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## THE USEFULNESS OF ADULT EDUCATION: LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE PORTUGUESE PUBLIC POLICY

### ABSTRACT

*The article first discusses the aims of lifelong learning proposed by the European Union and then analyses the reinterpretations present in the Portuguese policies of adult education in the last two decades. Finally, the influence of the European Union on policy discourses in Portugal is stressed, with increasing attention paid to the usefulness of adult education in relation to economic development and human resource management, while humanistic meanings and aims concerning critical education may be found to a lesser extent.*

**Keywords:** public policy of adult education, European Union, Portugal, lifelong learning

### UPORABNOST IZOBRAŽEVANJA ODRASLIH: VSEŽIVLJENJSKO UČENJE V EVROPSKI UNIJI IN JAVNA POLITIKA NA PORTUGALSKEM – POVZETEK

*V članku so najprej obravnavani cilji vseživljenjskega učenja, kot jih predlaga Evropska unija, v drugem delu pa so analizirane reinterpretacije portugalske politike izobraževanja odraslih v zadnjih dveh desetletjih. V sklepnih ugotovitvah je poudarjen vpliv Evropske unije na diskurz teh politik na Portugalskem, v okviru katerih vse bolj pridobiva pomen uporabnost izobraževanja odraslih v povezavi z gospodarskim razvojem in upravljanjem človeških virov, medtem ko je humanističnih pomenov in ciljev, povezanih s kritičnim izobraževanjem, vse manj.*

**Ključne besede:** Evropska unija, javna politika izobraževanja odraslih, Portugalska, vseživljenjsko učenje

## INITIAL THOUGHTS

The idea that people learn throughout life has a long history; it is even commonsensical. As far as policy documents are concerned, Condorcet already referred to lifelong learning during the French Revolution (Canário, 1999). Later, in 1919, post-First World War official documents in the United Kingdom mentioned the importance of learning throughout life as a means of developing peace, citizenship and civic involvement (Field, 2001). This idea was further developed within international organisations<sup>1</sup>, especially after the Second World War. Since then it has had a growing influence on national policies in several countries, such as Portugal (Barros, 2012; Guimarães, 2016).

Globally, Lee and Friedrich (2011) have argued that international organisations' discourses on education are based on two different understandings of human freedom: freedom of obtaining personal and private gains by the acceptance of rules and the accomplishment of objectives set in the context of capitalism; and freedom to pursue individual interests according to rules set collectively, with the aim of establishing societies in which individual aims are to be linked to societal ones. The latter understanding influenced lifelong learning in the 1960s and 1970s, specifically within UNESCO. Since the 1980s, the former understanding has been central to neoliberal policy discourses in most international organisations (Field, 2001).

International organisations have become prominent actors in adult education policy in recent decades. These organisations, such as the European Union (EU), produce guidelines that are followed more or less strictly by member-states. Lifelong learning guidelines are interesting examples of influence on national adult education policies (Field, 2006; Antunes, 2008), although there might be differences in impact among countries and regions (Jakobi, 2012). These differences may be explained by national contextual characteristics, by history and its impact on the systems and programmes of adult education. Some authors have argued that in each country (or region) there could be a reinterpretation of lifelong learning guidelines based on the specific contextual aspects that are valued in various national adult education policies (Antunes, 2008; Lima and Guimarães, 2011; Guimarães and Antunes, 2014). These reinterpretations occur due to different adult education realities, and due to national and regional specificities.

1 (1) According to Archer (2001), international (governmental) organisations have a formal existence including the setting of aims, activities and functions, membership and structure. Their material existence consists of representatives of states – these organisations are separate from states but dependent on them in terms of decisions to be taken – and they are concerned with specific issues in international relations (military, social, economic, etc.). The same author claims that the European Union has a “unique nature”; due to this reason it deserves a “complex” definition owing to the fact that it is a multi-level governance system in which states are no longer single actors at the European level of policy-making like in many other international governmental organisations. Archer argues that “[t]he EU can best be regarded as a complex that has a number of institutional forms and undertakes a variety of tasks, some familiar to many international governmental organisations, some state-like” (Archer, 2001, p. 45). Although this complexity is taken into account when discussing EU guidelines for lifelong learning, the article refers to the EU as an international organisation, owing to the fact that this analysis emphasises the aims of such guidelines and the influence they have on specific national policy documents, and not institutional forms or decision-making processes.

