

THE IMPACT OF EU STRUCTURAL AND
INVESTMENT FUNDS ON GREECE (1981-2019):
SUCCESSSES, FAILURES, LESSONS LEARNED AND
COMPARISONS WITH OTHER EU MEMBERS

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NIKOS APOSTOLOPOULOS and
MANOS PAPAZOGLOU (editors)

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COHERENCE OF ADULT LEARNING POLICIES IN DIFFERENT LEVELS AND TYPES

Zoe Karanikola, and Georgios Panagiotopoulos

Adult Education According to the International Discourse

Adult education is an integral part of lifelong learning and covers every formal, non-formal or informal learning activity. In addition it interacts with early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational education and tertiary education (European Commission, 2015:2), whereas it equips people with the right skills in order to learn and exercise their rights, promotes personal and professional development, supports active participation in society, community, and environment, and contributes to sustainable and inclusive economic growth (Panagiotopoulos and Karanikola, 2018a). The importance of adult learning derives from a wide range of factors including changes in the structure of occupations, changing ways of work, the need to reduce unemployment, ageing societies, the intense pace of economic, technological, demographic and cultural changes, diverse and complex societies with stronger need for intercultural understanding and democratic values, increased levels of migration requiring support both for individual and societal learning (European Commission, 2015; GRALE I 2009).

The vital role of adult education in the development of society has long been recognized, whereas according to the Hamburg Declaration (Alfred and Nafukho, 2010), it is linked to promoting equality, democracy, active citizenship, cultural diversity.

Particularly, in 1949, UNESCO members states dedicated themselves to ensuring that adults are able to exercise the fundamental right to education. In addition, in 1976, the UNESCO General Conference approved the Nairobi

Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education, according to which “adult education is considered to be an integral part of the educational system within a lifelong learning perspective” (GRALE I, 2009:12).

Besides, the Dakar Forum in 2000 reiterates the need to improve the status of adults who need to enjoy the respect of the state by participating in decisions that affect their life and job development. At the same time, appropriate strategies for attracting and staying in the educational context of people with increased formal qualifications are being sought (Tsaoussis, 2007).

According to the European Resolution of 16 January 2008 regarding adult learning, it is never too late to learn, whereas Member states are called to promote the acquisition of knowledge and implement gender equal policies designed to make adult education more accessible, attractive and effective.

The Council conclusions of May 2010 relates adult education to active inclusion and social participation, whereas the Council Decision of October 2010 seeks to promote effective incentives for lifelong learning, while in 2011, the European Council adopted the renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning with key objectives the following elements: more opportunities for access to high level learning opportunities, student autonomy, effective guidance and evaluation systems, in-company learning, involvement of many agents and players (European Commission, 2015).

The priority areas for the period 2012-2014 are, among others, making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving the quality and efficiency of education and training, promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through adult learning, enhancing the creativity and innovation of adults and their environments, improving the knowledge base on adult learning and monitoring the adult learning sector.

Finally, the New Skills Agenda “Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness” (European Commission, 2016), supports a shared commitment towards the strategic importance of skills for sustaining jobs, growth, and competitiveness, whereas it is centered around improving the quality and relevance of skills formation, making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable, improving skills intelligence and information for better choices.

Coherence and Coherence Policies

Support for adult learning has become a key focus of policy since the mid-1990s in EU Member States, whereas more and more policy fields rely on

adult learning in order to achieve their targets regarding efficiency and effectiveness. In such a context, the successful implementation of adult learning across these different policy fields has increased the need for coordination. Coordination is a necessity, because if policies are steered in different policy domains and different objectives there is a risk that they may not reinforce each other or even that they may undermine each other's impact (European Commission, 2015:38).

Coherence is a term used to describe the efforts made by different agents, actors and organizations in order to “identify effective responses to a particular crisis context and ways to work better together” (OECD, 2017:2). Development of coherence requires a shared context, a collective outcome, defined resources, adequate political leadership, strong partnerships and important incentives to overcome existing obstacles.

