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**Assessing the impact of Erasmus+
in Adult Education: empirical evidence,
transformative processes, and comparative
perspectives within the RIA-AE Framework**

Guest editor Vanna Boffo

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Editoriale

English version follows

Una riflessione sull'impatto sociale e il programma Erasmus+. Introduzione per una ricerca europea

Vanna Boffo

Il contesto di riferimento

Chiedersi, oggi, nel contesto politico, culturale, sociale che stiamo vivendo quale sia il ruolo dell'Educazione degli Adulti in Europa è quantomai importante. Viviamo in un tempo di populismi attivi, di migrazioni massicce e, al contempo, percepite come invasive, viviamo in un tempo dove il termine *communitas* (Esposito, 2010) si è rarefatto di fronte alle chiusure sociali e politiche sempre più incisive.

In questo nostro tempo, distante dalla fine della seconda guerra mondiale, distante dall'ordine che la politica mondiale aveva dato al globo terrestre, abbiamo perso il senso dell'altro. Il numero delle guerre locali, eppure globali, sta lì, a farci vedere che abbiamo dimenticato una identità umana. Eppure non dobbiamo lasciar andare la speranza. Ecco, allora, che la politica europea *su e per* l'Educazione degli Adulti si rende fortemente centrale.

Ha un senso parlare di politica per la formazione degli adulti in Europa, oggi? Al netto delle riflessioni metodologiche, al netto della indagine che già da circa tre anni si sta portando avanti, ha un senso cercare di capire cosa voglia dire essere *europei*? Anche un viaggio, in termini tecnici si dice mobilità, può sostenere l'idea di Europa? Perché al fondo delle indagini che qui presentiamo, la domanda centrale è unica e consiste nel chiedersi se il progetto di mobilità intrapreso sia stato una esperienza di formazione adeguata al fine che si era prefisso. Questo il nostro assunto di partenza: nel contemporaneo scenario del Lifelong Learning, il Programma Erasmus+ trascende la sua funzione di strumento di mobilità per configurarsi come un dispositivo pedagogico complesso, essenziale per lo sviluppo del potenziale umano e culturale europeo (European Commission, 2019). Sappiamo, infatti, che il Programma *Erasmus+*, fin dall'esordio del primo nucleo di idea *Erasmus*, avrebbe dovuto agire quale leva strategica per l'innovazione dei sistemi educativi, per lo sviluppo di condizioni di apprendimento/educazione formali, informali e non formali (European Commission, 2000) e per la promozione di una cittadinanza attiva e consapevole (European Commission, 2015).

In questa cornice sociale, educativa e politica, il progetto europeo *Research-based Impact Analysis in Adult Education (RIA-AE)*, condotto da un network formato da varie agenzie Erasmus di altrettanti paesi europei, sta lavorando proprio per dare evidenza a quanto è stato e può essere implementato attraverso la mobilità europea degli adulti in formazione. Il progetto ha preso avvio nel 2023 e si concluderà nel 2027.

Nel settore dell'Educazione degli Adulti, strutturalmente connotato da una marcata eterogeneità degli attori, la valutazione dell'efficacia del Programma Erasmus+ pone sfide metodologiche ed epistemologiche significative. Sebbene la partecipazione in termini

quantitativi sia ampiamente documentata (European Commission, 2024), permane la necessità di approfondire l'impatto qualitativo e longitudinale su discenti, sul personale amministrativo e di accompagnamento, sulle organizzazioni, con particolare riferimento alle dimensioni intangibili del *civic engagement*, della resilienza socio-economica e dell'inclusione sociale (De Greef, Segers & Verté, 2010). In linea con i pilastri concettuali che definiscono l'educazione come "tesoro" (Delors, 1996) e come processo esistenziale dell'"imparare a essere" (Faure, 1972), è indispensabile adottare lenti interpretative multi-dimensionali. Tali prospettive devono essere capaci di cogliere la profondità dei processi di cambiamento a livello individuale ovvero secondo una prospettiva Micro, devono essere in grado di cogliere l'evoluzione delle culture organizzative verso modelli di *Learning Organization* (Senge, 1990) a livello istituzionale, ovvero in una prospettiva Meso, e devono essere saper comprendere la capacità del Programma di fungere da "supporto funzionale" o catalizzatore di innovazione per le policy pubbliche a livello sistemico ovvero in una prospettiva Macro (OECD, 2003).

Sulla scorta delle evidenze empiriche emerse dal network transnazionale RIA-AE (Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ of Adult Education Programme) (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024), questo numero monografico intende indagare l'Erasmus+ come spazio privilegiato di apprendimento autodiretto (Knowles, 1975), riflessivo (Schön, 1993) e trasformativo (Mezirow, 1991). L'obiettivo primario è analizzare come la mobilità individuale (KA1) e la cooperazione strategica (KA2) agiscano sinergicamente sui tre livelli del sistema formativo: il livello Micro della persona, il livello Meso delle organizzazioni e il livello Macro delle politiche.

Il presente numero della nostra rivista *Epale Journal* affronta, dunque, un tema complesso, ma importante, molto diffuso, ma poco studiato. La valutazione e, soprattutto, la valutazione di impatto, sono questioni sempre più centrali per la ricerca scientifica, finanziata o no. La valutazione di impatto aiuta a comprendere se la variegata offerta formativa, di cui come ricercatori, *practitioners*, *adult* e *older adult* siamo beneficiari, abbia realmente ricadute sul nostro senso di cittadinanza e di costruzione del sé, come anche di partecipazione o crescita personale.

Assessing the impact of Erasmus+ in Adult Education: empirical evidence, transformative processes, and comparative perspectives within the RIA-AE Framework, raccoglie un'ampia serie di contributi teorici, indagini empiriche e testimonianze esperienziali sull'impatto del programma Erasmus+ nel settore dell'educazione degli adulti. Il lavoro si colloca all'interno delle attività di ricerca della rete transnazionale **RIA-AE** (*Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes*), finalizzata a monitorare e valutare gli effetti dei progetti europei, finanziati dalla Commissione, sulle organizzazioni, sui discenti e sui sistemi educativi e formativi a livello europeo. La rete transnazionale è composta da un numero significativo di Paesi membri, più di venti sono quelli che partecipano alla ricerca di matrice istituzionale. Per ogni Paese sono presenti sia ricercatori delle Agenzie Nazionali, sia ricercatori universitari.

Il nostro intento principale è stato quello di portare alla attenzione della comunità scientifica la riflessione sulla misurazione delle attività e dei prodotti di progetto, spostando l'attenzione da una analisi di mero tipo quantitativo a una analisi di tipo qualitativo. Comprendere quale sia la

ricaduta dei Progetti Erasmus+ sulla popolazione adulta europea è molto importante, non solo in termini di rendiconto, ma al fine di capire a fondo come le relazioni, i rapporti, la mobilità abbiano influito sulla trasformazione dei soggetti che vi hanno partecipato. Quale sostenibilità a lungo termine, quale accessibilità strutturale e come i processi trasformativi innescati dalle esperienze di mobilità individuale (Azione Chiave 1 – KA1) e dai progetti di cooperazione e partenariato (Azione Chiave 2 – KA2) hanno contribuito a far crescere il senso di cittadinanza e appartenenza europea?

Gli articoli ci restituiscono una visione globale sulle opportunità offerte da Erasmus+ e, soprattutto, ci aiutano a comprendere come queste opportunità si traducano in effettivo sviluppo personale, professionale e organizzativo, promuovendo l'inclusione sociale, l'*agency* individuale e la partecipazione democratica.

L'articolazione dei contributi

Il N. 19/2026 si articola in tre sezioni principali che riflettono diversi livelli di analisi e di applicazione del quadro metodologico RIA-AE.

In una prima sezione troviamo ricerche nell'ambito della rete RIA-AE (*Researches within the RIA-AE Network*). Questa sezione raccoglie studi transnazionali e analisi nazionali condotti da coloro che partecipano alla rete RIA-AE. Possiamo ricapitolare i contributi sotto le seguenti voci:

- **Mainstreaming degli output di cooperazione (KA2):** Bert-Jan Buiskool e Victor Verlaan analizzano il trasferimento e l'integrazione dei risultati dei progetti KA2 attraverso la teoria della diffusione delle innovazioni di Everett Rogers (2003), evidenziando come l'impatto a lungo termine dipenda dalla capacità organizzativa, dal valore aggiunto dimostrato e dalle reti istituzionali.
- **Accessibilità della mobilità transnazionale e politiche educative:** Francesca Torlone e Marco Ceccarelli esaminano Erasmus+ come misura di policy, introducendo la distinzione tra pubblico effettivo, potenziale e non-pubblico e discutendo il rischio di stabilizzare un "equilibrio di esclusione dall'apprendimento" (*learning exclusion equilibrium*) (Torlone, 2023) in assenza di servizi strutturati di mediazione, orientamento e tutoraggio.
- **Riflessività e traiettorie biografiche dei partecipanti:** Julita Pieńkosz esplora le narrazioni dei discenti adulti in Polonia alla luce della teoria della riflessività di Margaret Archer, mostrando come la partecipazione e gli esiti della mobilità siano plasmati dalle premure fondamentali (*ultimate concerns*) e dai contesti di vita dei partecipanti.
- **Approccio comunitario co-creativo:** Willeke van der Werf analizza il valore dell'approccio comunitario e co-creativo nell'educazione degli adulti all'interno della *New Public Governance* (Osborne, 2010), illustrando pratiche che collegano l'apprendimento delle competenze di base alla vita quotidiana e alla partecipazione civica.
- **Prospettive e casi di studio nazionali:** La sezione comprende inoltre lo studio sulle organizzazioni locali nell'educazione degli adulti in Portogallo (Paula Guimarães, Carolina Pereira, Ana Nascimento David); le riflessioni sull'impatto del programma in Slovenia (Borut Mikulec); la presentazione di RIA-AE come architettura valutativa nel contesto italiano e il ruolo dell'Agenzia Nazionale (Daniela Ermini); e l'indagine sulla formazione del sé nei discenti adulti italiani coinvolti in mobilità KA1 (Vanna Boffo, Christel Schachter).

In una seconda sezione troviamo le Ricerche che possiamo collocare nel quadro del RIA-AE (*Researches within the RIA-AE Framework*). Qui sono raccolte indagini empiriche e comparative orientate dal quadro concettuale RIA-AE:

- **Apprendimento trasformativo:** Antonio Sacristano analizza la mobilità Erasmus+ come catalizzatore di apprendimento trasformativo oltre l'esperienza del viaggio.
- **Valutazione linguistica per migranti:** Piera De Gironimo presenta uno studio comparativo tra Italia e Spagna sulla valutazione e certificazione L2 per adulti migranti.
- **Benessere dei discenti:** Ángel Navarro Rodríguez propone una prospettiva comparativa sul benessere dei discenti adulti tra le Isole Canarie e la Finlandia.
- **Integrazione tra educazione formale e non formale:** M. Amparo Aymerich Bort illustra un caso pratico sul programma di *Job Shadowing* presso la Volkshochschule di Francoforte.

Infine, nella terza sezione troviamo i Contributi esperienziali nel quadro del RIA-AE (*Experiential Contributions within the RIA-AE Framework*). Vengono valorizzati i modelli pratici, i casi di studio e le esperienze applicate che possono essere ricompresi all'interno di un possibile quadro di riferimento RIA-AE:

- **Sostenibilità e competenze:** Angelo Fanelli presenta un modello di competenze abduktivo per le mobilità Erasmus+ sulla sostenibilità.
- **Impatto comparativo sulle organizzazioni:** Maria Teresa Caccavale analizza l'impatto di Erasmus+ su organizzazioni e partecipanti in chiave comparativa tra Paesi.
- **Alfabetizzazione funzionale e inclusione:** Juan Cristóbal Ruiz González approfondisce il progetto EVLE incentrato su alfabetizzazione funzionale, inclusione e cittadinanza europea.
- **Sviluppo professionale dei docenti:** Ivan B. Šarčević analizza la mobilità KA1 come strumento di formazione per i docenti delle Scuole di Seconda Opportunità.
- **Job shadowing e modelli innovativi nelle scuole per adulti:** Cristina Meneguzzo illustra il progetto "TOP" sul *job shadowing* a scuola; María Álvarez Álvarez presenta l'esperienza dell'EOI di Collado Villalba e San Lorenzo de El Escorial; Rocío Romero Aguilera ed Enrique Tierno Galván descrivono un progetto di insegnamento individualizzato basato sul modello finlandese per studenti adulti con difficoltà di apprendimento.
- **Prossimità e narrazione nel territorio:** Marianna Capo esamina il progetto NEAR come metodo per valutare l'impatto di Erasmus+ nell'area napoletana attraverso la prossimità e la narrazione.

Rilevanza e conclusioni

Ancora mancano conclusioni complessive che potremo avere solo nel 2027, tuttavia sulla base di quanto abbiamo assunto fino ad ora dai dati, possiamo trarre alcune riflessioni, a livello di *Accessibilità* ci troviamo davanti ad alcuni fattori come la *democratizzazione dell'accesso* permettendo che sempre più micro-organizzazioni possano fruire del Programma Erasmus+, soprattutto organizzazioni con contenuto numero di dipendenti che, quindi, lavorano territorialmente e localmente. Alla accessibilità lavorano sempre più organizzazioni, dette del terzo settore (ONG, Fondazioni e Associazioni). Un orientamento verso il sostegno alla *educazione alla longevità*. L'età dei beneficiari dei programmi, infatti, sempre più alta, impone di curare i Programmi verso una attenzione all'*Active Ageing* (World Health Organization, 2002). Questo è sempre più un tema di inclusione sociale, culturale e politica.

Accessibilità, democratizzazione e prospettive di longevità ci dicono della preparazione professionale necessaria per pensare alla organizzazione. In tal senso, le competenze degli operatori sono fattore fondamentale per implementare i Programmi stessi con una offerta di apprendimento permanente di qualità. Comprendere che la professionalizzazione è importante, significa potersi rivolgere a gruppi sempre più variegati e diversi di adulti, si pensi solo agli adulti in difficoltà per le più svariate ragioni che possono fruire di esperienze di vita uniche. In tal senso, sarebbe importante comprendere come supportare queste fasce più deboli e, dunque, le organizzazioni che se ne possano far carico.

Soprattutto sui singoli, è stato già possibile rilevare i benefici della mobilità. Siamo davanti a un vero e proprio valore pedagogico della mobilità di gruppo (Kolb, 1984), come strumento protettivo e strategico per i discenti vulnerabili, sviluppando *soft skills*, incrementando l'autostima, infondendo nei partecipanti la consapevolezza di essere parte di uno spazio europeo (Delanty, 1995).

Attraverso la varietà delle metodologie e dei contesti analizzati, la pubblicazione evidenzia come l'impatto di Erasmus+ nell'educazione degli adulti non costituisca un esito automatico della partecipazione, bensì un complesso processo di diffusione e trasformazione (Rogers, 2003). Questo processo richiede un sostegno organizzativo costante, reti istituzionali di intermediazione e servizi orientati all'accessibilità reale.

Dobbiamo continuare a ritenere che sia centrale per la democrazia costruire spazi europei di condivisione, questi programmi vanno proprio in questa direzione. Devono diventare più ampi e più sostenuti, sono un mezzo valido per diffondere l'idea di Europa, ma soprattutto per avere la diffusione di una idea di uguaglianza, solidarietà e vita in pace. Tutti aspetti che gli eventi bellici degli ultimi anni stanno erodendo in maniera sempre più rapida.

La valutazione di impatto, scientifica, su processi educativi è complessa, è lunga, anche lenta, ma rende ragione che solo camminando sulla strada di valori condivisi di cittadinanza e partecipazione sarà possibile continuare ad avere risorse umane per orientare la politica. E non solamente per farsi orientare dalla politica.

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Editorial

A reflection on social impact and the Erasmus+ Programme. Introduction to a European research project

Vanna Boffo

The reference context

Asking ourselves, today, within the political, cultural, and social context we are currently experiencing, what role Adult Education plays in Europe is more important than ever. We live in a time of active populism, of massive migratory movements that are, at the same time, perceived as invasive; we live in a time in which the very notion of *communitas* (Esposito, 2010) has eroded in the face of ever more severe social and political closures.

In this time of ours, distant from the end of the Second World War, distant from the order that world politics had once brought to the globe, we have lost the sense of the other. The number of local yet global wars stands before us as evidence that we have forgotten a shared human identity. And yet we must not let go of hope. It is precisely here that European policy on and for Adult Education becomes absolutely central.

Does it still make sense, today, to speak of a policy for adult education and training in Europe? Setting aside methodological considerations and the inquiry that has now been underway for roughly three years, does it make sense to try to understand what it means to be *European*? Can a journey – in technical terms, a *mobility experience* – sustain the idea of Europe? At the root of the studies presented here lies a single, central question: whether the mobility project undertaken constitutes an educational and training experience adequate to the purpose it set out to achieve. This is our starting assumption: within the contemporary scenario of Lifelong Learning, the Erasmus+ Programme transcends its function as a mobility instrument to act as a complex pedagogical device, essential to the development of European human and cultural potential (European Commission, 2019). We know, in fact, that, since the very inception of the Erasmus idea, the Erasmus+ Programme was meant to act as a strategic lever for the innovation of educational systems, for the development of formal, informal, and non-formal learning/education conditions (European Commission, 2000), and for the promotion of active and aware citizenship (European Commission, 2015).

Within this social, educational, and political framework, the European project *Research-based Impact Analysis in Adult Education* (RIA-AE) – carried out by a network composed of various Erasmus agencies from an equal number of European countries – is working precisely to provide evidence of what has been, and can be, achieved through the European mobility of adults in training. The project began in 2023 and will conclude in 2027.

In the field of Adult Education, structurally marked by a pronounced heterogeneity among its actors, assessing the effectiveness of the Erasmus+ Programme raises significant methodological and epistemological challenges. Although participation in quantitative terms is widely documented (European Commission, 2024), there remains a need to deepen understanding of the qualitative and longitudinal impact on learners, on administrative and support staff, and on organisations, with particular reference to the intangible dimensions of *civic engagement*,

socio-economic resilience, and social inclusion (De Greef, Segers & Verté, 2010). In line with the conceptual pillars that define education as a “treasure” (Delors, 1996) and as the existential process of “learning to be” (Faure, 1972), it is essential to adopt multi-dimensional interpretive lenses. Such perspectives must be capable of grasping the depth of processes of change at the individual level – that is, from a Micro perspective; they must be able to grasp the evolution of organisational cultures towards models of the *Learning Organization* (Senge, 1990) at the institutional level – that is, from a Meso perspective; and they must be able to understand the Programme’s capacity to act as “functional support,” or as a catalyst for innovation in public policy at the systemic level - that is, from a Macro perspective (OECD, 2003).

Building on the empirical evidence emerging from the transnational RIA-AE network (Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ of Adult Education Programme) (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024), this monographic issue sets out to investigate Erasmus+ as a privileged space for self-directed (Knowles, 1975), reflective (Schön, 1993), and transformative (Mezirow, 1991) learning. The primary aim is to analyse how individual mobility (KA1) and strategic cooperation (KA2) act synergistically across the three levels of the training system: the Micro level of the person, the Meso level of organisations, and the Macro level of policies.

The present issue of our journal *Epale Journal* thus addresses a topic that is complex, important, widespread, yet under-studied. Evaluation, and above all impact evaluation, are increasingly central concerns for scientific research, whether funded or not. Impact evaluation helps us understand whether the varied training offer – of which we, as researchers, *practitioners, adults*, and older adults, are beneficiaries – actually has repercussions on our sense of citizenship and self-construction, as well as on participation and personal growth.

Assessing the impact of Erasmus+ in Adult Education: empirical evidence, transformative processes, and comparative perspectives within the RIA-AE Framework brings together a broad range of theoretical contributions, empirical studies, and experiential accounts concerning the impact of the Erasmus+ Programme in the field of adult education. This work is situated within the research activities of the transnational **RIA-AE** network (*Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes*), aimed at monitoring and evaluating the effects of European projects funded by the Commission on organisations, learners, and educational and training systems at the European level. The transnational network is made up of a significant number of member countries, with more than twenty participating in this institutionally grounded research. In each country, both researchers from the National Agencies and university researchers take part.

Our principal intent has been to bring to the attention of the scientific community a reflection on the measurement of project activities and outputs, shifting the focus from a purely quantitative type of analysis to a qualitative one. Understanding the impact of Erasmus+ Projects on the European adult population is highly important, not only for accountability purposes, but in order to grasp in depth how relationships, connections, and mobility have transformed the individuals who took part in them. What is their long-term sustainability and structural accessibility? And how have the transformative processes triggered by individual mobility experiences (Key Action 1 – KA1) and by cooperation and partnership projects (Key Action 2 – KA2) contributed to strengthening a sense of European citizenship and belonging?

The articles offer us a comprehensive view of the opportunities provided by Erasmus+ and, above all, help us understand how these opportunities translate into genuine personal, professional, and organisational development, fostering social inclusion, individual agency, and democratic participation.

The structure of the contributions

Issue No. 19/2026 is organised into three main sections, reflecting different levels of analysis and application of the RIA-AE methodological framework.

The first section presents research conducted within the RIA-AE network (*Researches within the RIA-AE Network*). This section gathers transnational studies and national analyses carried out by participants in the RIA-AE network. The contributions can be summarised as follows:

- **Mainstreaming of cooperation outputs (KA2):** Bert-Jan Buiskool and Victor Verlaan analyse the transfer and integration of KA2 project results through Everett Rogers's diffusion of innovations theory (2003), showing how long-term impact depends on organisational capacity, demonstrated added value, and institutional networks.
- **Accessibility of transnational mobility and educational policies:** Francesca Torlone and Marco Ceccarelli examine Erasmus+ as a policy measure, introducing the distinction between the effective public, the potential public, and the non-public, and discussing the risk of stabilising a "learning exclusion equilibrium" (Torlone, 2023) in the absence of structured mediation, guidance, and mentoring services.
- **Reflexivity and participants' biographical trajectories:** Julita Pieńkosz explores the narratives of adult learners in Poland in light of Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity (2007), showing how participation in, and outcomes of, mobility are shaped by participants' *ultimate concerns* and life contexts.
- **Co-creative community approach:** Willeke van der Werf analyses the value of the community-based, co-creative approach to adult education within the framework of *New Public Governance* (Osborne, 2010), illustrating practices that connect the learning of basic skills to everyday life and civic participation.
- **National perspectives and case studies:** This section also includes a study on local organisations in adult education in Portugal (Paula Guimarães, Carolina Pereira, Ana Nascimento David); reflections on the Programme's impact in Slovenia (Borut Mikulec); a presentation of RIA-AE as an evaluative architecture within the Italian context and the role of the National Agency (Daniela Ermini); and an investigation into the formation of the self among Italian adult learners involved in KA1 mobility (Vanna Boffo, Christel Schachter).

The second section gathers research that can be situated within the RIA-AE framework (*Researches within the RIA-AE Framework*). Here we find empirical and comparative studies guided by the RIA-AE conceptual framework:

- **Transformative learning:** Antonio Sacristano analyses Erasmus+ mobility as a catalyst for transformative learning that goes beyond the experience of travel itself.
- **Language assessment for migrants:** Piera De Gironimo presents a comparative study between Italy and Spain on the assessment and certification of L2 competence for adult migrants.

- **Learner wellbeing:** Ángel Navarro Rodríguez proposes a comparative perspective on the wellbeing of adult learners between the Canary Islands and Finland.
- **Integration between formal and non-formal education:** M. Amparo Aymerich Bort illustrates a practical case study on the *Job Shadowing* programme at the Volkshochschule in Frankfurt.

The third and final section presents experiential contributions within the RIA-AE framework (*Experiential Contributions within the RIA-AE Framework*). Here, practical models, case studies, and applied experiences that can be situated within a possible RIA-AE reference framework are given prominence:

- **Sustainability and competences:** Angelo Fanelli presents an abductive competence model for Erasmus+ mobility focused on sustainability.
- **Comparative impact on organisations:** Maria Teresa Caccavale analyses the impact of Erasmus+ on organisations and participants from a cross-country comparative perspective.
- **Functional literacy and inclusion:** Juan Cristóbal Ruiz González explores the EVLE project, centred on functional literacy, inclusion, and European citizenship.
- **Teachers' professional development:** Ivan B. Šarčević analyses KA1 mobility as a training tool for teachers in Second Chance Schools.
- **Job shadowing and innovative models in adult schools:** Cristina Meneguzzo illustrates the "TOP" project on job shadowing in schools; María Álvarez Álvarez presents the experience of the EOI of Collado Villalba and San Lorenzo de El Escorial; Rocío Romero Aguilera and Enrique Tierno Galván describe an individualised teaching project based on the Finnish model for adult students with learning difficulties.
- **Proximity and narrative in the territory:** Marianna Capo examines the NEAR project as a method for assessing the impact of Erasmus+ in the Naples area through proximity and narrative.

Relevance and conclusions

Comprehensive conclusions are not yet available and will only be possible in 2027; nevertheless, on the basis of what the data have shown so far, some reflections can already be drawn. At the level of *Accessibility*, we are faced with factors such as the *democratisation of access*, which is enabling an increasing number of micro-organisations to make use of the Erasmus+ Programme, particularly small organisations that operate at a strictly local and territorial level. Increasingly, so-called third-sector organisations (NGOs, foundations, and associations) are also working towards accessibility. There is a growing orientation towards supporting *education for longevity*. The age of Programme beneficiaries is, in fact, steadily rising, which requires the Programmes to be shaped with greater attention to *Active Ageing* (World Health Organization, 2002). This is increasingly a matter of social, cultural, and political inclusion.

Accessibility, democratisation, and longevity perspectives point to the professional preparation required to properly design organisational structures. In this sense, the competences of practitioners are a fundamental factor in implementing the Programmes themselves through a high-quality lifelong learning offer. Recognising the importance of professionalisation means being able to reach increasingly varied and diverse groups of adults - one need only think of

adults facing difficulties for the most varied reasons, who can nonetheless benefit from unique life experiences. In this sense, it would be important to understand how to support these more vulnerable groups and, consequently, the organisations that can take responsibility for them.

It has already been possible to observe the benefits of mobility, especially at the individual level. We are seeing the genuine pedagogical value of group mobility (Kolb, 1984) as a protective and strategic tool for vulnerable learners, developing *soft skills*, increasing self-esteem, and instilling in participants an awareness of being part of a European space (Delanty, 1995).

Through the variety of methodologies and contexts examined, this publication shows how the impact of Erasmus+ in adult education is not an automatic outcome of participation, but rather a complex process of diffusion and transformation (Rogers, 2003). This process requires constant organisational support, institutional intermediation networks, and services oriented towards genuine accessibility.

We must continue to hold that building European spaces of sharing is central to democracy, and these programmes move precisely in this direction. They must become broader and more strongly supported, as they are a valid means of spreading the idea of Europe, and above all of spreading an idea of equality, solidarity, and peaceful coexistence – all aspects that the armed conflicts of recent years are eroding at an increasingly rapid pace.

Scientific impact evaluation of educational processes is complex, time-consuming, and sometimes slow; yet it demonstrates that only by walking the path of shared values of citizenship and participation will it be possible to cultivate human resources capable of shaping policy – and not merely of being shaped by it.

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Mainstreaming intellectual outputs of cooperation partnerships (KA2) within Erasmus+: lessons learned from the Adult Education Sector

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Keywords

Erasmus+, Adult education, Impact, Innovation.

