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Emerging working contexts in adult learning and continuing education Initial findings from an exploratory research among professionals

Contesti operativi emergenti nell'educazione degli adulti e nella formazione continua. Primi risultati da una ricerca esplorativa con i professionisti

DANIELA FRISON, GLENDA GALEOTTI*

The paper presents the preliminary findings of a research project focused on the Adult Learning (AL) and Continuing Education (CE) sector to understand the emerging working contexts where professionals operate nowadays. The study aims at encouraging professional development processes for working successfully in different contexts in order to increase the rates of adults engaged in education, as well as the quality of the educational services provided. This issue has been explored by collecting the perception of those who in various roles are engaged in policies, research, and practices related to the sector.

KEYWORDS: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, ADULT LEARNING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION, UPSKILLING AND RESKILLING, PROFESSIONALISATION, ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Make the world work, for 100% of humanity, in the shortest possible time,
through spontaneous cooperation, without ecological offense or the disadvantage of anyone
(R. Buckminster Fuller)

Introduction

The current European planning (2021-2027) aims to guide Europe towards the dual green and digital transition and make society and economies more resilient and just¹, further strengthened by the tools and devices to support the post-pandemic recovery (e.g., NextgenerationEU). The European strategy is linked to a political agenda focused on the development of citizens' skills, thus implementing the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights: access to quality education, training, and lifelong learning for all and throughout the European Union². The main elements that shape the European policy

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agenda for the next few years are therefore the European Education Area by 2025, for bringing down barriers and promoting innovative and inclusive education and training, the “Pact for skills” in boosting joint action by businesses, social partners and other stakeholders to maximise the impact of skills investment, the Skills for Jobs, for up- and reskilling based on modern and dynamic education and training provision³. They sustain the direct link with labour market and societal needs and are addressed to people empowerment by the means of innovative tools and learning pathways more flexible and accessible.

In Italy, the «National Recovery and Resiliency Plan»⁴, also focuses, among other things, on learning new skills (reskilling) and improving existing ones to access more advanced jobs (upskilling), as a strategic trajectory for supporting green and digital transitions, enhancing innovation and the growth potential of the economy, promote economic and social inclusion and ensure quality employment.

A crucial issue seems to be professionals' improvement in Adult Learning (AL) and Continuing Education (CE) for working successfully in different contexts and increasing the rates of adults engaged in education, as well as the quality of the educational services provided. We specifically deal with professionals in education and training field as HR and training managers, project managers, trainers and training consultants, and adult educators.

In this paper, we present the preliminary findings of a research project developed within this framework and aimed at understanding the emerging working contexts where professionals in AL and CE operate nowadays.

Overcoming the functional boundaries among disciplines or sectors of reference, the analysis perspective adopts «the nested, interactive nature of learning at multiple levels - individual, collective, team, organisation, society - and across multiple planes, as people learn and grow interactively within social contexts»⁵.

Indeed, we examine this issue by collecting the perception of those who in various roles are engaged in policies, research, and practices related to the AL and CE sector.

The first phase of the study was launched in 2021 and the related results are presented here.

Study background

Today, organisations are experiencing a time of radical transformations, under the pressure of mega-trends of societal change that force them to modify, change or re-design themselves⁶. Digitalisation, demographic and environmental challenges, human

mobility, and so on, demand intense, irreversible, and structural transformations that seem to enable emerging organisational paradigms, also to respond to the need to redefine models that the post-pandemic recovery and green conversion require⁷. These paradigms arise from the dialogue between adaptive and innovative dynamics and stress the organisational capacities to be flexible or agile with contextual changes, to strategically address and manage them, to connect people, knowledge, processes, and sectors⁸. Moreover, they are a consequence of the constantly changing human behaviour and people's requirements, and the high degree of uncertainty and complexity of organisations' operating environments. They also have an impact on how education and training are delivered, fostering the shift from the centrality of formal education to the informal and embedded one and the emergence of new trajectories in lifelong learning and continuing education⁹.

These transformations also have an impact on the professionalisation paths of those who work in this field as well as on their working contexts. Indeed, reports and documents on the subject, published in very recent years by OECD¹⁰, Unesco¹¹, and World Economic Forum¹², support the reflection on the evolution of existing professions, on the skills they require, and on new professions.