Since the early 1990s, the OECD (2015a) has played a vital role in the promotion of policy coherence, through its ability to provide evidence to inform policy making and address cross- sectoral issues. Policy coherence refers to the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policy actions across government departments and agencies creating synergies towards achieving the agreed objectives, whereas there are two basic dimensions, the vertical and the horizontal coherence. Particularly, vertical coherence requires that the national, regional and local levels of government support common policy objectives and systems of funding and evaluation, whereas horizontal coherence means that there is significant coordination within national, regional or local government (Mallows and Carpentieri, 2015).

Regarding adult education policies, many studies have demonstrated that they do not work in isolation but are “anchored in many different policy fields, making important contributions to many other policies. Responsibility for adult learning policy is divided across several ministries and agencies and several levels. This shared responsibility often results in a situation where adult learning policy is fragmented and its efficiency suffers from insufficient coordination (European Commission, 2015:40).

Research Aim and Material

This present study, through the qualitative analysis of the text “Education and Training 2020. Improving Policy and Provision for Adult Learning in Europe (European Commission, 2015)” comes to explore the way coherence can be achieved.

The Education and Training 2020 Working Group on adult learning was established in 2013 as one of six thematic working groups that support Member States in policy development on addressing basic skills, promoting the use of new technologies and Open Educational Resources, and enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency and coherence of adult learning policies. This report presents the Group's findings and recommendations.

The research material was examined through the thematic analysis tool with the use of thematic networks. Thematic analysis is an inductive analytical process and it is based on the principles of the argumentation theory of Toulmin (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This method provides a methodical and systematic analysis of the material under investigation, facilitates the organization of analysis and allows a profound and rich exploration of the superficial and deeper structures of the text (Gibbs, 2007; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Boyatzis (1998) states that the thematic analysis is a process of coding quality information. In addition, it provides a rich, detailed and complex report of the data, while interpreting various aspects of the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Three classes of topics are included: basic theme, organizing, and global. The basic one is about the simplest features of text data, and by itself it gives little information about the text as a whole. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the content of the text, we must read it in relation to the other key issues and together they form the second class of subjects, the organizing theme. The organizational theme is a middle class theme, which organizes the core issues in groups of similar topics. Its role is also to increase the meaning and importance of a wider subject, which unites several organizational issues. This creates the third issue, the Global Theme. The overall theme is a superordinate theme and includes the basic idea of the text as a whole (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

In the present study the global theme is coherence. The organizing themes are coherence across policy fields, coherence across national, regional and local levels of policy making, coherence across types of policies and coherence over time.

Presentation of the Thematic Networks

Regarding the first thematic network, policies are complementary and interfere with each other, meaning that one policy may enhance or even un-

dermine the effectiveness and efficiency of another. Policy fields supporting adult learning differ in their logic and rationale as well as the timing of their policy cycles. To achieve coherence across policy fields, policymakers and stakeholders need to know what is going on in other fields and the rationale for the different initiatives. Collaboration and partnerships between, among others, Education, Employment, Welfare, Business, Justice and Health ministries, social partners and civil society promote the creation of a shared knowledge base and mutual understanding. Building on this shared knowledge, stakeholders can negotiate adjustments between policies and coordinate their policies, or develop new integrated policies, to enhance their potential and achieve common goals. This could in particular be of importance for simplifying access to services and making effective outreach to difficult-to-engage groups of adults (in particular vulnerable groups) which require a coherent approach (European Commission, 2015: 40).

There are mentioned two programs towards this direction, the program “Validation of skills in Belgium (French-speaking Community)” and the program “Language for Life (Netherlands)”. The first program was carried out in the region’s highly complex policy structure, with ministries in the three French-speaking community governments (Wallonia Brussels Federation, Wallonia and Brussels) and the regional governments all playing a role in policy development, implementation and funding. A consortium coordinates the accreditation of validation centers, establishes the methodology for assessing their skills and competence, issue certificates and ensures the overall management of the whole process of validation in the French-speaking part of Belgium.

The Consortium is composed of the stakeholders of training and second chance education and social partners and representatives of the ministries involved. Great efforts are made to ensure that the end users (i.e. adults having their skills validated) are presented with a simple, easily understandable interface. Another key principle informing the Program for Validation of Skills is that this program should seek to facilitate cross-organizational ownership by remaining small itself, but helping its partner organizations grow larger. A central aim is to avoid any one policy organization having a monopoly on the recognition and validation of skills; rather the effort should be shared across a range of stakeholders, with quality assured through a well regulated system of stakeholder certification. These efforts have met with success. However, a number of challenges, such as the

need for more, and more reliable, evidence of impact continue to exist and to be addressed (European Commission, 2015: 40-41).

