.

7 Conclusion

Despite some shortcomings in the availability of exact data for the private expenditure on adult education in India, the analysis of the two cases shows that when resources are limited, public financing of adult education, as compared to other types of education, becomes highly difficult. This might depend on the presumption that adults (who are assumed to be financially independent) might be able to fund their own education. However, in contexts such as India and Nigeria with widespread inequalities, equal opportunities to access education for adults cannot be ensured, and knowledge gaps might lead to accentuation of the divide between those who can and those who cannot access education. In such situations, on the one hand, countries tend to fill the gap through aid (e. g. in Nigeria), but this makes their programmes vulnerable and unsustainable due to dependency on foreign aid. On the other hand, if the market is allowed to mobilise resources (e. g. in India), it might further accentuate inequalities and prevent (adult) individuals from participating in education altogether. Thus, private market mobilisation does not appear to be a sustainable solution *per se* either.

The question of resource mobilisation for the education of adults is consequently a relevant one, and sustainability concerns have managed to change the perspective from ad-hoc arrangements to what could work in the long run. Despite the ad-hoc provisions through which most low- and middle-income countries are trying to mobilise resources for the education of adults, the challenge of doing so sustainably still remains unaddressed. Methodologically, Schuetze's framework provides a concrete base for understanding the different ways in which the resource mobilisation for the education of adults could be organised.

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Part III: Global Perspectives on Digitalisation

Digital Transformation and Adult Learning and Education Policies: The Cases of Germany and Portugal

Marie Rathmann, Paula Guimarães & Tadej Košmerl

Abstract

Digital education has become an important issue in the European Union's (EU) policy agenda as new demands are made on skills, employability, and citizenship, calling for the urgency of digital transformation and posing new policy challenges for EU member states in adult learning and education (ALE) (Schmidt-Lauff & Dust, 2020). To analyse the political guidelines of such policies and to compare two national contexts (Egetenmeyer, 2016), this study uses Lima and Guimarães' theoretical framework (2011). A qualitative content analysis of relevant official documents is carried out, focusing on the two EU Digital Education Action Plans and official policy documents from Germany and Portugal. The main results of this comparative analysis of ALE policies on digital transformation show the vertical influence of the EU at the mega level and on the national macro level, which follows the perspectives of human resources management and modernisation and state control. Various programmes for the acquisition and implementation of digital competences in ALE have been developed in both countries to engage in digital transformation.

Keywords: digital transformation, adult learning and education, digital competences, policy agenda, qualitative content analysis

1 Digital transformation: needs, opportunities, and challenges in education

As a ubiquitous and global phenomenon, digital education has been a significant research topic in recent decades. Several trends in research can be identified (cf. Dillenbourg, 2016). Some studies have focused on the link between technology development and learners' environments and competences (Breitschwerdt, Thees & Egetenmeyer, 2022; Sung, Leong & Cunningham, 2020). Other research has concentrated on individualisation and the social dynamics of learning based on different functionalities and design (Serpa, Sá & Santos, 2020; Stalder, 2021). A further set of studies have considered the role of learners themselves—as mere users of functionalities and pre-defined options or as creative users and teachers. These latter studies have reviewed the complementary roles developed by teachers in digital education to innovative creators of indi-

vidual and social learning environments (Bayne & Gallagher, 2021; Nicholls, 2019; Tomczyk & Fedeli, 2022). Some research has critically reflected on the digital divide and the processes of social and educational exclusion, for instance, for (older) adult learners and those holding low school education levels (Dijk, 2020; Kaplan, 2022; Schmidt-Hertha & Strobel-Dümer, 2014). The digital divide is more significant if one considers that changes in technological domains are happening with or without policy guidelines. Schmidt and Tang (2020) have clarified the challenges raised for education, stating that "[t]he field of education is mainly reactive, as new disruptive technologies develop in other industries and are then applied and accommodated into existing educational cultures and systems" (p. 287).

To grasp the phenomenon of digitisation, Legner, Eymann & Hess et al. (2017, pp. 301 f.) have distinguished between *digitisation, digitalisation,* and *digital transformation*. In broad terms, *digitisation* refers to the challenges and opportunities in the transition from analogue to digital data. It is considered mainly as a domain of technological transformation influencing education and learning. *Digitalisation* concerns the demands of digital storage, transmission, and processing. It is linked to using technology in teaching and learning. As an ongoing technological process, it requires new knowledge. Digital competences have become a key term. This underlines the necessity of digital education in the digitalised world. It stresses the vocational sphere to make the *digital transformation* and its potential valuable for citizens (cf. Gallardo-Echenique, de Oliveira & Marqueés-Molias et al., 2015, pp. 1 f.). It considers the risks of knowledge and skills reproduction and the lack of critical reflection by those involved in adult learning and education (ALE). Digitalisation offers many opportunities and challenges that link to cross-life educational dynamics, especially in ALE within the digital transformation as it places new demands on the labour market, raising opportunities and chances in employment supported by ALE (Schmidt & Tang, 2020, p. 287) but also in life in general. There are then risks involved in the educational and pedagogical domains that became more visible during the pandemic. Developing digital education only based on knowledge and skills transmission needs to be considered in policies promoting digital transformation (Schmidt-Hertha & Bernhard, 2022, pp. 12 f.; Schmidt-Lauff & Dust, 2020, pp. 4 ff.).

The importance of science and technological development has influenced the innovation of educational practice observed in recent decades. Recent fast technological processes have been introduced into the practice of teaching more quickly than into policy strategies. These influences cannot be separated from the growing relevance of digital education (public) policies, which have come to the fore worldwide. As a result of this global "fundamental upheaval" (Dander, 2020, p. 19), political action to promote digital transformation can be observed on different levels, at the mega level of the European Union (EU), at the macro level in national and regional policies and at the micro level relating to citizens (cf. Egetenmeyer, Kröner, & Thees, 2021). Holding broader goals, digital transformation is aimed at improving processes of teaching and learning, involving the mega, macro, (meso), and micro levels. Along with the process of digital transformation, institutionalised ALE and the lifeworlds of adults are confronted with

new needs to handle technological changes in society (Bernhard-Skala, Bolten-Bühler, Koller, Rohs, Wahl, 2021; von Laar, van Deursen, van Dijk & de Haan, 2020; Schmidt-Lauff & Dust, 2020).

In considering the implications of digital transformation and digital education policies, this study uses the three social policy perspectives of Lima and Guimarães' theoretical model (2011) as an analytical framework to focus on political priorities. This article aims to answer the following research questions: How are the EU's political priorities on digital education reflected in current German and Portuguese ALE policies? How can similarities and differences in political priorities between both countries be understood? To answer these questions, the EU Digital Education Action Plans and the governmental digital education policies of Germany and Portugal are analysed and compared (Egetenmeyer, 2016).

2 Theoretical framework: three policy perspectives on adult learning and education

The first analytical and interpretative framework in ALE policy is the *democratic-emancipatory* (DE) perspective, which perceives ALE as a social right and emphasises its role in social, cultural, political, and economic development and its contribution to equality and civic engagement. The provision of education is mainly public, allowing the promotion of basic education, democratic citizenship education and critical thinking, while the policy development process is decentralised and fosters bottom-up approaches. The main political priority of this perspective is to establish a democratic and participatory society, which contributes to social justice, solidarity, and the common good. The DE perspective is opposed to taking an instrumental approach to education and emphasises the value of an individual's life experience, diverse cultural knowledge, own understanding of the world, economic democratisation, and the transformation of social power structures (Lima and Guimarães, 2011, pp. 42 ff.).

The second perspective is *modernisation and state control* (MSC). It perceives education as a contribution to social and economic modernisation that takes place through the interplay of democracy and economy. It aims to achieve economic growth and full employment alongside social justice and cohesion. The policy development process in the MSC perspective is mainly top down, as the means and the ends of public policies are in the hands of the state. Educational provision is largely reduced to public formal education and education seen as a second chance, with the main focus being on literacy, vocational and academic programmes. The state maintains standardisation and bureaucratisation of education, promotes the instrumental value of education and prevents the establishment of private programmes, as formal education (but also non-formal education when part of public policies) is considered the best approach to economic and social modernisation. Educating vulnerable groups is also important for increasing social equality and literacy levels and fulfilling the social right to education (Lima and Guimaraes, 2011, pp. 48 ff.).

The third perspective is *human resources management* (HRM). It considers education as an instrument for economic growth and human capital production. It strives towards employability, competitiveness, individual choice, marketisation, and economic modernisation and mainly promotes vocational education. Non-formal and informal learning are also important, as they can contribute to skills development. To shape the field of ALE, the market takes the central role over the state, transposing the (financial) responsibility for individuals' learning. There is an increase in payable programmes, while public financing follows the market principles with different education providers competing for funding. Public policy development still takes place, but the effect of the resulting policies is smaller and usually planned for a shorter period (Lima and Guimaraes, 2011, pp. 56 ff.).

3 Methodology path followed: research question, document, and content analysis

In addition to the theoretical framework of Lima and Guimarães (2011), document analysis was the methodological path preferred for this research to analyse the influence of EU policy priorities in relation to recent government policy documents. Document analysis is "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents", using data examination and interpretation to "elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" on a specific topic (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Written official policy documents were the core of the analytical focus of this article. The selected texts were official documents from the EU, Germany, and Portugal, downloaded from the supranational and each state authorities' websites. These documents were:

- *Communication on the Digital Education Action Plan* (EC, 2018b) and the *Communication on Digital Education Plan 2021–2027: Re-setting education and training for the digital age* (European Commission [EC], 2020a).
- *Shaping Digitalisation: Implementation Strategy of the Federal Government* (in German, *Digitalisierung gestalten. Umsetzungsstrategie der Bundesregierung*, the 6th updated edition of June 2021) (Die Bundesregierung, 2021).
- *Action Plan for the Digital Transition* (in Portuguese, *Plano de Ação para a Transição Digital, Presidência do Conselho de Ministros. Resolução do Conselho de Ministros* n.o 30/2020, from 21 April 2020) (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.o 30/2020, 2020).

These documents include general guidelines for digital (adult learning and) education set by the European Commission and the governments of the countries selected. In collecting these documents, a range of judgements were made about the usefulness of the texts selected for the research, how these documents fit with the research question and the quality of access and their content (Rapley & Rees, 2018, p. 382). The content of these documents was taken as is. These texts are understood as smooth containers of ideas, "docile documents" to enable analysis of texts "in their own right" (Rapley &

Rees, 2018, p. 378). Bearing this in mind, the analytical focus was on the actual content of the documents selected. After the selection of the documents, qualitative content analysis was used as a non-reactive and non-obstructive method of analysis since the written documents already existed. This analysis was based on the establishment of a coding frame according to the three policy perspectives (cf. Lima & Guimarães, 2011). This coding frame included categories related to the political priorities of ALE policies, based on keywords of the three perspectives already presented in this article, which were applied to the documents to find the important words, phrases, or themes. The importance of these was analysed for each country independently and then in comparison between both countries and also in relation to the influence of the EU. By these means, the focus on the manifest, latent, and context-dependent meaning of ideas was preferred. The application of the categories allowed descriptive findings to be established. Afterwards, analysis was carried out with the chosen analytical framework of the three policy perspectives in mind (Rapley & Rees, 2018, p. 379). Units of analysis (Prior, 2014), such as words, phrases or themes approached in these texts, were considered for examining how they are connected or co-associated.

4 Discussion of data

In this section, the political priorities of the EU's Digital Education Action Plans, as reflected in the ALE policies in Germany and Portugal, are examined. The political priorities of ALE policies dealing with digital education in Germany and Portugal are discussed and compared (Egetenmeyer, 2016). These two countries were chosen because both are EU member states – meaning the EU's Action Plan may influence them – but they are sized differently in economic, social, and demographic terms, presenting different traditions in ALE policies. Both face contemporary educational, social, and economic challenges in digital education.

4.1 Digital education in the European Union

The EU has recently been paying more attention to digital education and defines digital competences as the "key competences for lifelong learning", while stating that holding such competences requires the "confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society" (EU, 2020a, p. 10). Digital competences include skills, knowledge, and attitudes in dealing with digital media and the use of communication and information technologies. These competences imply strategies and values that enable citizens to engage in effective, creative, reflective, and autonomous practices concerning their learning, work, and leisure. A culture of lifelong learning is argued to be established globally and across society to fully exploit digital education in its transformative potential. The policy discourse of digital (adult learning and) education (or rather lifelong learning, as often mentioned in EU policy documents) is holistically and structurally advanced as a political priority at the mega level. This political priority is accomplished by the EU's Digital

Education Action Plan as a long-term implementation strategy for digital education in the member states.