Indeed, an effective visualisation of emerging professions was proposed in 2020 by the World Economic Forum which focuses on seven emerging professional clusters that was formalised starting from the aggregation of professions characterised by similar skill sets: care professions, data and Artificial Intelligence, engineering and Cloud Computing, green professions, marketing, sales and content, people and culture, and product development¹³. The report clearly highlights how skills required by new professions or professions “to be updated” are hybrid and belong to different fields of study and work that are clearly separated from a “disciplinary sector” perspective.

Furthermore, as reports highlight, emerging professions require:

- 1) skills that are usually traceable outside the professional family in which they are located;
- 2) cluster of skills that refer, combine, and intertwine multiple disciplinary fields and domains;
- 3) a broader and more complex set of highly specialised skills and competences¹⁴.

Moreover, if soft and digital skills are by now considered essential, so-called green skills are increasingly recognized as crucial. Companies mentioned their relevance immediately after soft skills, and before e-skills, confirming a growing attention to the “green” and sustainability themes and an organisational focus on professionals with an eco-sustainability attitude and competences¹⁵.

These trends have of course important effects not only on the labour market, increasingly characterised by a rapid evolution of the professions and skills required, but also on the education and training systems and related providers, which educate and train new future professionals. Furthermore, the emergent variabilities and multidimensionality of roles and tasks that professionals cover in a variety of organisational settings and professional areas refer both to the teaching sector (with reference to formal and non-formal education), as well as to the non-teaching one (with reference to e.g., informal education, consultancy, etc.)¹⁶.

Most studies and research in the field of AL and CE focus on sets of knowledge and skills professionals should possess to operate effectively in their roles. These studies emphasise the need for more comprehensive research on standard competencies required to fulfil professional tasks¹⁷ as well as a lack of tools measuring the educational needs of the staff involved in Adult Education¹⁸. Other studies are about how to reform AL and CE policies and services provided on the basis of the changing training needs of the adult population consequently to the socio-economic transformations¹⁹.

It is much more difficult to find research that investigates the changes and transformation that have taken place and are in progress in the working areas covered by these professionals. This article is intended precisely to bridge this gap in order to reach a deeper understanding on the topic.

Research gaps and research questions

Based on the study's background, research questions have been formulated as follows:

What are emerging working contexts in the field of AL and CE?

What are the key dimensions and evolution trends of these working contexts?

In 2008, a Europe-wide study on adult learning professions underlined that staff work in different contexts responding to a variety of educational and training needs of a multiplicity of target groups²⁰. As Buiskool and Broek highlight in their contribution «the clustering in work domains is, however, still not precise enough to determine the exact context in which adult learning professionals work. Variations can be found also within and between work domains»²¹. Authors focused above all on the repertoire of activities AL professionals are expected to be able to execute, on the competences needed to carry out these activities, as well as on the context in which they are assumed to perform them. Despite the thorough analysis of the set of key competences, as the authors themselves underline, the article fails to say anything about the specific context in which activities are carried out and competences turned into action²².

On the other hand, the description of skill sets, characteristics, and functions associated with professionals lack systematisation because they also differ by prevailing country circumstances and regarding the tasks and challenges in each chosen field of action²³. Furthermore, the application of competence standards and profiles for adult learning staff differs considerably between institutional and regional levels²⁴.

The main classifications of professions in AL and CE use descriptors of working contexts that are often traced back to traditional macro areas of intervention, such as Adult Education from literacy to Higher Education, in the field of vocational training and workplace learning, education as social intervention addressed to specific targets, and in the leisure time that includes fun and volunteering. Federighi²⁵ describes the systems in which professionals in adult education are framed as follows: professional training; the continuing education provided by various educational organisations; continuing education in organisations; non-formal educational services for all ages. These areas are covered by the traditional and main recognised classifications, both at a National (e.g., Atlante delle Professioni, Repertorio dell'Emilia Romagna, Repertorio regionale delle figure professionali della Regione Toscana) and international level (e.g. ISCO-08, ESCO, O*NET Occupational Information Network)²⁶.

This complex analysis seems to be even more challenging - but also relevant - to be carried out within the above-described framework characterised by hybrid jobs and hybrid skill sets.

Research design

With reference to the identified research gap, a qualitative design has been considered appropriate in order to study an emerging topic which has been little explored so far²⁷, and a triangulation of sources have been identified to examine the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the investigated phenomenon. According to this research strategy the following phases have been planned.

First, a desk research, documental analysis, and literature review phase. This review phase was oriented toward emerging concepts, ideas, framework on new professionalism, emerging and hybrid professions in AL and CE, and a specific focus on emerging contexts, in order to provide the criteria to carry out the second phase.