Abstract

Erasmus+ increasingly emphasises the long-term impact, sustainability, and mainstreaming of project results beyond the immediate project partnership. This article examines the extent to which outputs developed through Erasmus+ Strategic Cooperation and Small-Scale Partnership projects (Key Action 2) in adult education are transferred, adopted, and embedded within organisations and beyond. Drawing on findings from the first survey round of the RIA-AE Network, the analysis combines evidence from an online survey in 15 countries and case studies conducted in 10 countries. Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory is used as the analytical framework to interpret the factors that facilitate or hinder the mainstreaming of project results. The findings show that Erasmus+ projects generate a wide range of outputs, many of which continue to be used after project completion. However, their wider uptake and impact depend on a range of organisational, innovation-related, and institutional factors, including demonstrated added value and existing networks. The article concludes that the impact of Erasmus+ project outputs is best understood as a diffusion process rather than as an automatic outcome of project participation. Strengthening organisational capacity, dissemination structures, and knowledge exchange mechanisms is therefore essential for enhancing the sustainable uptake and broader impact of Erasmus+ project results in adult education.

1. Introduction

Over successive programme generations, Erasmus+ has increasingly shifted its attention from the successful implementation of project activities towards the longer-term impact and sustainability of project results. This reflects a broader change in thinking within the European Commission, where the emphasis has moved beyond monitoring activities and outputs towards understanding how projects contribute to meaningful and lasting change in education and training systems. In this perspective, activities and outputs are no longer seen as ends in themselves, but as means to generate impact at individual, organisational, and systemic levels.

While many projects successfully develop innovative methodologies, tools, learning resources, and organisational practices, there is often limited evidence that these outcomes are subsequently adopted by other organisations or integrated into wider policy and practice (Van Lieshout et al., 2025). A recurring challenge is the difficulty of transferring project results to other contexts. Methodologies and products are often developed for specific organisational settings and target groups, which can make them difficult for external organisations to adapt and implement. In addition, dissemination activities frequently focus on sharing information about project results rather than supporting their actual uptake and use. As a result, valuable knowledge and innovation generated through Erasmus+ projects may remain confined to the original project partnership. Understanding the factors that support or hinder the mainstreaming of project results is therefore essential for maximising the long-term impact of Erasmus+ investments in adult education.

This article draws on findings from the first survey round of the RIA-AE Network (Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes) on the mainstreaming of outputs developed within Erasmus+ Strategic Cooperation and Small-Scale Partnership projects (KA2) in the field of adult education (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024). The study explores how project results are transferred, adopted, and embedded beyond the original project partnerships, thereby contributing to broader educational improvement. The analysis is based on a common monitoring framework implemented across 15 countries and combines evidence from an online survey among Erasmus+ beneficiaries (986 responses) with case studies conducted in 10 of these countries. It examines the extent to which project outputs continue to be used beyond project completion and explores the factors that stimulate or hamper their wider uptake within organisations, across the adult education sector, and at policy level. To interpret these factors, the article draws on insights from innovation adoption literature, using Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory as its primary analytical framework.

2. Theoretical background

Innovation is widely recognised as a key driver of economic growth, organisational competitiveness, and societal progress. Despite its potential benefits, many innovations fail to be adopted or implemented effectively by organisations and policymakers. The process of innovation adoption involves the acceptance, integration, and sustained use of new technologies, processes, products, or practices. Existing literature suggests that numerous organisational, institutional, economic, technological, and social factors can impede this process (Rogers, 2003). Understanding these barriers is essential for explaining why potentially beneficial innovations often encounter resistance or experience slow diffusion.

While many barriers identified in innovation adoption research are generic, the education sector is characterised by a number of distinctive challenges. Educational organisations often operate within complex governance structures, face resource constraints, and must balance the interests of multiple stakeholders. In addition, educational change frequently requires shifts in professional practice, organisational culture, and leadership, making the implementation and sustainability of innovations particularly challenging (Fullan, 2015). For these reasons, understanding the factors that support or hinder the adoption and mainstreaming of innovations is especially relevant in the context of Erasmus+ projects in adult education. To analyse these factors, this article draws primarily on Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory, presented in Section 4.

3. Outputs developed by Strategic Cooperation and Small-Scale partnerships (KA2) projects in the field of adult education

KA2 projects produce a wide variety of outputs (Figure 1). Most commonly, these take the form of concrete products, such as curricula, training modules, language courses and pedagogical concepts (60%), manuals and handbooks (60%), and websites (59%). Around half of participating organisations also developed online tools, learning materials, and teaching materials for staff. Publications, instructional videos, and webinars were less frequently produced.

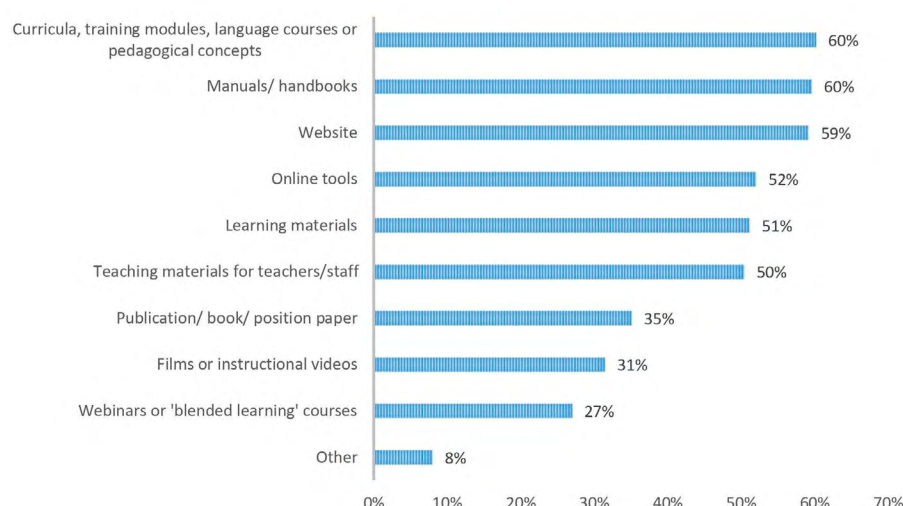


Figure 1 - Outputs or products developed as part of participation in KA2 in Erasmus+ (2018–2022) (N = 686)³

Source: Online survey beneficiary organisations RIA-AE Network (2024); already published in Buiskool et al. (2024).

Utilisation of outputs developed

Most organisations continue to use the outputs developed through their KA2 projects after project completion. However, the extent to which these outputs generate wider impact beyond their organisation varies considerably. The strongest impact beyond beneficiary organisations is found in the adaptation of training offers and educational provision by other organisations, reported by 68% of respondents. By comparison, policy-level impact is less common: 32% of respondents reported influence on local or regional policies, while 22% observed effects at the national level. The following sections explore the factors that facilitate or hinder the longer-term use, mainstreaming, and broader impact of project outputs.

4. Factors hampering or stimulating impact at organisation level

To interpret the factors that stimulate or hamper the impact of Erasmus+ project outputs, Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations Theory provides a useful theoretical lens. The theory explains how innovations spread within organisations and across wider social systems. According to Rogers, adoption depends largely on how potential users perceive an innovation. Five characteristics are particularly important: (1) relative advantage (whether the innovation is perceived as better than existing practices), (2) compatibility (whether it fits existing needs, values, and practices), (3) complexity (how difficult it is to understand and implement), (4) trialability (the possibility to test the innovation before committing to it), and (5) observability (the visibility of its results). In addition, diffusion is influenced by communication channels, social networks, organisational leadership, and change agents who promote adoption. Viewed from this perspective, the mainstreaming of Erasmus+ project outputs can be understood as a process in which project results are gradually adopted, embedded, and disseminated within organisations and across educational systems.

Rogers' (2003) theory helps explain the mechanisms behind factors, as discussed in the transnational analysis that influence the extent to which Erasmus+ project outputs generate impact beyond the immediate project partnership. These factors can either support or constrain the mainstreaming of project results, depending on their presence, quality, and degree of institutional embedding.

Proven quality and demonstrated added value of outputs

The importance of proven quality and demonstrated added value can be understood through Rogers' (2003) concept of *relative advantage*, which refers to the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than existing practices. Project outputs that have been tested, validated, and shown to be effective are more likely to be adopted and mainstreamed because their benefits are observable to potential users. Conversely, when the added value of project outputs is difficult to demonstrate, their uptake may be constrained. Given that KA2 projects under Erasmus+ most often lead to concrete outputs (see Figure 1), this explains why demonstrating the added value of project outputs and communicating these results within organisations are important factors for achieving impact beyond the project period. However, the added value of less tangible outcomes, such as developments in intercultural competences, language skills, or organisational culture, is more difficult to demonstrate. As a result, their perceived relative advantage may be reduced, which in turn may limit their wider adoption.

Committed staff and management support

The successful mainstreaming of project outputs depends not only on the characteristics of the outputs themselves, but also on the extent to which they are supported within the organisation. Rogers (2003) argues that innovations are more likely to be adopted when they are compatible with existing values, priorities, and organisational needs. This helps explain why Erasmus+ outputs are more likely to be embedded when they align with organisational objectives and are perceived as an opportunity for organisational development. By linking project results to strategic priorities, organisations can increase the likelihood that these outputs will be sustained beyond the project period.

A second finding emerging from the transnational report concerns the important role played by internal "boosters" in promoting and implementing project outputs. Rogers (2003) identifies change agents and opinion leaders as key actors in the diffusion process because they help reduce uncertainty surrounding innovations and encourage adoption among their peers. The internal "boosters" highlighted in the findings appear to fulfil a similar role. By taking responsibility for implementation and actively engaging colleagues, they help translate project outputs into everyday organisational practice. This helps explain why the presence of a committed staff member, supported by a broader group of engaged colleagues, emerged as an important condition for successful mainstreaming. The Austrian country report further suggests that broader stakeholder involvement within the organisation can strengthen this process by increasing ownership and enhancing the relevance of project outputs.

At the same time, Rogers (2003) argues that innovations only become sustainable when adoption extends beyond a small group of early supporters and diffuses more widely throughout a social system. This helps explain concerns that project outcomes are not always shared broadly enough within organisations, limiting the extent to which colleagues and learners benefit from them. In this vein, the Finnish country report highlights the importance of management commitment and support for achieving long-term impact. Ensuring that management is informed about internationalisation activities and their benefits, and that these benefits are integrated into organisational discussions and decision-making processes, can therefore support the wider diffusion and sustainable embedding of project results.

Available time and organisational capacity

A further factor described in the transnational report concerns the importance of available time and organisational capacity for achieving impact. While Rogers (2003) primarily focuses on the characteristics of innovations and the diffusion process, he also emphasises that adoption is not an automatic outcome. Rather, innovations require

sufficient opportunities for communication, learning, adaptation, and implementation before they can become embedded in practice. This is reflected in the observation that KA1 projects require sufficient time and resources to ensure high-quality preparation and follow-up of mobility activities, while KA2 projects often require continued organisational capacity after project completion to embed developed outputs into regular practice.

A limited number of involved staff can further undermine the sustainable embedding of project outputs. In such cases, ownership is constrained and continuity may be threatened if these individuals leave the organisation or cease to act as product owners. This is consistent with Rogers' (2003) argument that innovations are more likely to become established when knowledge about them is shared among a broader group of potential adopters rather than remaining concentrated among a few individuals. The German country report provides an example, noting that implementation is more likely to succeed when staff receive training in the use of project materials or have already been involved in their development, thereby increasing familiarity with project outputs and facilitating their adoption and integration into regular organisational activities.

External recognition, awareness, and follow-up dissemination

External recognition can be linked to Rogers' (2003) concept of *observability*, which refers to the extent to which the results of an innovation can be observed by others. Recognition as a best practice by Erasmus+ or through publications such as the *Erasmus+ Magazine* increases the credibility and profile of project outputs, thereby encouraging their continued use and promotion. Rogers (2003) further emphasises the importance of communication in the diffusion process. In this light, the emphasis placed on internal and external awareness-raising activities reflects the need to ensure that project outputs reach potential users and stakeholders. Sectoral interest and the availability of financial support further stimulate uptake by creating favourable conditions for continued use. Similarly, a dissemination strategy extending beyond the formal project period may contribute to the longer-term diffusion and mainstreaming of project results.

Practical applicability and accessibility

Rogers' (2003) concept of *compatibility* refers to the extent to which an innovation aligns with the needs and practices of potential users. Outputs that are highly theoretical, outdated, or insufficiently adapted to users' needs are less likely to be adopted. In the transnational report it is described that outputs are often developed in English, which can limit their use by teachers and other staff in national or local contexts. Conversely, professional translations may strengthen the integration of project results into regular practice by making them more accessible and relevant to potential users. Although translation can be funded through Erasmus+, translated materials need to be of sufficient professional quality to be attractive and usable.

5. Factors hampering or stimulating impact at system level

While the previous section focused on factors influencing the uptake and embedding of project results within beneficiary organisations, the transnational analysis also identified several factors that shape the impact of Erasmus+ projects at a broader system level. These factors relate to the diffusion of project outputs beyond the original project partnership and their uptake by other organisations, sectors, and, ultimately, policy actors.

One important success factor is the existence of close working relationships with like-minded organisations, particularly through membership of, or collaboration with, sectoral networks and associations of education providers. Such networks often provide institutionalised communication channels that can be used to disseminate project results, including manuals, curricula, and teaching and learning materials, to a wider audience. The German country report highlights the potential of national dissemination platforms, as European-level platforms are not

always regularly consulted by national stakeholders. Social media can serve a similar function, provided it is used professionally and forms part of a well-developed dissemination strategy. The importance attached to networks, dissemination platforms, and social media reflects Rogers' (2003) argument that innovations spread through social systems when information reaches potential adopters through trusted and accessible communication channels.

Another factor contributing to successful impact beyond the organisation is the organisation of training activities for staff from external organisations following a "train-the-trainer" approach. Consistent with Rogers' (2003) emphasis on interpersonal communication as a driver of adoption, such activities facilitate the transfer of knowledge and build the capacity required for the adoption and implementation of project outcomes.

The transnational analysis also identified several barriers that constrain the broader impact of Erasmus+ project outcomes. Similar to their role in limiting impact within organisations, language barriers constrain the *compatibility* (Rogers, 2003) – the transferability – of results across countries and sectors. A limited number of available translations reduces the extent to which project outputs can be readily understood and applied by potential users in different countries. A second recurring barrier concerns the limited time and financial resources available to beneficiaries for disseminating project outcomes after the formal completion of a project. These constraints also affect the maintenance and updating of project websites, reducing the accessibility and visibility of project results over time. From a diffusion perspective, such limitations weaken the communication channels through which potential adopters become aware of innovations and their benefits.

Quality-related challenges may also constrain the uptake of project outputs outside the originating organisation. The transnational analysis indicates that project partners do not always share the same quality standards and may lack the resources required to revise outputs, improve their presentation, or ensure a professional layout at the end of a project. This can reduce the perceived relative advantage of project outputs (Rogers, 2003), as outputs that are viewed as less useful, credible, or professional are less likely to be adopted by external organisations and stakeholders, thereby limiting their impact.

Achieving impact at the policy level presents additional challenges. The transnational analysis suggests that the relatively small scale and narrow scope of many Erasmus+ projects can limit their visibility and relevance beyond the immediate project context, while the long-term influence of project outcomes on policy development is often difficult to monitor once project funding has ended. As a result, evidence of policy uptake and systemic impact remains limited.

The findings concerning policy uptake can be further understood through knowledge exchange literature, which emphasises that knowledge is rarely transferred directly from producers to decision-makers. Instead, intermediary actors and institutional structures play an important role in translating knowledge, connecting stakeholder groups, and creating opportunities for interaction between those who generate knowledge and those who use it (Contandriopoulos, Lemire, Denis, & Tremblay, 2010). This is relevant because not all countries have dedicated umbrella organisations or intermediary bodies capable of translating project outcomes into wider sectoral learning and policy development. In addition, national adult education policies are not always aligned with Erasmus+ priorities and outcomes. The Slovenian country report, for example, notes that Erasmus+ is not explicitly referenced in the national Adult Education master plan. From the perspective of knowledge exchange, achieving broader policy impact in Erasmus+ depends not only on the quality of project outputs and dissemination efforts, but also on the presence of intermediary actors and institutional structures that connect project beneficiaries, sectoral stakeholders, and policymakers. Finally, newcomers and less experienced organisations often struggle with dissemination, stakeholder engagement, and policy influence compared with experienced beneficiaries. In a similar vein, project coordinators are often experts in implementation but may lack experience in advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and influencing policy processes.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The impact of Erasmus+ project outputs is best understood as a diffusion process rather than as an automatic outcome of project participation. While many projects produce tangible outputs that continue to be used after project completion, their sustainable and wider uptake depends on the extent to which their value is recognised, they are integrated into existing organisational practices, and they are actively disseminated to other potential users. This is reflected in the close correspondence between the findings and Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory. In particular, the factors identified in the transnational analysis relate strongly to the concepts of relative advantage, compatibility, and observability, as well as to the role of communication channels and change agents in supporting adoption.

The analysis further shows that achieving broader system-level impact requires more than dissemination alone. While organisational uptake of project outputs appears relatively common, achieving broader policy-level impact remains more challenging and dependent on supportive institutional structures. At organisational level, committed staff, management support, and organisational capacity remain important conditions for sustainable embedding. At system level, networks, dissemination platforms, and intermediary organisations play a crucial role in extending the reach of project results and facilitating policy uptake. Future efforts to strengthen the impact of Erasmus+ projects could therefore focus not only on supporting the development of outputs, but also on the organisational and institutional conditions that enable their wider adoption and use. This could include greater attention to post-project dissemination, procedures for internal knowledge transfer, translation and maintenance activities, as well as initiatives that strengthen connections between project beneficiaries, sectoral networks, national policy frameworks, and other relevant stakeholders. Organisations need to strengthen their strategies for integrating lessons learned and innovative practices from Erasmus+ activities into their broader institutional knowledge, thereby generating wider benefits for the organisation, its staff, and learners. National Agencies (NAs) could support this process by promoting good practices, while the European Commission could place greater emphasis on the related award criteria in its communications and the assessment of applications. In addition, further funding could be considered to support promising practices, facilitate knowledge sharing between projects, and strengthen the dialogue between Erasmus+, policy, and practice.

The analysis also points to avenues for future research and monitoring. While Rogers' (2003) theory proves useful in explaining many of the identified factors, future studies could further explore how different dimensions of diffusion interact and influence the long-term impact of Erasmus+ projects. In addition, literature on educational change may provide a fruitful complementary perspective, such as Fullan (2015), who emphasises the importance of leadership, organisational capacity, and sustained engagement in achieving lasting change. Such perspectives may provide additional insights into the conditions that should be met for mainstreaming of Erasmus+ KA2 outputs and could inform the further development of monitoring approaches and indicators for the programme.

Notes

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³ Figure 1 is based on the survey question: "What outputs or products have been developed within your organisation as part of participation in Key Action 2 in Erasmus+ (from 2018 onwards till the end of 2022)? More than one answer possible."

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Erasmus+ as a policy measure to promote access to transnational mobility*

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Keywords

Transnational mobility,
Learning exclusion equilibrium,
Accessibility, Potential Erasmus+
participants.

Abstract

This article analyses Erasmus+ (Key Actions 1 and 2) as a policy measure supporting transnational mobility, focusing on its structural accessibility. Accessibility is conceptualised as the measure's capacity to deploy devices converting formal opportunities into actionable possibilities. Drawing on twelve semi-structured interviews conducted in Italy within the RIA-AE research project, the article examines access barriers, delineates the boundaries between actual, potential, and non-participants, and analyses the role played by information, outreach, guidance, preparation, support, and tutoring services. Findings show that participation is highly mediated by organisations and professionals overseeing the mobility lifecycle. Organisations and professionals can contribute to releasing the demand for mobility, reducing barriers and supporting those less proximate to the measure. In the absence of such devices, however, the measure tends to reach mainly individuals and organisations already embedded in educational, associative and project-based networks, thereby risking the reproduction of forms of exclusion from learning, training and cooperation opportunities. The article therefore argues that the inclusive effectiveness of Erasmus+ mobility should be assessed not only in relation to the opportunities offered, but also in terms of the measure's capacity to expand the actual public through accessibility-oriented services and organisational mediations.

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

The transnational mobility promoted by Erasmus+ constitutes one of the main European policy measures supporting mobility for study, training and the development of strategic partnerships in the fields of education and lifelong learning (KA1; KA2). This article proposes to analyse Erasmus+ mobility through the methodological approach of policy measure analysis (Federighi, Horsdal, Knudsen, Nuissl, Sierra Orrantia & Torlone, 2007; Paparella & Savino, 2008), within the framework of the theory of the publics of education and training (De Sanctis, 1974, 1988).

The analysis focuses on the accessibility of the measure, leaving aside its other components³ (Federighi et al., 2007). This is a deliberate analytical choice: the article aims to examine the capacity of Erasmus+ to activate devices that prevent the ex ante exclusion of some of the less advantaged strata of the adult population. From this perspective, access to mobility does not depend only on the availability of European funding, but also on the presence of real conditions that make participation practicable. Among these, particular importance is attached to:

- the availability of organisations and services providing information, support, guidance and territorial outreach;
- the presence of professionals able to perform mediation and support functions, such as managers, teachers, coordinators, Erasmus+ contact persons, project designers and guidance practitioners;
- the definition of accessibility-oriented criteria and procedures.

These dimensions emerge from the interviews carried out in Italy within the framework of the RIA-AE research project between 2024 and 2026, which are discussed in this article.

The underlying hypothesis is that the effectiveness of mobility depends on the capacity of the measure to construct conditions of access, support and recognition that are appropriate to different profiles of adult learners and to the organisations able to reach out to them.

The theoretical framework integrates policy measure analysis with the distinction between the actual participants, the potential participants and the non-participants of mobility, taking the learning exclusion equilibrium as an interpretative category useful for understanding the possible stabilisation of selective forms of access to Erasmus+ opportunities.

The article is organised into five parts. After the introduction and theoretical framework (§1), §2 presents the results of the study of the measure with regard to barriers to access, mobility participants and the services that make this opportunity concretely accessible. This is followed by a critical analysis of the implications of the findings for research on Erasmus+ mobility and on the impact analysis of the measure (§3). §4 illustrates the methodology adopted for the analysis of the interviews. §4.6 provides information on the codes assigned to the excerpts from the empirical material. The article concludes with §5.

2. Empirical findings: access to and participation in Erasmus+ mobility

2.1. Barriers to access to transnational mobility

The analysis of modes of participation in mobility experiences aims to identify the rules and arrangements that define the effective use of the opportunities offered by Erasmus+. To this end, on the basis of twelve interviews carried out in Italy (2024–2026), we analysed the nature of the *barriers* relating to the following dimensions:

- a. the culture of mobility among coordinators and managers of the organisations responsible for the projects;
- b. the presence or absence of preparatory support measures aimed at creating favourable conditions for access by all potential participants;
- c. the definition of internal rules for the selection of participants.

The culture of mobility among managers and coordinators

The barrier connected to the way in which coordinators and managers represent mobility as a recreational experience emerges from the following:

- Project managers regard mobility projects as access to a “*Club Méditerranée*”, a “disruption of normal teaching activities”, a “waste of time” (P12).

“Many organisations sell Erasmus as a matter of tourism, a holiday, where one does not have to do anything. That was the mistake: presenting it in this way. In order to get people to leave, they reassured them that they would not have to do anything; the teacher goes because they spend a week away from their pupils” (P10).

- The quality and management of the project depend on the presence and interaction of different professionals capable of providing educational design and educational management of the mobility experience. All professionals involved in mobility projects funded by the Erasmus+ programme perform at least six fundamental functions. Each of these can be associated with different professional profiles (Table 1).

Table 1 - Functions performed in mobility projects and professionals involved.

Nr	Function performed in the Erasmus+ mobility project	Professionals involved
1	Governance and legitimization	Managers; presidents; directors of organisations implementing the projects
2	Project design and coordination	Erasmus+ coordinators; project managers.
3	Support, information and guidance	Teachers; trainers; Erasmus+ contact persons; tutors; educators; consultants.
4	Intermediation and construction of the demand for mobility	Consultants; consortium leaders; staff of dedicated help desks.
5	Ambassadors and network animators	Members/coordinators of international networks.
6	Administration and reporting	Directors of general and administrative services; administrative offices; administrative staff.

In the best cases, the different types of professionals are required to translate the complexity of the mobility project into organisational and educational practices implemented by the organisations taking part in the project. The success of the mobility project depends on the presence of professionals with these characteristics and on their capacity to reach potential participants. Several interviewees express awareness of the importance of this factor:

"Many people do not access it because of ignorance, mistrust and preconceptions. All it takes is a competent person who takes you by the hand; an expert professional mediator is useful" (P4).

"In schools there has to be someone, either internal or external, otherwise the school institution struggles to approach Erasmus. I work a lot with schools; we introduced Erasmus 14 years ago and then they got started. I continue to help the school Erasmus contact person with outreach" (P7).

"People participate in Erasmus+ mobility if they are aware of its potential and are supported in building their life project. We helped a Romanian participant take part in the mobility and reconcile it with the need to meet family members from whom he had been separated for many years" (P3).

Presence or absence of preparatory support measures

The presence or absence of preparatory support measures aimed at creating favourable conditions for access by all potential participants is considered a key factor in explaining participation and the expression of demand for mobility. Below are the views expressed by some of those involved in the design and management of support measures:

"I have to create the conditions for people to express their demand to take part in mobility: this is inclusion, namely giving everyone the opportunity to participate" (P12).

"For many people, Erasmus is the only opportunity they have to go somewhere and see a different reality; this is why we try to understand the barriers and manage them" (P12).

The culture of mobility among coordinators and managers, together with their capacity and possibility to implement support measures that create favourable conditions, appear to be two factors that affect the capacity of mobility projects to potentially include different types of participants. This, at least in part, explains why some coordinators observe that:

"In the end, it is always the same people who go on mobility"; "we always meet the same participants" (P8, P10, P11).

"We have a hard core of people who, within the same project, will probably take part in a couple of mobilities" (P5).

Others directly underline the difficulty of reaching new target groups and broadening the participant base:

"We try to send many people on mobility, and new people too, who perhaps have had little experience abroad" (P2).

The interviews show that inclusion does not coincide with the simple availability of mobility places. It requires a set of preliminary actions involving information, guidance, support and accompaniment, enabling potential participants to transform a formally accessible opportunity into a concretely practicable one:

"I fought to introduce Erasmus also in evening school, with adults, many of them foreign nationals, who do not know how to put their documents in order, do not use SPID, etc" (P5).

Definition of internal rules for the selection of participants

The definition of internal rules for the selection of participants is carried out autonomously by beneficiary organisations, Erasmus+ coordinators, intermediary bodies and consortium leaders in order to ensure rotation and distributed access. Inclusion is therefore the result of specific organisational choices, where such choices are made:

"In our view, participating in Erasmus+ mobility should be an almost necessary pathway - I would not say compulsory, but necessary for one's personal development: you have to do it because you need it" (P10).

"We try to send many people on mobility, and new people too: people who may have had little experience abroad, who have never taken part in this type of activity, who have not travelled much. Then we see that the demand for mobility increases: people who have just completed a mobility experience say to us, 'Guys, next time, where are we going, what are we doing, what will we see, who are we going to visit?'" (P2).

"One of the criteria we try to use is not having participated in previous Erasmus mobility experiences; this gives additional points" (P8).

"We try to include new people, so that it is not always the same ones" (P5).