In January 2018, the European Commission adopted its first Digital Education Action Plan (EC, 2018a), which was set out for the next three years (2018–2020) in line with the then remaining period of the 2014–2020 long-term EU budget. The plan followed the Gothenburg Social Summit of European leaders for fair jobs and growth in November 2017—where the *European Pillar of Social Rights* was proclaimed with (access to) education, training and lifelong learning as the first of twenty principles—and the Commission's communiqué *Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture,* which advocated the establishment of the European Education Area and identified that "driving innovation in education in the digital era" (EC, 2017, p. 11) is an important way of pursuing such a goal.

- Both the summit and the Commission's communiqué underlined the importance of combining economic freedom with social principles and identified education as one of the key factors in achieving that. It was argued that digital education should offer "new possibilities for teaching and learning approaches" through "innovative, personalised and digital teaching methods" to "improve learning outcomes" and contribute to 25 % lifelong learning participation in the EU by 2025. The Commission also emphasised that "Europe is lagging behind" in using digital technologies in education (p. 8).

With such a policy background, the 2018–2020 Digital Education Action Plan aimed at improving the use of educational technology and fostering the development of digital competences, particularly focusing on schools, vocational education and training and higher education (EC, 2018a). It determined three priorities and specified measures for supporting member states in making progress in them:

- *making better use of digital technology for teaching and learning* by reducing the digital divide between member states, by supporting the uptake of high-speed broadband, by improving digital readiness of teachers and learners and vocational schools and by providing a framework for digitally certified qualifications;
- *developing relevant digital competences and skills for the digital transformation* by creating a European platform for digital higher education and cooperation, piloting training on open and citizen science, bringing coding classes to all European schools, launching a campaign on cyber security and media literacy, and decreasing the gender gap in technological and entrepreneurial competences;
- *improving education through better data analysis and foresight* by publishing a study on ICT (information and communications technology) popularisation in education to supplement the data from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies and Programme for International Student Assessment surveys and by initiating strategic foresight and cooperation on key educational trends in digital transformation and also employing artificial intelligence and learning analytics to better use a substantial amount of data on education that is already available.

Under the new long-term EU budget (for the 2021–2027 period), digital education became an even greater priority with the aim to "rethink education by using the potential the internet provides to make learning material available to all, for example by the increased use of massive open online courses" (EC, 2020a, p. 14). The 2021–2027 Digital Education Action Plan follows such ambitions and puts greater emphasis on digital skills. The updated plan has two (instead of the previous three) priorities:

- *fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem* by facilitating dialogue with member states for preparing a Council recommendation on digital education, proposing a Council recommendation on distance learning for primary and secondary education, developing a European digital education content framework, encouraging member states to invest in technological equipment, supporting educational institutions through Erasmus projects, and developing ethical guidelines on artificial intelligence and data usage in education. This priority mainly focuses on establishing fruitful conditions for the development and practice of digital education to take place in all EU member states.
- *enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation* by developing guidelines for educators on digital literacy and disinformation, updating the European Digital Competence Framework, establishing a European Digital Skills Certificate, proposing a Council recommendation for improving educational provision on digital skills, improving monitoring of students' digital skills, supporting traineeships in the digital sector, specific learning opportunities for educators, and raising women's participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). This second priority more directly aims at the (digital) educational process and its outcomes.

The plans are complementary, but the 2021–2027 plan is more actively seeking wider political support for digital education from the Council of the EU and the member states. This action plan also specifies an additional action not included in the two priorities—establishing a European Digital Education Hub. This hub should contribute to several tasks, such as supporting member states' digital education implementation through national advisory services and good practice exchange, fostering cooperation between all relevant stakeholders (from the public, private and non-governmental sectors), connecting national and regional digital education initiatives, monitoring the Action Plan implementation, and supporting the development of policies and practices as the "think-and-do-tank" for digital education.

4.2 The German document Shaping Digitalisation: Implementation Strategy of the Federal Government

In June 2021, the German Federal Government published an updated policy document on the digitalisation strategy in Germany. The document *Shaping Digitalisation: Implementation Strategy of the Federal Government* (in German, *Digialisierung gestalten. Umsetzungsstrategie der Bundesregierung*, Die Bundesregierung, 2021) emerged from the necessity of the digital transformation, which prompts action to prepare Germany "in the

best possible way" (p. 8) for the future. A "joint strategic implementation of digital policy measures" (pp. 8 f.) was to take place to increase the opportunities of digitalisation for prosperity in the country and to assess the calculable associated risks. The political implementation strategy includes several fields of action, such as digital competences, infrastructure and equipment, or society in the digital transformation. In each field, the document identifies thematic priorities with concrete projects. In this paper, the "Project on the Focal Point: Education, Training and Continuing Education" is analysed in the action in *digital competences*.

Digital competences as a field of policy action in the digital education of the Federal Government aims at investing in digital competences, infrastructure, and teaching and learning materials for citizens so they can shape the digital transformation in a self-determined way and deal responsibly with risks. To achieve this goal, various offers for the development of digital competences are to be made available and the education system is to be geared even "more strongly to digitally shaped life, the digital working and economic world and the digital knowledge society" (Die Bundesregierung, 2021, p. 10). With this orientation, the Federal Government's plans tie in with the needs included in the EU's Action Plan on Digital Education (EC, 2018a, 2020a) and demonstrate the vertical influence of the EU. The Action Plan states that digitalisation will "dramatically change the future", so that there is a "serious danger" (EC, 2017, p. 9) regarding the workforce and the associated competitive advantage if digital competences are not taught. The German Government's document responds to this danger by preparing the education system for the long term with a view to the world of work and business. Relating to the theoretical policy perspective, a parallel to the HRM perspective can be seen here, in which education is a steering element to strengthen digital lives, promote employability and meet the needs of the labour market.

To achieve the political priorities in ALE, the Federal Government has undertaken five projects, which are named based on concrete goals, leading ministries, responsible institutions, and concrete implementation strategies. With the goal of "future-proof, attractive and competitive vocational education and training" (Die Bundesregierung, 2021, p. 13), digital qualifications for companies and the corresponding qualifications for trainers and examiners are promoted in the *Vocational Education 4.0* project. The aim of the project is to drive "transformation processes" (p. 13) in companies to advance Economy 4.0. The first project ties in with the political goals of the HRM perspective. In the long term, the vocational training sectors and its actors are qualified regarding digital competences. This sustainably increases the productivity of the sector. In the sense of the MSC perspective, the state assumes an important role in the definition of educational offers.

To digitise the health system in Germany, the second project *Promotion of digital competences in the health professions* aims to implement digital teaching and learning technologies and digital competences as a basic qualification in the licensing regulations and the training and prescription examinations (Die Bundesregierung, 2021, p. 22). This project is connected to the MSC perspective, in which the ALE regulation

follows formal and bureaucratic rules. In the sense of the HRM perspective, the health system is being modernised economically.

Helped by the third project, the *National Strategy for Continuing Education*, the working population and companies are to be supported in their professional and economic advancement by strengthening the skilled labour base and sustainably promoting employability. Political and structural measures are bundled to facilitate career advancement for broad segments of the population. In concrete terms, continuing education and lifelong learning are promoted even more strongly than before (p. 23). The policy objectives of this project reflect all three theoretical perspectives: facilitating career advancement for broad segments of the population and conveying justice, equality, and democratic values. In line with the MSC, digital education also functions as a tool for the economic and social modernisation of the state. From the HRM perspective, ALE becomes human capital and a steering element to meet the needs of the employment and labour market. Thus, the German document takes up the agenda of the Action Plan, in which digital competences become key competences for lifelong learning (EC, 2017, p. 1).

The fourth project, *INVITE Innovation Competition*, also aims to meet this need by increasing the "accuracy of fit between continuing education offers and individual or institutional demand" within the framework of a competition that develops innovative standards that enable all people to "find the right continuing education on demand" (Die Bundesregierung, 2021, p. 15). Due to its innovative character, the aspect of supporting the education system for "innovation and digital technologies" for the "development of relevant digital competences" (EC, 2017, p. 1), as stated in the Action Plan, is supported. Through the public announcement of further education offers and their broad accessibility, democratic and participative aspects of the DEM perspective can also be found, along with parts of the EU Action Plan, which aims at "opening [...] the education system" (p. 5). The formulation of standards is typical of the MSC perspective, in which formal and bureaucratic requirements are set.

The fifth project, *practice dialogue "digital dual training"* aims to use digital teaching and learning media in dual training and to promote cooperation between vocational schools and training companies. Using digital media in training is intended to strengthen the digital skills of trainees and trainers (Die Bundesregierung, 2021, p. 26). Using these media is in line with the EU Action Plan, which advocates the sensible use of new learning tools and materials in the education system (EC, 2017, p. 2). Both the promotion of digital competences of trainers and the provision of valid knowledge to training companies for implementing digital policy measures are based on the MSC perspective. The cooperation between the two institutions includes aspects of the HRM perspective, as profit-oriented fit enables employability.

4.3 The Portuguese document Action Plan for the Digital Transition

The Portuguese Government approved the *Action Plan for the Digital Transition* (in Portuguese *Plano de Ação para a Transição Digital*) at the beginning of 2020, within a strategy to be implemented from 2021 to 2027, the period of the available EU funding pro-

grammes (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.o 30/2020, 2020). This plan reflects the vertical influence of the EU (within the cohesion policy), fosters the convergence of Portuguese economic, social and ALE aims, and targets the harmonisation of policies at the supranational (mega) and national (macro) levels. This influence is mainly reflected within the HRM perspective.

Following the EU's guidelines concerning the digital age and decade and the digital rights and education, the Portuguese document sets several policy priorities within the global transition. This global transition is considered an opportunity (for the economic sector, the state sector, and the citizens), a challenge (to economic development, governance responsibilities of the Portuguese public administration, and to the citizens' participation in the labour market and in social spheres) and a process of change (within globalisation, global economic competition, and global climate changes). The global transition is said to start at the EU level, directed at the following guidelines already established, at benefiting from existing funding programmes and at maximising results. However, changes need to occur at the national level for Portugal to be "placed in the front line with other countries better prepared to face challenges and changes" (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.o 30/2020, 2020, p. 6) that are expected. Referring to results, the global transition demands that the Portuguese economy capture (national and international) investment to modernise the economy and to establish a favourable environment for innovation and knowledge development. When considering the EU influence and the HRM perspective, this national document stresses this perspective but also includes the MSC perspective.

This global transition is based on three pillars: the private sector (including enterprises acting in Portugal and Portuguese enterprises acting abroad); the public sector (the Portuguese public administration departments supporting economic and social development); and the (Portuguese and other) citizens (and workers) who are willing and able to deal with the digital transition both in the professional and social spheres. This global transition is characterised by economic challenges and changes forcing the rise of competitiveness and investment (national and international) capture and the improvement of productivity of Portuguese enterprises. Therefore, it requires state services to provide better services to the private sector within economic development, labour market policies, and implementing new modes of economic production based on technologies and digitalisation. It also requires citizens to follow digital changes, to be available for improving academic and professional qualification paths and to become lifelong learners of education and training programmes directed at technology and science knowledge development (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.o 30/2020, 2020).

Referring to the strategies of implementation, the plan includes three pillars: the first pillar relates to ALE aimed at digitally including people; the second pillar refers to the digital transformation mainly directed at enterprises; and the third pillar is linked to the digitalisation of state services. Concerning the first pillar of ALE (aimed at digitally including people), strategies involve digital education and training activities, funded by several programmes, such as the programme for the development of digital

competencies called *INCoDe.2030*. These programmes are directed at promoting the qualification and requalification of regular school education Portuguese teachers, other school staff, and students (referred to in the document as human resources) within three general aims: to promote access to information and communication technologies; to enable people to understand and evaluate contents involved in the global transition and challenges and changes resulting from it; and to communicate effectively. These programmes are coordinated by different state departments (such as the Ministry of Education, the agency for modernising the state and public administration, and the commission for citizenship and gender equality) (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.o 30/2020, 2020).

Complementarily, the programme *Industry 4.0*—the national strategy for the digitalisation of the economy and the programme for the development of digital competencies called INCoDe.2030—focuses on knowledge development for people already working in enterprises characterised by intense and complex technological workplaces, based on big data systems, advanced analytics, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things. These programmes are coordinated by several state dependant and sectoral institutions related to economic development and higher education (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.o 30/2020, 2020).