Additionally, in comparison with other education policies, lifelong learning often seems to be inconsistently implemented in national policies and to lack efficiency (UIL, 2009). A clear example of this situation can be seen in the heterogeneous (and purportedly insufficient) lifelong learning participation rates among European Union countries, when compared against benchmarks established by the Lisbon strategy (Lisbon European Council, 2000) and recently by Europe 2020 (European Commission, 2010).

In Portugal the influence of international organisations in adult education can be identified in the 1950s through the impact that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had on the definition and development of the National Plan of Popular Education (Teodoro, 2003; Medina, 2008). The influence of these organisations became clearer after the Democratic Revolution in 1974, when the adult education policy adopted the lifelong education (*éducation permanente*) concept in activities developed by the Permanent Education Directorate (Melo and Benavente, 1978), in line with the humanistic understanding favoured by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). In recent times, the influence of the EU on national education and training systems has been conducive to the impact of lifelong learning guidelines, especially when it comes to the influence of the European Social Fund on national programmes under development, as well as the importance of the open method of coordination, benchmarks and good practices (Guimarães and Antunes, 2014).

This article discusses the aims of lifelong learning and their influence on adult education policy. The focus is on the (non-)alignment of these aims with those of the new Portuguese adult education and training policy (Barros, 2009) adopted since 1999. The conclusion addresses the growing attention paid to the usefulness of adult education (Špolar and Holford, 2014) and the lesser influence of humanistic and critical political meanings in public policy.

In terms of methodology, the article is based on content analysis of policy documents (called “official documents”) of the European Union (EU) referring to lifelong learning and the Portuguese documents defining adult education policy. The purpose of content analysis is to infer patterns of interest in a specific text from the words used and the meanings that these words might have (Krippendorf, 1989). In this article, content analysis pertains to the discussion of documents setting aims that support the development of the EU strategy for adult learning and the national adult education policy in the last two decades.

## EU AND LIFELONG LEARNING

The analysis of EU official documents allows the argument that adult education was not a central issue at the moment of its establishment (Antunes, 2008; Rasmussen, 2014; Špolar and Holford, 2014). However, since the 1990s the EU has revealed growing concerns regarding training, education and learning, in the context of strong criticism of national education systems. In 2000, the Lisbon strategy (Lisbon European Council, 2000) included clear aims. The main aim was set as building the most dynamic and competitive

economy in the world by 2010. The economy had to be based on knowledge, guaranteeing sustainable growth, including more jobs and more social cohesion. The Lisbon strategy was based on the conviction that globalisation and the increasing importance given to information and communication technologies required the reform of national education and training systems. It also demanded more access to training and education in order to overcome high unemployment rates in many member-states (Field, 2006).

The reinforcement of economic processes would allow a more ambitious intervention of the EU than observed up until then. Innovations in national educational systems were fostered, for instance, by the introduction of the open method of coordination, a crucial element for the formulation of the organisation's policy since 2000. This method is directed at identifying and disseminating good practices, activities and programmes that might be implemented in different countries. It is also geared towards realizing EU aims in economic, social and educational domains, through the creation of benchmarks that foster the convergence of initiatives and results. It is based on a decentralised approach, in line with the subsidiarity principle, including the establishment of networks across different actors – state dependent, private or non-governmental organisations (Lee, Thyder and Madyn, 2008).

In the same year, the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2000) suggested the main aims of lifelong learning to be as follows: to promote active citizenship and vocational skills relevant to the knowledge-based society; and to foster participation in the spheres of economic and social life. These aims were linked to social policies that were directed at combining participation in different social arenas, the building of a feeling of belonging to the European society, the establishment of mechanisms of inclusion concerning employability and the promotion of the ability to find a job and to keep it. These were considered decisive conditions for the creation of a European space of education and of a society in which employment, competitiveness and prosperity, in a knowledge-based economy, were deemed essential (Antunes, 2008; Nóvoa, 2013).