The most structured case is that of the consortium coordinated by P8, where the guidelines for calls for applications include priority criteria for those who have not previously participated in Erasmus+ mobility, while placing participants who have already been involved in previous experiences at the bottom of the ranking list. In the same case, rotation also concerns the organisations belonging to the consortium, through the annual inclusion of new CPIAs and priority given to those that had not managed to send learners abroad in the previous year.

Selection criteria may be established directly by the beneficiary organisation, shared within consortia, or operationally translated by the coordinators responsible for mobility.

2.2. Actual, potential and non-participants in transnational mobility

The evidence collected suggests that the public of Erasmus+ mobility does not, of course, coincide with the whole set of potential beneficiaries of the programme. The processes and practices currently in place appear to favour access by a selected circle of adults, with the consequent emergence of informal rules that exclude people on the basis of:

- participants' areas of residence, particularly peripheral, insular or rural contexts (P11);
- the social and infrastructural characteristics of the territories in which they live (P1, P6, P9, P11);

- language skills (P7);
- nationality, or more specifically the administrative status and legal profiles of refugees and holders of international protection (P12);
- limited autonomy in managing the necessary administrative, digital and documentary procedures (P8, P12);
- low levels of education (P2);
- advanced age (P3);
- heavy family and professional responsibilities (P1, P3);
- lack of membership in associative and community networks (P2, P5);
- a weak culture of lifelong learning (P10, P11, P12);
- weak organisational support and insufficient availability of substitute staff (P6, P9);
- the absence of reference professionals or persons performing intermediation functions (P7, P8).

For analytical purposes, the target groups of the Erasmus+ programme can be grouped into three clusters: the actual public, the potential public and the non-public.

The *actual public of mobility* consists of those who take part in Erasmus+ experiences because they are embedded in organisational, associative or professional networks that facilitate access.

The *potential public of mobility* includes those who could access the measure but encounter various kinds of barriers that limit their participation. These may be territorial, geographical, logistical, symbolic, professional, legal, economic, family-related, linguistic, cultural or organisational barriers. This is not a homogeneous cluster. It includes individuals who are territorially distant, living in peripheral or rural areas, or in contexts poorly connected to educational and associative networks; adults constrained by professional or family responsibilities, for whom a temporary interruption of daily routines is difficult to reconcile with work, care duties or personal responsibilities; linguistically fragile individuals, discouraged by the use of foreign languages; and adult learners who are legally or administratively vulnerable, whose mobility is limited by their status, residence permits, incomplete documentation or restrictions on international circulation.

This group also includes individuals with low educational, digital or bureaucratic capital, for whom access procedures are difficult to understand and navigate independently; economically fragile adults, discouraged by advance costs, additional expenses or the management of the grant; people who are culturally distant from mobility and do not perceive Erasmus+ as an opportunity relevant to their age or social condition; and individuals who are not embedded in associative, professional or community networks capable of reaching and supporting them.

The potential public also includes professionals of organisations that could participate in Erasmus+ but do not have sufficient project-design competences, transnational networks or administrative resources. Finally, it also includes individuals within organisations that are already beneficiaries – teachers, staff members, operators, members or volunteers – who could participate but remain at the margins when opportunities are concentrated within a restricted circle of people who are already motivated, already competent or already involved in European projects.

The third cluster concerns the non-public, referring to people who remain at the margins of mobility circuits and whom the interviewees describe as particularly difficult, if not impossible, to reach, given the instruments currently provided by the programme. These are individuals who do not come into contact with the opportunities offered, not necessarily because of a lack of interest, but because of the weakness of the social, cultural and organisational devices that support the construction of demand for training and mobility.

If, under current conditions, it appears difficult to include segments of the non-public, a different assessment can be made with regard to the expansion of the actual public.

The interviews suggest that the transition from the potential public to the actual public may occur depending on the type of organisational and educational rules and processes adopted by the different actors responsible for implementing mobility projects. This transition is, in fact, strongly mediated by organisations, coordinators, consortia, territorial help desks, social services and professionals performing guidance, support and facilitation functions.

These intermediary professionals do not merely perform a technical function of supporting participation. They also contribute to concretely defining the boundaries of the public of mobility. Their capacity to activate latent demand for mobility among a broader public, especially potential participants, directly affects the social composition of those who take part in mobility experiences and, consequently, the programme's actual inclusive capacity.

In other words, access to mobility appears to reproduce educational differences among the different clusters of participants, even within a broader expansion of mobility provision and despite the role played by intermediary professionals operating within organisations.

2.3. Services and organisational mediations for the accessibility of transnational mobility

The issue of accessibility and participation is directly linked to the services through which the measure is implemented. These services are not ancillary or merely administrative elements of the mobility project. Rather, they represent constitutive components of the measure, since they affect the extent to which potential participants are informed, guided, recruited and selected, prepared, supported and placed in a position to carry out the experience. The analysis of services therefore makes it possible to understand through which organisational mediations Erasmus+ may reduce the distance between potential and actual participants, and in which cases, instead, this distance risks being reproduced.

The components of the Erasmus+ measure aimed at fostering adult mobility considered in this analysis refer to the different types of services offered by the organisations involved in the management of mobility projects (Regione Toscana et al., 2008):

- a. services for the selection of training centres and enterprises qualified, in terms of health and safety standards, to receive participants and implement personalised mobility programmes;
- b. quality standards for the services offered in the implementation of mobility projects;
- c. information services ensuring the matching of demand and supply in transnational mobility, with regard to the objectives, contents and level of specialisation of feasible mobility projects;
- d. assistance in organising stays;
- e. reception and assistance services upon participants' arrival;
- f. assistance services for participants with special needs;
- g. tutoring services;
- h. monitoring services and the use of tools for sharing information with the organisation promoting the mobility project;
- i. evaluation and dissemination of the results achieved by participants in relation to their educational and professional development during the transnational experience;
- j. certification of the learning outcomes achieved through mobility.

The analysis of the interviews shows that the services composing the Erasmus+ measure are not delivered by a single actor, nor are they limited to the formal requirements established by the programme. Rather, they are implemented through a chain of actors – beneficiary organisations, Erasmus+ coordinators, intermediary

bodies, consortium leaders, teachers, trainers, tutors, project managers and administrative staff – who translate the measure into concrete practices of access, support and valorisation of mobility.

A *first group of services* concerns information, guidance and the construction of demand for mobility. In public educational institutions, such as CPIAs and schools, these functions are often performed by managers, teacher contact persons and Erasmus+ coordinators, who present the opportunity to adult students, explain its objectives, conditions and constraints, and support self-application processes (P12).

In third-sector organisations and social promotion associations, information is instead channelled through associative networks, professional communities, territorial help desks and local animation activities (P7, P11). In intermediary bodies and consortia, it takes on a broader function of educational brokerage: identifying less experienced organisations, motivating them to participate, supporting them in understanding the rules of the programme and transforming a formal possibility into practicable access (P10).

A *second group of services* concerns the selection of participants and the regulation of access. The interviews show differentiated procedures. In some cases, selection is managed directly by the beneficiary organisation through internal calls, self-applications, criteria of relevance to project objectives or assessments related to the participant's profile (e.g., P5, P11, P12). In other cases, especially within consortia, criteria are shared at a supra-organisational level: the consortium leader provides guidelines, priorities and rotation rules, while the individual member organisations concretely apply the procedure (e.g., P8). In still other cases, selection takes on a situated and professional form, as the Erasmus+ coordinator translates project objectives, participants' learning needs and organisational constraints into concrete access choices for mobility (P5). Selection, therefore, does not appear as a merely administrative act, but as an educational and organisational device through which the effective public of mobility is defined.

A *third area* concerns the choice of hosting organisations and the construction of transnational networks. This function is particularly evident in intermediary bodies (e.g., P8), among project managers and in organisations with long-standing European experience (e.g., P2, P4), which select partners, training centres, enterprises or host institutions on the basis of their coherence with the objectives of mobility, organisational reliability and capacity to host adult learners, staff or professionals. In museums, foundations and specialised organisations, partner selection is also linked to the possibility of observing methodologies, practices and educational models that can be transferred to one's own context (e.g., P5, P11).

A *fourth group of services* concerns the organisation of the stay, reception and assistance upon arrival. The interviews show that travel, accommodation, meals, management of pocket money, documents, insurance and contacts with the hosting organisation are decisive conditions for making mobility practicable, especially for adults with limited international experience. This component emerges particularly in cases where organisations directly take responsibility for the organisational management of mobility (P3, P8). The most structured case is represented by P8, which coordinates departures, hosting organisations, preparatory meetings, accompanying persons, language training and the connection between sending CPIAs and receiving organisations. In some cases, the beneficiary organisation manages the grant in the form of services; in others, support is provided by teachers, tutors or coordinators who follow participants before and during their stay (e.g., P10, P12). Reception also has an educational value: placement in families, groups or new professional contexts may reduce initial insecurity and foster meaningful relationships (P11).

A *fifth area* concerns assistance for participants with special needs. Some organisations and consortia declare priority criteria for individuals with disabilities or economic, cultural or social disadvantage, activating additional resources or organisational adaptations (e.g., P8, P10). However, the interviews also reveal significant limitations: legal status, residence permits, language difficulties, family constraints and economic fragility may hinder

participation even when the measure is formally accessible (e.g., P7, P11, P12). In this sense, assistance services do not remove all barriers, but they may reduce the distance between the potential public and the actual public. *Tutoring and preparation* constitute a further central element. Teachers, trainers, tutors and coordinators prepare participants linguistically, interculturally, professionally and practically, anticipating the planned activities and clarifying expectations and responsibilities (e.g., P8, P11, P12). During mobility, tutoring supports participants' integration into the host context and fosters the transformation of experience into learning (e.g., P10). For teachers and staff, it may take the form of job shadowing, guided observation, professional exchange and post-mobility reflection (e.g., P5); for adult learners, it may also concern everyday autonomy, management of resources, use of language and relationships within the group (P3).

Lastly, *monitoring, evaluation, dissemination and certification of learning outcomes* are present, but with varying degrees of intensity. Overall, the interviews show that monitoring, evaluation and dissemination often take the form of immediate feedback or organisational capitalisation, while they appear weaker when it comes to measuring medium- and long-term effects.

Some organisations provide for reports, feedback meetings, internal seminars, workshops for colleagues or follow-up activities (e.g., P8, P10). Others acknowledge the difficulty of observing medium- and long-term effects (e.g., P5). Others are still at an initial stage in the institutionalisation of monitoring (e.g., P12), or define it in terms of the creation of ideas, models, tools or project initiatives that can be reused within the territory, thereby turning dissemination into an opportunity for local development (e.g., P7).

The certification of learning outcomes appears less central in the interviewees' accounts than the practical recognition of learning, that is, the participants' capacity to use what they have learned in their work, everyday life or organisation of belonging.

Overall, the interviews indicate that the services connected to the development of Erasmus+ projects (KA1 and KA2) are decisive for the accessibility of mobility. They do not operate as ancillary forms of support, but as educational and organisational conditions that enable potential participants to become actual participants. Where information, selection, preparation, assistance, tutoring and follow-up are structured, the measure can broaden access; where such services remain weak or depend on the initiative of individual coordinators, Erasmus+ instead tends to reach mainly individuals who are already motivated, already connected and already equipped with the resources needed to take part.

3. Discussion and implications for the research

3.1. Accessibility, organisational mediations and the formation of the mobility public

The results presented make it possible to discuss several implications for research on Erasmus+ mobility in adult education.

First, they suggest that accessibility cannot be assumed to be an automatic outcome of the availability of funding, but should instead be analysed as the product of services, professional mediations and organisational capacities. Second, they show that the public of mobility does not coincide with the potential pool of beneficiaries, but is constructed through processes of information, selection, support and intermediation.

Third, they highlight the risk that, in the absence of accessibility-oriented devices, Erasmus+ may primarily reach individuals and organisations already embedded in educational, associative and project-based networks.

In order to understand this process, it is necessary to consider the plurality of organisational actors involved in the implementation of Erasmus+. The measure does not operate through a direct relationship between the programme and the participant, but through a chain of actors composed of beneficiary organisations, sending

organisations, hosting organisations, intermediary bodies, consortium leaders and cooperation partners. Each of these actors performs different functions and contributes to defining who can concretely access mobility. From this perspective, the public of mobility is not made up only of individual adult learners, teachers, operators or professionals who take part in the activities, but also of the operators of organisations capable of identifying, interpreting and using the measure. The presence or absence of professionals and organisational capacities affects the possibility for Erasmus+ to reach new subjects and new territories. Intermediary bodies and consortium leaders therefore play a decisive role: they can reduce the distance between organisations outside European circuits and funding opportunities, while at the same time showing that access to the measure depends on organisational mediations that are not always uniformly available.

3.2. Erasmus+ and learning exclusion equilibrium

The expansion of the Erasmus+ programme to new types of organisations responsible for designing and coordinating mobility projects – primarily third-sector organisations and some types of private organisations, in addition to schools – has certainly had a positive impact on the enlargement of the network and of the points of contact with potential participants (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024).

However, on the basis of the interviews, this expansion does not appear to correspond to a systematic widening of participation in Erasmus+ mobility projects among less advantaged groups. If the current trend were considered acceptable, this would amount to validating the existing learning exclusion equilibrium as optimal and satisfactory. This equilibrium refers to a situation in which the supply of mobility funded by the Erasmus+ programme stabilises around a static balance that responds almost exclusively to the demand of habitual participants, thereby entrenching the exclusion of those located at the margins of the European programme.

This form of “discrimination” also applies to the organisations participating in European calls for proposals: these are organisations that tend to accumulate project-design competences, international networks and capacity to access funding. Organisations outside these circuits face greater difficulties in developing an autonomous demand for mobility and European cooperation.

When Erasmus+ succeeds in bringing the potential public closer to actual participation, the learning exclusion equilibrium is not overcome. Rather, it may be displaced towards a less restrictive configuration, in which the pool of actual participants expands beyond those already active in mobility circuits. In this sense, the inclusive effectiveness of Erasmus+ cannot be assessed solely in relation to the overall number of mobilities carried out, but must also be evaluated in terms of its capacity to modify the composition of the actual public.

The risk that mobility opportunities may be concentrated mainly among those already active in the international dimension may come into tension with the programme’s inclusive aims, generating a gap between the declared universalism of Erasmus+ opportunities and the actual composition of the programme’s beneficiaries. This should lead us to qualify the judgement of those who believe that:

“Working on participation and on the impact that Erasmus can have on certain segments of the public remains a utopia” (P10).

The data collected reveal a tension between the programmatic universalism declared by Erasmus+ and the social selectivity that characterises actual access to it. The deconstruction of these asymmetries and the progressive expansion towards new publics represent the primary political challenges for realising the inclusive effectiveness of the entire Erasmus+ ecosystem (de Greef, 2021).

3.3. Implications for the research on the impact of Erasmus+

At the research level, the findings suggest the need to shift attention from the study of the individual effects of mobility alone to the reconstruction of the organisational, professional and territorial conditions that make access possible. The Erasmus+ experience cannot be studied solely as a training experience abroad, but also as the outcome of a complex measure implemented through a plurality of services, rules, professional roles and organisational mediations.

This has at least three implications for research.

The first concerns the object of analysis. Studying the impact of the Erasmus+ measure requires considering not only those who leave, but also those who could leave and do not, those who remain excluded from information and organisational circuits, and the organisations that are able to create the conditions for the demand for mobility to emerge.

The second concerns the level of observation. The interviews show that access to mobility cannot be explained solely on the basis of participants' individual characteristics, such as motivation, language skills or personal availability. It also depends on organisational conditions: the presence of contact persons, project-design competences, a culture of mobility, the availability of support, the capacity for fair selection, transnational networks, administrative resources, and the mobility culture of managers and coordinators.

The third concerns the evaluation of the measure's inclusive effectiveness. Evaluating Erasmus+ only in terms of opportunities offered or mobilities carried out risks obscuring inequalities in access. Research should instead examine the capacity of the measure to reduce the distance between the potential public and the actual public, to support less equipped organisations, and to prevent the accumulation of project-design competences and international networks from continually strengthening the same actors.

From this perspective, policy measure analysis makes it possible to read Erasmus+ as a measure that produces effects not only through the funding of mobility, but also through the concrete configuration of the arrangements regulating information, guidance, outreach, preparation, assistance, tutoring, monitoring and the recognition of learning.

4. Methodological note

4.1. Methodological approach

The methodological framework adopted in this study is grounded in the analysis of policy measures (European Commission, 2008; Federighi et al., 2007). This paper examines Erasmus+ as a European policy instrument aimed at supporting transnational mobility, positing that a policy's capacity to deliver its intended outcomes is fundamentally contingent upon how its constituent measures are conceived, designed, and implemented. Consequently, Erasmus+ mobility is not analysed comprehensively across all its dimensions, but rather through the specific lens of its universalistic vocation and its efficacy in ensuring genuine accessibility. This methodological choice is driven by the understanding that, given the available resources and the organisational constraints surrounding its implementation, the Erasmus+ measure must be critically interrogated regarding the mechanisms it deploys to prevent the *a priori* exclusion of the most disadvantaged individuals from mobility opportunities. The research design strictly adheres to the protocols established by the international consortium *Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes* (RIA-AE), with specific reference to its methodological guidelines (Buiskool, de Greef, & Mulder, 2023; Buiskool et al., 2024). The primary objective is to evaluate the qualitative impact of Key Actions 1 and 2 (KA1 and KA2) on the adult education sector in Italy, foregrounding the phenomenological dimension of professional and organisational experiences.

4.2. Sampling strategy and composition of the Italian sample

The sampling strategy employs purposive selection criteria to capture the diverse array of organisations and professionals engaged in Erasmus+ KA1 and KA2 projects. The sample consists of twelve entities: three public educational institutions, two private enterprises, and seven third-sector organisations (including foundations, museums, training providers, and intermediary bodies) that serve as support, coordination, or facilitation hubs for accessing Erasmus+ opportunities. Consequently, the sample extends beyond direct funding beneficiaries to encompass actors and professionals dedicated to intermediation, mentoring, demand generation, consortium management, project support, and territorial outreach. For analytical purposes, these organisations can be classified into four functional typologies:

1. The first category comprises public educational institutions, such as schools and CPIAs (Provincial Centres for Adult Education), which engage in Erasmus+ as direct beneficiaries and as sending organisations for adult learners, educators, and administrative staff.
2. The second category encompasses associations, social promotion associations (APS), foundations, museums, and other third-sector entities. These operate both as beneficiaries and as promoters of educational, cultural, and social initiatives tailored for adults, professionals, vulnerable cohorts, and local communities.
3. The third category features private enterprises, training centres, and consulting firms tasked with the coordination, conceptualisation, management, and valorisation of mobility programmes and partnerships.
4. The fourth category consists of intermediary bodies and consortium leaders acting as educational and institutional brokers. They facilitate access to Erasmus+ for organisations lacking prior experience or autonomous project-design capacities, with some of these brokers also operating within the third sector or the consulting industry.

These typologies are intended to be descriptive rather than rigidly taxonomic, as several organisations demonstrate hybrid profiles, functioning simultaneously as direct beneficiaries, promoting entities, project designers, or intermediaries.

The professionals interviewed span a wide spectrum of responsibilities in mobility management, including executive leadership, coordination, project design, administration, training, mentoring, awareness-raising, and territorial intermediation. The cohort features executives, presidents, agency founders, Erasmus+ coordinators, project managers, consultants, and personnel dedicated to guiding and mentoring both actual and potential participants. This diverse sample composition facilitates the examination of mobility processes through the lens of actors who not only participate in the programme but actively operationalise it within their respective organisational and territorial contexts.

4.3. Semi-structured interviews and data collection

The analysis of the empirical data follows a sequential workflow that prioritises dialogic and interactive engagement with the respondents. The interview is conceptualised as a collaborative space for the co-construction of meaning, where the dynamic between researcher and participant stimulates professional reflexivity and yields a nuanced understanding of the motivations driving Erasmus+ mobility.

The methodological framework utilised a thematic map of issues, formulated as questions, which functioned as a flexible guide for the semi-structured interviews. A “probing” technique was central to this process, allowing follow-up inquiries to emerge organically from the participants’ responses. Conducted between 2024 and 2026, the interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each. The interviewer served predominantly as a facilitator –

introducing topics and raising pertinent issues – to ensure participants could comprehensively articulate their mobility experiences. Accordingly, the interviewer’s speaking time was restricted to roughly 10 minutes, thereby dedicating the remaining 40 to 50 minutes entirely to the interviewee’s narrative.

The results of the interviews were subject to full transcriptions (via AI software) that were revised and fine-tuned. These empirical data formed the basis for the subsequent thematic analysis.

4.4. Analysis of the empirical data

Data collection was based on twelve semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol acted as a flexible guide, encompassing questions about the organisations’ involvement with Erasmus+, their procedures for participant access and selection, the perceived impact of mobility, organisational changes, key challenges, and the specific conditions that either enable or hinder the sustainability of results.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed. The empirical data were then subjected to a multi-stage thematic analysis. This process involved an exhaustive reading of the transcripts, the identification of recurring thematic clusters, the coding of salient segments, and comprehensive cross-case comparisons. Subsequently, interpretive categories were progressively developed, and the empirical evidence was aligned with foundational theoretical constructs. The analytical process was inherently iterative, allowing initial interpretive hypotheses to be continually refined and updated in response to the emerging data.

Finally, to guarantee the auditability of the empirical corpus while strictly maintaining participant confidentiality, all full transcripts and related working materials are securely archived in a controlled-access repository.

4.5. Selection criteria and use of quotations

The quotations presented in the text were selected based on criteria of analytical relevance and thematic representativeness. Specifically, priority was given to statements that most clearly articulate recurring content across the twelve interviews - namely, themes, evaluations, or issues that emerge in multiple instances and are central to the research questions. Consequently, these quotations are not employed as isolated or merely illustrative anecdotes, but rather as discursive evidence capable of illuminating interpretive categories developed through the comparative analysis of the entire corpus.

Alongside quotes representing recurring themes, several statements relating to specific cases have been included when they serve to highlight significant variations, internal tensions, or less frequent but theoretically relevant aspects. In these instances, the quotation is not treated as an indicator of generalisability, but as a valuable element for understanding the complexity of the observed processes, particularly where differences emerge regarding organisational typologies, forms of access to mobility, levels of institutionalisation, or methods of capitalising on learning.

4.6. Anonymisation, auditability, and research limitations

All quotations are attributed using anonymous identification codes to protect the confidentiality of the participants and the involved organisations. These codes distinguish between different types of entities, allowing statements to be situated within their relevant organisational context without rendering the respondents identifiable. The quotations have been kept as faithful to their original phrasing as possible; minor interventions were made solely for readability purposes, without altering their substantive content.

The research, currently underway in Italy, presents certain limitations. First, the corpus is predominantly composed of interviews with coordination, executive, or management figures, and therefore primarily reflects the perspectives of organisational actors engaged in the design and implementation of Erasmus+ activities. Second,

the sample comprises organisations already active within the programme, which frequently possess consolidated project-design competences or are embedded in national and transnational networks. While this allows for an in-depth observation of the processes underlying access, management, and the capitalisation of mobility, it precludes a full representation of the perspectives of excluded or non-participating organisations. Finally, the investigation lacks a longitudinal design: consequently, the individual and organisational transformations described by the interviewees are analysed as perceived and retrospectively reconstructed effects, rather than as outcomes measured over time.

Despite these limitations, the adopted qualitative approach illuminates dimensions of impact that are difficult to capture through standardised instruments. Specifically, the analysis enables the observation of the role played by organisations and intermediary figures in structuring access to mobility, the socially mediated nature of the learning produced by Erasmus+, and the conditions that either foster or hinder the translation of the mobility experience into individual, professional, and organisational change.

5. Conclusion

The analysis highlights that the inclusive effectiveness of Erasmus+ mobility lies in the mediating action of organisations and professionals in facilitating access to the transnational experience. In the absence of structured guidance, tutoring and outreach mechanisms, as well as professionals specialised in these functions, the measure risks reinforcing a learning exclusion equilibrium, by meeting the demand of an already advantaged public and crystallising pre-existing educational inequalities.

The distinction between actual, potential and non-participants makes it possible to observe the relationship between available learning opportunities and concretely practicable possibilities. It shows that the expansion of mobility provision does not necessarily coincide with a social broadening of participation. For this reason, the impact of the measure should be assessed above all in terms of its capacity to reduce the distance between potential and actual participants - and, where possible, also between actual participants and non-participants.

From this perspective, services do not represent ancillary elements in the management of the measure. They constitute essential components of it, since they make it possible to enable the demand for mobility to emerge, support adult learners and organisations less proximate to the European programme, and counteract the tendency to reproduce the learning exclusion equilibrium.

When these devices are structured and accessibility-oriented, Erasmus+ can expand the actual public of mobility. When, by contrast, they remain weak, fragmented or dependent on the initiative of individual actors, the measure risks consolidating the participation of subjects who are already active in educational, associative and project-based circuits.

Notes

* This article is the outcome of sustained and fruitful collaboration between the authors. For the purposes of academic attribution, the authors declare the following distribution of responsibility: Francesca Torlone authored Sections 2 and 3; Marco Ceccarelli authored Sections 1 and 4. Section 5 was jointly authored by both authors.

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³ The components of a measure may be summarised as follows: the object of the measure and the expected results; the explicit and implicit requirements of the target groups; the type of good or service provided; the duration of access to the good or service; the mode of delivery; costs, including direct, indirect and opportunity costs; investments and their distribution; the institutional and organisational actors involved in the financing, organisation, delivery and evaluation of the measure, including their roles and regulatory sources; and the processes and outcomes of monitoring and evaluation.

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"Non-obvious" narratives: mobility adult participants' experiences from the perspective of reflexivity theory

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Keywords

Adult education, Erasmus+,
Learning mobility, Reflexivity,
Biographical learning.

Abstract

This article examines the experiences of Polish adult learners participating in short-term Erasmus+ mobility projects in the adult education sector. Drawing on Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity, it explores how individuals' ultimate concerns shape their decisions to participate and the meanings they assign to mobility experiences. The study is based on twelve in-depth biographical interviews with participants from six organisations implementing Erasmus+ mobility projects in Poland. The findings show that the functions and meanings of educational mobility vary according to participants' dominant concerns and biographical trajectories. Mobility provides respite and emotional support for caregivers, reinforces recovery and agency among participants with experiences of crisis, strengthens civic engagement, and supports active ageing among older learners. Across all groups, mobility is valued less for competence acquisition than for its contribution to agency, self-confidence, social relationships and opportunities for further learning and participation. The study also highlights the crucial role of sending organisations in facilitating participation, reducing uncertainty and supporting learners with fewer opportunities.

1. Introduction

Within the Erasmus+ programme, under Key Action 12, adult education has recently become an important area of learning mobility, providing opportunities for adult learners to participate in short-term international education activities. Within the programme framework, adult education refers to non-vocational learning activities. Adult education providers can apply for funding to support mobility activities for individual learners or groups and participants and accompanying staff may receive grants covering travel and accommodation costs.

One of the key policy objectives is to increase the participation of those individuals who have fewer opportunities, including those facing health, social, economic, educational or geographical barriers to learning (European Commission, 2025).

In Poland, the adult education sector is dominated by non-governmental organisations. Consequently, learning mobility is often embedded in community-based education, civic engagement and voluntary activities rather than in formal educational institutions. This organisational context shapes both access to mobility and participants' learning experiences, with senior learners representing a particularly visible group among mobility participants (Respondek, Pokrzywnicka-Jakubowska & Chodniewicz, 2024).