The programme of digital inclusion of adults can be considered the only programme reflecting a few characteristics of the DE perspective, while the HRM and MSC characteristics are dominant. This programme is intended to develop the digital literacy of one million Portuguese who have never used the internet and technological devices. This programme is funded by the European Social Fund within the *IAmDigital* programme and is co-ordinated by the digital Portugal mission. It is implemented by a wide range of centres, numbering approximately 950 (state dependant institutions, such as regular schools, public libraries, town hall and local administration organisations, higher education institutions, non-governmental organisations and civil society institutions, and private profit-making institutions). These centres are spread all over the country. It is expected that approximately 10,000 volunteers (also called mentors) will agree to support the learning of adults who know little about internet devices, access, and use up to 2023. However, even if the aim of including adults in the digital transformation trend can be considered democratic and emancipatory, it is still a programme implemented according to a top-down, centralised, and bureaucratic approach, following the MSC perspective and directed mainly at inserting and maintaining large sectors of adult learners in the labour market, who are foreseen as an active population, according to the HRM perspective (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.o 30/2020, 2020).

Other initiatives involving ALE are coordinated by the programme for the development of digital competencies called *INCoDe.2030*, supported by higher education institutions. This programme is in line with the previous ones, sharing characteristics of the MSC and HRM perspectives (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.o 30/2020, 2020).

4.4 Similarities and differences in the selected documents

Both the Portuguese and the German Governments' political plans regarding digital transformation and education are aimed at preparing internationally to deal skilfully with the expected global challenges—in Germany these are called possible risks—and to be able to play an active role in shaping them. Both governments strongly tie in with goals expressed in the EU's action plans. The vertical influence of the EU can thus be found when both countries place a strong focus on the professional and economic sector to increase the country's competitiveness and productivity. The aim of this is to competently counter the digital transformation by increasing economic growth while increasing productivity. The teaching of digital skills to raise employability and human capital and lifelong learning and education processes for economic and social adaptation can be found in both countries' documents. Here, the HRM perspective can be found, being more prominent in Germany because of the competition-like structures that often emerge. The equipment of the economy via the projects *Industry 4.0* (Portugal) and Vocational Training 4.0 (Germany) also promotes the economy in the sense of the HRM perspective due to the need to develop the qualifications of digital competences for trainers, teachers, and companies.

Elements of the MSC perspective are also conspicuous in the political documents of Portugal and Germany. In both countries, the state promotes economic and social modernisation of the countries through government programmes. In Germany, for example, modernisation of the health system is taking place through state implementation of digital competences in training and ordinance examinations. ALE as a second chance is also supported by the state in Germany via digital policy measures, such as *INVITE* or the *National Strategy for Continuing Education*. Formal and bureaucratic requirements are implemented in Germany through digital teaching and learning tools and the promotion of cooperation. In Portugal, the education and training programmes that enable ALE support a qualification of citizens corresponding to the MSC's goal of education as a second chance. Valid knowledge for companies and trainers, such as the Portuguese *INCoDe.2030* programme and the *IAmDigital* project as the provision of education, learning, and access to basic education, also corresponds to the MSC perspective. In both Portugal and Germany, the state assumes important functions for the definition and provision of digital education. This enables the economic development and modernisation of the countries, as also claimed in the EU's Digital Education Action Plan.

Individual elements of the DE perspective, such as inclusion, equality, participation, and social responsibility, can rarely be found in both policy documents and in the EU ones. These elements are clearer in Portugal through projects, such as the national strategy for greater equality—*IAmDigital*. This strategy aims at the digital inclusion of adults and broad access to digital technologies for all citizens. The national strategy in Portugal, however, also has significant overlaps with the understanding of digital competences as defined by the EU (2018b, 2020b). For example, the aim is to promote the ability to understand and evaluate content or the competent use of digital ICT, following the HRM perspective. In Germany, the DE perspective is much less present. Individual elements can be found in the *National Strategy for Continuing Education*, which

aims to secure employability in the long term, but may also facilitate career advancement for broad sections of the population. Justice and equality are conveyed through these means and are subject to the influence of the HRM perspective.

The weighting of the three policy models, in comparison, in the respective countries, is represented in Figure 1:

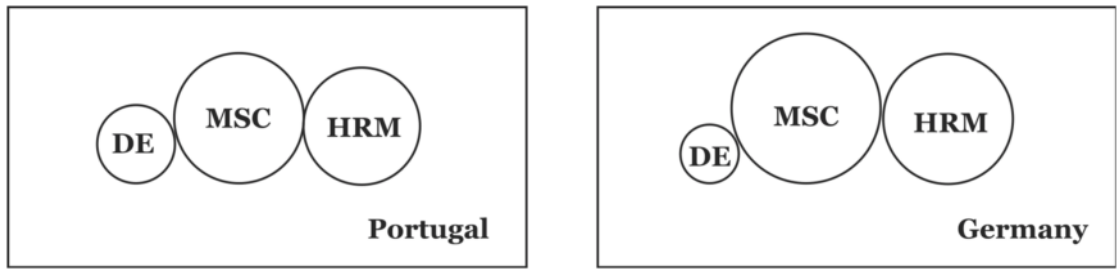

Figure 1: Lima and Guimarães perspectives (2011) of the digital education plans of Germany and Portugal (own presentation)

5 Conclusion

The theoretical framework of Lima and Guimarães (2011) has enabled an analytical view of the digital education policy implementation strategies in the EU, Germany, and Portugal. It has shown that the Portuguese and German Governments are pursuing the projects of the EU's Digital Education Action Plans, helped by different implementation strategies and funding from the supranational organisation. A clear vertical influence of the mega level on the macro level is recognisable, mainly following the HRM and the MSC perspectives. Aided by the content analysis, it is possible to argue that both countries' policies contain elements of the HRM and MSC perspectives with different emphases.

The comparative analysis of the two government documents has shown that the educational processes of ALE are to take account of the challenges of *digitisation*, *digitalisation,* and *digital transformation*, such as the use of digital education and teaching and learning tools, but also via various programmes for the acquisition and implementation of digital competences in the education and business sectors (Legner, Eymann & Hess et al., 2017; Radovan 2022). In the long term, the political projects of the two governments should contribute to competently meeting the challenges, opportunities, and risks associated with digitalisation and enabling digital use profitably within international and economic competitiveness trends (Gallardo-Echenique, de Oliveira, Marqués-Molias et al., 2015). The influence of the EU on the member states can be traced. There is a vertical influence from the mega level on the macro level—and, although lacking empirical data on this, on the micro level, since the citizens of the country are affected by the educational policy measures implemented institutionally and structurally. The concrete implementation strategies in Portugal and Germany are subject to the policy objectives at the mega level but are shaped in slightly different ways, as

shown in this discussion, and eventually according to economic and social characteristics at the macro level (Egetenmeyer, 2016).

Other research questions may be raised that would need further data collection; referring, for instance, to the influence at the micro level of the EU guidelines and of the national policies when implemented. Data interpretation could stress the imposing character of fast changes in digital education and the reactive character of ALE practices in implementing national policy programmes. This interpretation might focus on the urgency of reflecting (and eventually resisting) the digital education trends promoted by the EU, German, and Portuguese ALE policies and basing practices on critical education and pedagogy processes (Bernhard-Skala, Bolten-Bühler & Koller, 2021; Schmidt-Hertha & Bernhard, 2022; Schmidt-Lauff & Dust, 2020).

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Policies and Online Learning Environment for Adult Education and Higher Education's Emerging Needs

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Abstract

The outbreak of the pandemic in March 2019 led to a shift in the educational system around the world despite low technological advancement in both developed and developing countries. The sudden digital transformation in the educational system makes it necessary to understand digital preparedness, review impact of online learning, practices, and methods of online learning as well as government policies both before and after the pandemic for the development of digital learning tools and implementation. The objective of the paper is to determine the level of online learning preparedness in adult and higher education through the lens of the multi-dimensional model. The comparative analysis focused on policy formulation, practices, and challenges of e-learning implementation in Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines at the mega, macro, meso, and micro levels in three countries. The desk research methodology is used for the discourse. The study led to the interpretation of similarities and differences among the three countries.

Keywords: Adult/higher education, digital learning, online learning, policy formulation, digital preparedness/readiness

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in March 2019 led to an unprecedented global disruption of social and economic life. To mitigate the effect of the disease and the spread of the pandemic, all public and private institutions, which included schools, were closed, shutting out about 1.37 billion learners and their teachers, including university students and adult learners from their institutions of learning (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2020). To ensure continuity of educational processes while complying with shut down orders imposed by nations, educational institutions abruptly moved online (Armstrong-Mensah, Ramsey-White, Yankey & Self-Brown, 2020; James & Theriault, 2020). Although online learning is not new in the education sector, especially in continuing education, online learning, when

planned, prepared for, and implemented by institutions, is different from the sudden and complete shift of all learning activities of higher and adult education.

Considering the abrupt nature of digital transformation in education systems around the world, this study investigated and compared the level of online learning preparedness in adult education in Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines through the lens of the multi-dimensional model. The comparative analysis will focus on policy formulation, practices, and challenges of e-learning implementation in Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines at the mega, macro, meso, and micro levels for each country.

2 Review of related literature

2.1 Adult learning and higher education

Adult education deals with the teaching of adults which emphasises the provision of unlimited educational opportunities to both latecomers and early completers to realise their potentials through literacy, remedial, and continuing education programmes (Ojo-Ajibare, 2010) after the cessation of formal schooling. It aims to improve their literacy skills, improve their English proficiency, and increase their earnings (Slowey, 2016). Realising the need for skills development, there should be ongoing efforts to deepen understanding of adult learners through university initiatives and programmes. Such programmes, while maintaining the integral facets to meaningful learning, should also adapt to the needs of an ever-changing world. In the digital age, it is crucial to develop new forms of learning that facilitate students to live and successfully compete at a globalised and connected level. Thus, higher education institutions should know how to harness the potential of technological innovations that support education, be it technology-enhanced learning (TEL) or e-learning. This entails proper preparation and mobilisation of resources.

2.2 E-learning readiness

E-learning readiness is defined as an institution's technical, content, human, and financial preparedness in adopting and implementing e-learning (Rohayani, 2015; Mosa, Mohd. Naz'ri bin Mahrin, & Ibrrahim, 2016). For an institution to successfully implement e-learning programmes, it should first determine the level of preparedness (Mosa, Mohd. Naz'ri bin Mahrin, & Ibrrahim., 2016) of its potential users (Hashim & Tasir, 2014) such as faculty members (Sadik, 2007), students, and academic staff (Nwagwu, 2020) based on defined criteria, which could include policies, technology infrastructure, competencies, support, experiences, attitudes, et cetera (Darab & Montazer, 2011; Sadik, 2007).

Based on recent literature reviews on e-learning preparedness (Hashim & Tasir, 2014; Rohayani, 2015), there seems to be a focus on meso to micro level factors–that of the institution or entity and the individual, respectively. There is little exploration on macro or even mega factors that could affect e-learning preparedness, such as governmental or international policies. Using the lens of systems thinking, e-learning could

be viewed as a system functioning at different levels: micro, meso, macro (Hannah & Lester, 2009), and mega (Simmons, 2016), as adult learning and higher education institutions operate within a context, where individual (micro), local and regional (meso), national (macro), and even mega (international) contexts come into play.

3 Theoretical framework

The study was hinged on multidimensional modelling as expounded by Pederson (2009) and the comparative theory as propounded by Egetenmeyer (2017). The multidimensional model implies that there should be dimensions that are hierarchically organised into a number of levels representing factors to be examined for better understanding. Both dimensions and factors are scrutinised at different levels for clarity. In this study, the locations of Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines were examined according to the factors of policy formulation, practices, and challenges at different levels: mega, macro, meso, and micro.

The comparative theory as propounded by Egetemeyer states that for a study to be termed comparative, it must comprise three dimensions: provision and effect; (non) participants and learners; and transnational contexts. This study examined provision and effects in terms of policies, the providers and institutions that determine such policies, professional situations of teaching and learning as they affect adult learners and young adults. She underlines the importance of investigating the relationship among provisions and effects (policies, providers/institutions, professional situations, educational provision, learning and competencies) within the transnational contexts and in relation to '(non) participants and learners' who are part of the 'relevant societal sector (state, market, civil society) (Egetenmeyer, 2017, pp. 84–85). Hence, Egetenmeyer's perspective has encouraged authors to focus their attention on the comparison of 'provision and effects' in the contexts of Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines, analysing policy formulation, practices, and challenges during the time of Covid. Educational provision in terms of availability of infrastructure, training of the trainers and e-learning competencies were examined. The roles of (non-) participants, which include the State, were also investigated. Both the model and theory provided the framework on which the study revolved. E-learning readiness was therefore examined through the lens of multidimensional modelling, as expounded in various studies (Wibowo & Laksitowening, 2015; Huidrom, 2021; Suwawi, Aditya, Selviandro, Herdiani, Rohayati, & Wibowo, 2021) and in the comparative theory of Egentemeyer (2017), with both complementing each other to serve as ideal framework.