Borg and Mayo (2005) claimed that individual and collective dimensions of lifelong learning were stressed in this document. However, the aims were increasingly approaching those of economic policies, which were directed at augmenting productivity and competitiveness, as well as the preservation and creation of jobs. Therefore, words and meanings referring to lifelong learning devoted to economic development were more evident. A trend based on the belief that “for each economic and social problem there would be an educational solution” (Lima, 2005, p. 45) could be observed. Education and learning were considered central features of economic growth, aiding individuals in joining the labour market. A new educational economy characterised by individualisation of knowledge was stressed. According to Olssen (2004), learning emerged as a technology that each individual could use to improve their options in life. It was supposed to promote the adaptability and mobility of workers in the labour market, and facilitate changing jobs in a specific sector of economic activity or between different sectors. It was to improve flexibility that high levels of general and technical education would facilitate. It would also

allow the development of skills, such as operational competences, along with the diminishing of legal constraints in work and employment. At the same time, it was supposed to favour the transfer of skills from the economic sphere to the social sphere (Borg and Mayo, 2005). In a new economic context influenced by globalisation, lifelong learning was to be understood as a technology that could allow flexible adaptation of people to labour market changes (Olssen, 2004): individuals would be better able to fight individually, as their own responsibility, to keep their jobs.

Education and Training 2010 (European Commission, 2004) pointed out the value of investment in human capital, revealing the importance of lifelong learning to economic development (Morgan-Klein and Osborne, 2007). It established targets to be achieved by every member-state, such as participation rates in lifelong learning of 12.5%, promoting the Europeanisation of public policies (Antunes, 2008). This target was aimed at making European systems of education a world reference and giving greater visibility to common trends of development. Among the goals established, the following were central to adult education: development of key competencies set by the EU; access to information and communication technologies; establishment of distance education; promotion of active citizenship, equality of opportunity and social cohesion; strengthening of links connecting work, research and society. To achieve these goals, several decisions were adopted and benchmarks were set to solve problems and needs identified by various member-states. There was an emphasis on the processes of monitoring and evaluation of outcomes obtained following the open method of coordination, as part of a strong call to adopt the European guidelines in national policies (Rasmussen, 2014).

Owing to poor and divergent results achieved in 2010 (Gravani and Zarifis, 2014), such as low lifelong learning participation rates in several member-states (EUROSTAT, 2015), the Lisbon strategy was relaunched with a greater stress on the aims of economic growth and employment, as well as more attention to social cohesion. The fragility of the EU agenda forced the adoption of new guidelines (Hake, 2005), which were part of the document *Adult Learning: It Is Never Too Late to Learn* (European Commission, 2006). The main argument expressed in this document included the commitment of the EU to the promotion of economic competitiveness, by means of improving the qualifications of workers. These would enable individuals to deal with increasing work requirements (for instance owing to the proliferation and increasing complexity of written information and of information and communication technologies in the workplace). Additionally, the search for solutions to the problems of demographic changes, ageing of the society and migration was stressed as well. The importance of fighting poverty and social exclusion was mentioned, due to the impact of low educational levels on unemployment, rural isolation, lack of opportunities, illiteracy, etc.. Once more, apart from social concerns, what was prominent was the economic agenda of the EU favouring those meanings of lifelong learning that concerned economic development (Morgan-Klein and Osborne, 2007).

In the wake of the economic and social crisis, several debates on the role of the EU in domains such as education and training took place after 2008. Owing to poor results

achieved in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in lifelong learning, the continuation of the existing strategy based on lifelong learning guidelines was fostered (Nóvoa, 2013). In general, the document Europe 2020 (European Commission, 2010) kept the same aims established in the Lisbon strategy (Lisbon European Council, 2000), strengthening the link connecting education, training, learning and the economy. Several goals to be achieved by the end of 2020 were pointed out, such as the development of education and learning programmes that would accomplish the following: foster worker mobility between different member-states; improve the quality and efficiency of education and training; promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; foster creativity and innovation as well as entrepreneurship. Benchmarks were established, including a lifelong learning participation rate of 15% (European Commission, 2010).