In the second program the government works closely with an NGO to design, implement and govern adult basic skills policy and programs. Within government, there are strong efforts to achieve political consensus and ownership across a range of ministries, and there is also a broader policy trend within the Netherlands of decentralization, resulting in larger policy roles for municipalities and a more facilitating role for central government. The need to provide training for an increasing number of people with low levels of literacy, coinciding with a decrease in public finance and increased decentralization, made a new approach necessary.

The Language for Life policy was launched in six regions in 2012, with a strong emphasis upon cross organizational partnership. The policy combines bottom-up and top-down approaches, with increased efforts to create more effective local infrastructures for adult basic skills education. National policymakers and their partners then use rigorous research methods to monitor and evaluate results, note effective practices, and feed this information back to the local level. Local Literacy Hubs are the most visible manifestation of the partnership based orientation of the policy: these are community-based centers based in libraries, hospitals and other public spaces, at which potential adult learners can find help desks volunteer tutors, and opportunities to receive guidance, and can also undergo literacy assessments.

These Literacy Hubs also contribute to the broader objective of ensuring that policy ambitions are concordant with policy resources. By making use of civic spaces, the Language for Life program makes efficient use of resources while maximizing opportunities for public outreach. All of these coherence-related factors have impacts on policy, with some impacts having both a positive and negative aspect. For example, in working with the Read Write Foundation, the Netherlands government benefits from that NGO's high level of understanding of basic skills issues, and its years of addressing the issue. However, such a partnership can create challenges for governments – for example, because the Read Write Foundation has a high level of expertise, it also demands a high level of autonomy with regard to policy implementation. Government needs to grant the NGO the status of an equal partner on a level playing field, with fully shared policy ownership. The NGO is not just a vehicle for implementation and/or advice. Throughout all these processes, there is a need for constant feedback loops,

running both horizontally and vertically. Establishing and sustaining such loops is resource intensive, but does contribute to policy coherence. Such coherence, after all, must be worked at constantly if it is to be sustainable (European Commission, 2015:41).

Regarding the second thematic network, adult learning policies are implemented on different levels of policy making, and initiatives are often spearheaded locally before being rolled out across regions and taken up by policy makers at a national level. Actual implementation is carried out by a wide range of government, private sector and voluntary organizations. Mutual adjustment is a key requirement. Coherence is also fostered by the interaction between top-down and bottom-up policy processes. Key triggers for policy development may come from the field. Good practice then filters upward, influences policy, and is disseminated back downwards, where it can spread horizontally. Policymakers learn from the field, and then support the spread of good practices throughout that field. Policy is also influenced from the top down, and in some countries EU policy guidance as expressed in the renewed “Adult Learning Agenda” and “Opening up Education” is seen as having a powerful influence (European Commission, 2015: 42-43).

As far as the third network is concerned, there is a need to combine different policies to increase participation in and the quality of adult learning. The right mix of policies could enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of each single policy, but any incoherence in approach is likely to weaken the intended outcomes. Case studies of large scale reform programs (for example, the two large scale reforms of adult learning in Sweden in the 1990s and the early 2000s) give reason to believe that the right scale and combination of measures can make a lasting difference. However, there is a lack of systematic empirical evidence on how to combine policies in a coherent and thereby mutually reinforcing way.

In Norway a National Skills Policy Strategy is being developed as a follow-up to the OECD Skills Strategy project, to be implemented in 2016. It is being coordinated by Vox, the agency in charge of implementing adult learning policies, and will involve several ministries, local and regional authorities, social partners and other central skills actors in the framework of a strategic partnership. Norway’s economy is to a large extent based on industries and sectors that require a highly skilled labor-force, a demand that will increase. In spite of a well-functioning economy, low unemployment rate and a relatively highly qualified workforce, present challenges in-

clude a high drop-out rate from upper secondary education, approximately 700.000 adults without upper secondary education, about 400.000 adults with inadequate basic skills and many adults on disability pension. There is also a worrying health-related exclusion from the labor market, especially among youth and people with low educational attainment.