4 Methodology

The analysis was carried out based on the transnational characteristics. On the basis of Egetenmeyer's theoretical approach, the authors examined the countries' policy and

practices, then carried out the discourse of similarities and differences between the different cases with their interpretation. A search of review of relevant documents and empirical literature was conducted to gain insights into how policies before and during pandemic impacted on practices and challenges faced.

The study found its roots in the online deep debate carried out during the Intensive Programme of Adult Education Academy 2022 managed by the University of Wurzburg. The programme entailed a comparative group work where representatives of different countries discussed several categories of comparison; then they clustered the categories according to the most common themes, which best illustrated the situation in their respective countries. Three categories were found to be dominant in the comparison: policy formulation (agencies, structures/hierarchy, existing policies and strategies), teaching practices (methods, modes, tools, training groups positively impacted), and challenges (access, groups negatively impacted, diffusion of internet, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) index, global connectivity, and implementation of existing policies). The three categories were compared at mega, macro, meso, and micro levels, according to the applicable level of analysis in three countries: Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines.

5 Comparative Analysis

5.1 ICT-enhanced Adult Learning and Higher Education in Italy

The pandemic showed a fragmented level of readiness of Italian educational institutions due to the existing differences among the different territories, in terms of culture, openness to innovation, resources investment, and policy implementation at regional and local level. In fact, the unexpected event promoted a fast reaction from those institutions that usually lead research and innovation, finding creative solutions for guaranteeing learning to students; others felt disoriented and showed their unpreparedness in face of unexpected problems. Therefore, much more effort is needed to be prepared and inclusive at a national level.

Adult Learning and Higher Education

In Italy, the Central State provides the "general rules of education" and determines the essential levels of services that must be guaranteed throughout the national territory. The regions have concurrent legislative power in the field of education and exclusive in the field of vocational training. The formal education system is centralised and managed by the Ministry of Education that formulates specific norms for schools, from kindergarten to secondary schools. Adult education is promoted by the Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA) and they represent autonomous educational institutions with their own staff and specific didactic and organisational structure. They carry out the following activities: adult education courses aimed at obtaining educational qualifications and certifications; initiatives to expand the training offer aimed at integrating and enriching adult education paths and/or facilitating the connection with other types of

education and training courses; research, experimentation and development activities aimed at–among other things–enhancing the role of the CPIA as a service structure.

To support the transition to the new adult education system, the General Directorate for school systems and the evaluation of the national education system (DGOSV) has promoted the Activity Plan for the Innovation of Adult Education (P. A. I.D.E.I.A.) from the 2014/2015 school year (decree n.1329, 2 October 2018). The plan aimed to train managers, teachers, and administrative, technical, and auxiliary staff of CPIAs. In addition, the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) provides regulations for the universities and continuing education, guaranteeing academic courses both for traditional students and workers who want to update their skills and their curriculum according to a continuing education perspective.

ICT-enhanced Education

Since 2006, the European Union has included digital competence as one of the eight key competences of the Lifelong Learning Programme (European Council, 2006), and UNESCO (2011) provided the *ICT Competency Frameworks for Teachers*. The ICT education system was introduced at national level with the new law of education n.107 in 2015, through the National Plan of Digital School (PNSD). Many training initiatives for teachers and staff, and resources were provided at any level of education and in every educational organisation, providing the formulation of dimensions necessary to implement a successful action: tool, competences and content, training, and support for the implementation (MIUR, 2015).

The evolution of ICT (in terms of instrumental innovation and progressive diffusion and accessibility) initially proceeded hand in hand with the quantitative extension of education in adulthood. Distance learning and open education in the last decades has supported adult and continuing education. Since the beginning, CPIAs have included some modules at distance in their programme, increasing the use of ICT during the pandemic. Many universities, considering the learning needs of some categories of students, in recent decades, have been delivering blended or distance learning programmes (Corazza, 2006). Other universities implemented MOOCs; research carried out by CRUI (universities' consortium) in 2014 showed that 18 % of the respondents (10 out 55) declared to have completed 39 MOOCs courses (Paleari, Corradini, Perali, Porta & Breno, 2015), opening the path for an open education. From 2014 to 2016 the same universities developed 94 more MOOCs, and this aspect was reinforced much more in 2016 when a group of people with different profiles (researchers, entrepreneurs, teachers, students, experts) created the network of Open Education Italy. A further development of MOOCs was highlighted by Goglio and Nascimbeni's study (2021) based on Italian universities' institutional websites analysis. It counts up to a total of about 983 MOOCs provided by 28 Italian universities. The ICT power was strongly recognised by the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers, March 4th 2020 (DPCM) that forced educational institutions to manage teaching and learning at distance through the use of platforms.

Challenges in ICT-enhanced Adult Learning and HE

Despite efforts made at educational, legislative, and university levels, the development of ICT initiatives has not achieved the same results in the different areas of Italy due mainly to two aspects: the unequal spread of broadband in Italy emphasising the digital gap existing between the different areas of the country, with a nationwide coverage of 89 %, but which in rural areas is 50 % (Batini & D'Ambrosio, 2008); and the level of digital competence among learners and teachers/educators.

This phenomenon of varying opportunities among the different Italian areas emerged during the pandemic, showing that not all the regions were ready to face that unexpected event. The pandemic soon showed the weak infrastructure and socio-economic differences among territories. They were due to both network connection issues and economic conditions of families (33 %) who could not afford broadband internet or a computer (Istat, 2020). In addition, the fast transition forced a large number of teachers to deal with virtual realities for the first time, facing not only the lack of digital competences, but also the issue of integrating technological skills and pedagogical knowledge (Ranieri, Raffaghelli & Pezzati, 2018).

National and Local Best Practices

Among the best practices that emerged during the pandemic is the EPALE platform for adult learners and educators, where learning resources are provided. During the pandemic, MOOC production intensified in Italy through platforms such as 'Federica.eu' (University Federico II- Naples), 'PoK'(Politecnico of Milan), 'EduOpen' (University of Reggio Emilia), and 'Book' (Alma Mater -Bologna). In addition, the experience of *start@unito* at the University of Turin, activated in 2018, is a Digital Learning Environment based on Moodle, that offers 50 open online courses relevant to the main disciplines of the first university year (Marchisio, Rabellino & Sacchet, 2021). They are Open Educational Resources (OER), freely accessible and usable. Universities' responses to the pandemic also made the difference for learning and teaching. For instance, the University of Padova, that since 1916 has implemented training course for professors (T4L programme), intensified training and provided many resources for the academic community: Zoom platform, digital support for synchronous and asynchronous teaching, video tutorials for Moodle, Kaltura, and other interactive tools.

5.2 ICT-enhanced Adult Learning and Higher Education in Nigeria

Adult Learning and Higher Education

The 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria put education on the concurrent legislative list. This means that there is a division of education law making powers between the Federal (Central) and State (Regional) Governments. The Federal Government, through the Federal Ministry of Education and other relevant parastatals, make general policies to guide all levels of adult education, including mass literacy across the nation (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2014). The States also have policy powers and control over pre- primary, primary, secondary, and higher education institutions that belong to them or fall within their purview of control such as private institutions within

the States. All policies made by state governments must conform to the requirements of the National Policy on Education.

Adult education in Nigeria is administered by two different entities – the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) and universities under the jurisdiction of the National Universities Commission (NUC). Both are parastatals under the Federal Ministry of Education. The NMEC was founded to develop policies and strategies for eradicating illiteracy; organising mass literacy; adult and non- formal education programmes; certifying uniform standards and quality control nationally, liaising with relevant bodies for the implementation of policy; training the required workforce for state agencies; developing curricula and other necessary materials; and providing a nationally acceptable basic education certificate. NMEC exists at state and local government levels where it is controlled by State Ministries of Education. The lifelong education aspects of adult education are usually run under the auspices of universities (mainly through the distance and continuing education centres) and professional organisations. There are also private continuing education centres owned by private, non-governmental, and sometimes faith-based organisations that have to adhere to policies of their respective states.

ICT-enhanced education

The Nigerian Government, in reaction to the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, drew up the National Policy on Information and Technologies (ICT) in Education, through the Federal Ministry of Education (Adamu, 2019). While most institutions for adult and higher learning are responsible for the provision and maintenance of ICT infrastructure in the institutions, their educators and learners usually have to source their own devices.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), a Federal Government-owned and funded institution of open and distance learning, was established by the National Open University Act No. 6 of 1983, and is a major provider of open, flexible, distance e-learning that supports adult education to a large extent (NOUN, 2022). The eight licensed dual mode universities in Nigeria also provide adult, continuing, and distance education (Inegbedion & Opateye, 2018). Both the single mode NOUN and dual mode universities practice the blended mode of curriculum delivery (Olatunji & Adebisi, 2021).

Despite the attempt to fully integrate ICT into ALE and HE in Nigeria, the fact remains that prior to the COVID- 19 pandemic, there was limited use of ICT for adult and higher education curriculum delivery (Chigozie-Okum, Ezeanyeyi, & Odii., 2018). Major successes recorded have been particularly in the areas of distance learning and in administrative functions. With the emergence of the pandemic, it became imperative for education institutions at all levels to transit to the online mode for curriculum delivery, despite some having little to no online experience (Lawal, Haruna, Kurfi & David, 2020; Iseolorunkanmi et al., 2021). A huge disparity was evident when comparing private institutions with the needed infrastructure for such a move and public uni-

versities with more students but less vital infrastructure (Iseolorunkanmi et al, 2021; Ogunode, Hammadu, Ahmed & Ojo, 2021).

Challenges in ICT-enhanced ALE and HE

ICT-enhanced adult and higher education in Nigeria is fraught with a number of challenges that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to urgently transit to ICT-enhanced teaching and learning has made them more obvious. Despite the existence of strong policies, implementation is an issue; the government has not provided the necessary infrastructure (hardware and software) for proper implementation of the policy. Another major issue for ICT-enhanced adult and higher education is the slow speed of broadband internet connection (Oyefara, Adejoh, Adisa, Abdusalam & Alabi, 2021). Erratic power supply, inadequate training of instructors, learners' poor ICT skills, high cost of internet data, unstable internet services, lack of access to internet, and inadequacy of devices are other challenges that have been identified as problems of the online adult and higher education environment in Nigeria (Lawal, Haruna, Kurfi & David., 2020; Ogunode, Hammadu, Ahmed & Ojo, 2021).

National and Local Best Practices

The blended mode of curriculum delivery which was experienced during the gradual reopening of institutions of higher education (particularly single mode institutions) have been found to be the preferred choice of most adult learners and some higher education students (Koledoye, Osilike & Obiozor, 2021; Deekor & Bruce, 2021). If this learning mode is properly integrated into adult and higher education, with learners and instructors properly trained, it has great potential for the expansion and success of opportunities provided by these levels of education. If vital infrastructure and needed tools are made accessible in adequate quantities for adult and higher education institutions that practice single and dual modes of training in Nigeria, it will result in the production of an open, flexible learning environment which according to European Commission/ European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)/Eurydice (2021) will enhance learners' engagement in a variety of activities.

5.3 ICT-enhanced Adult Learning and Higher Education in the Philippines

Even prior to the pandemic, there had already been efforts to integrate ICTs into Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in the Philippines, and the country's Department of Education has also recently released a strategic plan for its more effective and efficient integration (DepEd, 2021). However, due to inequality of access to ICT tools and poor infrastructure at a national level, despite accelerated efforts to migrate learning online during the pandemic, ALE in the country remains unprepared to effectively integrate ICT. More needs to be done at a national scale, infrastructure-wise, to better support the current initiatives for ICT-enhanced ALE.

Adult Learning and Education

In the Philippines, ALE programs are organised into the three main government agencies: the Department of Education (DepEd), which focuses on basic education from kindergarten to Grade 12; the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), which supervises tertiary degree programmes; and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), which oversees technical and vocational training and development (Soliven & Reyes, 2008). This trifocalised system has created "diverse but incongruent" (Soliven & Reyes, 2008, p.5) programmes in support of ALE–while their respective programmes are similar and often overlap in terms of mission, these agencies operate independent of each other. However, the newly-established Bureau of Alternative Education aims to more effectively oversee and implement the country's Alternative Learning System (ALS) programme, a national programme for out-of-school youth and adult (OSYA) learners to complete their basic education (DepEd, 2019).