To date, research on educational mobility has paid relatively limited attention to adult learners. The literature on learning mobility has been dominated by studies of higher education students and other groups of young learners, with particular emphasis on outcomes such as intercultural learning, language development, personal growth and employability. Only recently has a growing body of research begun to explore mobility experiences in the adult education sector (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024; Petelewicz & Pieńkosz, 2024;

Erckrath et al., 2026). While these studies have significantly expanded knowledge about adult learning mobility, they have focused largely on identifying its outcomes and impacts.

This article examines the experiences of Polish adult learners participating in Erasmus+ short-term mobility projects from a different angle. Rather than focusing primarily on mobility outcomes, it explores why adults engage in learning mobility and how these experiences become embedded in their biographies. It also extends beyond the profile of the "typical" mobility participant frequently discussed in the Polish context, namely older adults engaged in lifelong learning, by including participants with diverse and often more complex biographical trajectories.

Using Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity as its analytical framework, the article explores how reflexive processes, and especially individuals' ultimate concerns, shape engagement in learning mobility. It addresses the following research questions: how are decisions to participate in mobility programmes formed, what motivations and concerns shape those decisions, how are the outcomes of mobility interpreted, and how are mobility experiences integrated into broader biographical narratives.

In Archer's theory, reflexivity is understood as a process through which individuals engage with their social context and deliberate on their situations, priorities and courses of action (Archer, 2007; 2013). Through internal conversations, reflexivity links external circumstances with personal concerns, enabling individuals to navigate changing social conditions.

A central element of this framework is the notion of ultimate concerns, understood as priorities that individuals consider most important and worth pursuing. Reflexivity enables individuals to define these concerns and align their actions accordingly. The concept has been further developed in studies on adult learning in Poland (Gola, 2023). These studies show how educational activities emerge from the interplay of life concerns, resources and structural conditions. Reflexivity is visible both in decisions regarding participation in learning and in biographical narratives through which individuals interpret educational experiences.

From this perspective, participation in educational mobility is viewed as a biographically embedded process whose meaning varies according to individual priorities and circumstances.

2. Methodology

The study draws on qualitative data collected within the project "Monitoring the Impact of Erasmus+ on the Adult Education Sector" conducted in Poland and implemented under the RIA-AE Network². It employs a thematic biographical approach, focusing on the meanings participants assign to their experiences and their broader biographical contexts (Sarleja, 2003; Merrill & West, 2009; Helling, 1990). Rather than reconstructing complete life histories, the study explores learning experiences related to Erasmus+ mobility and examines how their importance emerges in relation to other life domains.

A total of twelve individual in depth interviews were conducted between November and December 2025. Interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. In two cases, the interviews were conducted online because of personal obligation constraints. Participants were recruited from six organisations implementing Erasmus+ mobilities in the adult education sector (five non-governmental organisations and one public institution). The sample was purposely selected to ensure socio-demographic diversity. Only participants whose mobility had taken place within the previous 12 months were included, balancing reflective distance with accurate recall. The study deliberately included less typical mobility participants, such as caregivers, activists and individuals with experiences of personal or social crisis, allowing for the exploration of a broader range of biographical contexts.

3. Findings

3.1. Ultimate concerns and the biographical frame of reference

A key analytical step involved identifying participants' dominant life concerns shaping their engagement in educational mobility, as well as the place of mobility within their life trajectories. The analysis focused on how participants articulated their aspirations and needs, and how they positioned mobility within their broader biographies.

Participants' orientations can be interpreted through three analytically distinct, though often overlapping, orders of concern identified by Archer: the natural order, encompassing care for physical and mental well-being; the practical order, related to effective functioning and the acquisition of useful competences; and the social order, in which concerns relate to self-worth, recognition, social roles and engagement (Archer, 2013). Although all three orders were present across the narratives, typically one played a dominant role in structuring the meaning of mobility within a given biography. At the same time, participants often articulated multiple concerns, which were hierarchised and prioritised in different ways.

Within the natural order of concerns, mobility was most often associated with efforts to maintain or restore psychophysical well-being, either in relation to participants themselves or to significant others. This included experiences of health-related problems, both personal and relational, as well as active engagement in learning processes aimed at acquiring knowledge and skills for coping with these challenges. Mobility could also function as a temporary withdrawal from everyday pressures and as a strategy for protecting oneself from overload.

"I was happy that I'd be able to go to the bathroom alone, take a walk by myself, have a beer, Well, with children you have to be a responsible parent. And I was still breastfeeding, so that was an additional factor as well."
(Participant of mobility 1_1)

This configuration is particularly visible in the narratives of mothers of children with disabilities, where participation in mobility is embedded in long-term caregiving responsibilities and cumulative strain. Their biographies are shaped by inadequate institutional support, delayed diagnoses and the social questioning of caregiving competences, all of which contribute to the gradual destabilisation of everyday life.

"Parenthood with a child who has a diagnosis and difficulties is simply very demanding. You're constantly going everywhere, sometimes walking on eggshells, looking for opportunities and openings to do something for the child, and managing all these crises." (Participant of mobility 1_1)

"It was all very negative. A negative reaction to the fact that I'm having problems with my child and that I'm not coping." (Participant of mobility 1_1)

Within such trajectories, mobility serves different functions depending on the biographical moment. For some participants it is understood as a strategy for maintaining well-being and supporting dependent family members. It provides a temporary break from caregiving responsibilities and everyday strain. For others, mobility acts as a "gentle awakening", prompting reflection on personal needs and identity.

Despite these differences, a shared pattern can be identified: the ultimate concern is not oriented towards a radical transformation of life trajectory, but towards preserving the capacity to sustain caregiving relations, while reclaiming a limited yet meaningful space for oneself. A similar logic can be observed in other biographies situated within the natural order, such as that of a legal professional seeking protection from work-related overload.

"I'm trying to introduce some kind of work-life balance, but there's still helping my parents, and taking care of my pets [...] That [mobility] would also be a bit of an escape from everyday life, an opportunity to meet new people, an opportunity to spend time in a city I've never been to before." (Participant of mobility 5_1)

The analysis of narratives of individuals with experiences of profound life crises further demonstrates that mobility does not perform a uniform function, but instead reflects different configurations of concerns depending on the stage of the biographical process. In all these cases, mobility takes place only after the most disruptive phase of the crisis has subsided, when the initial experience of the crisis has already been worked through. In one type of narrative, shaped by recovery from addiction, the dominant concern is maintaining a stable, agentic identity through engagement with others in similar situations. Mobility becomes a form of reflexive social action, enabling participants to share experiences, assume leadership roles, and sustain a meaningful life rhythm based on responsibility and supporting others. In this sense, participation helps prevent a return to crisis.

"That was already a huge shock for me, because of who I used to be in the past, a bum, a drunk, dirty. If I had told my friends that I'd been to the European Parliament, they would've thought I'd gotten hold of some dealer or that I was just talking nonsense." (Participant of mobility 3_2)

"For me it means that I have to do something: talk to people, motivate them, help them change their path to a different one." (Participant of mobility 3_2)

In contrast, in narratives shaped by experiences of homelessness and prolonged structural instability, mobility remains anchored in the natural order. Here, the dominant concern is pragmatic stabilisation and securing minimal conditions of functioning. Mobility serves as a tool for organising life rather than as a source of meaning.

"I don't even know if I really wanted to go like that, because there were still some Erasmus trips, also to the Netherlands. (...) Also to Ireland. I guess at the time it just didn't fit my schedule anyway. I'm not saying it doesn't suit me. I'm saying, sign me up there, I'll go to Ireland." (Participant of mobility 3_3)

The comparison of these cases shows that not only the experience of crisis itself, but also the stage of recovery, determines whether mobility becomes part of the natural order or serves as a bridge towards social action. All three orders of concern are also present in the narratives of older participants, although they take specific forms in later life. In some cases, mobility and foreign language learning are embedded in the natural order and oriented towards maintaining cognitive vitality, autonomy and meaningful engagement with the world. Learning is not driven by crisis or deficit, but forms part of a consistent biographical project grounded in curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Reflexivity assumes an autonomous and affirmative character, with learning experienced as a rewarding activity.

"I had been thinking about learning Spanish. (...). But with my job and my studies I simply didn't have the time to learn earlier." (Participant of mobility 5_2)

In the narratives of civically engaged participants, mobility is embedded in the social order of concerns, where the central stake is the ethical quality and effectiveness of engagement. Participants are involved in grassroots and voluntary activities supporting local communities, including initiatives related to minority rights, democratic participation and social inclusion. Learning is understood not as an individual resource but as a responsibility enabling more informed and effective action for others. Mobility becomes a space for exchanging experiences, reflecting on practice, and strengthening the capacity to support collective initiatives.

Nevertheless different configurations can be observed. In some cases, mobility reinforces an already established activist identity. In others, normative concerns intersect with practical ones, as participants seek competences needed to sustain their activities under increasing workload and risk of burnout. Here, learning also serves a protective function, helping participants renegotiate the boundaries of engagement without abandoning their core commitments.

Reflexivity is also evident in mobility-related decision-making. Such decisions range from relatively autonomous choices to more complex deliberations shaped by personal concerns and external constraints. Participation may

be readily accepted or become the subject of deliberation and negotiation in relation to perceived limitations, family obligations or organisational conditions. Reflexivity thus operates not as a fixed personal trait but as a situational practice shaping the relationship between thought and action.

Across the analysed narratives, mobility is rarely actively sought out. Instead, it usually emerges as an opportunity embedded in existing relationships with organisations, voluntary engagement or participation in educational activities. Information about mobility is typically mediated through coordinators, facilitators or social networks, and decisions are made in response to recognised opportunities rather than through systematic exploration of available options.

Within this framework, three patterns of reflexivity can be observed. The first corresponds to autonomous reflexivity, in which reflection directly leads to action (Archer, 2010; Goodman, 2016). Decisions tend to be relatively straightforward, as mobility is perceived as a natural continuation of learning practices, such as language learning. In these cases, reflection plays a closing function, enabling action without generating uncertainty. This pattern is particularly visible among participants with relatively high cultural capital and prior educational engagement. Occasional scepticism regarding the effectiveness of short-term mobility may appear, but it does not condition the decision, instead becoming subject to later verification.

"At first I had a somewhat skeptical attitude toward what you can actually learn through this kind of informal education." (Participant of mobility 5_1)

A second pattern reflects communicative reflexivity, where decision-making is relational, extended in time and embedded in consultation with others. Here, participation is strongly problematised, and decisions emerge through dialogue with family members, peers or organisational representatives. Concerns related to caregiving responsibilities, financial issues, competences or unfamiliarity with mobility contexts shape the process, but do not necessarily prevent action.

"At the beginning I thought not really, because what would I do with my daughter? You know, a woman worries about everything, even whether they'll do [a husband and older sons] any laundry, how they'll cook for themselves. [...] Later there was also this kind of dilemma. I don't know these people at all. How am I supposed to go (...) with ten women whom I don't know at all. What are we going to talk about?" (Participant of mobility 1_2)

"From my side, the preparation was quite demanding, because I was still breastfeeding my son, about a month earlier I started weaning him, and fortunately it worked out." (Participant of mobility 1_1)

For participants without prior mobility experience or with limited foreign language skills, reflection extends to very basic aspects of functioning in a foreign context, such as communication, travel logistics or everyday interactions. Mobility thus becomes a practically boundary situation, activating concerns about fundamental agency in everyday life.

"I had never been abroad. The other participants had travelled before, and I was terrified. (...) Oh my God, how am I going to communicate with these people there? [...] I also called friends, asked them how I was supposed to exchange the money." (Participant of mobility 1_2)

Decision-making in these cases is often processual and extended over time. Initial rejection of the opportunity may be followed by gradual familiarisation, conditional openness and persistent ambivalence. Even after formally committing to participation, some participants continue to experience doubts, suggesting that decisions require ongoing reinforcement.

Support from organisational staff and significant others plays an important role in sustaining participation by providing reassurance and helping individuals manage uncertainty. Doubts are often internalised through self-limiting expectations, such as anticipating rejection from the programme, which serves as a protective mechanism.

"I said, okay, I'll fill in this application, and I thought, well, I probably won't get accepted anyway." (Participant of mobility 1_2)

In this sense, reflexivity does not eliminate uncertainty but enables action despite it. Participation becomes possible through the ongoing negotiation of personal concerns, external support, and situational conditions. The third pattern corresponds to meta-reflexivity (Archer, 2010), in which decision-making is organised around the normative evaluation of mobility. Rather than focusing primarily on feasibility, participants reflect on whether participation is ethically and biographically justified. Consultations with others tend to serve a technical or confirmatory role, while the core of the decision is shaped through internal deliberation.

This pattern is particularly visible among participants engaged in civic and community-oriented activities. Here, participation is assessed not only in terms of alignment with personal commitments, but also through a critical evaluation of the learning offer itself. Participants pay close attention to who organises the course, the credibility and competences of facilitators, and the extent to which the content reflects values they consider legitimate and trustworthy.

"I was very interested in a course on anti-racism, because it's also a topic that really interests me, and in Poland it is not really "covered". (...) What also really mattered to me was who was leading the course. I knew that I wanted to learn from a person who actually experiences this kind of oppression also talks about it and teaches about it. It really determined my final decision that this was the course I wanted to go to." (Participant of mobility 4_2)

Importantly, this reflexive scrutiny extends beyond learning content to the conditions under which mobility is undertaken. Participants reflect also on whether participation aligns with their values and commitments. This includes practical aspects such as modes of transport, which are treated as morally significant rather than merely logistical. Decision-making often involves balancing competing values, such as ecological commitments and practical constraints related to time and cost. Thus, even seemingly mundane aspects of participation become subjects of normative reflection.

"I was thinking about what the journey would look like, what the travel options were. I was also wondering whether to go by train or bus, or to fly. And here I had this kind of strong ecological reflection, and it really mattered to me to travel by train (...) So in the end I didn't choose ground transport, but it was still an important part for me to at least check, to think it through." (Participant of mobility 4_2)

The comparison of these patterns shows that reflexivity in decision-making processes is not a stable attribute of individuals, but a dynamic practice shaped by dominant concerns, biographical positioning and the relational context in which decisions are made.

3.2. Reflexive interpretation of mobility experiences and their effects

While decision-making processes reveal how reflexivity shapes participation, mobility experiences show how participants interpret its effects. These effects are rarely framed as gains in knowledge or competences alone. Instead, they are understood as relational, normative and agentic changes embedded in broader biographical narratives. What counts as an "effect" depends on participants' dominant concerns and the meanings they assign to their experiences.

One of the most consistent outcomes across all cases is the strengthening of agency and self-worth. Participants frequently describe mobility as a moment after which they feel more confident.

In narratives shaped by caregiving responsibilities, mobility is interpreted primarily as a break from prolonged isolation and as access to meaningful social support. Its most important outcome is the experience of being understood by others in similar situations, which normalises difficult emotions and legitimises self-care. Agency here is not redefined in transformative terms, but strengthened as a capacity to continue functioning within demanding life circumstances while reclaiming a limited space for oneself.

"I felt as if I had gone back twenty years and was finally doing something. Me and my circle, we were finally doing something for ourselves. We went to great workshops. Finally, it was the first time, really the first time, that I actually separated like that." (Participant of mobility 1_2)

Among participants with experiences of crisis (e.g. addiction, homelessness), mobility is embedded within longer recovery trajectories. It does not constitute an independent turning point, but reinforces processes of stabilisation, enabling participants to rebuild self-esteem and resume meaningful social roles. In this sense, mobility may function as a partial turning point, opening new possibilities rather than completing transformation. For participants with limited prior mobility experience or language skills, the strengthening of agency is closely linked to everyday situations, such as navigating space, communicating or managing basic interactions. These experiences become symbolic markers of coping and overcoming barriers, representing a subtle form of emancipation.

"In the past, when I listened to English, I barely understood anything, maybe just one word like love or something like that. But there, during the workshops, I could actually understand some of the words and follow what was going on. I even went to a shop by myself and managed to buy a coffee. Honestly, I was as happy as a kid." (Participant of mobility 1_2)

"It definitely opened me up more. It really helped me break through those language barriers. (...) I have come out of that isolation. I'm not afraid to travel anymore. (...) And I make sure to stay in regular contact with the language now." (Participant of mobility 6_3)

In contrast, among older participants, mobility is incorporated into ongoing life projects and interpreted as an extension of existing engagement rather than a response to deficit. It reinforces narratives of active, autonomous ageing and continuity of learning.

"When it comes to improving my language skills, it definitely happened. I wouldn't dare say that I speak Spanish, but I can certainly manage much better than before the trip." (Participant of mobility 5_2)

Another key outcome concerns the development of social capital. Mobility fosters the creation of new ties and a strengthened sense of belonging, although their functions vary, from emotional support and exchange of experience to access to resources and new learning opportunities that are rarely accessible through formal channels.

"Our experience really brought us closer together, because we knew exactly what we were talking about. We didn't have to explain everything in detail. When you talk to people outside the autism community, you often have to describe your whole life from scratch. (...) We understood each other often after just half a sentence." (Participant of mobility 6_3)

Importantly, new networks function as sources of information about further educational opportunities and forms of assistance. Through contact with other participants and the sending organisation, individuals gain better orientation in the available offer and develop the capacity to navigate it more effectively.

"One of the women has four children, three of them with official diagnoses, so it's amazing when she tells me: 'You can do this and that, here are the workshops you can go to, come on, let's go together'. And even just going somewhere together is incredibly supportive. It gives you the courage to take that step, because it's not easy to go somewhere and talk about everything, to ask for help and to speak openly about your child." (Participant of mobility 1_1)

Finally, an important dimension of mobility concerns processes of reframing. Some participants describe moments of confronting and questioning previously held assumptions, particularly in relation to social issues or mediated representations of reality. These encounters do not necessarily lead to stable attitude change, but rather generate disorientation and reflection, prompting re-evaluation of perspectives and practices.

"[I learned that] basically everyone has the right to be here, wherever they want to be. It changed my attitude towards these people. That they are valuable people, but they want to go somewhere else in order to help their families, somewhere back in Africa." (Participant of mobility 3_2)

"I mean, I had different kinds of views before (...) I don't even know if it wasn't a bit xenophobic. And in fact it [mobility] change my beliefs about all of this at least a little." (Participant of mobility 3_3)

A more narrowly defined set of outcomes concerns knowledge and skills acquired directly through course participation. Participants referred to specific competences, such as strategies for organising everyday responsibilities, approaches to supporting children with ADHD, leadership techniques, or methods of addressing disinformation. However, in most narratives, references to such competences did not emerge spontaneously, but were rather elicited through the interview process. This suggests that, although skill acquisition is present, it is not the primary lens through which participants interpret their experiences. Instead, its significance tends to be instrumental and situational.

4. Conclusions and discussion

This article contributes to the emerging body of research on educational mobility among adult learners outside vocational education by demonstrating that educational mobility among adults is not simply a discrete learning intervention but a biographically embedded process whose meaning depends on participants' dominant concerns and stage of the biographical trajectory. Mobility performs different functions at different moments of life: it may provide respite from caregiving burdens, support recovery from crisis, strengthen social engagement, or reinforce ongoing learning projects. Consequently, its outcomes are interpreted less in terms of competence acquisition alone and more through changes in agency, self-worth, social relationships and opportunities for further participation.

The study also points to the limits of policy expectations regarding the inclusion of vulnerable groups in mobility programmes. Participation rarely occurs during the most disruptive phases of the crisis. Rather, mobility becomes accessible once a degree of stabilisation has been achieved and can then support ongoing processes of recovery, reintegration or biographical reconstruction. This does not diminish its value for vulnerable groups but suggests that mobility should be understood as one element within longer support trajectories rather than as a stand-alone intervention capable of reaching those in the most acute situations of exclusion.

The findings also highlight the crucial role of sending organisations. Their contribution extends far beyond administrative coordination and includes building trust, reducing uncertainty, encouraging participation and maintaining supportive relationships before and after mobility. For participants facing caregiving responsibilities, social disadvantage or limited prior learning experiences, these organisations often act as essential intermediaries connecting individuals to educational opportunities. If Erasmus+ is to fulfil its inclusion ambitions, greater attention should therefore be paid to the relational and resource-intensive work carried out by sending organisations, whose capacity to reach and support more vulnerable learners is often constrained by limited resources.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of recognising the diversity of meanings, goals and perceived benefits associated with participation in educational activities via Erasmus+ programme. These are closely linked to individuals' social and biographical contexts, including differing constraints, resources and structural positions. From a practical perspective, this implies that educational mobility cannot be effectively supported through uniform solutions or standardised tools. Instead, policies and programmes should be sensitive to the plurality of motivations and concerns that shape engagement in learning. A better understanding of these differences may contribute to more accurate identification of factors that facilitate or hinder participation, and to the design of more responsive support mechanisms.

Taking into account the socio-biographical embeddedness of learning also reinforces the importance of acknowledging diverse pathways into education. Supporting lifelong learning therefore requires not only expanding the availability of opportunities but also creating conditions under which individuals with different life situations and constraints are able to engage with them meaningfully.

Notes

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² Key Action 1 'Learning Mobility of Individuals' supports mobility opportunities for learners and staff in schools, vocational education and training, higher education, adult education, youth participation activities, as well as staff mobility in sport and language learning.

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The value of a co-creational community approach for adult education and participation in a changing world

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Keywords

Adult education, Co-creation, Community, New public governance.

Abstract

A co-creational community approach narrows the gap between learning basic skills and everyday life of adult learners. Connecting a community's clear mission to a vivid, locally relevant problem helps to create opportunities for participation in a local community, thereby developing soft skills and basic skills in a broad sense. The article discusses a best practice from the perspective of New Public Governance, aiming for a transformative process within a broader community around the involved adult learners.

1. The value of a co-creational community approach for adult education and participation in a changing world

As complexity increases in society, underrepresented and vulnerable groups may suffer more seriously from exclusion (Kromhout, Van Echtelt & Feijten, 2020). Social capital is not equally divided in society and within its networks (Vissers & Wach, 2025). Democratic participation becomes under pressure as adults in vulnerable situations become either more isolated or more likely to become affected by misinformation or unhealthy choices, thus increasing their vulnerability. To reverse the circle into wellbeing and participation in society and democratic life, communities may play a major role (Bryson, Crosby & Bloomberg, 2014; Maton, 2000). As such, a community approach next to, or instead of, a predominantly education approach, is promising for successful outreach, support, participation or co-creation. Though the Erasmus+ programme has the potential to innovate by a community approach, in practice Erasmus+ initiatives tend to follow the educational pathways in outreach for participation (Buiskool, De Greef & Mulder, 2023; Mikulec & Kristl, 2025). Dutch national policy is predominantly related to narrow basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy and digitalisation (Rijksoverheid, 2026a). This brings a supply of rather classic educational settings such as workshops, courses or classroom-teaching, though sometimes in libraries. Over the years, there has been a plea to replace the (national policy for) narrow basic-skills approach in The Netherlands by an approach heading for broader life-skills, to bring education closer to the lifeworld of potential participants (De Greef, De Haan & Brugman, 2021; Rijksoverheid, 2026b). As such, a community approach becomes relevant.

The central question of this article is *what the value is of a co-creational community approach for basic skills learning and participation in a changing world?* The research question is: *what characteristics of a co-creational community approach can be found in a best practice?* By analysing the characteristics of a best practice, the case will be brought in the larger perspective of different policy types from literature. As such, the subtle mechanisms of co-creation from the viewpoint of New Public Governance will be clarified from the case description, with the purpose of clarifying the need for a policy context that is suitable for improving democratic participation. To answer the central question, firstly, an elaboration on the Dutch policy context is presented, illustrating the tension between education and welfare policy for adult education in practice, the structure of governance,

and attempts for policy improvement. Secondly, the Dutch adult education sector is described as it features in the programme Erasmus+, partly mirroring the results of the Dutch adult education policy. Challenges coming from this are discussed, as well as a best practice from a Dutch Erasmus+ project, followed by insight in a co-creational community approach. Thirdly, light is shed on policy principles supporting a co-creational community approach, by describing the relation between policy and practice in adult education. Different policies and their consequences for practice are elaborated, to show the meaning of changing policy in a changing society. To conclude, lessons learned are summarised by reflection on the value of a co-creational community approach in a changing world, emphasising the importance of New Public Governance in relation to challenges in today's society.

2. Dutch policy on adult education and basic skills learning

Non-formal learning and community building in adult education have received increasing attention over the years (EAEA, 2026). Dutch policy increasingly recognises the value of a broadened interpretation of basic skills, including life skills and (democratic) participation (Rijksoverheid, 2026b). However, the focus remains on literacy, numeracy and digitalisation (Rijksoverheid, 2026c). Not only for political reasons and reasons concerning the strengthening of the labour market, but also to protect budgets from being used by others than the most vulnerable target groups (Rijksoverheid, 2026b). This Dutch focus is in line with the educational nature of the adult education budgets of the Ministry of Education, leaving a more holistic approach of vulnerable adults to the welfare domain and budgets of the Ministry of Social Affairs. Even though, more than in previous policy, attention is paid to bridge the domains of education and welfare at central and local policy level (Rijksoverheid, 2026c).

The welfare domain has been involved in community building ever since the beginning of poverty care. In the welfare domain, the division in society is no longer only discussed in terms of unequal means, but increasingly in terms of cognitive stratification (Vrooman, Boelhouwer, Iedema & Van der Tor, 2023, p. 21). This is about people who not only lack financial resources, but also lack social, cultural and personal capital, meaning lack of education, literacy, digitalisation, physical and mental health, a supportive network and cultural *looks* that are helpful in full participation in society and work (Vrooman et al., 2023, pp. 72–73). This group would potentially benefit most from a *crossover between welfare- and education policy*. Strategies for outreach and participation in a relatively more holistic way have a long state of history in the welfare domain (Maton, 2000). Recently, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research published a report on the question of reaching out to difficult to reach citizens. The report is a plea for *responsive governance*, with active outreach, attractive possibilities for contact, transparent communication, and awareness to adjust communication to the nature of contact with citizens in a vulnerable situation (Van Noije, Geurkink, Ten Berge & Iedema, 2026, p. 7). Responsive governance is in development. For those living a precarious life, attachment and trust does not come easy, making it even more difficult to participate in administrative (digital) procedures, necessary to deal with public institutions, education, healthcare, and welfare. Crossover policy between education and welfare in the Netherlands is however predominantly left to decentralised policy, leaving tailor-made solutions to local initiatives. In combination with a top-down financial framework for policy budgets, this situation guides (unintendedly or intendedly) the adult education practice to supply-based educational programmes. These programmes are offered by a wide range of (private or not for profit) organisations commissioned by municipalities (De Greef & De Haan, 2024). Depending on local initiatives, this leads to rather narrow basic skills-offers for adult education with little adaptation to the lifeworld of adult learners. And though the door opened a little for community-approaches and tailor-made solutions, path-dependent historically grown patterns may not be solved overnight. Budget receiving municipalities may also strengthen the image that adult education is predominantly for literacy, numeracy and digitalisation in a narrow

sense in their outsourcing policy. This is in line with political ambitions for integration and participation in the Dutch labour market, in line with the educational origin of the budget, and brought to practice by suppliers of adult education in predesigned courses, with different shades of outreach and learners' voice. Community-based co-creation remains underrepresented. Even though problems of precarious people persist in society (Vrooman et al., 2023, p. 77), and policy recognises that particularly adult learners with fewer opportunities participate less in non-formal learning and Life-Long-Learning (PIAAC, 2023; Rijksoverheid, 2026c).