In spite of including general goals related to social cohesion and active citizenship, the Renewed Agenda for Adult Learning (European Council, 2011) reinforced the strategic aims of Education and Training 2020 (European Council, 2009), such as making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving the quality and efficiency in education and training, and including entrepreneurship at all levels of education. There was an emphasis on the development and improvement of skills and competences, such as literacy, numeracy and those related to general education as well as those specific to technical domains. As Rasmussen (2014), and Špolar and Holford (2014) argue, even if it did include other social, cultural and civic goals, it was increasing economic growth that was at the forefront once again, as part of a strong link between key skills and the instrumentalisation of adult education for economic goals. From this point of view, the reinforcement of issues concerning economic development and employment favoured the legitimisation of the political emphasis on lifelong learning with a view to adaptability and employability (Gravani and Zarifis, 2014).

Recent developments that directly concern adult education policy have included validation of non-formal and informal learning and the importance of the harmonisation of systems in each member-state. Once again, the alignment of these systems with the European Qualification Framework in order to foster individual mobility in the labour market was stressed (European Commission, Cedefop and ICF International, 2014). Additionally, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission (2015) have set priority areas and concrete issues to work on by 2020, including the following: knowledge, skills and competences developed through lifelong learning in order to promote employability (as well as innovation, active citizenship and well-being); transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to facilitate learning and labour mobility. Again there is a political emphasis on creating job opportunities but mainly on making sure that citizens acquire marketable skills (Milana and Holford, 2014).

The analysis of EU documents has allowed the identification of the importance of words and meanings connecting lifelong learning, adult education and economic development. The analysis of adult education policy in Portugal that may be found in the next section of this article shows the influence of EU guidelines for lifelong learning. After 1999

complex reinterpretations can be found justified by contextual issues reflecting the impact of the economic, social and political sectors on the definition of adult education policy. Recently, a stronger connection has been reinforced between adult education policy and the transformation of the Portuguese economy in the context of globalisation.

## **ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICY IN PORTUGAL**

Since 1974, adult education public policies in Portugal have been marked by intermittence and discontinuity (Lima, 2005). Owing to the influence of international organisations, some specific periods saw policies directed at promoting democracy and emancipation including humanistic and critical education aims. This was the case in the period between 1974 and 1976 as part of the intervention of the General Directorate of Permanent Education. After 1986 and during the 1990s, aims concerning modernisation and state control dominated public policy. This favoured the establishment of second-chance education as the main form of provision for adults who did not complete compulsory 9-year education (Lima and Guimarães, 2011).

Strongly criticising the formal education system, specifically second-chance education, the 1995 programme of the newly elected Socialist Party included a particular stress on adult education. In this programme it was claimed that adult education needed to be relaunched (Portugal, 1995). This emphasis was due to a consensus in the academia concerning the inexistence of a wide and diversified public system of adult education (Silva and Rothes, 1998). In order to fill this lack that had a strong negative impact in social and economic terms, the Task Group on the Development of Adult Education was created (Melo, Queirós, Silva, Rothes and Ribeiro, 1998). This group included individuals who had been involved in civil society organisations implementing critical education and social transformation projects; others who had developed second-chance education programmes; and some involved in continuing education and vocational training. They were the ones who defined the new adult education and training policy (Barros, 2009) as a new expression and field of policy intervention. This policy aimed at connecting education, namely educational attainment, and training, specifically professional qualifications, in innovative forms of provision (Lima and Guimarães, 2011).

This policy, adopted after 1999 by the National Agency of Adult Education and Training, reveals the influence of the European Union lifelong learning guidelines, although it still reflects some humanistic and critical education aims. The first policy document released was titled *An Educational Bet in the Participation of All*. The Strategy Document for the Development of Adult Education (Melo et al., 1998) included a scathing analysis of adult education policy, based on studies done during the 1990s. These discussed the low levels of educational attainment and literacy (Benavente, Rosa, Costa and Ávila, 1996). This document also mentioned the guidelines of the European Year of Lifelong Learning (1996) while including ideas discussed at the 5<sup>th</sup> CONFINTEA held in Hamburg in 1997 (Melo, Lima and Almeida, 2002). Additionally, forms of provision such as recognition



of prior learning (called recognition, validation and certification of competencies) and adult education and training courses were created. These provisions were launched after 2000 while the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2000) was under public discussion and the document Education and Training 2010 (European Commission, 2004), framed by the Lisbon strategy (Lisbon European Council, 2000), was being prepared. There were obvious connections between the international agenda for lifelong learning and the making of the policy and educational documents on which the above-mentioned forms of provision were based. EU guidelines referring to the reform of education and training systems as well as the link between education and the labour market have since become clearly recognisable in the national agenda for adult education (Guimarães and Antunes, 2014).