ICT-enhanced ALE

When looking at ICT penetration and use, based on the October 2021 census data, among those households with at least one ICT device (which could either be a personal computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone), 73.8 % used it for learning. According to that same census, when asked about their willingness to engage in open distance learning–whether or not they were familiar with the system, eight out of ten households were willing, with those in urban areas (83.4 %) expressing more eagerness than those in rural areas (81.1 %). As of now, all school processes have been moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but even prior to this, ICTs were already used to support both initial and post-initial education in the country. For example, the Philippines is home to one of the leaders in Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) in Asia, the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU). Since 1995, UPOU has pioneered ODeL in the country and now has three undergraduate degree programmes, 26 graduate diploma/master programmes, two doctoral degrees, and over 100 MOOCS (Zuhairi, Raymundo & Mir, 2020). There have also been efforts to digitise the ALS Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) programme through mobile-based education (Villenes, Igliane-Villenes & Alcaraz, 2018). In 2012, TESDA also launched the TESDA Online Programme (TOP), their online portal with educational resources (Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba & Pacio, 2018), which saw a jump in registrants during the outbreak of the corona virus. These efforts were accelerated due to the pandemic. For instance, the ALS shifted all their A&E resources to an online platform so that both instructors and learners could access material. Continuing professional development (CPD) courses, which are necessary for licensed professionals such as teachers, nurses, pharmacists, etc., seeking the renewal of their licences, are also being offered online. University students, whether undergraduate, or postgraduate, have been conducting all their classes online since the academic year 2019–2020. Changes to the national structure–with the establishment of the BAE–and plans for adult learning in the Philippines show great promise in terms of ICT penetration and use. The recently released ALS 2.0 ICT Strategic Plan and ALS Research Agenda of 2022–2026 with ICT as a primary target and research

agenda evinces its centrality in the forthcoming plans and policies for ALE in the country (DepEd, 2021).

Challenges in ICT-enhanced ALE

However, several existing issues impede the growth of online modes of ALE, one of which is poor internet connectivity in the country. In 2017, the internet connection speed in the country was ranked as the lowest in the Asian Pacific at 5.5 megabytes per second in 2017 (Statista, 2020), a major cause of frustration for university students (Pastor, 2020) and the biggest challenge reported by TOP learners (Dumaua-Cabauatan, Calizo, Quimba, & Pacio, 2018). In addition, the Philippines lacks infrastructure, both hardware and software, to support this mode (Bonifacio, 2013).

National and Local Best Practices

Despite these challenges, it has been pointed out that there is potential in incorporating ICT in ALE in the Philippines, and that it would especially benefit those in remote areas (Asian Development Bank, 2021). UPOU is an example of the power of digital technology in providing access to quality education. Distance education providers have already incorporated a blended approach to their programmes, one of which is the Asian Institute for Distance Education (AIDE). Historically a distance school, it provides both print-based or electronic resources through its learning management system. This is only one of a number of higher education institutions in the country that were providing educational opportunities for adult learners even before the pandemic.

In terms of technical and vocational training, the TOP has also experienced growth since its inception in 2012; so far, over half a million learners have completed an online course, reaching even Filipinos outside the country, as over 90,000 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their dependents registered for the programme (Agub, 2020). The recent development of Mobile-based Enhancement Learning Material (MELMA) for the A&E programme demonstrates the promise of adjusting e-learning for mobile-based learning (Villenes, Igliane-Villenes & Alcaraz, 2018), as more Filipinos have mobile phones than personal computers or laptops.

5.4 Similarities and differences among Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines

Table 1: Similarities and differences among Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines

	Policy Formulation	Practices	Challenges to E-learning implementation
		SIMILARITIES	
Italy	Central State provides general rules of education Regions have concurrent legislative power in the field of adult and vocational education	ICT in ALE and HE accelerated during pandemic Operate open distance continuing education Open University and conventional universities	Poor internet connectivity due to low broadband in some areas Trainers and educators not all ready for online delivery

(Continuing table 1)

	Policy Formulation	**Practices**	**Challenges to E-learning implementation**
	EU initiated key competencies of lifelong learning UNESCO provided ICT competency framework for teachers	operate open distance continuing education	Affordability of internet access
Nigeria	Federal Ministry of Education formulates policies for education States have concurrent legislative power on education SDGs of UN influenced National Policy on ICT	ICT in ALE and HE accelerated during pandemic Operate open distance continuing education Open University and conventional universities operate open distance continuing education	Poor internet connectivity due to differences in the provision of broadband by institutions and organisations as well as low broadband in rural areas. Trainers and educators not trained for online or blended delivery Lack of infrastructure: hardware and software Affordability of internet access
Philippines	Newly-established Bureau of Alternative Education to oversee ALS in the country	ICT in ALE and HE accelerated during pandemic Open University and conventional universities operate open distance continuing education	Poor internet connectivity due to insufficient infrastructure Lack of infrastructure: hardware and software Affordability of internet access
DIFFERENCES			
Italy	Ministry of University and Research provides regulations for Universities and Continuing Education	All education activities moved online Adult education promoted by CPIA autonomous educational institutions	Training initiatives for teachers and staff Resources provided at all levels Tools, competencies, content, training, and support for implementation provided
Nigeria	NUC provides regulations for universities. NMEC provides regulations for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non- Formal Education	Blended mode was adopted Adult education promoted and run by Universities and Agencies supervised by the Ministry of Education	Lack of tools, competencies, and support for implementation Poor implementation of ICT Policy Eclectic electricity supply
Philippines	Adult Education trifocalised – three government agencies which operate independent of each other	No existing law or institution to oversee ALE All agencies operate independent of each other	Lack of infrastructure

The three countries demonstrate similarities in terms of cost of internet access and poor connectivity, but while Nigeria and the Philippines lack the infrastructure, Italy experiences unequal access to the internet due to poor broadband connections in certain areas. In terms of differences, Italy and Nigeria have a more centralised system overseeing the country's ALE, while the Philippines has a trifocalised system that could affect policy implementation in general. The three countries also adopted different strategies for ALE to operate during the pandemic.

6 Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 forced educational institutions to suspend their academic face-to-face educational activities, making schools and universities adopt e-learning in early 2020, thus showing the gap between the traditional and new approach of teaching and learning, which is more technology-based. This study sought to investigate and compare the level of online learning preparedness in adult education in terms of policy formulation, practices, and challenges of e-learning implementation in Italy, Nigeria, and the Philippines. At all levels, there are some similarities in the three countries, but also some stark differences (see table 1).

Policy formulation

The three countries, in diverse ways, focus their attention on adult educational policy formulation: in Italy and in Nigeria the systems seem to be more normed and centralised, compared to the Philippines where AE policy is less coordinated. This can be explained in that both Italy (directly) and Nigeria (indirectly) are influenced by lifelong learning and permanent education EU policies. Due to Italy's role in the EU, it always embraces European educational recommendations. Nigeria may be facilitated not only by its geographic position that allows it to look up easily to Europe, but also by the influence of international organisations (such as UNESCO).

Practices

Many institutions in Italy practised online learning for various purposes even before the pandemic. In Nigeria, ICTs have been used for distance learning and open universities. In the Philippines, ICTs are used to support both initial and post-initial education with TESDA Online Program (TOP) for educational resources. However, the urgent and complete transformation of teaching and learning has required the wide use of online learning models in the three countries. Inevitably, policies also had a strong impact on practices during the emergency. In fact, even if the acceleration of online teaching/learning modes was registered in each country, it was normed in different ways. In Italy, a quick and new policy reaction moved all educational systems and activities online, providing resources, tools, training, and support for the changes required. In the Philippines, while guidelines were established, they depended greatly on the institution (whether public or private) and the support of the local government units. In

Nigeria, the Federal Government just issued a directive, institutions determined how the directive was followed depending on availability of facilities.

Challenges

The pandemic revealed both the countries' ability to face emergencies – and also their weaknesses, as the urgent need to spread distance education strategies highlighted their vulnerability. In Italy, despite the good policies (at mega-macro, and sometimes meso levels), the pandemic soon showed the big differences among areas in terms of resource investment, professionals' digital competencies and levels of policy implementation. Policies did not provide the expected outcomes in all areas: some areas responded in an excellent way, some others revealed old unsolved Italian problems, which include the different regional cultural systems, the lack of a national and compulsory training policy for professionals of education, and even an individualistic attitude. In the other two countries, next to the low level of digital abilities, the real problem seems to be the lack of infrastructure, hardware, and software, because of economic issues. In the Philippines, there also seems to be fragmentation in the government offices overseeing adult education. While the study found that efforts to incorporate ICTs in ALE were accelerated in all three countries due to the pandemic, many barriers still need to be overcome to enable a sustainable online learning environment in ALE.

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Appendix

Table 2: List of data sources

Type of document	Country	Title
Law n.107/2015	Italy	Riforma del sistema nazionale di istruzione e formazione e delega per il riordino delle disposizioni legislative vigenti. (Reform of the national education and training system. (https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/07/15/15G00122/sg)
National Plan of Digital School (PNSD) (MIUR, 2015)	Italy	Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale (PNSD) https://www.miur.gov.it/scuola-digitale
Rectors Consortium of Italian Universities (CRUI's research)	Italy	MOOCs MASSIVE OPEN ON-LINE COURSES Prospettive e Opportunità per l'Università italiana (2015) https://www.crui.it/images/allegati/pubblicazioni/2015/mooc_2015.pdf
Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers, March 4th 2020 (DPCM)	Italy	Measures regarding the containment and management of the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19 at a national level (2020)
EPALE-Indire	Italy	https://www.indire.it/progetto/epale/
Book written by Educators in Department of Adult Education University of Lagos	Nigeria	Adult education and development. Lagos: Edittext Publishers Ltd. (2010).
National Policy on ICTs	Nigeria	National Policy on Information and Communication Technologies in Education Adamu, A. (2019) https://education.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/NATIONAL-POLICY-ON-ICT-IN-EDUCATION-2019.pdf
National Open University Act No 6 of 1983	Nigeria	National Open University of Nigeria (2022). About us. https://nou.edu.ng/
Department of Education	Philippines	Alternative Learning System Version 2.0 Strategic Roadmap 2017–2022 https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/02142020_als_roadmap_maroon.pdf
ALS Strategic Plan	Philippines	Alternative Learning System 2.0 ICT Strategic Plan 2022–2026 https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ALS-Strategic-Plan-V6-Final-Web.pdf
UNICEF Report 2021	Philippines	Barriers to Access and Complete the Alternative Learning System Among Adolescents in the Philippines https://www.unicef.org/philippines/media/2571/file/UNIPH-2021-ALS-research-brief.pdf

(Continuing table 2)

Type of document	Country	Title
DepEd Order No. 047 s.2021	Philippines	Creation of the Bureau of Alternative Education in the Department of Education https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DO_s2021_047.pdf
Republic Act No. 11510	Philippines	Alternative Learning System Act https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/12dec/20201223-RA-11510-RRD.pdf
ALS Research Agenda	Philippines	Alternative Learning System Research Agenda 2022–2026 https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/12222021_ALS_Research-Agenda.pdf

Digital Competence Development in Higher Education – Political Influence and Student Experiences in Portugal and Italy

Marica Liotino, João Paulo Costa, Daniela Rocha Bicalho, Lívia da Cruz, Hannah Hassinger

Abstract

The digital transformation of our societies brings new possibilities and new challenges. To shape this transformation in a self-determined and reflexive manner, digital competencies are necessary. The education system in general, and adult education in particular, are addressed as relevant social spaces for acquiring these competencies and considering how educators develop them. We analyse strategies for digital competence development against the backdrop of the interplay of different levels of policy making. First, European guidelines (mega level) are analysed and, then, the national (macro level) governmental strategies are studied. We present findings from interviews with adult education students on the development of their digital competencies (micro level). To analytically differentiate the impact of policies at these levels, we conduct an international comparison of two European Union countries (Portugal and Italy). Drawing on Egetenmeyer (2016), categories of comparison are developed, the two country cases are juxtaposed, and the commonalities and differences are interpreted. Our results contribute to academic reflection on national characteristics in digitalisation discourse and enrich the practical development of strategies.

Keywords: digitalisation, digital competencies, policies, higher education, Portugal, Italy

1 Introduction

When considering new possibilities for our societies, digital transformation is a part of that scenario, but it can also mean new challenges for people (European Commission, 2022a). As Martin (2008) has confirmed, technology has produced immense changes in the economic, political, cultural, and social structures of the planet, itself becoming part of the process of change it has triggered. Technology is present in various contexts of our lives. It is pertinent to global strategies for online communication, e-governmental actions, policies, and strategies for digitalisation. New technologies offer perspectives on how to appropriate, enjoy, shape, and use the opportunities offered by the digital to promote the development of society.