Second, interviews with key informants characterised the further phase of research. An interview protocol was defined to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues of interest, taking into account the following dimensions: emerging contexts related to education and training, AL and CE processes, emerging profiles not directly

corresponding to formalised classifications of occupations, competences areas, and connected work contexts. Specifically, the qualitative data collection was carried out through a semi-structured interview addressed to a convenience sample of key informants working both at a national and international level. Key informants were identified:

- via analysis of reports and based on the above-mentioned documental analysis, with reference to the field of AL and CE;
- via contact with European and extra-European associations in the field of AL and CE;
- via contact with national associations/delegations in the field of AL and CE.

Thirdly, based on the results of the second phase, a third phase has been planned. Considering the emerging scale of the phenomenon, the research group became interested in mapping cases mentioned by the interviewed key informants or quoted by the analysed literature and documentation. A multiple case study research design has been chosen as a qualitative methodology²⁸, which allows an in-depth understanding of the issues of interest. Indeed, as Yin states, the case study research design is more suitable when the goal is to provide and answer 'how' questions that aim to explain a certain phenomenon investigated in its real-life context²⁹. Therefore, the research group has been researching and mapping multiple instrumental cases³⁰, such as cases selected to better understand the issue.

First findings

In order to explore the emerging working contexts in the field of AL and CE, 15 key informants have been reached between September and December 2021:

- 4 International key informants belonging to European and extra-European associations (specifically: EUCEN - European University Continuing Education Network (1), ISCAE - International Society for Comparative Adult Education (1), and OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2));
- 11 national practitioners distributed as follows: HR manager (1); In-company training manager (1); Project manager (3); Trainer & consultant (4); Educator (1); and Museum Educational Department manager (1).

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in order to identify: emerging contexts related to AL and CE, emerging job profiles, and related competence areas with a specific focus on emerging contexts in which adults are mainly trained nowadays and emerging sectors in which AL and CE has a crucial role or should have an important role according to the interviews' point of view.

As highlighted above, this contribution focuses on the first point taken in account by the interview regarding emerging working contexts.

A recording and transcription of the interview data was followed by a computer-assisted analysis procedure using ATLAS.Ti. Concerning the analysis process, 15 primary documents were collected and divided into two document groups: national practitioners and international key informants.

The whole analysis generated 129 codes, aggregated into 13 main group codes referring to 323 quotations. With reference to the 11 national practitioners, 4 main aggregation of code groups emerged related to the interview theme, connected to the research questions (top-down approach) or that emerged from the interviews (bottom-up approach) (see Figure 1).

Primary documents: 15

Document group: national practitioners (11)

Document group: international key informants (4)

Codes: 129

Code groups: 13

Quotations: 323

Fig. 1 - Analysed documents

The 4 aggregations refer to:

- “emerging working contexts” in the field of AL and CE,
- “organisational management” of AL and CE within, across, and outside organisations.
- “emerging professions”, with reference to the profiles and the skills needed,
- “methodological apparatus” of AL and CE professionals, with a wide focus on learning strategies and approaches.

Concerning emerging working contexts, rather than pointing out specific ones, the interviewees identify the main features of the contexts where professionals in the field of AL and CE work and actively contribute (see figure 2).

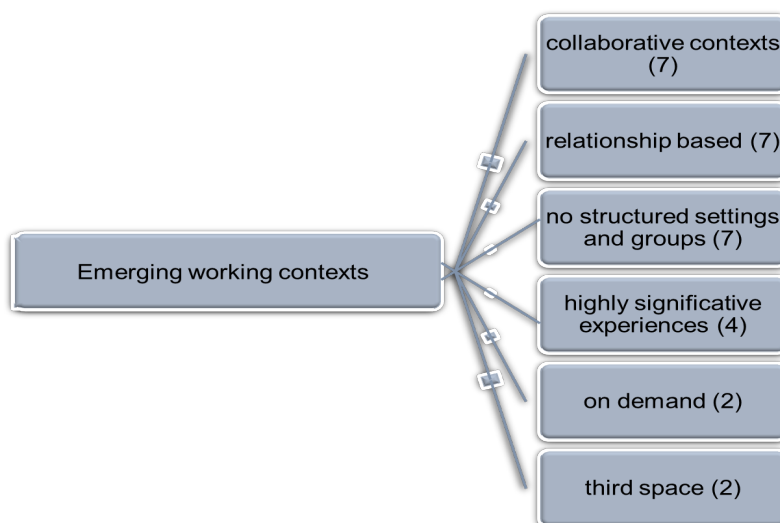


Fig. 2 - Emerging trends of working contexts in the field of AL and CE

These are mainly informal, based on meaningful and collaborative relationships. Indeed, the interviewees connected these contexts with informal and collaborative learning processes such as being part of a network or a community of practice³¹.