To conclude: the fragmented policy, the division between education and welfare, the decentralised municipal policies, with for-profit and nonprofit subcontractors, is not favourable for learners in vulnerable situations (De Greef et al., 2024; Stam, 2016). Despite international agreements, it appears hard to change the situation into effective policy for practice (De Greef et al., 2021). The adult education landscape illustrates a strong connection between policy and financial schemes at central level, and the fragmented practice resulting from this at local level. This illustrates policy with one leg in classic administrative (financial) governance and one leg in New Public Management, leaving it to a decentralised local policy or market to come up with tailor-made solutions, often intervention tools in supply based offers due to the financial frameworks.

3. Erasmus+ in Dutch adult education

The Dutch Erasmus+ beneficiaries are characterised by small scale organisations, mostly foundations or businesses (Buiskool et al., 2023). This corresponds with the fragmented nature of the Dutch adult education policy. The adult education sector may also suffer from struggle for survival under severe cuts on adult education over the years (Buiskool, 2020). Staff professionalisation remains vulnerable as well, especially if part of the staff are volunteers (De Greef et al., 2024). In practice, many of these organisations are supply orientated, trying to reach adult learners, and provide them with a (with Erasmus+ subsidy) designed (tailored) educational offer for basic skills, basic life skills or participation (Buiskool et al., 2023). Sometimes in unconventional settings, adjusted to adult learners' needs in learning, informal settings, camouflage courses, and so on. Although we have evidence that small organisations are considerably strengthened by participation in the programme Erasmus+, and impact on participating adult learners is high, there is less evidence that a considerable number of learners is being reached with an Erasmus+ mobility programme yet (Buiskool et al., 2023). The latter indicates not only difficulties in outreach for difficult to reach target groups for adult learning, but it also leaves the potential benefits from a mobility experience relatively unused. Especially since the programme Erasmus+ offers possibilities for crossovers between welfare and education, welfare and arts, inclusion, and participation in democratic life, with or without mobility for adult learners. These activities address basic skills and life skills, or basic skills through informal settings for life skills, and participation. Erasmus+ possibilities are less limited by policy frameworks for adult education, and less compromised by historic pathways. Unfortunately, in practice, still a lot of applicants for Erasmus+ tend to stick to historical pathways of supplying a predesigned offer (of supply-based educational interventions) rather than co-creation for participation and learning-experiences together with their target groups. Nevertheless, there is an example of a research based best-practice of community-based co-creation in Erasmus+ (Buiskool et al., pp. 18–19):

A Dutch Science Museum aims to facilitate families in an interactive informal learning environment, to connect a wide range of visitors to science and technology. The museum works together with several national and international partners to make science accessible for different target groups. Recently, the museum wished to work more with neighbourhood organisations, especially regarding adult education.

Exhibitions tended to offer a learning experience to children, but now they were looking for a possibility to offer a learning experience adjusted to the needs of adult learners too. So they started an experiment, based on improving a dialogue between those adults and their children. This way, the community approach aiming to

involve adult learners became more embedded in the museum. Staff were trained (-in an Erasmus+ exchange project-) to facilitate adult learners and make the museum more inclusive for underrepresented groups. For example by offering explanations in different home languages of adult learners. Besides, more activities were organised by the museum at the local level, resulting in higher visitor rates of adult learners from the neighbourhood into the museum, and as such more adult learners from vulnerable backgrounds.

This example of a community-based co-creational learning experience contains several innovative elements. The museum was effective in co-creation together with families of adult learners. The museum's perspective on community is based on reciprocity: not only seducing adult learners to visit the museum but also adapting the museum to the adult learners by staff training and adjustments in the exhibitions, based on adult learners' needs (democratic participation). Also, outreaching activities were initiated by the museum, by organising the museum's involvement in local activities. Sense of belonging to the local community was created by the museum and the adult learners together, which supports emancipation and participation of adult learners. The intergenerational approach used the connection of adult learners with their children, and involvement in their children's life and future, while discussing the interactive informal learning environment as a family, meanwhile enlarging attention for science and technology. Altogether, the learning environment was the result of mutual investment of adult learners and museum staff, in an informal experience of participation, thereby creating possibilities for learning life skills as well as basic skills in a broad sense.

4. Background of New Public Governance and a co-creational community approach

The governance principles, policy and practice from the past, may not always address future problems. Hence, reconsideration of policy and practice is ideally a continuous process, both benefitting from and leading towards new perspectives. A changing society most likely means that old pathways in policy preferably should change too, to adapt to times of transformation. However, adaptation is only part of the process. More valuable would be a process where adult education is part of a transforming force, as was highlighted in the best practice. To shed some light on the latter, the following table shows how policy and practice can be aligned, by giving insight in different policy paradigms and their consequences in practice, following from Hartley (Hartley, 2005, p. 28–29), summarised in Table 1:

Table 1 - Competing public policy paradigms and their logics for practice.

Characteristics per policy-type	'Traditional' public administration-policy	'New' public management-policy	Networked governance, new public governance-policy
Context	Stable context	Competitive context	Continuously changing context
Population	Homogeneous	Atomized	Diverse
Needs/problems	Straightforward, defined by professionals	Wants, expressed through the market	Complex, volatile and prone to risk
Strategy	State and producer centred	Market and costumer centred	Shaped by civil society
Governance through actors	Hierarchies and public servants	Markets, purchasers and providers, clients and contractors	Networks and partnerships, civic leadership
Key concepts	Public goods	Public choice	Public value

Innovation	Some large scale, national and universal innovations	Innovations in organisational form more than content	Innovation at both central and local level
Improvement	Large, but less capacity for flexibility	Managerial improvements in process and systems	Transformative and continuous improvement
Role of the policy makers	Commanders	Announcers/ commissioners	Leaders and interpreters
Role of public managers	'Clerks and martyrs'	Efficiency and market maximisers	'Explorers'
Role of the population*	Clients	Costumers	Co-producers

*= role of the adult learners

Source: Hartley, 2005, pp. 28, 29.

In practice, most countries have a mixture of different policy paradigms at the same time. Every paradigm has its own advantages and disadvantages. The *Traditional Administrative policy* is strong and stable, however, only in a stable homogeneous society that hardly exists anymore. But this policy remains useful to divide budgets over municipalities, accompanied by guidelines for spending. The *New Public Management-policy*, rooted in business, works best in a market, and is thereby more flexible for tailor-made practices. However, a market is difficult to combine with the vulnerable target group of adult education, for this neoliberal paradigm expects 'own responsibility', 'freedom of choice' and 'self-resilience'. In practice, this business logic with intervention strategies, has been popular since the 1980's. A disadvantage is that New Public Management subjects professionals to output-delivery, by focusing on professional methodology over social purposes: protocols, procedures, methods and tools (Stam, 2016).

New Public Governance is the youngest type of policy, emerging around 2000, as a kind of answer to the failures of market-ideology in the public domain. It is value- and problem orientated, and community driven. Though rather small scale by nature, it is in the end seriously transformative. As we connect the previous best case to the different policy-types in table 1, we can see the richness of possibilities of New Public Governance to answer today's complex environment: for diverse target groups, answering multiple complex challenges, by involving the civil society. The target group is free to co-create, and to give direction to the experiment, through partnership within a broader local network. Within the best practice there is room for innovation-by-doing, however in line with central policy purposes. As such, transformative improvement is reached together, in a community, through a sense of belonging. A setting in which both the museum and the adult learners explore together in co-creation. This is not an easy experiment. Working together is hard by nature, and especially with difficult to reach target groups. However, the best practice shows that the added value of a community based co-creational approach goes beyond the value of single supply-based workshops, courses or classroom settings, even if enriched by participative add-on's inspired by New Public Governance. The best practice stands out in meeting the principles of previously described responsive governance, which is especially relevant for vulnerable adult learners.

The only missing link in the best practice mentioned, is the *policymaker*, showing civic leadership in facilitating, inspiring and supporting the public values that direct this community orientated co-creational initiative. From the

description of the case, it is unknown whether there was such a policymaker involved. Generally, the policy component in the Netherlands is still predominantly captured in Traditional Administrative and New Public Management policy frameworks, dominated by professional logic on supply-based methodology, for clients and customers. And though at local level some municipalities, just like the programme Erasmus+, give opportunity to participative co-creational initiatives, these initiatives could gain more impact if they were supported by local New Public Governance-policy. However, if local governance is not involved in these types of initiatives, they can still flourish, as their bottom-up nature is transformative. Just *formal participation of municipality representatives* does not contribute. It needs policy officers with *a wish to make a difference*, a contribution by engagement and civic leadership. As such, complexity is inherent and embraced, which makes it suitable for a complex and changing society. The process is step by step, an exploration to find out what works in light of the purpose. These transformative initiatives, contrarily to other types of governance, embody the transformation they would like to see for adult learners, by owning the responsibility for the social purposes over historically grown pathways of learning. They take action to realize communities as a starting point to involve adult learners in a participation experience, shaped together. It is necessary that adult learners experience a sense of belonging: contact before contract as a precondition for learning.

Maton (2000) mentioned examples of emancipation through community, leading to learners becoming community representatives in the political area. This shows, also in our best practice, the close relation between progress on local (social) issues, issues from every day-life as well as educational efforts to take these issues as fundamental for learning, without focus on teaching narrow basic skills. To conclude: annexing context is not new, but valuable. In fact, it is Maton-in-practice, covering democratic participation, emancipation and basic (life) skills in a broad sense, as a breeding ground for learning.

5. Conclusions

How can a co-creational community approach narrow the gap between adult learners in vulnerable situations and the growing complexity in society? Co-creation offers an informal learning experience while involving adult learners in their own chosen basic learning. Practitioners connect with the lifeworld of adult learners, setting the (public) purposes together. A sense of belonging, being part of a community, coping together with society's complexity emancipates for work and democratic life, while learning life skills. Contact prevails over contract. Change is reached by small steps and perseverance, based on equality between everyone involved.

The academic contribution of this article is that characteristics of a best practice are identified and can be applied in future for comparing other best practices or for further empirical research. The application of different policy frameworks on the characteristics of the case offers academic insight in policy logics that may affect the context of basic skills learning for adults. A limitation of this study is the use of only one best practice as case study, in an inductive way. Therefore, more research in this matter may offer more scientific body to this explorative qualitative research findings.

From a policy perspective, transferability of a co-creational community approach is best served by New Public Governance. New Public Governance is based on networking-governance, as shown in the interorganisational relations of the case involved, actively working together with neighbourhood-organisations. The approach fits well to a complex and changing context, implying a need for volatility of staff and organisations involved, as a necessity to serve a diverse population and complex challenges. Actions are shaped by civil society, under civic leadership and through ownership. In this explorative step-by-step process, innovation and continuous improvement shape transformation. Limitations are that trust is essential, but difficult. Stepping away from procedures needs an explorative mindset. It is time consuming and difficult to keep everyone involved. The reward is that democratic value is not a side effect, but inherent to co-creation.

The community-based co-creational approach may not be that new in social/work, but it is still an underrepresented way of working in adult education. Existing policy and practice becomes under pressure, and this is already tangible in the thin connection between the adult learners' world and education in basic skills (PIAAC, 2023). Policy and practice struggle to bring the idea of connection with the lifeworld of the adult learner to practice. The value of a community-based co-creational approach is a kind of answer to this struggle, as well as an answer to the complexity of a changing world, by its holistic nature. Though Erasmus+ offers possibilities for informal learning in informal settings, in the Netherlands there are still only a few examples of best practices heading for an explicitly co-creational community approach. Moreover, culture-crossing museums appear more innovative in taking up this challenge than traditional (small scale) adult education (for profit and nonprofit) organisations. So, policy involvement by civic leadership needs more attention.

Following from New Public Governance (Hartley, 2005, Moore, 2014), a co-creational community setting offers potential to answer complex and changing challenges. Following Maton (2000), basic skills for democratic participation grow effectively in a community setting. Of course, this does not underestimate the necessity of literacy as a basic skill (Segers, De Greef, Nijhuis & Heimens-Visser, 2023). However, moving away from the educational pre-offered or prescribed courses, towards Non-formal and informal settings of learning for adult learners still needs attention. It needs to be more than just a superficial New Public Governance flirt. Learners should really be involved in the design and the shared holistic purposes. It is important to realize that New Public Governance, just like New Public Management and Traditional Administrative Policy, is not a religion, but a way of working with policy in practice. Its advantage over other policy-types is coping with complexity, which makes it suitable for the adult learning environment.

Notes

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The Erasmus+ and adult education local organisations in Portugal: discussion based on an impact study

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Keywords

Adult education, Non-formal education, Erasmus+, RIA-AE impact study.

Abstract

The Lisbon Strategy, adopted in 2000, marked the beginning of policy guidelines for adult education in the European Union (EU). These guidelines have been supported by various mechanisms, such as objectives and financial programmes, reflecting a form of political intervention through effective governance instruments (hard and soft law). These mechanisms have significant relevance in national public policies as well as in the implementation of local adult education practices. This article has the following research question: what was the impact of Erasmus+ funding in local organisations promoting projects of non-formal adult education? Although included in a larger impact study, this article focuses on an impact study of the Erasmus+ programme on organisations that promote adult education activities (meso level) in Portugal. It is based on research drawing on a) quantitative data collection techniques, such as an online survey distributed to organisations that got financial support by the Erasmus+ Adult Education to develop specific projects, after application between 2018 and 2022, and b) qualitative techniques, such as document analysis and semi-structured interviews with staff members of these organisations. The results highlight the importance of Erasmus+ programme within organisations under analysis but raises interrogations concerning the role these organisations play locally in non-formal adult education.

1. Introduction

Since the Lisbon Strategy of 2000, lifelong learning has become a central theme in European Union (EU) policy discourses, framing education as a continuous process throughout the life course of people. These guidelines have been linked closely to several aims, such as social cohesion, employability, and economic competitiveness (Holford & Milana, 2022). Within this broader agenda, adult education has been progressively integrated into a lifelong learning policy, in which formal, non-formal, and informal learning are formally recognised, even if not equally valued in existing policy guidelines (Milana & Holford, 2014).

In the field of adult education policy, several hard and soft law instruments have been developed, including EU funding programmes such as Erasmus+ (Adult Education) (Trubek & Trubek, 2005; Barros, 2025). These programmes (such as the Erasmus+) have played a crucial role in steering national priorities without creating binding legal obligations to national governments. Instruments such as Erasmus+ are particularly important for the development of non-formal adult education, and they are often among the few mechanisms that give visibility and support to projects developed by local organisations. Through project funding, such programmes help sustain local initiatives, partnerships, and transnational cooperation (Nuissl, 2024).

Erasmus+ constitutes a significant funding instrument for non-formal adult education in the member states of the EU, providing resources that often national budgets do not allocate to this sector (EAEA, 2022). In the case of Portugal, its relevance is even greater, given that public policies have largely focused on formal adult education offers (such as adult education and training courses, recognition of prior learning, short duration courses or Portuguese language courses for migrants). The public adult education policy has often set aside

non-formal education and local organisations that haven't specific contracts with national agencies in charge for the development of the public policy. These specific contracts have mainly subordinated adult education to employability-driven objectives (Lima & Guimarães, 2018). In this context, EU funding such as the Erasmus+ (Adult Education) becomes a key lever for maintaining a more plural and community-oriented non-formal adult education sector implemented by local organisations, such as non-governmental, which might otherwise remain marginal or underfinanced (EAEA, 2022).

This article aims at answering the following research question: what was the impact of the Erasmus+ funding in local organisations promoting projects of non-formal adult education in Portugal? Based on quantitative and qualitative data from a larger impact study, it is directed at focussing the meso-level, the local organisations themselves that have received funding for developing a specific project after Erasmus+ application.

In the first part of this article, a general overview of adult education policy in Portugal is made. In the second part the analysis will stress non-formal adult education and the importance of non-governmental organisations. In the third part, the presentation of the impact study will be made. In the following parts, data discussion will be made as well as data interpretation. In the final part, the conclusion, an answer to the research question will be attempted and concerns will be raised.

2. General overview of adult education policy in Portugal

Adult education can be broadly defined as the whole body of organised and intentional educational processes, whether formal, non-formal or informal, through which persons regarded as adults in their society develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve or redirect their technical and professional qualifications, or acquire new competences and attitudes for personal, occupational, and social life (UNESCO, 2015). Following a similar definition, Merriam (2008) describes adult education as the organised practice of adult learning, that is, of how adults acquire and transform knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values throughout life in formal, non-formal, and informal settings, taking into account adults' experience, self-direction, and the social context of learning. The author emphasises that adult learning is a complex, multidimensional and context-embedded process, developed following policies or guidelines fostering learning throughout the life course.

In Portugal, following the Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974, which ended the authoritarian fascist regime (called *Estado Novo*, in Portuguese), non-formal adult education surged as part of democratic consolidation, within popular education. The Directorate-General for Permanent Education (DGEP), created in 1972, allowed the coordination of nationwide basic education of adults and popular education initiatives, targeting the 30% adults illiterate, within activities developed by popular local associations and universities extension programmes, such as the one from the Unit for Adult Education of the University of Minho (Castro et al., 2006), community centres, and worker cooperatives. After approval of the Law 3/79, adult basic education programmes and development initiatives, emphasised emancipation and local development, aligning with the Constitutional right (Article 73) to free access to education. However, these efforts waned by the mid-1980s amid economic crises and modernisation priorities, shifting non-formal practices to non-governmental organisations such as local associations, however without relevant public policy funding (Lima, 2005). With the adoption of the Basic Law of the Education System (Law nr. 46/86), out-of-school education projects got small funding to be developed. Owing to the Portuguese membership to the EU, some other initiatives were the outcome of European funding promoted largely by local organisations, mostly non-governmental (Fragoso & Guimarães, 2010).

The National Agency for Adult Education and Training (ANEFA, 1999–2002) introduced key innovations in the adult education policy. Offers such as Adult Education and Training Courses (*Cursos de Educação e Formação de Adultos*), S@ber+ clubs, and the recognition of prior learning (*Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação*

de Competências) of non-formal competences have to be highlighted. However, non-formal adult education projects were not directly targeted in this public policy. The 2005 New Opportunities Initiative (*Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades*) expanded through a network of centres (initially mostly private/non-governmental, later mostly public schools and centres of the Institute of Employment and Vocational Education and Training), blending non-formal validation with employability goals under the National Qualifications instruments (post-2000 Lisbon Strategy). In addition, since 2000, the country has implemented a comprehensive set of governance instruments – including the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the National Catalogue of Qualifications (CNQ), and national lifelong learning benchmarks and indicators – to structure and monitor educational pathways across formal, non-formal, and informal domains. These instruments reflect a technocratic approach to lifelong learning, following human resources and personal optimisation approaches (Lima & Guimarães, 2024; Guimarães & Barros, 2025), emphasising credentialisation, validation of prior learning, and employability metrics. Post-2011 financial crisis austerity dismantled the 2005 New Opportunities programme, fragmenting non-formal education into project-based survival via EU programmes: Socrates (1995–2006), Lifelong Learning (2007–2013), and Erasmus+ (2014–2027). Since 2016, public policy still prioritises formal adult education, marginalizing non-formal modalities despite their role in social cohesion and active ageing—as noted in several texts by Canário (1999) and Guimarães (2013, 2024).

3. Non-formal adult education and the importance of non-governmental organisations

The development of non-formal adult education in Portugal since 1974 reflects a trajectory from post-revolutionary grassroots mobilisation to EU-influenced vocationalism, marked by policy fragmentation, underestimating non-formal education, and reliance on external (from the EU mostly) funding (Lima, 2005). Anyhow, within this context, even if public policies have shown intermittent policy interest in adult education, non-governmental organisations have been central to the implementation of non-formal adult education (Loureiro, 2008).

Non-formal poles (Canário, 1999) – namely local development, and sociocultural animation – gained traction via third-sector organisations, though often subordinated to formal certification when projects were funded by the Portuguese State and the European Social Fund. Following a programme logic, non-governmental organisations were called to join the adult education formal policy. By these means, these organisations were setting aside the goals they had established when they were created, namely those referring to the aims of solving local problems and needs of territories they were located in and those of local populations. By then, many local development associations and other non-governmental organisations were added to the network of local adult education centres promoting public policy offers (Guimarães, 2011, 2013).

In the non-formal sector specifically, EU programmes have served as pivotal funding mechanisms: among others, NOW (1990–1993), LEADER (1991– up until present times), Socrates I-II (1995–1999; 2000–2006), then the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007–2013), and subsequently Erasmus+ (2014–2020; 2021–2027). These initiatives have sustained grassroots projects, educators' training, and transnational partnerships that national budgets have historically underfunded, thereby compensating for the absence of a dedicated national strategy, while subtly shaping local practices toward EU priorities like digital inclusion and social innovation (EAEA, 2023; Guimarães, 2024). This reliance on supranational funding underscores a fragmented policy landscape, where non-formal adult education persists through external impulses rather than endogenous vision, potentially limiting its scalability and cultural rootedness. The Erasmus+ programme thus emerges as a particularly relevant instrument for bolstering adult education in Portugal, channelling resources into non-formal modalities that lack dedicated public funding. In particular, non-formal adult education relies on diverse financial streams derived from project applications, local authorities, civil society organisations, and contributions from adult learners themselves (EAEA, 2023).

In parallel, without a holistic and wide-ranging adult education policy framed within lifelong education (or *educação permanente* in Portuguese, as termed by Melo et al., 2021), Portugal demonstrates a long-standing tradition of EU-driven policy alignment. In parallel, no instruments were adopted to non-formal education and the existing EU guidelines for lifelong learning often sideline the emancipatory or community-based dimensions of non-formal adult education.

4. Impact study of Erasmus+ on adult education

Impact studies in adult education evaluate the long-term effects of educational programmes or policies on participants' skills, employment, social inclusion, health, or civic engagement, distinguishing them from short-term outcomes – like immediate knowledge gains. These studies mostly measure how interventions such as literacy courses, vocational training, or other offers of community education – create broader societal or personal changes, often years after participation. Researchers prioritise rigorous designs, such as randomized controlled trials and longitudinal tracking, to establish attribution over correlation rather than mere association (Reder & Bynner, 2009).

Impact studies focusing on local organisations promoting adult education remain less common, partly due to resource constraints, high attrition rates, and challenges in isolating programme effects from broader socioeconomic factors (Beder, 1999). This gap is particularly evident in the non-formal sector reliant on project-based funding, where long-term tracking is logistically difficult. In response to the lack of existing studies focussing on local organisations promoting adult education, the RIA-AE Network based on Erasmus+ National Agencies for adult education was formed in 2022 to examine the impact of the Erasmus+ programme (specifically KA1 for mobility and KA2 for cooperation) on non-formal adult education. Today, this network spans more than 20 countries, fostering cross-national comparability (Buiskool et al., 2023).

4.1. RIA-AE Study Design

The RIA-AE impact study employs a multi-method approach: a) documentary analysis of data from the Erasmus+ programme website on funded projects and other documents, such as project application and reports; b) online surveys of organisations that got projects funded after application – quantitative metrics; and c) in-depth case studies involving interviews with local organisations managers, adult educators, and adult learners – qualitative metrics, complemented by further documentary review. Structured in three phases – SR1 (projects funded 2018–2022), SR2 (2023–2025), and SR3 (2026–2027) – the study tracks evolving impacts amid programme cycles (Buiskool et al., 2023). The study attempts to answer the following research question: What is the impact of the Erasmus+ programme on the non-formal adult education sector in Europe? The general objective of the study is to understand the impact of the Erasmus+ programme on the (non-formal) adult education sector in member countries, considering various levels of analysis (macro – in national public policies, meso – in funded organisations and micro – in professionals, volunteers and adult learners participating in funded projects) (Buiskool et al., 2023).

In this article, data from the first phase referring to Portugal is discussed. This article stresses data referring to the online survey and considers three case studies out of the four made, of non-governmental organisations' projects funded by Erasmus+ due to their relevance to the research question established for this article. Data analysed stressed the kind of organisation that had Erasmus+ projects funded. The meso level of local organisations promoting non-formal adult education, and the impact on their characteristics were considered.

The SR1 online survey was launched in October 2023 to 128 local organisations which had projects KA1 and KA2 funded (2018-2022) and 81% answers were collected (answering rate: 63%). Additionally, four case studies were

conducted in organisations that participated in Erasmus+ from 2018-2022. Three of these four case studies were selected for the analysis in this article from a convenience sample with the following criteria: geographical location, type of organisation and main topics addressed in the project funded:

- Case study 1 – an NGO devoted at developing migrants’ adult learning projects, located in the Lisbon metropolitan area;
- Case study 2 – an NGO devoted at developing special needs’ adult learning projects, located in the Lisbon metropolitan area;
- Case study 4 – an NGO devoted at developing older adult learners projects, located in Almeirim, in the centre of Portugal.

5. Data discussion

Data collected (for 2018-2022 period – SR1) with the online survey shows that a significant number of civil society or third sector organisations⁴ from the social economy (CASES, 2026; Guimarães, 2013), such as non-governmental organisations/associations, welfare organisations, sports club/association/federation as well as folk high school, were funded by the Erasmus+ programme in Portugal.

Table 1 - Type of organisation inquired.

Type of Institution	fr	%
Non-governmental organisation (NGO)/ association	29	27,36
Welfare organisation	13	12,26
Civil society organisation	4	3,77
Sport club/ association/ federation	3	2,83
Folk high school	1	0,94
Accreditation, certification or qualification body	2	1,89
Adult education provider (School/ Institute/Centre)	17	16,04
Child day care/ Kindergarten/ Early childhood education	2	1,89
Healthcare institution	1	0,94
Primary/ secondary general education	11	10,38
Higher education Institution (tertiary level)	12	11,32
Research institute	2	1,89
European network/ association	1	0,94
Other	8	7,55
Total N	106	100,00

Source: data from the online survey (Guimarães et al., 2024, p. 34).

Organisations inquired can be divided in two main groups⁵: the smaller organisations, up to 10 staff members, and the ones that are medium or larger organisations (more than 11 staff members).

Table 2 - Dimension of the organisation (according to the number of staff) that answered to the survey.

Number of staff	fr	%
NR	12	11,3
1-5	16	15,1
6-10	12	11,3
11-50	21	19,8
51-100	15	14,2
101-250	14	13,2
More than 250	16	15,1
Total N	106	100,0

Source: data from the online survey (Guimarães et al., 2024, pp. 35, 36).

The referred difference concerning the organisations' size can also be noticed when the number of adult learners involved in activities implemented is considered. Two main groups can be considered: on the one hand, smaller organisations (up to 50 learners engaged in initiatives), on the other hand larger organisations having 51 adult learners participating in initiative implemented or more.

Table 3 - Learners participating in learning activities in 2022.

Number of learners	fr	%
NR	12	11,3
0	4	3,8
1-10	13	12,3
11-50	21	19,8
51-100	10	9,4
101-250	25	23,6
More than 250	16	15,1
Don't know	5	4,7
Total N	106	100,0

Source: data from the online survey (Guimarães et al., 2024, p. 36).

When having in mind Erasmus+ projects funded and developed, it is clear that some organisations have a smaller number of projects implemented (up to 3), while a significant number have 4 or more projects developed.

Table 4 - Projects (KA1 and KA2) joined by the organisation since 2014.

Number of projects	fr	%
NR	13	12,3
1	17	16,0
2	15	14,2
3	8	7,5
4	16	15,1
5 or more	35	33,0
Don't know	2	1,9
Total N	106	100,0

Source: data from the online survey (Guimarães et al., 2024, p. 37).