Shifts in technology (communication equipment, technological tools, devices that enable connectivity) have modulated how people work, learn, participate, and live. They require appropriate skills and the organisation and promotion of learning, providing for the digitalisation of education. In this environment "learning comes to be understood, based on an ecosystemic logic in which human actors and diverse entities (which digitisation gave voice) dialogue and, in a process of interdependence, they build an intelligent ecology" (Schlemmer, Felice & Serra, 2020, p. 12).

Knowledge and skills are, therefore, fundamental social resources, which are present in the digitisation of education. As suggested by Tømte, Fossland, Asmodt, & Degn (2019), this process involves several quality aspects, including organisational issues, technological infrastructure, and pedagogical approaches, which are hosted by online and flexible educational programmes. The same authors have drawn attention to "how external and internal processes of digitalisation might influence teaching and learning in higher education institutions (...and) how political processes and governmental decisions might influence governance within higher education institutions as regards digitalisation" (pp. 111–112).

For this study, two research questions were addressed: (1) What are the indications and initiatives at European and national level concerning the development of digital competencies? and (2) How have students developed their digital competencies?

This paper focuses on digital competences in adult education in higher education with a view to recommended actions. The study explores how students of adult education acquire these competences in Portugal and Italy and how this reinforces the European Commission digitisation goals. There are various possibilities for the development of learning linked to the digitalisation of education. This perception may be conditioned by the way some concepts are appropriated. The next section focuses on the delimitation of three basic terminologies. After the definitions, the methodological approach is described. In a first step, the literature review of national policies and EU strategies is reviewed as a basis for the comparison of Portugal and Italy. In a second step, the methodological approach of the content analysis is explained. In Chapter 4, the country comparison of Portugal and Italy is discussed. First, the national policies are analysed and juxtaposed, and then the results of the content analysis are presented. The results of the empirical part are interpreted in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 concludes the article with a discussion of the results and an outlook on future research questions.

2 Terminology: Digital Competences, Digital Skills, and Digital Literacy

A minimum requirement is that individuals can recognise and exploit the functionality of the technological resources to which they have access. The majority of adults are not prepared for new challenges in the digital and technological offerings of the contemporary world, and risk being excluded from obtaining good jobs and accessing active citizenship, public services, or medical care. This is especially the case for people at risk of

social exclusion (Duda & Dziurzyński, 2019). Another example of this risk of being excluded is related to the experience of 2020 and 2021 with the Covid-19 pandemic situation. Professors and students at universities looked for methodologies, tools, virtual education rooms, and other digital strategies to continue with formal classes. Everybody needed to know something about digital technology and to have access to the internet. This situation "highlighted the need for a comprehensive view of the pedagogy of online education (digitalisation of education) that integrates technology to support teaching and learning" (Flores & Swennen, 2020, p. 454).

Technology is a challenge faced by individuals who need to adapt to the complexity of a digitally permeated society. They often have to bring their individual resources and adaptive spirit into play. Furthermore, "understanding the essential phenomena of digital technologies in society, and in one's own life, and the motivation to participate in the digital world as an active actor" is required for different levels and contexts in digital competencies and skills (Ilomäki, Paavola, Lakkala & Kantosalo, 2016, p. 670).

A debate has emerged around definitions among experts and between disciplines on the subject. Some have focused more on operational skills (Van Deursen, 2010, 2014). Others have concentrated on new technologies, such as data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, security, and problem-solving (Vuorikari, Punie, Carretero & Van den Brande, 2016). There is no uniformity in the terms to be used. Some authors use digital competence, others use digital skills or digital literacy (Ilomäki et al., 2016) and there is no consensus with definitions. In the broad framework of the theory of digital competencies, digital skills, and digital literacy, three referential definitions guide the discussion in this study.

Ilomäki and colleagues (2016) define digital competencies as:

> the skills and practices needed to use new technologies meaningfully and as a tool for learning, work, and leisure, understanding the essential phenomena of digital technologies in society and in one's own life, and the motivation to participate in the digital world as an active and responsible actor. (p. 670)

Here, digital competencies are associated with different contexts in society, and with different activities in professional or private life, highlighting the importance of everyone taking up a relationship with the digital world. This definition concurs with the definition in the *Digital Competence Framework for Citizens of the European Commission*: "Digital Competence can be broadly defined as the confident, critical, and creative use of ICT to achieve goals related to work, employability, learning, leisure, inclusion and/or participation in society" (Vuorikari, Kluzer & Punie, 2022, p. 2).

Digital skills mainly relate to practical and technical actions when using digital tools and devices (Ilomäki et al., 2016). They are sub-elements of digital competence and include, for example:

> finding information on the web, word processing and document preparation, electronic communication, creation and manipulation of digital images, use of spreadsheets, creation of presentations, publishing on the web, creation and use of databases, simulations

> and modelling, desktop publishing, digital and interactive games, production of multimedia objects, and mastery of digital learning environments. (Martin, 2008, p. 171)

Digital literacy corresponds to:

> [...] awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process (Martin, 2008, p. 167).

Digital literacy is described by Martin (2008) as a level superior to digital competences. He argues that it is the result of the use of technology contextualised to the professional or disciplinary sphere and of digital transformation through innovation and creativity. It corresponds to a broader relationship between people and digital tools. Beyond functional interaction, people can make changes and visualise the effective and friendly applicability of the digital age in their lives.

If the definitions of digital literacy and digital competences are compared, there is an overlap, and they cannot be clearly distinguished from each other. In this paper, the term digital competences is used. This decision follows Ilomäki and colleagues who argue that "The term as such seems to be relevant because it widens the narrower terms used earlier and integrates essential elements into a new term better suited for current phenomena" (2016, p. 670). Digital competence is the term used in EU policy papers (see above) that directly relate to learning and adult education.

3 Methodology

This paper compares the acquisition of digital competences from the perspective of two countries, Portugal, and Italy. It takes into account the influence of the international agreements of the European Union (EU); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and the European Commission. It considers the views of postgraduate students. The research concept was based on a systematic comparison used in the COMPALL and INTALL Winter Schools on Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning programmes. As a result of the measures put in place to curb the spread of Covid-19, including the online migration of universities, much attention was paid to online learning and the digital competencies of teachers and learners. The present international, comparative research, such as this research on adult and continuing education, can offer greater understanding of the learning contexts in which adults develop and apply digital competencies. This study explores the effects of policy strategies undertaken by two European nations and offers important insights for educational providers and institutions on how to support digital competency acquisition processes.

A systematic research-based comparison, according to Egetenmeyer (2020, p. 19) requires "critical and detailed reflection on (1) the object of the comparison, (2) the field of comparative research, and (3) the categories of the comparison". This author also underlines that "if people are compared by age, gender, or nationality, people are assigned to socially created boxes. For researchers, it is highly important therefore to reflect on the social realities and consequences their research may create by defining comparative categories" (Egetenmeyer, 2020, p. 24).

The object of study is related to digital competences in adult education and lifelong learning in higher education. The field of comparison is the governmental programmes adopted in Portugal and Italy and the perception of students from the PhD and master's programmes in education at the University of Lisbon (Portugal) and the University of Padua (Italy). The data collection occurred through document analysis (mainly policy papers) and interpreting 15 interviews conducted in January 2022 at the two universities.

Structured interviews were conducted with Portuguese and Italian postgraduate students to reveal the participants' perceptions of their digital competence development journey. The interviews were conducted with nine MA students and six PhD students enrolled in different areas of education degrees in Portugal and Italy, as shown below (Tab. 1). The research group took ethical aspects into consideration, such as preserving interviewees' identities and avoiding extensive and invasive questions. The real names of participants were not revealed, and, to ensure their anonymity, nicknames were used (authors adhered to the code of ethics of the EU and preserved the anonymity of all participants (cf. All European Academies (ALLEA) 2017).

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of interviewees (N=15)

Participant	country	age	gender	occupation
Francisco	Portugal	30	M	Doctoral student
Cátia	Portugal	26	F	Doctoral student and worker
Mónica	Portugal	23	F	Master's student
Raquel	Portugal	36	F	Master's student
Catarina	Portugal	73	F	Doctoral student and worker
Cecília	Portugal	63	F	Master's student and retired
Rita	Portugal	43	F	Doctoral student
Maria	Portugal	39	F	Doctoral student
Stefania	Italy	27	F	Master's student and worker
Giuseppe	Italy	23	M	Master's student
Beatrice	Italy	23	F	Master's student and worker
Valeria	Italy	34	F	Master's student and worker

(Continuing table 1)

Participant	country	age	gender	occupation
Pietro	Italy	27	M	Master's student
Marta	Italy	39	F	Master's student and worker
Sara	Italy	47	F	Doctoral student and worker

The students were interviewed separately using various online conference tools and by different interviewers, who previously agreed on five main, semi-structured questions based on the second research question.

1) How did you acquire the digital skill you use today?
2) What do you understand as "digital skills"?
3) Do you think your digital skills are sufficient for what you need to do (in your studies/in pedagogical practice in the future)?
4) Is there anything in your learning process of digital skills you believe could be done differently?
5) Was there a moment during your background when digital skills played an important role in your studies/work/life?

Text analysis was conducted on transcriptions of the interviews by the authors with the support of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Answers were analysed using the categories methods. This method classifies and organises similar answers and codifies them by content analysis (Bardin, 1977) with an agreed codebook. The results are presented later in the article.

Deductive categories based on the research question guided the data collection process. During data analysis, the categories were slightly modified by taking emerging data into consideration and following an inductive process indicated by Charters and Hilton (1989). The categories identified were period, context, and mode of digital competences development, digital competence definition, individual evaluation of competences, and recommendations for the digital competence development process.

The three-step model proposed by Egetenmeyer (2020) guided the data analysis process. Descriptive juxtaposition using deductive categories was the first step to identify the similarities and differences descriptively. An analytical juxtaposition followed "by mirroring the research fields against each other" (p. 27); arriving at the ends of that process through the modification of categories based on inductive processes; undertaking analytical interpretation highlighting the characteristics of the research fields to search for reasons generating the differences and similarities in the two research contexts.

4 Comparison of Portugal and Italy

Two UNESCO directors have emphasised the importance of developing digital skills in a European context where "90 % of jobs require some level of digital skills, while more than a third of the workforce has extremely limited capacity to use ICTs productively" (UNESCO, 2017, ii). Inclusion and equity are expressed by the slogan "Leave No One Behind" which was a resounding message from the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development towards inclusive and fair quality education and lifelong learning for all (UNESCO, 2019).

Digital competence is one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning defined by the European Commission. Due to the particular importance of digital competences, a study was carried out on behalf of the EU in 2013, which aimed to clarify which knowledge and skills constitute digital competence. It was entitled The *Digital Competence Framework for Citizens* (DigComp). This framework is an "EU-wide tool to improve citizens' digital competence, help policymakers formulate policies that support digital competence building, and plan education and training initiatives to improve the digital competence of specific target groups" (Vuorikari et al., 2022, p. 2). Used as a tool to identify the level of digital proficiency of a citizen, DigComp can aid government action by identifying information for correlation between job skills or developing training and education to improve people's digital competence. As described on the EU Science Hub (European Commission, 2022b) page in Portugal, the Ministry of Education uses DigComp as an input for teachers' professional development. It was translated by the Centre for Research in Didactics and Technology in Training of Trainers in Portugal. In Italy, it was translated by the Italian Digital Agenda to be implemented as part of its public policy strategy to redesign courses and materials. This strategy was an e-inclusion initiative by the *Pane e Internet* project to promote the development of citizens' digital skills and an online tool to measure people's readiness for employment by a nongovernmental initiative.

Based on these strategies, the Digital Skills Indicator (DSI) was developed, which is used to monitor the digital economy and society (DESI). This report shows how, among other factors, human capital, digital skills, and technological advancements are changing and are used by the European Commission to measure digital progress. The DESI report is organised into four key areas: human capital, connectivity, digital technology integration, and digital public services. It is possible to observe the DESI data (Fig. 1) for 2021, which draws attention to "how policy processes and government decisions can influence" (Tømte et al., 2019, pp. 111–112) the way member states interpret and engage with developing the digital skills of the population.