Due to this informality, it was not easy to collect reflections on the topic of emerging working contexts. In fact, as Noe, Clark, & Klein highlight, «traditionally organisations have relied upon, and researchers focused on, learning that occurs through formal training and development programmes»³² such as «formal education, job experiences, relationships, and personality and skills assessments that help employees prepare for future jobs or positions». Searching outside of this formality was and still remains challenging for both researchers and interviewees.

Features highlighted by key informants are strongly related to core competencies and skills expected from professionals, such as the ability to engage people in knowledge sharing and learning processes as well as the ability of make or re-make sense of their actions under a systemic vision. They also include the ability to «manage unstable groups, often work teams that start and end ... in any case knowing how to manage these dynamics within a group that is not stable», as underlined by one of the interviewees. These groups are characterised by internal high diversity and variability of roles, backgrounds (professional, life, etc.) and needs, that encourage meaningful learning experiences based on common challenges and the search for shared solutions. Professionals in this case become change facilitators who interact with multiple roles and many other professionals, not always related to the field of education and learning.

In this way, «collaboration, exchanges with others, and doing together are therefore aimed at achieving objectives that are not imposed but chosen by people as shared». Interviewees underline that, thanks to the active contribution and resources of each participant, these same processes also generate new knowledge, skills, know-how that can be immediately usable, due to the reasons for which people find themselves collaborating.

To create and recreate relationships, connect needs and solutions, overcome the organisational boundaries become core skills of professionals in AL and CE in order to enable learning environments, aimed at qualifying a training experience as meaningful because it is based on mutual exchange and dialogue that is transformative because oriented to change individuals and contexts at the same time. As another interviewee states, the focus is on «the value [of the organisation] based on the ability to create the community [also online] and to collect from the community stimuli, innovation, etc.».

The continuous reference by the key informants to collective and participatory dynamics of learning does not overshadow the individual dimension, which manifests through both the attention to the expression of the personal training needs and the leveraging of resources and contributions of each one, but also the usability of learning outcomes in specific areas of action. Interviewees underline the centrality of an “on-demand” approach concerning learning and training processes. Specifically, in the provision of training, the use of digital technologies, which has grown exponentially with the pandemic, opens up not only the possibility of using them at the times and in the ways most suited to personal needs, but also an explosion in supply thanks to the use of “on-demand” platforms and thus the possibility of choice on the basis of specific interests and in-depth study needs.

In other words, the data underline how the subjective dimension is strictly linked with the social ones, and the organisational boundaries are overcome by the interconnection among people, knowledge, processes and so on, toward new shapes of learning spaces.

Discussion and further research development

In line with the collected data, the expected outcomes of the research project are related, first, to the identification of emerging trends that characterise working contexts in the field of AL and CE, and presented in the previous paragraph.

These preliminary elements lead to a substantial extension and heterogeneity of professional context, as well as educational and learning ones, with the consequent spread of new ways of providing educational goods and services. Therefore, they also

seem to have an impact not only on professionals' core competencies and skills in the investigated field, but also on learning places and environments that became "third places" arising from the hybridization of traditional ones.

Second, findings stimulate reflections on the professionalisation pathways in AL and CE³³. Concerning Higher Education, degree courses in Education areas as well as degree courses not directly connected with the field – but from which professionals who actually operate in the sector come – are invited to reflect on contexts and professions variability. Furthermore, placement and career services as well are involved by this analysis in order to ensure cooperation opportunities with emerging working contexts in which AL and CE professionals can work, nowadays. The final research results will provide suggestions for designing and redesigning higher education degree courses as well as non-formal training opportunities addressed to professionals.

Third, the research aims to encourage a strong relationship between the European Education Area and the European Research Area, with a specific focus on educational research in AL and CE. Bringing out the learning and training dimension embedded in organisational and professional processes and contexts could contribute to qualifying the reskilling and upskilling pathways through a high integration between research and practices in AL and CE.

With this in mind, the cases cited by key informants and practitioners will be analysed in depth with the aim of specifying how the trends and dimensions detected can be traced in concrete experiences and contexts.

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