Therefore, the data collected allows the identification of two large groups of local organisations: the smaller ones, with less staff, shorter number of learners involved and less projects developed, having adult learning staff less skilled or professionalised in applying to the Erasmus+; and the larger one, having larger numbers of staff, more skilled to prepare applications and having more learners involved and a much number of projects funded. Additionally, it was observed that larger and more skilled local organisations in preparing applications were more able to participate and coordinate projects. On the other hand, the smaller number of grassroots organisations, less skilled and with less professionalised adult learning staff to develop projects' application and their implementation were also observed but revealed relevant constraints when applying to Erasmus+ funding. When smaller organisations were at stake, lack of staff to prepare applications and develop projects as well as the complexity of the application procedures in Erasmus+ were widely referred to in case studies developed.

"We're just a small team and the requests are many and sometimes our time is less than a full week of 7 days isn't enough. The constraint is mainly ours, lack of time." Interviewee 1 of case study 1 (Guimarães et al., 2024, p. 41)

As referred to in case studies (1, 2 and 4), Erasmus+ funded projects have very specific aims, following EU guidelines established. Within these aims, local organisations, such as civil society/third-sector organisations/NGOs, make a significant effort to accommodate the Erasmus+ funding objectives to project applications (Guimarães et al., 2024). Experience in previous applications is significant for gaining confidence in project implementation.

"The Erasmus+ project coordinated by case study 4, designed in collaboration with six partners, was an opportunity for the development of training in the field of digital literacy, an area considered essential in contemporary society. Digital education for older adults is an area of intervention of case study 4 organisation, and their experience and dynamism in this field facilitated the design and management of the project funded (...)." (Cavaco et. al, 2024)

"We had already participated in ERASMUS projects before; we took part in the first ERASMUS project in the 2006/2007 academic year, where the coordinating country was the Czech Republic, a formal university. It is also with some pride that we say we still maintain that partner; we still have projects with that partner today." Interviewee 2 of case study 4 (Cavaco et. al., 2024)

"We have known each other for a long time, so we already had some sensitivity to working with partners on ERASMUS projects". Interviewee 1 of case study 4 (Cavaco et al., 2024)

"As we work more with European projects, we also acquire these skills". Interviewee 2 of case study 4 (Cavaco et al., 2024)

6. Data interpretation

Portugal does not have a long-standing tradition in adult education policy. The most significant developments began in the 1970s, particularly following the democratic revolution on April 25, 1974. This period saw widespread civic engagement, which fostered a vision of adult education grounded in democratic and emancipatory principles (Lima, 2008; Lima & Guimarães, 2018). Adult education during this time was deeply influenced by popular education ideologies, emphasising participatory methods and socio-educational activism. Civil society organisations played a key role, creating a wide range of local initiatives characterised by their independence and creativity (Melo & Benavente, 1978).

In 1986, Portugal passed the Basic Law for the Education System (still in effect today) and joined the European Economic Community in the same year. At that time, the country faced the challenge of modernising its economy and infrastructure, improving public and private sector efficiency, and increasing productivity and competitiveness. Despite these national goals, non-formal adult education was not prioritised as a strategic tool (Lima, 2008). This marked a shift toward policies that emphasised modernisation and State control (Lima & Guimarães, 2011; 2018), allowing democratic and emancipatory aims of adult education practices to be set aside. From the late 1990s onwards, adult education policy began aligning more closely with the EU's lifelong learning strategy, emphasising human resource development. The connection between education/training and economic growth became more pronounced. Formal offers enhancing social and economic value were valued (Guimarães, 2011). This policy often ignored or conflicted with the popular and basic education models, highlighting structural, political, and educational incompatibilities (Lima, 2008).

Adult education in Portugal is marked by the coexistence of diverse modalities, particularly formal, when it comes to public policy under development, and non-formal education (Canário, 1999). Influenced by the European Union guidelines for lifelong learning, recent public policies have tended to prioritise formal adult education within the broader adult education and training agenda, thereby rendering other modalities less visible (Guimarães, 2024). This emphasis reinforces a hierarchy of educational forms in which non-formal adult education appears secondary or residual. This situation contributes to the marginalisation and peripheral character of non-formal adult education as a sector of public intervention, producing what has been described as a disturbing silence surrounding these practices in the sphere of public policy debate (Conselho Nacional de Educação [CNE], 2025). It also has a significant impact on activities and projects developed that depend still very much on existing (short) funding, such as the Erasmus+ as the RIA-AE study showed.

Civil society/NGOs are crucial in non-formal adult education practices as they reach groups that formal offers rarely access and foster lifelong learning. The impact study under analysis has allowed the identification of different kinds of organisations. Data collected in the RIA-AE impact study have allowed the identification of two main groups of organisations having projects funded: the ones that are big in size (considering adult learning staff and learners involved in activities), experienced in applying and the ones that are smaller with a shorter scale of impact (less staff and adult learners involved).

Guimarães (2011) analyses how third sector/local development associations mediate the implementation of EU lifelong learning guidelines and public adult education and training policies, highlighting its hybrid, ambivalent role between critical community work and bureaucratic service provision. Many of these associations were

created for integrated rural and local development, but progressively reoriented activities towards EU and State-induced priorities such as second-chance basic education and vocational training, driven by access to EU and national funding and the need for institutional survival. Within this accommodation process through the professionalisation of adult learning staff (Fernandes & Kerneis, 2020), adult education thus becomes a socially induced activity, strongly shaped by EU and national programmes and indicators, which pushes the referred associations to adopt managerial, isomorphic procedures (project applications, monitoring, audit, accountability) and to function increasingly like training enterprises rather than a grassroots and emancipatory organisations. This produces a crisis of values (by assuming goals that are distant from original aims of democratic participation, local development and social transformation) and a crisis of functioning (loss of informal, associative practices, tightening of formal regulation), leaving little room for innovative, critical local adult education initiatives (Guimarães, 2013).

7. Conclusions

Considering the research question of this article, in spite of difficulties in evaluating impact of Erasmus+ projects funded due to constraints in isolating project effects from broader socioeconomic factors, it is possible to stress that the RIA-AE study has highlighted the importance of the Erasmus+ programme as a harder soft governance instrument for organisations, in specific non-governmental organisations, that developed non-formal adult education projects. The impacts identified in the study stress mainly the meso level. Local organisations align projects' objectives with EU aims for lifelong learning which encourage gradual accommodation of these organisations' own aims and practices to the EU priorities. In parallel, these organisations reorient their offers, investing more in projects holding the EU aims. Big and very skilled local organisations, mostly in what concerns adult learning staff, in applying to Erasmus+ funding are more likely to implement non-formal education projects, reflecting a professionalisation path of staff of these organisations. The smaller organisations, victims of lack of human resources, due to long term inexistent public funding, face bigger constraints in getting projects funded, even when project aims are aligned with European Union guidelines for lifelong learning. When reinforcing professionalisation of adult learning staff, strategic capacity is also promoted, in specific when it comes to internationalisation and local partnerships. The funded organisations strengthened contacts with similar organisations in other countries within internationalisation strategies. They also develop national and local partnerships with similar organisations. This situation raises questions about how far local, historically rooted aims are being reshaped by external funding logics and EU soft and hard law steering. Within this scenario, several questions arise that would require, however, new studies: how distant are aims of projects funded to the main goals of the organisation, namely the ones set when the organisations was created and that were relevant within their history? What ideas and main aims have been given up for the implementation of the Erasmus+ funded projects? How strong was the impact of the funding from Erasmus+ in ways of conceiving and implementing non-formal adult education in local territories these organisations are located? When considering the period after 1974, when local associations were very dynamic in Portugal, what has been lost and gained and what is the impact of such losses and gains to democratic and emancipatory non-formal adult education?

Notes

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- ⁴ Following CASES (2026) typology, civil society organisation in Portugal involve non-governmental, welfare, associations, foundations, as well as cooperatives in the third sector (in <https://cases.pt/#economia-portugal>).
- ⁵ There are no established criteria to assess the size of a civil society organisation. However, some have tended to use the number of staff criteria also used when profit-making enterprises are concerned. For Portugal following EU guidelines (Recommendation 2003/361/CE), a micro and small organisation might include up to 50 staff, while medium ones are up to 250 staff and larger ones more than 250.

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Rethinking the impact of Erasmus+ on Adult Education: lessons from Slovenia

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Keywords

Adult education, Erasmus+, Empowerment, Professionalisation.

Abstract

This discussion paper presents the research process and selected findings from two impact studies on Erasmus+ in the adult education (AE) sector in Slovenia. It explores the relevance of Erasmus+ for the AE sector in the European Union (EU) and Slovenia, as well as the type of research and knowledge contributed by the Research-based Impact Analysis in Adult Education (RIA-AE) network. The paper also critically re-examines findings on two central topics identified in the impact studies: the improvement of AE quality through staff professionalisation, and the empowerment of adult learners through new Erasmus+ learning opportunities. It argues that the “openness” of Erasmus+ in the AE sector tends to hinder professionalisation, and that the empowerment of adult learners through Erasmus+ is viewed simplistically as a unidimensional process.

1. Introduction

This paper serves as a discussion paper, based on a reflective secondary analysis of selected findings from two previous impact studies I co-authored on Slovenia (Mikulec & Kristl, 2024). These studies are part of a larger transnational monitoring project on the Erasmus+ programme in adult education (AE), conducted by the Research-based Impact Analysis in Adult Education (RIA-AE) network. Both studies aimed to inform the National Agency responsible for Erasmus+ about the implementation and impact of the programme in Slovenia, focusing on the impact of Key Action (KA) 1 (learning mobility of individuals) and KA2 (cooperation of organisations and institutions) by examining funded organisations, their staff, learners, and the AE sector more broadly.

Based on data from the two impact studies and a relevant literature review in the field of AE, the paper aims to exchange views and reflect on (McGregor, 2018): (1) the relevance of Erasmus+ for the AE sector in the European Union (EU) and Slovenia; (2) the type of research and knowledge the RIA-AE Network is contributing; and two topics that emerged as central in the two impact studies, namely (3) the professionalisation that Erasmus+ is fostering in the AE sector, and (4) the empowerment of adult learners through (new) Erasmus+ learning opportunities.

Methodologically, the paper combines the format of a discussion paper (McGregor, 2018), engaging with contemporary AE literature, with a reflective secondary analysis of empirical material from two RIA-AE impact studies on Erasmus+ in Slovenia (Mikulec et al., 2024), which used a mixed-methods design, combining survey data (51 organisations participated in the first study and 59 in the second) with qualitative material collected through interviews and focus groups involving staff members of beneficiary organisations (23 in both studies) and adult learners (12 in the first and 20 in the second study). Rather than re-analysing the complete datasets, this paper revisits selected findings that emerged prominently across both studies and are particularly relevant to current debates in AE. The themes of professionalisation and learner empowerment were chosen as they represent recurring findings and central claims regarding the impact of Erasmus+ in the Slovenian context. The analysis is interpretive and reflective, revisiting findings from the impact studies through contemporary AE literature and critical policy perspectives to explore their broader assumptions and implications.

2. What is the relevance of Erasmus+ for the adult education sector?

At EU level, cooperation in general education began in 1974 with the establishment of the Educational Committee. In 1976, the Committee adopted the Action Programme for Education, which legitimised education as a policy area and initiated various initiatives and projects that served as precursors to today's EU programmes. Since 1995, the EU has established three main programmes: Socrates I–II (1995–1999, 2000–2006), Lifelong Learning (2007–2013), and Erasmus+ (Mikulec & Kristl, 2025).

In 2014, the Erasmus+ programme (2014–2020) was established (European Parliament & Council, 2013). Its aims were to: (1) achieve the objectives set by the Europe 2020 strategy, the European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020) framework, and the European Cooperation in the Youth Field framework; (2) develop a European dimension in sport; and (3) promote European values. An overall budget of EUR 14.7 billion was allocated, 77.5 per cent of which was earmarked for education and training, including a minimum of 43 per cent for higher education, 22 per cent for VET, 15 per cent for school education, and 5 per cent for AE (European Parliament & Council, 2013, p. 61). In 2021, a new Erasmus+ programme (2021–2027) was adopted (European Parliament & Council, 2021). The overall budget for this iteration of Erasmus+ was EUR 26.2 billion, of which 83 per cent was allocated to education and training, with 5.8 per cent, the smallest share, allocated to AE.

In both programmes, AE is defined as “any form of non-vocational education for adults after initial education, whether of a formal, non-formal or informal nature” (European Parliament & Council, 2021, p. 14; European Commission [EC], 2020, p. 318), targeting members of “organisations, trainers, staff and learners in non-vocational adult education” (EC, 2020, p. 21). The Erasmus+ programme was designed to contribute to higher quality formal, non-formal and informal AE programmes; improved AE quality through staff professionalisation; enhanced provision of AE for key competences; increased capacity of AE providers; and greater participation of adults, especially disadvantaged learners, in AE (EC, 2024, p. 79).

Although AE receives the smallest share of funding under the Erasmus+ programme – which could suggest that the programme pays the least attention to the AE sector – it is also true that the non-vocational orientation of AE within Erasmus+ primarily promotes broader social objectives in European AE policy (Mikulec et al., 2025) and broader, community-oriented, non-formal AE (Guimarães et al., in press). These objectives therefore counterbalance the dominant economic and vocational goals, which are often criticised as predominant in European AE policy (Rasmussen, 2014; Mikulec, 2018; Holford & Milana, 2023).

3. The RIA-AE: research for policy or research of policy?

As a researcher in the RIA-AE Network, I must consider the type of research and knowledge I am contributing to when conducting impact studies on Erasmus+ in the AE sector. According to the project description, the aim is to contribute to a “better understanding of the impact of international cooperation and mobility projects in adult education in the context of the Erasmus+ programme” (NA-BIBB, 2021, p. 1). As a researcher, and as part of a research network, we contribute to policy-relevant knowledge based on the “evidence” or “good practices” we collect and co-construct. This knowledge legitimises Erasmus+ education policy and supports evidence-based policy (Sivesind & Karseth, 2022).

In the international context, the relationships between research, practice, and policymaking remain a persistent and highly relevant topic of discussion among scholars in the field of AE (Teräsahde, 2025). Traditionally, research in AE has been closely intertwined with practice: emerging from practice, research has developed its themes and questions, while research findings have subsequently fed back into practice (Fejes & Nylander, 2019; Zeuner, 2019). Today, however, policy must also be incorporated into this relationship, as since at least the 1970s, AE has become an object of public policy in most European and Anglo-Saxon countries, supported

by international organisations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the OECD, which have promoted concepts of *permanent*, *lifelong*, and *recurrent* education (Lima et al., 2022; Kalenda & Desjardins, 2025; Mikulec, 2026). As noted by Marcella Milana (Kozyra & Maksimović, 2023), in an ideal cyclical process, knowledge derived from research can be translated into practice, while knowledge generated in practice can, in turn, inform new research. Together, knowledge from research and practice can better inform AE policy, while also challenging policy assumptions that are not grounded in research evidence or practical experience, thereby advocating more effective policy solutions. This is also one of the aims of the RIA-AE Network: to strengthen cooperation and dialogue between research, policy, and practice, and consequently contribute to the further development and quality improvement of the Erasmus+ programme in the AE sector (NA-BIBB, 2021).

In the study of educational policy, two main approaches are typically distinguished, as outlined by Desjardins and Rubenson (2009): (a) “research for policy”, a *problem-solving* approach in which the problem is taken as given and research is primarily oriented towards finding solutions (e.g., good or best practices or “what works” for migrants, low-skilled workers, or disadvantaged groups of adults); and (b) “research of policy”, a *critical approach* in which both the problem and the solution are called into question. The aim of critical policy research is therefore not only to solve problems, but also to identify and shape them. Thus, when researching the impact of Erasmus+ on the AE sector, we as researchers are primarily contributing to “research for policy”. However, as researchers, we should also balance this dominant approach in the RIA-AE Network with “research of policy”, at least by critically questioning and reflecting on the data gathered and when interpreting research findings. There are, however, different ways of understanding what constitutes critical research in (adult) education policy. For example, criticality may be associated with: (i) critical thinking, which concerns the rationality and epistemological validity of arguments (within the Anglo-Saxon analytical tradition); (ii) normative and emancipatory goals aimed at envisioning a better society, including the critique of oppressive social and educational practices, as well as strategies for progressive change that can challenge such structures and practices within the tradition of the Frankfurt School or radical AE; (iii) the uncovering of power relations and the critique of how problems and solutions are constructed, without necessarily offering future visions or solutions within the post-structuralist tradition; (iv) the critique of elite global actors, networks, and power, and their influence on the shaping of educational ideas within and across states within the tradition of the critical sociology of public policy (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Savage et al., 2021; Helkala et al., 2025).

Finally, with the increasing integration of educational research, policy, and practice, there is a noticeable rise in research dependence on external funding sources (e.g., EU funds) and in the networking of researchers within networks (e.g., RIA-AE), which may facilitate academic career advancement (Addey & Piattoeva, 2021) or promote professionalism in AE by linking academic knowledge and practice (Mikulec & Egetenmeyer, 2025). However, when AE practice and its core organisations also rely heavily on external (EU) funding, as is the case in Slovenia and some other EU countries (Ioannidou, 2014; Mikulec, 2021; Mikulec & Guimarães, 2023; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2024; Guimarães et al., in press), it is necessary to ask how impartial and independent Erasmus+ beneficiary organisations are when reporting data in various questionnaires or interviews about the impacts of Erasmus+ to the European Commission, national agencies, and researchers of the RIA-AE Network, if funding from Erasmus+ is often essential to their existence or organisational development, as in the Slovenian case (Mikulec et al., 2024). In this context, do Erasmus+ beneficiary organisations and staff not tend to report data in favour of Erasmus+, so as not to cut the branch they are sitting on?

4. Erasmus+ and professionalisation: Is it about quality and increased professionalisation?

In both impact studies (Mikulec et al., 2024), professionalisation is strongly emphasised, as Erasmus+ enables greater professionalisation of adult educators (for example, improved pedagogical and didactic skills among staff, better identification of learners' needs, enhanced competences in using digital learning technologies, and developed international competences such as intercultural skills, international orientation, and personal development, as well as increased attention to inclusion and diversity). It also benefits organisations by supporting their professional development, growth, capacity building, and innovation. For example:

"Erasmus+ projects are ... an ongoing thing, for our growth ... we are constantly growing, developing ... each individual, but also as an institution ... We are opening up new areas that we want to learn about ... It [Erasmus+] is one such ongoing process now. I don't see us stopping, but it is something we are growing with. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., 2024, p. 114)

"Erasmus enables you to strengthen partnerships locally and internationally ... the growth and quality of the staff and the quality of the content offered by the organisation. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., 2024, p. 114)

"Erasmus enables the openness of the organisation ... the openness of the staff and the willingness of the staff to learn and grow ... (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., 2024, p. 114)

"Erasmus+ enables institutional empowerment, in terms of infrastructure, staffing, facilities, tools we create ... improving the management capacity of the organisation, better access not only to the target base [group] but also to decision makers, stakeholders, experts, other organisations. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., 2024, p. 121)

"From the perspective of a person responsible for the development of the organisation, I believe that the Erasmus programme has significantly contributed to enhancing the organisation's visibility at both national and international levels ... The primary benefit, in my view, lies in the continuous development of the organisation and the collective as a whole. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec & Kristl in press)

"Erasmus+ projects give the organisation prestige. When I attend meetings, whether in the local community or elsewhere in Slovenia, there is a great deal of approval for what we are doing through these projects ... So, Erasmus+ functions as a kind of strong brand. It is almost as if one could say that the organisation holds a certificate of innovativeness. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., in press)

"We certainly gain new insights into pedagogical and didactic skills. You encounter new developmental approaches to the pedagogical transfer of knowledge. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., in press)

"Directly and indirectly, we gain a great deal of knowledge, experience, and consequently confidence through Erasmus, which has a significant impact on our acquisition of international experience, developing new pedagogical and didactic skills, strengthening our self-confidence, and shaping our whole organisational culture. In short, it influences everything that constitutes the core of our organisation. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., in press)

From the interview quotes above and from both impact studies, it is clear that staff involved strongly believe Erasmus+ provides higher quality AE through staff professionalisation, which is one of its core objectives. However, both impact studies (Mikulec et al., 2024, pp. 43–47; Mikulec et al., in press, pp. 19–20) also show that various types of organisations are eligible for and benefit from the programme, such as (adult) education providers, NGOs, art or culture institutes, (social) enterprises, libraries, museums, local or regional governments, and employer organisations, among others. While this could be seen as greater inclusiveness of the programme, it is less clear how organisations that are not educational institutions and do not focus on education and training (of adults) as their core activity, but, for example, on tourism or regional development, can actually ensure higher quality AE programmes and greater professionalisation of staff. If I set aside the question, although important, of whether greater professionalisation of AE is desirable (Grotlüschen et al., 2020), it is clear that the "openness" of Erasmus+ in the AE sector, where virtually anyone can act as an applicant organisation for AE, works against

efforts to professionalise the field. Scholars (Nuissl & Lattke, 2008; Egetenmeyer et al., 2019; Ioannou, 2023) and international organisations (Council of the European Union [CEU], 2021; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL], 2022) have emphasised the importance of having adequately trained and well-qualified personnel working in AE. These authors, who advocate greater professionalisation of adult educators, point out that goodwill or activism in AE is not sufficient; adult educators must know what they are doing and reflect on their work professionally, as only professionally trained staff can manage complex learning situations and thereby reduce and eliminate errors in the planning and implementation of AE.

5. Erasmus+ and empowerment: is it about empowering adult learners?

In both impact studies (Mikulec et al., 2024, in press), but especially in the second, which involved more adult learners and their experiences, the empowerment of adult learners, particularly those with fewer opportunities or who are vulnerable, is strongly emphasised. Erasmus+ learning opportunities enable adult learners to increase self-confidence and independence, and to gain new knowledge and skills needed to navigate the contemporary world, such as digital skills and intercultural competences (EPALE, 2026). For example:

"A participant who has been involved in an international project has gained employment. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., 2024, p. 88)

"The vocational skills competition (and the good ranking) gave the learners a boost in confidence and led to their involvement in further education. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., 2024, p. 88)

"We taught older adults' critical skills, including how to recognise fake news and develop digital literacy, so that they would not be excluded from what are now everyday activities in society. In this way, we contributed to their empowerment, enabling them to be more competent in decision-making processes, participation, and the critical evaluation of media information. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., 2024, p. 88)

"The project empowered participants; elderly participants gained confidence and independence through digital skills. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., in press)

"The project activities also influenced the women's personal growth. In fact, by strengthening their financial literacy, they can indirectly become more independent – more self-initiated, self-confident, and so on – once they have acquired knowledge they may not have had before. Yes, essentially, it is about empowering rural women. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., in press)

"The events we develop through our projects are intended to connect and actively involve people with disabilities in the community, so that they become empowered and strengthen their skills. Precisely for this reason, they can more easily participate in a democratic community. (Participant of focus group)" (Mikulec et al., in press)

From the interview quotes above and both impact studies, it follows that AE staff understand empowerment as linked to the development of self-confidence and independent expression, and that for them the concept of empowerment has become synonymous with personal effectiveness, competence, and a positive self-image (Inglis, 1997). Thus, an empowered individual is someone who can express what they feel, want, and think to gain greater control over their own life and decisions (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, in this process of empowering adult learners, the adult educator, as also evident from the interview quotes above, plays a key role as the one who possesses knowledge, while the learners do not yet know. The educator's task is to empower learners by enabling them to gain the knowledge of the "adult educator emancipator" (Biesta, 2012). However, this image of empowerment is problematic for several reasons. First, as Wildemeersch and Salling Olesen (2012) emphasised, the notion of empowerment in AE, linked to individual responsibility for one's own development, has replaced the notion of emancipation, which was associated with social movements and aimed at education for liberation and social and political transformation. As collective transformation has lost momentum, it has taken the form of empowerment – the individual's capacity to work and live in contemporary (democratic)

society, and to be economically and socially included. Second, it is important to remember, as some researchers have noted, that the good intentions of (adult) educators to foster empowering educational practices often did not feel empowering but instead reinforced forms of domination (Ellsworth, 1989; Wildemeersch, 2014), and that empowerment through AE is not a linear or unproblematic process, as “empowered agency” only emerges in some cases (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). Third, while (adult) education and the knowledge it provides might be the force through which individual (empowering) and social (emancipatory) practices are fostered, these must relate to wider economic (e.g., material goods, financial resources), political (e.g., representation, decision-making), and psychological (e.g., self-confidence, self-esteem, self-assertiveness) dimensions and conditions (Stromquist, 2015; Mikulec, 2018). Finally, in contrast to a unidimensional understanding of empowerment, which is often promoted by staff engaged in Erasmus+ projects, recent research argues for a multi-level understanding of empowerment, i.e., the combined interactions of the micro (participants), meso (organisations), and macro (umbrella organisations and associations) levels (Saam & Egetenmeyer, 2026).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed selected results from two impact studies I have co-authored on the impact of the Erasmus+ programme on the AE sector in Slovenia, as part of a larger transnational monitoring project conducted by the RIA-AE Network. By comparing data collected from these studies and reflecting on the findings through my academic knowledge and relevant literature in the AE field, I argue: (1) for the importance of Erasmus+ projects and funding for the AE sector in EU countries and Slovenia, despite AE receiving the smallest share of funding under the Erasmus+ programme; (2) that the RIA-AE Network primarily contributes to “research for policy” and policy-relevant knowledge, but its findings should also be balanced and supplemented with “research of policy” by researchers; (3) that the “openness” of Erasmus+ in the AE sector tends to work against professionalisation, rather than towards achieving better quality of AE through staff professionalisation, although Erasmus+ may enable staff from various types of organisations (where education and training are not their core activities) to acquire some pedagogical and didactic skills; and (4) that the empowerment of adult learners through Erasmus+ is viewed in simplistic terms as a unidimensional process related to learning opportunities provided by staff involved in Erasmus+, whereas empowerment, as other research indicates, is a much more complex, multidimensional, and multi-level process.

Notes

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Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes (RIA-AE) as an evaluative architecture for Lifelong Learning: Erasmus+, Adult Education and the role of the National Agency in the Italian context

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Keywords

Erasmus+, RIA-AE, Adult education, Impact evaluation, Adult learner mobility.

Abstract

Within the European framework of lifelong learning, Erasmus+ has come to perform a function that extends well beyond international mobility. In the field of adult education, the programme operates as a pedagogical, organisational and institutional device: it supports the development of educational staff competences, broadens learning opportunities for adult learners, promotes the internationalisation of organisations, and strengthens civic, social and intercultural competences. This article offers a theoretical and documentary reading of Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes (RIA-AE), a transnational Long-Term Activity (LTA) designed to analyse the impact of Erasmus+ in adult education. The article situates RIA-AE within the European and Italian lifelong learning landscape and discusses the role of the Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa (INDIRE), the Italian Erasmus+ National Agency for Higher Education, School Education and Adult Education, as a mediating structure between European policies, beneficiaries, territories and the production of evidence. Drawing on the 2023/2024 transnational survey, institutional sources and the pedagogical literature on adult learning, RIA-AE is interpreted as an evaluative architecture whose potential lies not only in documenting outcomes, but also in making visible the conditions, inequalities and institutional mediations that shape the impact of Erasmus+.

1. Introduction

Lifelong learning is today one of the key arenas in which European democracies test their capacity to respond to social, demographic, technological and economic transformations. To speak of lifelong learning is not merely to refer to the adjustment of skills required by social, technological and economic change, nor to the compensation of previous educational deficits. It means asking what conditions allow adults to continue participating in social, cultural, civic and working life throughout the entire life course.