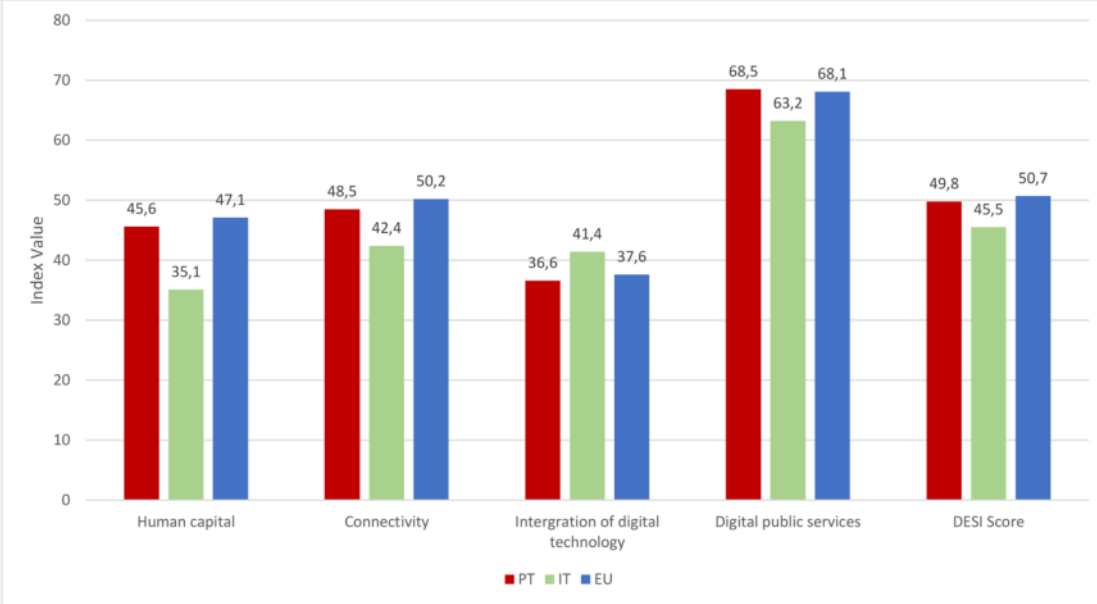

Figure 1: Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2021 ranking (Source: European Commission (2021), p. 19. accentuation by the authors)

Figure 1 presents the index values of Portugal, Italy, and the European Union. Both Portugal and Italy are below the European average. Analysis of the reports on Portugal and Italy show a relative alignment of digital public services progress in both countries. This alignment meets the framework of the policy guidelines set by the EU in the priorities estimated between 2019 and 2024 (EU, 2022) regarding the preparation of the European territory for the digital era. The priorities include an interest in joining the digital transformation process with the corresponding rules and investments and expanding the availability of access to digital public services (EU, 2022).

Progress on the other three categories (human capital, connectivity, and digital technology integration) occur differently in the two countries. Portugal has developed better in the human capital category and Italy has made some progress in the coverage and uptake of connectivity networks and in the digital technology integration category, pushed by Italian companies' digital performance.

4.1 Digitalisation on the National Level in Portugal and Italy

The development of the population's digital competences is also present in EU discussions. This issue can be identified in the set of categories established by the DESI data (2021) and the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027). There is also a concern over preparing information and communication technology (ICT) specialists and graduates (EU, 2021).

Figures 2 and 3 present the EU (56 % of the population has basic digital skills, 4.3 % ICT specialists, and 3.9 % ICT graduates); Portugal (52 % of the population has basic digital skills, 4 % ICT specialists, and 2.3 % ICT graduates); and Italy (42 % of the population has basic digital skills, 3.6 % ICT specialists, and 1.3 % ICT graduates).

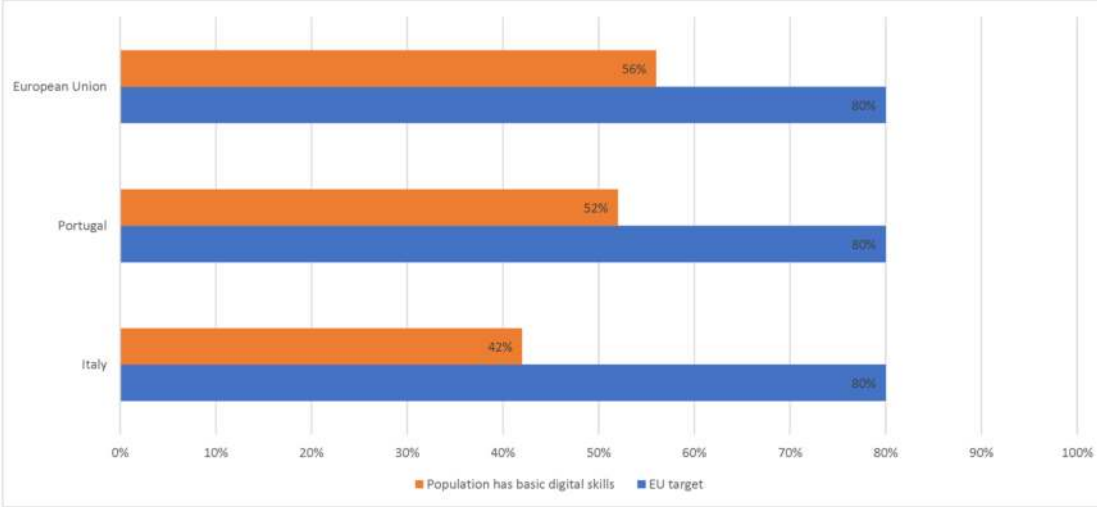

Figure 2: Percentage of population with basic digital skills in EU, Portugal, and Italy. (Source: Own representation based on DESI (2021) data.)

The strategy outlined by the European Commission is to equip at least 80 % of the population with basic digital skills by 2030.

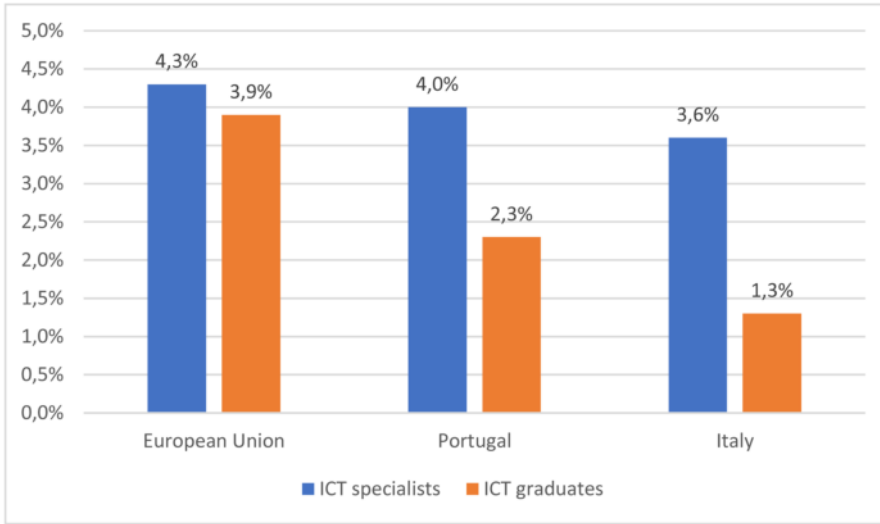

Figure 3: Percentage of ICT specialists and graduates in EU, Portugal, and Italy. (Source: Own representation based on DESI (2021) data.)

The Portugal DESI report demonstrates that Portuguese policy focuses on digital skills training. Portugal, in 2021, has increased the number of ICT specialists, and the proportion of female ICT specialists is above the EU average. Its performance in basic digital skills is below the EU average, it has individuals with advanced digital skills above the EU average. The percentage of Portuguese companies with at least a basic level of digital intensity is 51 %, while the EU average is 60 %.

The Italian DESI report shows that the country is significantly behind other EU countries in terms of human capital and has low levels of basic and advanced digital skills. The need to reduce the large gaps in acquired digital skills prompted Italy to release its first National Strategy for Digital Skills in 2020, which contains over 100 specific actions and sets ambitious goals for 2025. And in contrast to Portugal (Fig. 4), most Italian small and medium-sized enterprises (69 %) have at least a basic level of digital intensity, a share well above the EU average (60 %).

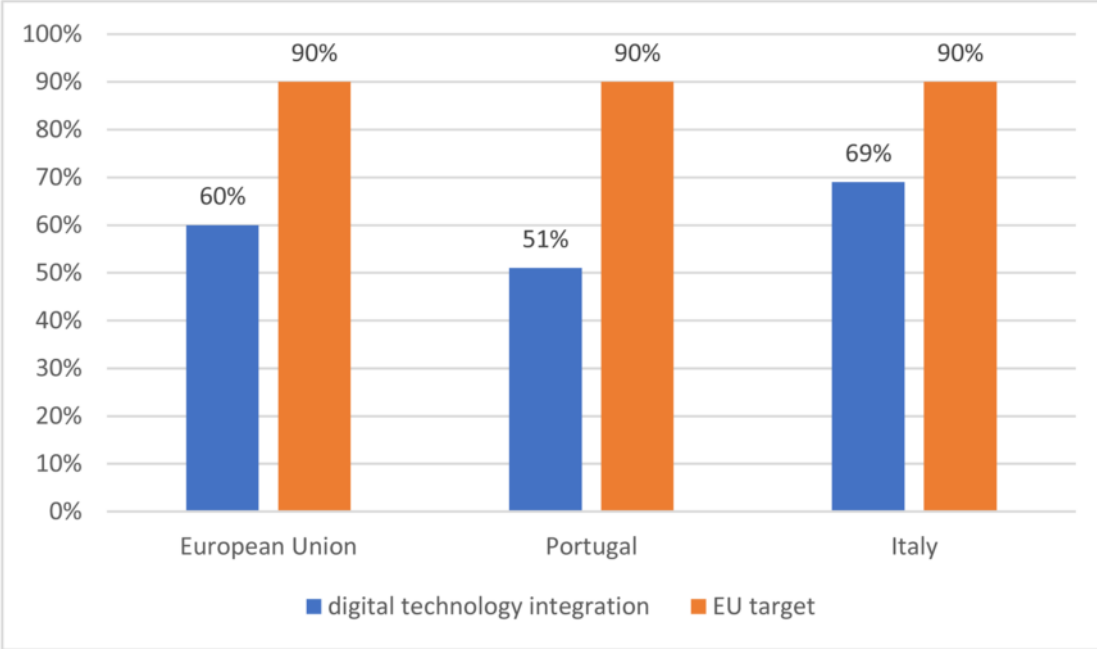

Figure 4: Percentage of digital technology integration in EU, Portugal and Italy. (Source: Own representation based on DESI (2021) data.)

This situation motivates a reflection on the relation people have with digital technology, and how this relationship could be an impulse for social, economic, and educational development, and particularly the process of digitalisation in the university. Following this reflection, the macro dimension, which is related to the national context, is considered, and some governmental programmes of the EU member states, Portugal and Italy, are presented.

In Portugal, the National Plan for Digital Transition was approved in 2020, which has digital inclusion as a priority and offers training for the development of digital skills in several domains, including education (European Commission, 2021). The plan's pillars are the digital empowerment of people, the digital transformation of companies, and the digitisation of the state. In education, the plan aims to enhance digital capacity and inclusion, focusing on professional qualifications, requalification, and digital literacy inclusion. The Portuguese scenario also includes the National Digital Competences Initiative e.2030'-Portugal INCoDe.2030, an integrated public policy to enhance and foster digital competences, created in 2017, which aims to "respond to the

challenges of ensuring digital literacy and inclusion for the exercise of citizenship; stimulate expertise in digital technologies and applications for employment qualification and a higher value-added economy, and produce new knowledge in international cooperation" (INCoDe.2030, 2022).

Some programmes implemented by the country to improve the DESI's Portuguese outcomes aim to support initiatives to increase a young parcel in higher education (or not) and reinforce its commitment with the EU throughout the next decade. These programmes are *Progama Nacional Jovem+ Digital*; *Impulso Adults*; *Impulso Jovens STEAM*; UPSKILL: Digital Skills & Jobs.

Since the enactment of the Lisbon Strategy of 2000–2010, a series of reforms have followed in Italy. These reforms, such as the Berlinguer Reform, 2001 (Law 30/2000), were aimed at acquiring technological tools for teachers and classrooms. The Moratti Reform (2003) paid attention to the acquisition of technical skills for the use of technology by students and teachers, which will lead to the proliferation of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). Many other reforms have followed, keeping the technological equipment of school classrooms as the goal. However, looking at data from the INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Educational System of Education and Training) questionnaires on teachers for the period 2014–2017, despite substantial money and resources being allocated to the purchase of technological devices in schools, there has been slow growth in their use as teaching support tools. In 2015, the Programme for International Student Assessment promoted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development through the OECD-PISA survey 2012 highlighted that Italian students "do not learn how to plan and execute a search, how to evaluate the usefulness of information, or how to assess the credibility of sources" (OECD, 2015). Italy's April 2020 stability programme further reiterated the need to introduce tools to encourage digital diffusion, acceleration of the process of technological innovation and digitisation, use of IT goods and services and connectivity between citizens and businesses, and simplification of tools for accessing the online services of the public administration. They also pointed out that the Covid-19 emergency had made manifest the need to accelerate this digitisation process (Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, 2020, p. 15).