However, this process of producing the new adult education and training policy was quite two-sided. Some actors (individuals and institutions) involved in this process had been part of specific social and historical periods in which emancipatory social movements were important for the Portuguese society. Some others revealed aspirations and interests supporting the transformation of the economy in connection with globalisation. A few were committed to the human resource management trend that has since then become prominent in public policy. Some of these actors were “grassroots educational activists, progressive pedagogues, academics, some political decision makers and members of the top or intermediate administrative educational structure” (Guimarães and Antunes, 2014, pp. 71-72) and exhibited different ways of interpreting the Portuguese adult education policy. These reflected concerns regarding educational weaknesses such as low school education levels and professional qualifications but also democratic deficit and low social participation in the society reflecting low standards of living and a long period of authoritarian regime (1926-1974).

After the 1990s, the emphasis on basic competences favoured by the EU served as the basis for the adult education and training policy by means of two different but decisive developments. The first one included forms of provision enabling educational attainment and professional qualification. In terms of aims, the policy was directed at i) improving educational levels of large sectors of the Portuguese population that had not joined formal education processes for a long time; ii) continuing education and vocational training supporting the transformation of the economy in connection with a progressive opening to global markets – the main outcome of this situation had to do with increasing rates of participation in vocational training; iii) the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired throughout life that could be formally certified of those adults already integrating into the labour market. The second development included the elaboration of a competence framework (Alonso, Magalhães, Imaginário, Barros, Castro, Osório and Sequeira, 2000), a document that can be considered a technical and political tool for the regulation of adult education and training provision (Guimarães and Antunes, 2014). This document was based on some aims of emancipatory and critical education, but also created the conditions for the certification of individuals’ learning experiences in recognition of their prior



learning and enrolment in adult education and training courses. At the same time, this framework was essential for the implementation of a policy that had as its main aims an increase in the productivity, competitiveness and flexibility of the Portuguese workforce.

While some concerns with social justice and equality of opportunity could be observed in legal documents supporting the adult education and training policy, hinting at the partly humanistic nature of the provisions in place, there was also a noticeable emphasis on the usefulness of adult education for economic development. This ambivalence in the reinterpretation of EU guidelines for lifelong learning was due to the policy discourse which stressed that the “unacceptable educational deficit of the Portuguese population” (Guimarães and Antunes, 2014, p. 74) was constraining the consolidation of democracy. Adult education was finally considered a social right that the State and the elites had denied adults for decades (Melo, 2004). The main outcome of this “deficit” was reflected in the significantly lower rates of educational attainment and participation in lifelong learning of Portuguese people when compared with other European countries, particularly Central European and Nordic ones (Melo, Matos and Silva, 2001). Additionally, EU lifelong learning guidelines were well received in a political context of social life economisation and education marketisation trends (Afonso, 1998). Therefore, the political propositions established for the adult education and training policy in the late 1990s (Melo et al., 1998) were directed at the creation of a national system of education and training. These proposals supported a diversified and complex understanding of the field (Canário, 1999) that would overcome the human resource management trend in education evident in lifelong learning guidelines. Nevertheless, during the 2000s, policy concerns regarding the need to have properly qualified workforce for the globalised Portuguese economy became more important given the goal of making the EU the most competitive economic region in the world (European Council, 2000).

The To Know+ Programme for the Development and Expansion of Adult Education (1999–2006) (Melo et al., 2001) was produced as part of this scenario. In this programme, which was abandoned in 2002 although the main aims and forms of provision have been kept until today, there was a stress on the combination of a public service logic – directed at increasing educational attainment through adult basic education and training provisions – and a programme logic, based on partnerships with a variety of local organisations that were to become the providers. The public service logic was to allow state intervention in the creation, development and evaluation of provisions directed at educational attainment and promoted by a network of adult education centres as part of state dependent, profit-making and non-profit making providers. The programme logic had to do with evaluating to what extent the existing projects, programmes and experiences were underdeveloped. This would allow the allocation of funding resources to civil society organisations in a way that would ensure a better quality and greater impact in the building of an adult education and training system (Melo et al., 1998, p. 15).