From this perspective, adult education occupies a crucial yet ambivalent position. It is recognised as a factor of inclusion, employability, democratic participation, social cohesion and individual well-being; at the same time, it remains less visible than other fields of education and training, more fragmented in its organisational forms and more exposed to institutional and financial discontinuities. This ambivalence makes it necessary to document not only the activities carried out, but also the changes produced in people, organisations and systems.

It is within this scenario that Erasmus+ acquires a specific significance. Originally perceived above all as a mobility programme, it is now a European device for learning, cooperation and innovation across the life span. In the field of adult education, the Programme supports the development of pedagogical, organisational and intercultural competences among staff, the hosting of experts, individual and group mobility for adult learners, including those with fewer opportunities, and transnational cooperation projects aimed at process innovation and the improvement of educational provision (European Commission, 2025). The 2021-2027 programming period also

assigns centrality to inclusion, digital transformation, sustainability and democratic participation, according to a rationale that links educational quality, equitable access and European citizenship (European Commission, 2021, 2025). This approach belongs to a broader European trajectory that sees adult learning as a lever for inclusion, socio-economic resilience and participation, but also as a field in which quantitative measurement alone cannot adequately account for the changes produced (European Commission, 2015, 2024).

The broadening of the Programme's aims raises both a methodological and a political question: how can the impact of Erasmus+ be assessed in a sector marked by a plurality of actors, national differences, diverse target groups and non-linear learning processes? How can the implementation of activities be distinguished from the changes produced in practices, competences, relationships and policies?

The RIA-AE project emerged from this need. This article adopts a theoretical and documentary methodology and draws on the RIA-AE 2023/2024 transnational report, the conceptual note on the priority "participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement", European and national institutional sources, and the pedagogical literature on adult learning. Three questions guide the analysis: what understanding of lifelong learning does RIA-AE make visible? How can Erasmus+ contribute to strengthening the Italian adult education system? What role can the National Agency play in transforming a European programme into a factor of institutional, territorial and professional learning? The argument advanced here is that RIA-AE constitutes an evaluative architecture, understood as a coordinated set of methods, data, actors and processes oriented towards the shared use of evidence, and therefore a knowledge infrastructure capable of making the links between project design, learning and institutional change more legible.

2. The RIA-AE LTA: governance, network and development in waves

To understand RIA-AE, it is first necessary to read it as an infrastructure for research and cooperation, rather than as an occasional survey. The network is configured as an Erasmus+ LTA, launched in 2022 (Erasmus+ Italia, n.d.): a multi-year cooperation framework through which National Agencies share evaluative questions, data-collection procedures and interpretations of the Programme's impact. Institutional leadership is entrusted to the National Agency Education for Europe at the Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (NA at BIBB), namely the German National Agency for Erasmus+ in adult education. Alongside this network coordination, transnational scientific coordination is entrusted to a consortium led by Ockham IPS, with the Institute for Innovation and Technology (iit) and artéduc/Université libre de Bruxelles. This distinction matters: the NA at BIBB ensures the cooperation framework among Agencies, while Ockham IPS and the consortium provide methodological coherence, data comparability and European-level synthesis.

The Network, originally established by eight National Agencies, now involves 21 countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Türkiye. Its scale is not merely quantitative: it makes it possible to observe a notoriously fragmented sector through a common evaluative grammar, without erasing institutional, organisational and cultural differences across national systems. The official Network website (<https://www.ria-ae.eu/>) serves as the public access point for the mission statement, monitoring approach, partner countries, national reports, transnational publications and synthesis materials (RIA-AE Network, n.d.-a). The temporal architecture of the LTA is structured around three survey rounds. The first round (2023/2024) functioned as the empirical and organisational test of the model: it combined document analysis, data from European databases, an online survey addressed to beneficiary organisations, case studies, and interviews with adult learners and non-participating organisations. The decision not to impose all modules uniformly on all countries should be read as a realistic adaptation to different national capacities, rather than as a weakness of

the design. The first round generated the European synthesis report, the fact sheet on the impact of Erasmus+ in adult education and the 2025 Position Paper, which translates the evidence into policy recommendations (RIA-AE Network, n.d.-b; RIA-AE Network, 2025b).

The second round (2025/2026), currently being finalised, retains the main modules of the first cycle to guarantee comparative continuity, while placing particular emphasis on participation in democratic life and civic engagement. This focus is especially consistent with the profile of adult education, because it makes it possible to observe not only the acquisition of competences, but also processes of agency, belonging, trust and participation (RIA-AE Network, 2025a). In response to the European Commission's interest in studies that can better estimate the effectiveness of interventions, the second round also integrates two additional modules: a qualitative module on the impact of Erasmus+ mobility on adult learners with fewer opportunities, and a quantitative pre/post module on Key Action 1 (KA1) mobility, designed to assess its net effectiveness. National and transnational reports are expected in 2026.

The third round (2027/2028) is planned as a survey comparable with the previous two and should enable a diachronic reading of the progress achieved during the current Programme period. RIA-AE therefore does not merely produce successive snapshots; it builds a longitudinal observatory on the evolving impact of Erasmus+ in adult education.

3. Lifelong Learning, citizenship and impact: a theoretical and methodological framework

Lifelong learning can be interpreted as one of the main democratic safeguards of contemporary societies. Its relevance does not derive solely from the adjustment of skills required by social, technological and economic change, but from its capacity to support agency, participation, recognition and belonging. From this perspective, adult education is not a residual sector: it is a field in which educational, social, cultural, employment and civic policies intersect. This reading recalls the tradition of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) of learning to be and education as a common good, as well as pedagogical perspectives that connect educational quality, democracy and social justice (Biesta, 2010; Delors, 1996; Faure, 1972; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022a, 2022b).

Democratic pedagogy has long emphasised the link between education and participation. In Dewey (1916), education is constitutive of democratic life, because it forms subjects capable of experience, cooperation and judgement. In Freire (1970), adult learning is connected to conscientisation: the capacity to read the world critically and to intervene in it. In Mezirow (1991), transformative learning occurs when adults revise frames of meaning, assumptions and established perspectives. In Schön (1993), educational professionalism develops through reflection in and on action. This tradition also resonates with Delors's (1996) humanistic vision of lifelong learning and with the perspective of self-directed learning, central to Knowles (1975).

This framework is well suited to interpreting Erasmus+ in the field of adult education. European mobility and partnerships do not produce only individual acquisitions; they configure learning environments in which people and organisations are brought into relation with cultural, institutional and professional differences. The transnational dimension makes alternatives visible, enables practices to be compared, supports the reworking of professional identities and fosters the construction of networks.

Within this framework, impact cannot be understood in linear terms. It does not coincide with the number of mobilities carried out, products developed, or events organised. These elements are necessary, but insufficient. Impact concerns the changes that an experience produces in subjects, organisations and contexts: competence development, intercultural openness, strengthened autonomy, pedagogical innovation, greater cooperation capacity, institutionalisation of practices, wider access or influence on policies. This requires evaluative tools able

to observe both tangible and intangible dimensions, including effects on social participation and inclusion (De Greef et al., 2010).

RIA-AE explicitly adopts this multi-level perspective. Its monitoring considers the effects of Erasmus+ at the micro level, concerning adult learners and educational staff; at the meso-level, concerning organisations and their educational provision; and at the macro level, concerning institutional conditions, sectoral networks and policies. This choice avoids two opposite reductions: on the one hand, the individualistic reduction of impact to the growth of personal competences; on the other, the administrative reduction of impact to the correct implementation of a project. The organisational perspective is particularly relevant because internationalisation can foster reflective institutional cultures close to the model of the learning organisation (Senge, 1990).

The RIA-AE research design uses mixed methods. The first round combined document analysis, data from European databases, an online survey addressed to beneficiary organisations, case studies, interviews with adult learners and interviews with non-participating organisations. The survey involved fifteen countries and collected 986 responses, with an average response rate of 41%. Not all countries implemented the modules in the same way, which limits full comparability, but the overall structure nevertheless produced a substantial cross-national evidence base for a sector in which evidence is often local, discontinuous and difficult to accumulate (Buiskool et al., 2024).

These strengths should not obscure the limitations of the available evidence. The uneven implementation of research modules across participating countries reduces full comparability, while several components rely on organisational self-reporting and may be affected by the self-selection of beneficiaries that are already more experienced or internationally oriented. The findings are therefore better interpreted as evidence of recurring patterns, mechanisms and enabling conditions than as definitive proof that the observed changes can be attributed exclusively to Erasmus+. A further issue concerns institutional proximity: RIA-AE is promoted by the National Agencies whose Programme implementation it examines, and the present analysis is written from within INDIRE. This position provides situated knowledge and direct access to the Italian implementation context, but it also requires reflexivity and a clear distinction between evaluation, institutional learning and Programme legitimisation.

Read in this light, the wave structure is not an organisational detail: it enables evaluation to take on a longitudinal form, maintaining comparability across countries and survey rounds while progressively incorporating political priorities, emerging findings and more mature evaluative questions. RIA-AE therefore does not simply seek to measure “how much” the Programme works, but to understand “how”, “for whom” and “under what conditions” it produces value. It is here that evaluation assumes a genuinely pedagogical function: it does not merely certify outcomes, but provides actors with criteria for interpreting and improving their own action.

4. RIA-AE evidence and the role of the National Agency in the Italian context

RIA-AE may be read as an attempt to transform the evaluation of Erasmus+ into a shared process of institutional learning. The network was not created simply to collect data, but to strengthen the capacity of National Agencies to read the Programme’s impact in their own contexts and from a comparative perspective. European policies always produce situated effects: a measure that in one country encounters a consolidated network may, in another, encounter a more fragmented ecosystem; a mobility action may be easily incorporated where a culture of internationalisation already exists, yet may prove complex for small organisations with limited resources.

The evidence considered here concerns five main areas: the accessibility of the Programme and the participation of newcomers; the inclusion of adult learners with fewer opportunities; the organisational impact of KA1 and Key Action 2 (KA2); the relationship between mobility and cooperation; and the capacity to produce effects at system

level. Erasmus+ involves non-governmental organisations, training providers, cultural institutions, civil society organisations, local authorities, educational institutions and other actors. This confirms the polycentric nature of the sector, in which formal, non-formal and informal learning coexist. The diversity of beneficiaries is a strength, but also a challenge: not all types of organisations are reached with the same intensity, and in some countries, there are difficulties in involving providers located in peripheral areas or less accustomed to European project design (Buiskool et al., 2024).

A second issue concerns access. Organisations that have already participated in the Programme tend to recognise its value and submit further applications. This indicates continued engagement and perceived relevance, but it also raises the problem of newcomers. If participation becomes concentrated among organisations already capable of designing and managing Erasmus+ projects, the Programme risks reproducing inequalities in institutional capacity. The barriers identified by RIA-AE - limited human resources, insufficient leadership support, costs, difficulties in finding partners and administrative complexity - show that accessibility depends not only on the availability of funds, but also on organisations' capacity to make effective use of them. The risk is that the organisations closest to social needs may also be those least equipped to access European opportunities.

The mobility of adult learners is a particularly significant test case. The 2021-2027 programming period introduced new possibilities under KA1, yet RIA-AE evidence indicates that these opportunities are not yet fully used. Obstacles include limited awareness of the measure, difficulties in linking mobility to organisational objectives, discontinuous access to learners, family and work responsibilities, health conditions, language barriers, legal-status issues, fears related to travel and difficulties in finding suitable hosting organisations. These obstacles reveal a specificity of adult learning: adults do not participate in education as abstract subjects, but as individuals situated within networks of obligations, vulnerabilities, expectations and complex biographies. For an adult with fewer opportunities, mobility can become an experience of trust, autonomy and recognition, provided that it is carefully prepared, supported and reflected upon after return.

RIA-AE evidence also indicates positive effects on organisations. Erasmus+ contributes to the strengthening of international networks, project-management capacity, the development of internationalisation strategies and the improvement of educational provision. In KA2 projects, a significant proportion of organisations developed curricula, training modules, language courses, pedagogical concepts, digital tools, guides and teaching materials; many outputs are used on a stable basis by beneficiary organisations (Buiskool et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the development of products does not automatically guarantee impact: their usefulness depends on pedagogical quality, relevance to needs, capacity for integration into ordinary provision, external recognition and organisational support.

The distinction between KA1 and KA2 is functional to the architecture of the Programme, but from a pedagogical point of view the two devices should be more closely integrated. Mobility can generate needs for cooperation and organisational innovation; partnerships can produce tools, relationships and environments that make adult learner mobility more sustainable. Consistently, the Network's 2025 Position Paper, developed on the basis of evidence from the first round, does not merely perform a dissemination function, but a function of translation between research and policy. The document values Erasmus+ as a driver of inclusion, innovation and competence development in adult education, and identifies several enabling conditions: greater flexibility in Programme design and funding mechanisms; stronger synergies between mobility (KA1) and cooperation (KA2); more robust support for outreach, learner preparation and hosting structures; better access for underrepresented providers; and more stable dialogue between policy and Programme implementation (RIA-AE Network, 2025b).

The Italian context offers a particularly relevant framework for understanding the potential of RIA-AE. Italy has a diverse adult education ecosystem: Provincial Centres for Adult Education (Centri provinciali per l'istruzione

degli adulti, CPIAs), schools offering second-level pathways, universities, local authorities, the third sector, associations, libraries, training bodies, social enterprises, territorial networks and European platforms such as the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE). This richness, however, does not automatically amount to an integrated system: the governance of adult education remains exposed to fragmentation, discontinuity and territorial differences, as analyses of adult learning policies have also shown (Federighi, 2019; OECD, 2003). According to Italy's National Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, ISTAT), in 2022 just over one third of individuals aged 25-64 participated in education and training activities; the Italian rate was almost eleven percentage points below the European average (ISTAT, 2024). This national picture is consistent with the broader findings of the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills, which documents persistent and, in many countries, widening inequalities in literacy and numeracy, especially among adults with lower levels of education, and underlines the need for more adaptive lifelong and life-wide learning systems (OECD, 2024).

In this situation, Erasmus+ can play a propulsive role, but it cannot be understood as a self-sufficient solution. The Programme can open opportunities, strengthen competences, promote networks and support innovation; however, its impact depends on the capacity of the national and territorial system to take up these opportunities, accompany less experienced actors and make effective use of project outcomes. In Italy, INDIRE is the Erasmus+ National Agency for Higher Education, School Education and Adult Education. Its functions include information, promotion, advice, management of applications, support for beneficiaries, monitoring, valorisation and liaison with European and national institutions (INDIRE, n.d.-a).

Within the Italian adult education system, the CPIAs constitute a fundamental institutional reference point. Presidential Decree 263/2012 redefined the organisational and pedagogical structure of the CPIAs, including evening courses and establishing a specific regulatory framework for adult education (Presidente della Repubblica, 2012). At the same time, lifelong learning exceeds the boundaries of formal education and requires networked governance. EPALE is a space for community-building, documentation, exchange and professional development for practitioners, teachers, researchers, policymakers and organisations active in the sector. In Italy, the EPALE National Support Service is managed by INDIRE, a condition that makes it possible to connect European project design, professional community engagement, dissemination and community-building (INDIRE, n.d.-b). This function is particularly relevant when read through the lens of communities of practice, in which professional learning emerges from participation in shared repertoires, common languages and relations of mutual recognition (Wenger, 1998), and within the framework of adult citizenship education, which links learning, agency and democratic participation (Schugurensky, 2006).

The role of the National Agency may be interpreted as that of a boundary organisation: an organisation positioned at the interface between the European Commission, national administration, territories, beneficiaries, professional communities and research (Guston, 2001). From this position, the Agency does not simply apply rules or manage funds; it translates European priorities into accessible opportunities, gathers needs from the territory, accompanies less experienced actors, promotes project quality and feeds evidence back into Programme improvement. In the case of adult education, this mediation is also cultural: it makes visible a sector often dispersed across education, social, migration, cultural and labour policies.

This mediating function is especially important in addressing the paradox of inclusion. Erasmus+ aims to reach people and organisations with fewer opportunities, yet precisely these actors may encounter the highest barriers to accessing the Programme. This tension is not specific to Erasmus+: the Fifth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education shows that adult learning opportunities still fail to reach many disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, even where overall participation has expanded (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022a). Small territorial bodies, community-based organisations, associations working with vulnerable adults, CPIAs and

local networks do not always have staff dedicated to European project design, language skills, administrative experience, international relationships or the capacity to pre-finance activities. Promotion, in this sense, does not coincide with the simple dissemination of calls. It requires capacity-building: strengthening the conditions that enable organisations to access the Programme on an informed basis and to translate an educational need into a project proposal.

RIA-AE offers the National Agency valuable tools to perform this function in a more targeted way. Data on access can guide actions towards underrepresented organisations; evidence on barriers can inform training pathways and support materials; information on organisational impact can help promote effective examples; and critical findings on systemic impact can stimulate dialogue among beneficiaries, decision-makers and territorial networks. The challenge is not only to increase the number of applications, but to improve the quality of the ecosystem by building channels for transferring project results into lifelong learning policies.

5. Conclusions

The RIA-AE project represents a significant step in the development of European policies for adult education. Its importance lies not only in the production of data on the impact of Erasmus+, but in the construction of a shared approach to knowledge, comparison and improvement of the Programme.

This article has proposed a reading of RIA-AE as an evaluative architecture for lifelong learning. This architecture makes visible the effects of Erasmus+ at individual, organisational and systemic levels; it identifies obstacles and enabling conditions; it strengthens dialogue among research, National Agencies, beneficiaries and policymakers; and it helps shift evaluation from an accountability logic to a generative practice.

The available evidence indicates that Erasmus+ can generate significant positive effects in adult education: it can strengthen staff competences, expand international networks, support organisational innovation, develop educational outputs and enable transformative experiences for adult learners. These findings, however, should not be interpreted as uniform or automatically attributable effects. Their extent depends on organisational capacity, national and territorial conditions, the quality of implementation and the ability to sustain and transfer results beyond individual projects. Critical issues therefore remain: unequal access, difficulties for newcomers, the complexity of adult mobility, organisational barriers and limited influence on system-level policies.

In the Italian context, these critical issues are especially significant. Adult participation in education and training remains below the European average; the sector is rich but fragmented; and the actors closest to social needs are not always those best equipped to access European opportunities. In this scenario, INDIRE can play a strategic role in mediation, capacity-building and coordination, especially when supported by robust and comparable evidence. Erasmus+ is not simply a funding programme: it is a European laboratory of institutional learning. RIA-AE is a particularly promising instrument because it allows us to understand how the Europe of adult education is built through practices, relationships and evidence, transforming dispersed data into public knowledge and orientations for action.

Notes

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Formation of the self and KA1 mobility among adult learners in Italy: initial evidence from the second survey round within the RIA-AE Network

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Keywords

Erasmus+, KA1 mobility, Adult learners, Formation of the self, Lifelong learning.

Abstract

This contribution analyses KA1 mobility of adult learners in Italy on the basis of aggregate data from the second Survey Round of the RIA-AE Network. In the context of a descriptive-interpretative paradigm, mobility is conceptualised as an educational and formative endeavour that engages with adult subjectivity by fostering a nexus between personal lived experience, educational accompaniment, and future-oriented projectuality. The analysis takes into consideration a range of participant profiles, with particular attention paid to the participants' access to their first mobility experience, the support available to them, the outcomes they have perceived, and the knowledge they have declared. These aspects are analysed in relation to the horizontal priorities of the Erasmus+ programme. The results demonstrate that participation varies according to gender and age, with adults in the central and later stages of life exhibiting a notable presence, particularly in group mobility. The outcomes that have been declared pertain to the development of practical skills, confidence, autonomy, responsibility and projectual orientation. In the context of a descriptive survey based on declarative data, the evidence provides valuable insights into the interpretation of KA1 mobility as an experience of self-recognition, capacity to act, and conscious belonging to social, cultural, and European contexts.

1. Introduction

The introduction of specific formative mobility opportunities addressed to adult learners represents one of the new features of the current Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programming cycle, defined by Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021). Within this architecture, Key Action 1 (KA1), Learning Mobility of Individuals, supports pathways addressed to learners and staff across the different sectors of education, training, youth and sport, also including adult education (European Commission, 2026). In the domain of adult education, this openness assumes particular significance, as it enables adult learning to be situated within a framework that cannot be reduced to professional development alone. Instead, it relates to the possibility of continuing to learn throughout one's life, in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. This approach is consistent with the 'European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030' and with the Council Recommendation 'Europe on the Move', adopted in May 2024, which strengthen the value of lifelong learning and learning mobility as opportunities to be made more accessible and inclusive (Council of the European Union, 2021; 2024).

Within this institutional framework, KA1 mobility of adult learners represents an area of particular interest for understanding how a transnational learning pathway may intersect with the formation of the self and with social participation in adulthood. The present contribution takes this area as its specific object of analysis in the Italian context, drawing on the aggregate quantitative data produced within the second Survey Round of RIA-AE. The RIA-AE Network (*Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes*) is a long-term initiative that was initiated in 2022. It is a transnational research and monitoring network that aims to

strengthen the evidence base on the impact of the Erasmus+ programme in the adult education sector (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener, & Erckrath, 2024). This is achieved through the involvement of national agencies and research institutions from twenty-one European countries. Consequently, the article does not seek to provide a comprehensive examination of the Erasmus+ programme or the degree of organisational collaboration. Instead, its focus is on adult participants as subjects of the formative experience, who are called upon to engage with a range of heterogeneous cultural, linguistic, educational and relational environments, mobilising their personal resources, awareness and possibilities for action.

The decision to focus on KA1 mobility responds to the need to analyse the micro level of the experience, relating to adult learners. This distinguishes it from the meso level, referring to beneficiary organisations, staff and the project-related and organisational conditions that make mobility possible, and from the macro level, which refers to the adult education system, European policies and the institutional orientations that define its frame of reference. Such boundaries allow for a more direct investigation of the correlation between mobility and adult subjectivity, thereby facilitating an analysis of how participants report having experienced the journey, which aspects of the experience are recognised as significant, and how the available evidence can be understood as descriptive indicators of a possible educational and formative process. In order to do so, it is necessary to consider the participants' profile in relation to gender, age, mode of mobility, and the life-course perspective, while also directing attention to the conditions that accompany the pathway -with particular reference to the first Erasmus+ experience, the preparation received, and language support. This, in turn, facilitates the interpretation of perceived benefits and declared knowledge in relation to skills, confidence, autonomy, responsibility, projectuality, intercultural openness, and European awareness.

The research question may be formulated as follows: What quantitative evidence makes it possible to interpret KA1 mobility of adult learners in Italy as an educational and formative experience associated with self-perception, capacity to act and participation across the life course? In this direction, the contribution proposes an interpretation of the outcomes declared by participants. These outcomes are not to be regarded as objective and immediately measurable effects, but rather as evidence which, within the limits of a descriptive-interpretative design, can be understood in the light of a theory of adult experience and of processes of formation of the self, as outlined in the theoretical framework.

2. Formation of the self in the KA1 mobility of adult learners

Within the framework of KA1 mobility programmes targeting adult learners, the formation of the self allows for a pedagogical interpretation of the relationship between lived experience, self-awareness and future planning. Mobility does not concern only the acquisition of knowledge or skills, but also the way in which the subject attributes meaning to their experiences, re-elaborates them in the light of their own history and integrates them into a personal trajectory that is still susceptible to alteration. Indeed, in adulthood, learning involves coming to terms with one's life experiences, recognising their meaning through a process of reflection, and reorganising one's understanding of oneself, others and the world (Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1991).

KA1 mobility places adults into an unfamiliar situation, where distance from familiar points of reference may stimulate new ways of learning, orientating oneself, communicating and participating. Its pedagogical relevance stems not only from the transnational character of the experience, but also from its ability to foster greater awareness of a journey that has already been undertaken.

Adults do not participate in mobility programmes as abstract entities, but as individuals with specific backgrounds, formative memories, family and social responsibilities, cultural affiliations, personal and professional experiences, vulnerabilities, and expectations for the future. Exposure to different linguistic, cultural and educational

environments can therefore highlight the relationship between what individuals know, what they fear and what they discover they are capable of doing. Indeed, it is the experience of continuity, the reorganization of the relationship between the individual and their environment, and the opening up of further possibilities for understanding and action that constitute the formative experience (Dewey, 1916; 1938). It may also influence the perspectives of meaning through which adults interpret themselves and the world. However, this possibility does not justify viewing every form of mobility from a transformative perspective. Transformation is neither a linear consequence of exposure to something new, nor a result that can be directly verified through descriptive data, as it depends on the conditions underpinning the experience, on opportunities for reflection, and on the possibility of integrating what has been experienced into one's personal perspective (Mezirow, 1997).

From this perspective, mobility can be understood as a formative threshold. The process of engaging with an unfamiliar educational environment entails more than simply entering another country; it involves navigating an unfamiliar situation in which personal resources, encounters with otherness, educational mediation and subjective re-elaboration all interplay. A new environment has the potential to expand the scope for understanding and participation; however, it can also result in a sense of disorientation, particularly when the conditions required to prepare the individual for the experience, to guide them and to support their presence are absent. The educational value of mobility therefore lies in the quality of the support mechanisms that enable adults to navigate new experiences without being overwhelmed by them, whilst fostering their autonomy, sense of responsibility and ability to make sense of their experiences.

An understanding of the objectives and planned activities, the guidance provided by the organisation and educators, the support of the reference group and language support all help to make mobility more accessible and feasible. These conditions help adults to enter their new environment with greater awareness, to understand the situations they encounter and to cope with uncertainty without feeling excluded. This standpoint pertains to the realm of educational care, encompassing the provision of individualised attention to each learner's unique needs and personal history, the cultivation of a conducive relationship, and the assumption of responsibility for establishing the conditions that facilitate the engagement with, comprehension of, and processing of the educational experience. Care does not diminish the challenge of encountering the new, nor does it take the place of the individual; conversely, it supports the conditions enabling the adult to take part in the learning situation and gradually recognise their own capacity to act within it (Boffo, 2006; 2011; Tronto, 1993; 2013). In the context of adult mobility, providing care entails the creation of an environment in which encounters with otherness do not result in disorientation. This is achieved by preparing, informing, accompanying and providing linguistic support to the individual without relieving them of the responsibility of going through the experience.

The provision of linguistic support to an adult abroad is not merely concerned with the enhancement of their communicative proficiency; it is also concerned with the facilitation of their understanding of the environment in which they find themselves and the enablement of their active participation. The process of communicating in a language which one has not yet fully mastered necessitates an openness to error, the ability to request clarification, the capacity to negotiate meanings, and the acceptance of a certain degree of communicative vulnerability. It is precisely at this stage that what initially appears to be a limitation can take on educational value when the participant realises that they are able to understand, communicate and be understood even in a situation that is not entirely under their control. Language thus becomes not merely a functional tool, but also a space in which the individual experiences their own capacity to relate to others of their own accord.