The National Skills Policy Strategy shall improve achievement with respect to good access to skilled labor by good education, jobs and career choices for individuals and society as a whole, targeted and employer relevant learning and training in and for working life, and improved skills for disadvantaged low-skilled adults. Under each above mentioned main objectives of the Strategy, the different partners' responsibilities, policies, measures and suggestions for new actions and enforced efforts, including new political initiatives, will be described and made clear. This includes the different actors' financial resources, monitoring and evaluation of actions. Key partners will develop an action plan within their own responsibility mandate specifying actions and how their respective measures and resources will be used to reach the Strategy's goals.

Finally, regarding the fourth thematic network (coherence over time), providing the time needed for adult learning policies to become effective is crucial. In many cases, not allowing adequate time for policies to take effect undermines their effectiveness and efficiency. Frequent changes undermine the coherence of systems and are likely to cause a loss of motivation among all parties involved. The "Great Recession", starting in 2008, interrupted ambitious policy programs in various European countries, leading governments to scale down available funding for adult learning, for example in Ireland or in Portugal Portugal's New Opportunities Initiative (NOI) 2005-2011 focused on several measures, with a special emphasis on recognizing and validating adults' skills. It did so against the backdrop of relatively low qualification levels in Portugal, with 72% of the labor force lacking secondary-level qualifications.

The Initiative sought to achieve these objectives through a large, comprehensive and coherent policy effort, involving a broad range of measures, stakeholders, high levels of vertical and horizontal integration, and world-leading efforts at public participation. These ambitious policy efforts built on former policies, including the creation of a national agency for adult education and training and approaches for recognizing and validating prior learning. The NOI, which ran from 2005 to 2011, therefore displayed an important level of chronological policy coherence. However, it

expanded upon these earlier efforts greatly – for example, by seeking structural coherence through the creation of a national qualification system. The goals of NOI included helping one million adults to gain at least an upper secondary education qualification, out of a total national population of approximately 10 million. Over the seven-year life of the policy, these efforts led to the creation of 451 New Opportunities Centers throughout the country, and the participation of more than 1.4 million adults, with more than 770.000 of these embarked upon basic education levels and nearly 650.000 participating in secondary education-level pathways. By 2011, more than 450.000 Portuguese adults had achieved some type of certification recognizing prior learning, with more than 330.000 gaining a basic level certification and nearly 125.000 achieving a secondary certification.

These figures means that adults certified through recognition of priori learning processes represent more than 80% of the number of adults certified with the basic level or secondary level in this period of 7 years. Ultimately, however, the New Opportunities Initiative was abandoned. A number of factors contributed to its demise, most importantly political changes (governmental changes. Other factors included the extreme economic crisis faced by Portugal, high level of dependence on the European Social Fund and difficulties in realizing the policy's hoped-for labor market impacts which were particularly difficult to achieve during a period of rapidly rising unemployment. Since 2011, Portugal has continued its efforts to recognize and validate prior learning, albeit in a much scaled down manner (European Commission, 2015: 44-45).

Conclusions

According to the thematic analysis, the Education and Training 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning offers important guidance and information regarding the ways policies should become more effective. Adult education is a necessity, given that it benefits individuals, companies and societies. So member states should adopt sustainable long term strategies. In addition, adult learning policies need to be coherent. The coherence of the many different strands of policy need to be informed by evidence and proper monitoring, whereas clear leadership and government arrangements should be adopted. What is more, member states should develop intra-governmental cooperation by planning and implementing projects

and processes in which ministries, regions, agencies and other stakeholders cooperate to enhance learning opportunities for particular adult target groups. These processes should also be flexible enough to respond to societal challenges. The need for initiatives for coordinating policy coherence is also supported by the OECD (2015b) and the UNESCO (2013).

However, it should not be overlooked that adult education is a multidimensional and complex policy field that interacts and contributes to other areas of political action. Therefore, there is often a lack of coordination and different approaches. This contributes to the fragmentation and inefficiency of adult education (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2018b).

Additionally, some questions arise regarding the transfer of policies into the field of application. How easy is it to achieve the objectives of international policies? In any case the best adult policies and programs are evidence-based. By investing more in long-term research on what works in a particular context, countries can make their policies more efficient and effective (European Commission, 2015).

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