The influence of the EU became more evident when the above-mentioned programme was aligned with the National Plan of Employment of 1998, the Portuguese answer to

the European Strategy of Employment. A strategy for lifelong learning was announced for the first time in the National Plan for Employment in 2001 (Guimarães and Antunes, 2014). The To Know+ programme stressed the importance of the European Strategy of Employment (1997) and the Lisbon strategy (2000) for the definition of policies in Portugal, having involved the adoption of lifelong learning guidelines as it aimed to increase competitiveness and social cohesion as well as achieve the goals established by the Education & Training 2010 programme in terms of basic competences for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2004).

The duality of aims in the adult education and training policy in Portugal was also clearly visible in government programmes. Between 1999 and 2011, this public policy was mentioned in official documents on several occasions, particularly in the case of Socialist governments. That way its contribution to economic and social modernisation, to the transformation of the Portuguese economy in connection with globalisation and to the qualifications of the workforce was emphasised. In particular, when human resource management was at stake, policy documents were in line with the stipulations of EU funding bodies, such as the European Social Fund, and the main guidelines of the European Union regarding unemployment (namely in the government programmes of 1995, 1999, 2005, 2009 and 2015). In policy discourses, the stress was on education and training with a view to increasing competitiveness, even if combined with social cohesion, the qualifications of the workforce and the impact of education on economy in what was referred to by Lima (2005, p. 45) as “social and economic pedagogism”. This policy was very pessimistic in its evaluation of the educational situation, as the Portuguese levels of educational attainment were, for example, strongly emphasised as well as their impact on the economy, but at the same time very optimistic in the aims established. These stressed the urgency to reposition Portugal in the knowledge economy as proposed by the EU (Guimarães and Antunes, 2014).

The preoccupation with increasing Portuguese educational attainment rates to approach those of many Central European and Nordic countries remained in place at the time of the adoption of the New Opportunities programme in 2005. This programme stressed the fact that in the reference year the average number of years in education in Portugal was 8.2 years while it was 13.4 in Germany and 13.6 in Denmark (OECD data in Education at a Glance from 2005 in Portugal, 2005a). The increase in the qualification levels of the population was the main topic where the “importance for economic growth and social cohesion” and the “diminishing of the delay in the modernisation process” (Portugal, 2005a, p. 2) were mentioned. A convergence with the most developed countries was intended. In alignment with the National Plan of Employment and the Technological Plan, the aim was also to raise participation in lifelong learning of workers in medium and small enterprises. As suggested, this programme was “a fundamental pillar of employment and vocational training policies” (*idem*).

Policy aims established in the processes of economic growth and modernisation strengthened the focus on the qualifications of the workforce. The convergence of national social

and economic benchmarks with those in other EU member-states was often emphasised in policy discourses. One of the key ideas concerned the expansion of public provision where the rationale behind changes in education (such as the prolongation of compulsory education to 12 years of school education) was linked to that behind training. An ambitious political aim included qualifying 1,000,000 young people and adults (about 10% of the Portuguese population) using existing provision (Portugal, 2005a). This aim meant dramatically increasing participation in adult education provision. Between 2000 and 2005, 153,719 people applied for recognition of prior learning and among these 44,192 obtained a school certificate. In comparison, between 2006 and 2011, 1,163,236 people joined the same provision and 365,449 obtained a school certificate (CNE, 2011). Including quite heterogeneous social groups taking advantage of the provision that stressed educational individualisation processes, 386,463 people obtained a school education certificate between 2000 and 2011 after applying for recognition of prior learning and 68,255 attended adult education and training courses (ANQ, 2011).