In December 2020, the Italian government developed an operational plan for the National Strategy for Digital Competencies (Ministro per l'innovazione tecnologica e la transizione digitale, 2020), which includes higher education institutions. The programme aims to increase the number of students enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, the percentages of higher education subjects with advanced digital skills, and the gender gap percentages of the ICT specialists. These increases can provide support measures for scientific research and activation of PhD programmes in digital and ICT subjects and on the digital divide; improve school-university connections, to promote STEM courses; and promote open learning initiatives and other actions. The actions implemented by Portugal INCoDe.2030 started in 2017 have increased the number of ICT specialists in the country. Italy's initiatives, which only started in 2020, have not yet been reflected in the percentages. According to

Duda and Dziurzyński (2019), the educational system must support the population in digital competencies development. This was observed and recorded in Portugal and Italy, with the empirical information focused at the meso level.

4.2 The Perspective of Portuguese and Italian Students

The answers of the participants (N=15) are presented according to the categories of comparison they inform. The categories were period, context and mode of digital competences development, digital competence definition, individual evaluation of digital competences, recommendations for the digital competence development process.

Regarding digital competence development, most students stated they were self-taught, stimulated by the tasks to accomplish in bachelor's and master's courses, in daily experiences and challenges, and forced by the measures put in place to contain the pandemic (isolation and use of online teaching modes). Some were influenced by family interests, while others took the comparison with more experienced people as an opportunity to enhance their digital knowledge and practices. Only a small amount of teaching was devoted to acquiring these skills in secondary school, and a few interviewees attended courses outside the school and academic tracks (professional training and a European patent).

When participants were asked about how they acquired the digital competence they currently used (*mode of digital competences development*) most said they developed it by themselves and through their daily experiences and challenges.

> Sara: "(..) I did not follow courses and so simply through experience (...)."

> Francisco: "Perhaps, the digital skills are much related to my natural curiosity and my aptitude since I was a child, for everything was related to computers and the internet. (...) if someone asks me: How I developed it? I'd answer it was by my self-interest about the theme and for all digital things."

The participants' answers also elucidated that they considered sharing experiences with specialists and with people with more experience and the influence of the family to have been important in the development of their digital skills.

> Sara: "(...) sharing with people more experienced than me who shared with me what they knew and helped me in using them."

> Cátia: "(...) Information coming from specialised people allows us to get a better understanding about several subjects. Because of it, I'd do more formations."

> Cecília: "From training in the professional sphere, son and daughter subsidy, and friends."

> Valeria: "(...) then definitely by personal passion and familiarity because at home I have a dad who has always been passionate about technology."

Regarding *place and context of digital competences development*, some participants emphasised they had developed their digital skills during their master's degree, with little training in secondary education, and mainly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> Pietro: "some of the modules of the master's degree course were devoted to this, above all in the *magistral* they have explained some instruments (...)."

> Mónica: "In the third cycle of schooling, I learnt to master some Microsoft tools, namely PowerPoint, Word, and Excel. Besides that, I had contact with the Python programming language (although very remotely) and ASPEN (which is a simulator used a lot in chemical engineering) in college (...)."

> Beatrice: "(...) with the pandemic, I had to learn how to follow courses and take exams online; and the current course I am attending gives me a lot of project work for which digital skills are essential."

Respondents also evaluated the adequacy of their skills *(individual evaluation of digital competences)* in relation to their needs in different spheres of life (labour, private, and student life). A few of the interviewees said that they did not have sufficient digital skills, while most said they were sufficient for what they needed to do, although in the future they were likely to upgrade them to align with new challenges and needs that may arise.

> Beatrice: "For the moment I can manage, I should certainly implement them because I have a basic level. I think this upgrade will happen spontaneously when I enter the job market."

> Maria: "I understand that for what I do today, they are enough, but digital technologies, the tools we use, change a lot and possibly when I start teaching again, I will need to study more and research more other tools. (...) I don't know if what I know today will be enough for the future in this way, because it is very fast, very dynamic."

They explained the relevance of digital competence in their private, student, PhD, and working lives, highlighting the unexpected needs related to the pandemic period, as shown in the following answers.

> Pietro: "also in the informal moments they have served me to do a lot of things that are like also to meet people I could not see at the moment and therefore we used platforms to connect us. In short, to meet people and to connect us in the period of the pandemic."

> Marta: "even during this period of pandemic, it was really, not only those I had and implemented since my higher education studies but also the ability for problem-solving was essential. Like zoom[...] if I hadn't known how to use the tools, I wouldn't have seen my family at all."

Concerning the meaning given by the participants to digital competence (*digital competence definition*), the participants' answers revealed that they mainly related it to using

technological tools and devices, but they also highlighted the importance of using them responsibly.

> Maria: "(..) I think it is the ability to use digital tools to do your daily activities but not only for work activities and for your communication."

> Rita: "(...) it is the ability to use skills and knowledge to use digital tools that are technological."

> Stefania: "(...) it not only allows you to use a computer device but also allows you to use it critically. (..) includes technical skills (use of e-mail, the office package, social networks), but also those of a critical/analytical type (knowing how to distinguish between true and fake news, knowing netiquette, knowing how to find and analyse scientific articles, knowing how to protect our privacy online and our personal data) (...)."

> Marta: "(...) it is to have learning outcomes in autonomy and responsibility, it is not enough to know how to use them practically but above all to use them responsibly."

They also define it as in-depth knowledge related to tools and devices.

> Valeria: "(...) have proficiency and knowledge of computers and smartphones and the programmes and applications that can be used in them."

> Beatrice: "The set of knowledge, skills, and behaviours that enable me to manoeuvre in specific situations through the use of telematic tools, with digital techniques and strategies, to arrive at a solution to a problem."

> Francisco: "(...) they are those skills that allow us to get along with the technological evolution challenges we realise nowadays, and those skills also allow us knowledge about how to research, understand the process, deeper knowledge in those topics, so that something won't be a barrier, but it'll be a challenge easily overcome if we have those digital skills."

Some of the interviewees also understood that information research, selection, and management were very much related to digital competence.

> Cátia: "(...) about research and information selection as in the producing and digital content communication and also the equipment manipulation."

> Raquel: "(...) includes online searches, social networks, and various work tools (Microsoft Office for example)."

Still related to digital competence, some students mentioned the relevance of using devices and technological skills in an ethical and critical manner.

Finally, the analysis aimed to understand what, in the perception of the interviewees, could have been done differently in their learning process and asked for their *recommendations for the digital competence development process*. Most believed that courses that support the development of digital skills should be introduced in basic education,

drawing attention to its importance and raising students' awareness of it. They also highlighted the importance of attending specialised courses and maintaining computer proficiency.

> Mónica: "I feel that already at the time when I was in the third cycle and knowing the implications that technology would have in the near future (...) even because I felt, in college (where I had my first big contact with this world of programming), there was a big gap between the content and what I really knew how to apply. Precisely, I believe, for not having previously exercised that same logical thinking and consequent projection in programming. There was a gap in the bridge: project and applicability in real life (...)."

> Beatrice: "If I had realised their importance earlier, when I had more free time, I would have undertaken some dedicated training."

> Valeria: "(...) there was a time when I wasn't attending college that I used the computer really infrequently and I focused mostly on my phone and lost computer dexterity (...)."

5 Interpretation

Despite the expectations developed, the analysis of the different political choices and strategies of the two countries under consideration demonstrated that there were not any substantial differences in the conferral of meaning, the process of development, and the practice of digital competence between Portuguese and Italian students. The data was presented in the previous section. All students agreed on the importance of acquiring digital competence for living in social, educational, and work contexts. Most would have changed something in their development path, as the perception was that they had formed themselves. What most distinguished the respondents was the period of life in which they developed these skills. Younger people (who mostly coincided with the Italian students) had increased their skills as a response to the stimuli they received mostly in secondary school and in their bachelor's and master's degree courses. Older people had increased these skills in their work and research lives. Older respondents relied more on help from more experienced people, while younger respondents more frequently reported developing skills with peers and individually.

The pandemic situation accelerated all these development processes, but it was a particular influence on the Italian respondents. It was mostly younger students who suggested the introduction of digital competence development courses into formal pathways. The older students considered training initiatives sufficient. They saw competence development as taking advantage of different opportunities for competence development. Interviewees showed advanced knowledge of digital skills. Some of them interpret digital competences not only as a development of knowledge and skills on digital tools and devices, but also as ethical and critical aspects of using technology.

Unexpectedly, although Portugal has implemented policies aimed at increasing digital competence, both Portuguese and Italian students equally require more support from higher education institutions for their development (connection to national pol-

icy). Likewise, although Italian policies have been focused on digitisation of schools, students attach limited importance to the development of digital skills in the basic education period. Initiatives at academic levels (*ad hoc* teachings for students and training courses aimed at academic staff) were more frequently reported. Scholarly research has also emphasised European departmental and academic initiatives (top-down processes) as a response to the paucity of policies and strategies for curricular reorganisation in relation to increased online teaching and learning (Tømte et al., 2019). Therefore, the impression is that Portuguese and Italian policies have not been accompanied and enhanced by scientific studies and expert opinions in education and digitisation but have been the result of an *a priori* protechnological innovation culture and have neglected genuine citizen support in the development of adequate skills. Confirming this, Bulman and Fairlie (2016) have pointed out that many investments in network and technological tool enhancement have a negligible result on student learning levels if they are not accompanied by specific critical training of teachers and students.

6 Conclusion

Addressing the digital transformations of society, this paper has been organised with the aim of understanding the digitalisation strategies present in higher education where students and teachers are involved. Considering the mega level, represented by the European guidelines, the policy guidelines were identified regarding the digital transformation process and how these policies are reflected in the development of the EU member countries, specifically Portugal and Italy (macro level) (EU, 2021). Based on the comparison performed, the national programmes organised in these countries in relation to higher education were presented, characterising the meso level of the strategies studied here. Both Portugal and Italy are focusing their strategies on technological innovation, on the labour market, and on the digitalisation of public services (EU, 2021). From the analysis of the documents, there is still little guidance provided to higher education institutions regarding the development of digital skills. Therefore, the complaint made in 2016 by Ilomäki and colleagues is still relevant.

> It is generally assumed that the basic competences that are important for every citizen, including digital competence, should be acquired at school. In vocational education, work-related competences are more specific, including particular competences for using technologies, although policy papers seldom focus on this level. Higher education is less bound by policy regulations, and it is often more independent from the national authorities. Digital competence is not a central topic of the curriculum at this level. It appears, furthermore, that the school level is the main object for policymakers when it comes to learning and teaching digital competence. (p. 657)

To provide answers to the research questions, the interviews revealed important aspects concerning the development of personal digital competencies in both countries, and at different ages and stages of the participants' lives. Some described this process as happening through the influence of family interests; exchanging school,

academic, or work experiences with more experienced people; during training courses; or even through self-learning and daily experiences and challenges. The participants in this part of the study also highlighted, although some had acquired their digital competencies since their school and academic life, how the period of the COVID-19 pandemic drove their need for the development of these competencies.

While the demands about the development of citizens' digital competencies emerge every day in contemporaneity, whether for the use of digital devices, mobile phone applications, managing digital content responsibly, using software in the world of work or in academic life, public policies concerned with this development by the population must always map the scenario expected. Although new generations have contact with these technologies in childhood, there must be a concern whether their use is being carried out responsibly and whether they meet what is expected of a citizen with digital competencies. Policies must also be concerned with the responsible digitalisation of the generations that have not had contact with these technologies at other stages of their lives, ensuring equity for the population.

Even with the limitations presented in this paper, such as the sample selection, the restricted number of interviewed students (which does not allow the information obtained to be generalised to the whole country) and the record of shallow information about the policy programmes developed in Portugal and in Italy, possibilities for review should be admitted in institutions.

Besides the structural investment, the relevance of a review from a pedagogical perspective has been identified since, according to Lima (2018), the professional educational offer meets the demands of the market, instrumentalises learning, and, within a perspective, can result in the fragility of the humanisation of learning.

Some directions for future research would be the development of a meso level, to provide more space for institutional-level initiatives and reduce the gap between the macro and micro levels, where the perspectives of different institutional experts (teacher, director, technicians) and politicians (minister, government, advisers) could be explored. It might also be interesting to explore the categories employed in our interviews from a national perspective, through national and statistically relevant surveys.

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ISBN: 978-3-7639-7132-9