After 2011, the structural adjustment programme imposed by the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the European Central Bank involved the suspension of the adult education and training policy supported by the right wing government elected in that same year. The optimistic discourses stressing the importance of adult education for economy lost relevance as did the work done by almost 10,000 adult educators hired in local adult education centres and more than half a million people who obtained school certificates between 2005 and 2011. The policy discontinuity that had characterised adult education policies after the Democratic Revolution in 1974 once more became a significant trend. In this context, however, vocational training supported by the European Social Fund and promoted by big enterprises saw a significant increase in the number of courses held and workers participating (Gabinete de Estratégia e Estudos/ Ministério da Economia e do Emprego, 2013), a trend that may still be observed today. In addition, recent adult education and training surveys (INE, 2007 and 2011) have pointed out the importance of participation in programmes related to the labour market or linked to specific work contexts.

In 2015, when a Socialist government was elected, it was claimed that was the beginning of a new political cycle regarding the adult education policy and its alignment with the EU guidelines for lifelong learning. Since 2016, several developments have been noted. The Qualify programme was launched in this same year (Decree Law n.º 232/2016, 29/08) and included provision such as recognition of prior learning and adult education and training courses. New local adult education centres were opened, even if fewer in number than those existing between 2007 and 2011. In spite of policy discourses, the existing funding did not allow a convincing relaunch of the policy in place until 2011, nor even the adoption of a new democratic and emancipatory policy. Like the previous programme – New Opportunities – the Qualify programme included aims of human resource management and social and economic modernisation. These aims referred to an increase in school certificates and professional qualifications in order to raise employability and develop

competences important for the insertion of people in the labour market. They included diminishing illiteracy rates and increasing rates of participation in lifelong learning. These aims also reinforced the need for greater alignment between local adult education centres, the labour market and regional, national and international economic development trends.

The (few) policy documents on adult education that are still being published reveal exaggerated ambition. In fact the adult education and training policy currently being developed is marked by several problems. The first one is the limited diversification of provision. The existing provision fosters educational attainment and professional qualifications. There is no funding for the provision of content such as non-formal and informal education, nor subjects that are not directly related to the labour market and the promotion of competitiveness. Another problem is that each form of provision that can be found at this moment is limited in number. A third problem involves the scarcity of available funding. Most of the funding comes from the European Social Fund (85%) and provision in the Lisbon and Algarve regions cannot be financially supported due to EU rules. Additionally, the funding available for 2017 and 2018 compares unfavourably to that given annually to local adult education centres between 2007 and 2011. One last problem refers to the high number of people (around 50%), mostly with low educational attainment levels and professional qualifications, who do not express any interest in joining lifelong learning (mainly non-formal and formal) programmes (INE, 2011). Involving these people in lifelong adult education activities requires provision with goals closer to democratic and emancipatory aims. These activities need to engage them in social and educational changes, whereas the present policy is not expected to do so.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

At the end of the 1990s, the relaunch of adult education in Portugal in accordance with EU guidelines for lifelong learning could be observed following the aims of human resource management on the one hand and of modernisation and state control on the other. The qualifications of the Portuguese population were a significant challenge for the New Opportunities programme and for the current Qualify programme, with the aims of increasing economic competitiveness in the context of globalisation. What must be mentioned is the increasing rates of participation in lifelong learning, particularly among those enrolled in existing forms of provision, affecting large sectors of adult workers. The involvement of civil society organisations was also a relevant aspect of this policy, especially between 2000 and 2011. Several authors believed that progressive pedagogues working in these organisations could make a significant difference where critical and emancipatory adult education policy making and practice implementation were concerned (Guimarães and Antunes, 2014). However, the adult education policy developed raised concerns about what lifelong learning aims were concerned with, particularly since the educational goals seemed (and still seem) to favour the usefulness of adult education provision for economic development. Even if this is a trend that can be observed in many other countries (UIL, 2009) as part of hegemonic neoliberal trends, the devaluation

of humanistic and critical education dimensions is a serious concern. These dimensions have influenced the understanding of adult education as a field of practices, policies and research emphasising its heterogeneous and diversified character but also its support for the consolidation of democracy, social justice and equality of opportunity. Civil society organisations could have a relevant role to play in this respect, not just in policy making but especially if the promotion of democratic practices and programmes geared towards the autonomy and responsibility of adults were to be favoured. Despite their importance, these dimensions are not to be found in the present policy. Instead, the adult education and training policy developed since 2000 has been progressively stressing the usefulness of the field in line with EU guidelines.

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