When the experience is sustained by such conditions, the subject has greater possibilities to recognise their own resources, take initiative, orientate themselves within the situation and participate with greater awareness. The capacity to act does not stem solely from an individual's disposition, but from the interplay between personal

resources, social conditions, available opportunities and one's perception of one's own effectiveness. (Bandura, 1997; Sen, 1999). In adult learning, this possibility is rooted in previous experience, concrete needs, motivations connected to real life and the integration of the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of learning (Knowles, 1980; Jarvis, 2004; Illeris, 2007). For this reason, competence is not reduced to performance, but concerns the capacity to mobilise personal and relational resources in meaningful situations. The pedagogically relevant passage is not only from not knowing to knowing, but from knowing to recognising oneself as capable of acting. Such recognition does not occur in isolation; rather, it is shaped through relationships and interaction with others. Mobility places the participant amongst a variety of interlocutors, practices and affiliations, through which otherness takes on not only an intercultural value but, as has been said, also a self-reflective value. Through engagement with different ways of communicating, learning and participating, the adult may understand differently their own position, points of reference and possibilities. From this standpoint, adult autonomy does not signify the absence of support; rather, it can evolve within relationships that render the experience viable, bolster personal initiative, and transform interactions with others into opportunities for acknowledgement and the cultivation of values.

When this encounter assumes a formative character, the process of constructing adult subjectivity also opens onto a civic dimension. Adult education cannot be reduced solely to employability or to the updating of functional skills, since it also concerns the possibility of participating, critically interpreting reality, recognising rights and responsibilities, inhabiting plural contexts and contributing to social life. Adult learning can thus be understood as a process that intertwines personal development, inclusion, social awareness and democratic participation (Milana, 2012; De Greef, Segers & Verté, 2010). In the case of KA1 mobility, this dimension is not taken as a directly verifiable outcome, but as a pedagogical horizon within which to question the relationship between transnationality, otherness and belonging to a wider social space. From this perspective, it is necessary to distinguish between a cultural and value-based citizenship, more immediately connected to openness to otherness, understanding of social diversity and knowledge of the European space, and explicit democratic participation, connected with more formalised practices of civic and political engagement. This distinction makes it possible to read the data without overloading them with meanings they cannot bear.

On this basis, the quantitative evidence will be interpreted not as direct proof of personal transformation, but as descriptive traces through which to question the relationship between mobility, educational accompaniment, capacity to act, relationship and social participation. The formation of the self is therefore assumed as the pedagogical key to the KA1 experience, insofar as it enables an understanding of how the adult subject may attribute meaning to mobility, recognise their own resources and situate themselves with greater awareness within broader social, cultural and educational contexts.

3. Adult Learners in KA1 mobility in Italy: initial evidence

3.1. Methodology

The empirical basis of this paper is founded on a re-analysis of aggregated secondary quantitative data relating to adult learners involved in individual or group mobility experiences in the adult education sector in Italy. The survey makes it possible to distinguish the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programming period, the RIA-AE Survey Round 2025-2026 and the period of the mobilities observed, 2021-2024, thereby specifying the temporal perimeter within which the analysis is situated.

Since the data have already been aggregated in percentage form, the analysis assumes a predominantly descriptive-interpretative nature and does not use statistical inference techniques. The aim is not to generalise

the outcomes beyond the available data, nor to measure causal effects relating to mobility, but rather to interpret the observed trends from an educational perspective, by linking participants' profiles, access conditions, support, perceived benefits and reported knowledge. The findings are therefore regarded as descriptive indicators of complex educational and training processes, rather than objective measures of personal transformation.

In relation to the research question, the formation of the self is considered neither as a directly measurable variable nor as a result that automatically derives from participation in mobility. It is interpreted as a key through which to analyse the convergence of multiple dimensions, such as access to the first Erasmus+ experience, the preparation received, language support, perceived benefits in terms of skills, self-confidence, independence and responsibility, and the declared knowledge relating to social diversity, the European space and the horizontal priorities of the programme. The most relevant indicators were selected on the basis of their relationship with adult subjectivity and with the educational conditions of mobility, and then reorganised into four interconnected analytical clusters. The first concerns the profile of participants; the second examines access to the first Erasmus+ experience and the forms of preparation, orientation and support that accompany participation; the third considers perceived benefits in terms of skills, confidence, independence, responsibility and personal planning; the fourth, finally, concerns the declared knowledge in relation to the horizontal priorities of the programme, with particular attention to social diversity, the European space and the civic dimension of mobility.

The distinction between individual mobility and group mobility is also considered as a descriptive criterion, rather than as a basis for comparison between statistically equivalent groups. These two modes outline different configurations of the KA1 experience and allow to observe how mobility may assume different forms in relation to personal exposure to the transnational context, the presence of the group and modes of accompaniment. The differences identified in the data must therefore not be interpreted as effects directly attributable to the mode of participation, but as descriptive elements to be assessed with caution.

Another methodological element to consider is the variability of the information sources, which are determined by the availability of valid cases for each indicator. As regards individual mobility, variability is limited, since the base fluctuates from N=1116 for gender to N=1088 for age, without significantly changing the overall scale of the observation. By contrast, for group mobility, gender is available for N=2023 participants, whereas other indicators, such as age, preparation, language support, perceived benefits and declared knowledge with respect to the horizontal priorities, are based on smaller samples, ranging from N=238 to N=262. This disparity requires caution in interpretation, since the group-mobility values represent the valid cases available for each indicator and do not automatically extend to the entire population of participants.

3.2. Participant profile in KA1 mobility

The first stage of the analysis focuses on the profile of the participants (Table 1). Variables relating to gender and age are not considered indicators of impact, but rather descriptive elements that help to understand who benefits from KA1 mobility and at what stage of the life cycle it takes place. The gender data show a female prevalence in both cases: 62% in individual mobility (N=1116 participants) and 64% in group mobility (N=2023). These data represent the composition of the population surveyed and do not allow inferences to be drawn about the declared benefits.

The age distribution makes it possible to move more directly towards the life-cycle perspective. With regard to individual mobility, which is calculated on a sample of N=1,088 participants, the 18–29 age group is the most prevalent, accounting for 59 per cent, followed by the 30–44, 45–59 and 60+ age groups, which account for 15 per cent, 14 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. Turning to group mobility, the distribution is more complex, based on a sample of N=238 participants. The age distribution of the group is as follows: 24 per cent of individuals

are in the 18–29 age group, 41 per cent are aged between 30 and 44, 17 per cent are aged between 45 and 59, and 18 per cent are in the 60+ age group. These two configurations indicate a possible complementarity: individual mobility mainly reaches young adults, whereas group mobility, limited to the valid cases available for age, shows a more substantial presence of adults in the central and later stages of life.

Table 1 - Participant profile in KA1 mobility.

Dimension	Information base	Selected data	Interpretative function
Gender, individual mobility	N=1116	Women 62%; Men 38%	Composition of the population reached
Gender, group mobility	N=2023	Women 64%; Men 35%; undefined 1%	Confirmation of female prevalence
Age, individual mobility	N=1088	18-29: 59%; 30-44: 15%; 45-59: 14%; 60+: 10%	Prevalence of young adults
Age, group mobility	N=238	18-29: 24%; 30-44: 41%; 45-59: 17%; 60+: 18%	Greater differentiation across the life course

Source: authors' elaboration, based on aggregate data from the second Survey Round of RIA-AE.

Note: N values vary according to the mode of mobility and the indicator, depending on the number of valid cases available for each question (see § 3.1).

These data allow us to view KA1 mobility in a long-term perspective. The participation of people from different age groups – and in particular of adults in the middle and later stages of group mobility – suggests that adult learners should not be regarded as a homogeneous category, nor should mobility be confined solely to the professional sphere. This interpretation is in line with studies on active ageing and the ageing society, building on the policy framework proposed by the World Health Organisation and pedagogical reflections on the need to support adults' life trajectories through educational and training processes capable of fostering autonomy, social relationships and social participation (WHO, 2002; 2015; Boffo et al., 2025).

From this perspective, KA1 mobility may be interpreted as part of a broader process of learning across the adult life course, in which the formative experience sustains not only the updating of knowledge and skills, but also the possibility of continuing to plan one's own existence within social and community contexts. While the inclusion of the 60+ age group does not imply a specific focus on older adults, it underscores the potential for the Erasmus+ experience to encompass adults across diverse stages of their lives and educational and social trajectories. This assertion serves to substantiate its relevance as a domain for engagement and acknowledgement throughout the entire spectrum of adult life.

3.3. Access to first mobility and accompaniment

The second segment of the analysis revolves around access to mobility and the conditions that facilitate the experience (Table 2). 79% of participants, out of a total of N=1116, state that this is their first experience with Erasmus+. This figure suggests that KA1 mobility can be regarded as a formative milestone, as, for the majority of participants, it represents their first entry into a European learning environment.

The educational value of this threshold emerges more clearly when placed in relation to support indicators. The vast majority of participants in both individual and group mobility programmes report receiving some form of

preparation, training, or information from the organisation. Notably, the proportion of individuals who receive such support is consistently high, with 93% of those in individual programmes and an overwhelming 100% of those involved in group programmes confirming this. Furthermore, 60% of participants (N=252) state that they received support to improve their language skills before or during their mobility placement. Although these data do not allow direct detection of difficulties or feelings of subjective disorientation, they suggest that entry into the pathway is sustained by organisational and educational systems that prepare, orientate and accompany the experience.

Table 2 - Access to first mobility and accompaniment.

Dimension	Information base	Selected data	Interpretative function
First Erasmus+ experience	N=1116	79%	Mobility as a formative threshold
Preparation, training or information received - individual mobility	N=1116	93%	Accompaniment of the individual experience
Preparation, training or information received - group mobility	N=262	100%	Accompaniment of the group experience
Language support before or during mobility	N=252	60%	Language as a condition for relationship and participation

Source: authors' elaboration based on aggregate data from the second Survey Round of RIA-AE.

Note: N values vary according to the indicator considered and correspond to the number of valid cases available for each question and for each mode of mobility.

The integration of preparation and language support is instrumental in enhancing accessibility, thereby equipping participants with the necessary tools to navigate, comprehend the context, communicate, and engage in training activities. This support functions as an educational component of mobility; while it does not supplant personal initiative, it renders access to the international context more structured and less dependent solely on individuals' ability to cope with uncertainty.

3.4. Perceived benefits and formative dimensions of KA1 mobility

The third part of the analysis concerns the benefits perceived by the participants (Table 3). The acquisition or improvement of useful practical skills is declared by 82% of participants in individual mobility and by 92% of those involved in group mobility. Such data suggests that, from the perspective of adult learners, KA1 mobility is associated with practical learning, which is recognised as useful and potentially transferable to various contexts in life. In addition to the skills dimension, indicators relating to increased self-confidence, independence and responsibility also proved significant. These were reported by 71% of participants in individual mobility programmes and 90% of those in group mobility programmes. Greater clarity regarding personal and professional goals was reported by 53% and 61% respectively. Although these data cannot confirm a direct link between mobility and personal transformation, they indicate a significant convergence of declared learning, self-recognition, and projectual orientation – a space where the shift from knowing how to do to feeling capable of doing can be descriptively identified.

Table 3 – Perceived benefits and formative dimensions of KA1 mobility.

Indicator	Individual mobility	Group mobility	Interpretative reading
Acquisition or improvement of useful practical skills	82%	92%	Concrete and transferable learning
Strengthening of self-confidence, independence and responsibility	71%	90%	Agency and self-recognition
Greater clarity regarding personal and professional objectives	53%	61%	Personal project-planning
Perceived improvement in employment opportunities	38%	31%	Employment-related outcome present but not dominant
Greater possibility of accessing further study pathways	30%	38%	Formative continuity

Source: Authors' elaboration based on aggregate data from the second Survey Round of RIA-AE.

Note: information base: individual mobility N=1116; group mobility N=262. For some indicators, multiple answers were possible; the percentages do not constitute exclusive distributions.

The resulting outcome alters a purely functionalist view of mobility. While benefits for the professional sphere and access to further study pathways are taken into account, these are less prominent than the indicators linked to skills, confidence, independence, responsibility and clarification of objectives. Mobility, therefore, is not reduced merely to an opportunity for professional development, but also includes subjective aspects of recognition and personal re-planning. However, it is important to recall that these are perceived benefits. The results obtained are a consequence of individual motivations, organisational mediations and relational contexts, and do not represent automatic effects of mobility itself.

3.5. Horizontal priorities and the civic dimension of KA1 mobility

The fourth nucleus of the analysis concerns participants' declared knowledge in relation to the horizontal priorities of the Erasmus+ programme (Table 4). Among the indicators surveyed, understanding of social diversity recorded the highest figures, at 72 per cent for individual mobility and 87 per cent for group mobility. Subsequent to these, the subjects of Europe, the European Union and European values were identified, with 58 per cent and 82 per cent respectively. Furthermore, the subjects of the fight against discrimination, intolerance, xenophobia and racism were identified, with 50 per cent and 60 per cent respectively. The remaining indicators, pertaining to sustainability, digital technologies and interest in elections and democratic processes, offer a more nuanced perspective.

Table 4 - Horizontal priorities and the civic dimension of KA1 mobility.

Indicator	Individual mobility	Group mobility	Interpretative reading
Understanding of social diversity	72%	87%	Intercultural openness
Knowledge of Europe, the European Union and European values	58%	82%	European awareness
Countering discrimination, intolerance, xenophobia and racism	50%	60%	Ethical-social sensitivity
Knowledge of environmental and climate sustainability	48%	53%	Socio-environmental responsibility
Useful use of digital technologies	43%	51%	Digital strengthening
Greater inclination to use digital technologies	39%	43%	Openness to digital learning
Change of habits towards sustainability	39%	43%	Orientation towards sustainability
Greater interest in elections and democratic processes	32%	32%	Explicit democratic participation less immediate

Source: authors' elaboration based on aggregate data from the second Survey Round of RIA-AE.

Note: information base: individual mobility N=1116; group mobility N=262. For some indicators, multiple answers were possible; the percentages do not constitute exclusive distributions.

The data shows that participants primarily associate KA1 mobility with intercultural and European dimensions, thereby broadening their relational and social horizons beyond mere operational skills. Understanding social diversity, knowledge of the European space and sensitivity towards issues such as discrimination, intolerance, xenophobia and racism outline an area of learning that concerns the relationship with otherness, shared values and coexistence in plural contexts.

However, these are declared forms of knowledge and orientations. The data do not reflect civic behaviour that is actually practised, nor do they allow for the verification of lasting changes in patterns of participation. In the case of KA1, the priority 'Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement' can be interpreted primarily as exposure to different educational contexts, encountering otherness, and the experience of belonging to a European learning space.

The finding regarding increased interest in elections and democratic processes – at 32 per cent in both categories – calls for a particularly cautious interpretation. Compared with intercultural and European indicators, formalised democratic participation is less immediately apparent from the available data. This does not diminish the educational significance of mobility, but it does indicate that the transition from stated knowledge to explicit democratic participation requires further conditions, time for reflection and supportive contexts.

3.6. Limitations of the analysis

The present study is grounded in aggregated quantitative data, precluding the reconstruction of participants' individual trajectories and the longitudinal tracking of learning processes triggered by mobility. The extant evidence thus permits the observation of trends, convergences and self-reported benefits; however, it does not allow for the verification of causal effects or the permanence of personal transformations.

A further limitation pertains to the self-reported nature of the indicators utilised. Dimensions such as self-confidence, independence, responsibility, intercultural openness and civic awareness are assessed through participants' own perceptions and accounts, rather than through direct observation or learning assessment tools. Consequently, they are not regarded as evidence of transformation; rather, they are considered descriptive indicators that can be utilised to explore the relationship between KA1 mobility, self-formation, the capacity for action and social participation from a pedagogical perspective.

4. Conclusions

The contribution provided an analysis of KA1 mobility of adult learners in Italy, based on the aggregate quantitative data produced during the second Survey Round within the RIA-AE Network. Overall, the data show a picture of mobility that crosses different adult age groups and cannot be attributed exclusively to the logic of professional updating. The presence of young adults, adults in the middle stages of life and participants aged 60 and over allows KA1 to be contextualised within a framework of lifelong learning – a reference that does not artificially broaden the scope of the analysis, but which reflects how the learning experience remains open to planning, relationships and recognition even in the middle and later stages of life.

For a significant proportion of the participants, the opening phase of the experience reinforces the view of KA1 mobility as a formative milestone. Access to a European learning space is not confined to mere movement across a transnational context; rather, it signifies entry into a learning environment which, for a considerable number of adults, may represent their inaugural opportunity to engage with divergent educational practices, relationships and frameworks. This threshold assumes educational and formative value when it is supported by mediations – such as preparation, information, language support and organisational accompaniment – which do not replace the subject's initiative, but contribute to creating the conditions through which it may be faced without generating disorientation or displacement. From this perspective, group mobility does not appear as a lesser form of autonomy. Instead, it is an experience capable of sustaining exposure to the new and of making the international experience more feasible for adults less accustomed to such transnational learning contexts.

While the acquisition of practical skills is undoubtedly a significant outcome, it does not fully capture the comprehensive formative significance of mobility. The experience is characterised by a declared strengthening of self-confidence, independence, responsibility and clarity regarding one's objectives. This allows for the interpretation of the experience as an opportunity for self-recognition and personal re-planning. In this convergence, the shift from 'knowing how to do' to 'feeling capable of doing' becomes apparent on a descriptive level – not as a directly measurable transformation, but as an interpretative indication of the adult's ability to navigate the contexts they encounter with greater awareness.

KA1 mobility also assumes a relational and civic dimension. An understanding of social diversity, knowledge of Europe and its values, and an awareness of discrimination and intolerance suggest that the experience can be linked to forms of intercultural openness and ethical and social awareness. However, this dimension does not immediately coincide with explicit democratic participation. The comparatively low level of interest in elections and democratic processes suggests a distinction should be made between a sense of citizenship based on culture and values – which can be more directly fostered through the experience of mobility – and explicit democratic

participation, which requires more time, further mediation and more complex contexts for educational re-engagement.

KA1 mobility of adult learners in Italy may therefore be interpreted as an educational and formative experience capable of bringing learning, accompaniment, self-recognition and participation into relation. Within the limits of the aggregated and self-reported data, the evidence analysed suggests that KA1 mobility for adult learners constitutes an educational and training experience in which adults can recognise their own capacity to learn, navigate new contexts, rethink their life path and participate in a broader social and European context, with greater competence, awareness and confidence in their own potential.

Notes

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Beyond the journey: Erasmus+ mobility as a catalyst for transformative learning

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Keywords

Transformative learning, Erasmus+ Mobility, Adult Education, Reflective practice, Organisational innovation.

Abstract

This contribution analyses transnational mobility within the Erasmus+ programme not as an unproblematic or automatically positive event, but as a contested pedagogical device operating within the structural reconfigurations of Adult Education (AE). Through an empirical investigation of the project ADU-RE: Resilience and Education for Adult Learners, developed under the Erasmus+ Accreditation framework, the article deconstructs the linear relationship between international displacement and professional transformation. Utilising a rigorous Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) applied to in-itinere reflective logbooks and ex-post semi-structured interviews, the study maps the cognitive resistance and “disorienting dilemmas” experienced by practitioners faced with alternative pedagogical models. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Mezirow and Schön, the findings demonstrate that professional identity reconfiguration is a strictly conditional outcome, heavily dependent on structured post-experience reflection and dedicated institutional infrastructures – such as Teaching & Learning Centres (TLC) – capable of overcoming bureaucratic inertia. The conclusions suggest a replicable matrix for the capitalisation of adult educators, shifting the focus of educational governance from a purely quantitative inflation of mobility flows to the sustainable, systemic capitalisation of qualitative learning outcomes across the European Education Area.

1. Introduction: mobility as an ecosystem for transformation and professional growth

In the contemporary landscape of Global Lifelong Learning, transnational mobility within the Erasmus+ programme represents a crucial, yet highly complex, object of pedagogical investigation. Far from being a mere logistical occurrence or an uncritical accumulation of international credits, mobility functions as a pedagogical device that intersects the structural reconfigurations of Adult Education (AE). In a socio-economic framework marked by “radical uncertainty” (UNESCO, 2021) and twin transitions – digital and green – the professional development of adult educators cannot be reduced to the acquisition of functional or technical skills (OECD, 2003).

Rather, it requires a profound interrogation of the professional agency and identity schemes of the practitioners involved.

However, within international literature, the relationship between European mobility and professional transformation remains a contested area.

As argued by Ioannou (2023), AE policies in Europe suffer from an implicit tension: on one side, they are driven by market-oriented rationales focused on human capital and competitiveness; on the other, they inherit a historical commitment to social justice and emancipation.

This systemic ambiguity directly affects practitioners, who often navigate non-formal educational settings as “self-made professionals” without standardised initial training.

Consequently, investigating international mobility requires avoiding a simplified, linear view of professional growth, shifting the focus toward the friction between institutional expectations and actual field practices.

From a theoretical standpoint, Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (1991, 2012) offers a foundational lens for analysing these dynamics, particularly through the construct of the *disorienting dilemma*. Uprooting a subject

from their habitual professional routines and cultural comfort zones can systematically expose them to cognitive and cultural discrepancies. Yet, current critique warns against a deterministic interpretation of this process.

The encounter with alterity and institutional displacement does not automatically yield critical reflexivity or perspective transformation. Instead, as empirical evidence suggests, it can trigger cognitive resistance, defensive mechanisms, or a regression toward consolidated prejudices when the subject lacks adequate elaborative resources.

To prevent the journey from deteriorating into a form of “educational tourism” or remaining an isolated, unintegrated episode, the activation of secondary reflective processes is methodologically necessary. According to Donald Schön’s paradigm of the *reflective practitioner* (1993), experience translates into learning only if the *reflection-in-action* is sustained by a structured *reflection-on-action* after the experience. In this light, professional transformation is a highly conditional outcome, heavily dependent on the presence of qualitative monitoring systems, collaborative debriefing, and intentional pedagogical guidance.

Furthermore, this analytical complexity must account for the multi-level impact of mobility, which spans from individual biographical dimensions (micro) to organisational cultures (meso). While literature often highlights how returning staff can transform institutions into *Learning Organisations* (Senge, 1990) through the hybridisation of practices, such systemic innovation is rarely frictionless.

Tensions between the innovative inputs brought by mobile staff and the bureaucratic inertia of home institutions are frequent. In this regard, recent perspectives on Higher Education and professional training emphasise that sustainable innovation requires solid institutional infrastructures, such as *Teaching & Learning Centres* (TLC), capable of systematising individual transformative outcomes into collective, non-formal learning practices (Fabbri & Romano, 2022).

Adopting a rigorously critical posture, this paper aims to deconstruct the uncritical, celebratory rhetoric often surrounding terms like “resilience”, “innovation”, and “European citizenship” within Erasmus+ frameworks.

By anchoring the theoretical contributions of Mezirow, Schön, and Senge to the empirical context of the ADU-RE project, the study addresses the methodological and epistemological conditions under which international mobility genuinely transforms into an engine for sustainable, non-formal educational practices.

2. The ADU-RE project: research design, methodological framework, and contextual variables

The analysis of the project *ADU-RE: Resilience and Education for Adult Learners*, promoted within the framework of the Erasmus+ Accreditation for Adult Education (AE), is approached in this study not as a mere reporting of institutional outcomes, but as a critical qualitative investigation into the epistemological and structural shifts underpinning lifelong learning policies. Historically, the AE sector has been impacted by fragmented governance and structural vulnerabilities that limit the long-term sustainability of training interventions (Federighi, 2019). In this scenario, the ADU-RE initiative was intentionally designed as a counter-strategy to disrupt consolidated, transmissive pedagogical routines by leveraging transnational mobility as a systematic reflective device.

To operationalise this investigation and address the need for a rigorous, non-linear research design, the study adopts an empirical approach based on narrative and assisted self-assessment. The target population consisted of education professionals and adult educators who participated in structured courses and Job Shadowing activities at European centres of excellence, specifically within Swedish and German co-learning ecosystems. Rather than assuming mobility as an unproblematic, automatically positive event, the research framework intentionally isolates the qualitative and contextual variables that facilitate – or hinder – the translation of individual experiences into systemic institutional changes.

The primary data collection architecture was structured around two qualitative tools designed to capture “knowledge-in-action” and subsequent perspective transitions (Schön, 1993):

In-itinere Reflective Logbooks: Maintained by participants during their international placement. Far from serving as mere descriptive diaries, these tools were utilised as formal devices for Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). Grounded in the pedagogical methodology highlighted by Dreyer (2015), the systematic practice of reflective journaling allowed practitioners to externalise their cognitive conflicts, transforming the immediate emotional impact of displacement into clear, documentable data on professional self-examination;

Ex-post Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted three months after the return, aimed at assessing the permanent integration of new perspectives within local work routines and identifying institutional resistances.

The corpus of qualitative data obtained from the logbooks and interview transcripts was subjected to an inductive and deductive *Qualitative Content Analysis* (QCA). This analytical process did not seek a linear verification of the project’s goals; instead, it aimed to map the specific semantic recurrences and coding categories that emerged from the field. The thematic coding process generated three primary axes of interpretation, corresponding to the systemic operational dimensions of the educational ecosystem:

The Individual Level (Micro-perspective): Centred on the coding category Identity Reconfiguration and Facilitation Stance. This axis maps how the encounter with alternative pedagogical models forces educators to question their prior assumptions regarding teacher-learner asymmetry, shifting their posture from “knowledge transmitters” to “process facilitators” (Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1993);

The Institutional Level (Meso-perspective): Centred on the coding category De-siloing and Community of Practice Formation. This axis captures the friction and alignment dynamics between the mobile staff returning with innovative digital or methodological insights and the bureaucratic routines of the home organisation (Senge, 1990);

The Systemic Level (Macro-perspective): Centred on the coding category Territorial Alignment and Quality Standards. This axis analyses the transferability mechanisms required to connect local grassroots practices with the strategic priorities of the European Education Area.

By contextualising the ADU-RE project within this multi-layered framework, the study avoids a prescriptive or celebratory evaluation. Instead, it problematises the qualitative variables that determine whether an international journey structures itself as a permanent evolutionary process or remains confined to an isolated instance of educational tourism.

3. Analysis methodology and results: towards an evidence-based qualitative impact assessment

Evaluating the impact produced by the ADU-RE project requires moving beyond a purely descriptive or linear verification of institutional outcomes. In the field of Adult Education (AE), learning outcomes are inherently linked to intangible and complex shifts, such as the transformation of interpretive lenses, the evolution of professional self-awareness, and the development of pedagogical resilience. Consequently, evaluating these dynamics purely through quantitative or performance-based metrics would result in a reductionist assessment. To provide a rigorous and replicable empirical foundation, the corpus of qualitative data gathered through the *In-itinere Reflective Logbooks* and the ex-post semi-structured interviews was subjected to a systematic *Qualitative Content Analysis* (QCA).

The analytical protocol followed an inductive-deductive category application. First, the texts were screened to isolate raw meaning units (semantic recurrences). These units were then clustered into sub-categories and finally mapped onto the three macro-dimensions (Micro, Meso, Macro) that define the educational ecosystem of the project.

To demonstrate how the empirical evidence supports the interpretative conclusions, Table 1 outlines the qualitative coding matrix, connecting each systemic level to its corresponding empirical indicators and operational outcomes.

Table 1 - Qualitative Coding Matrix and Empirical Evidence of Transformative Impact.

Dimension	Core Coding Category	Empirical Indicators (Logbooks & Interviews)	Operational Field Outcomes
Micro (Individual)	Identity Reconfiguration	• Friction and “disorienting dilemmas” • Re-coding of “error” as a resource • Rejection of transmissive teaching	• Shift from “transmitters” to “facilitators” • Adoption of student-centric models • Increased self-efficacy with vulnerable users
Meso (Organisational)	De-siloing and Communities	• Friction with institutional inertia • Need for cross-departmental sharing • Integration of international tools	• Formation of internal peer-learning groups • Optimisation of user intake protocols • Alignment with European quality standards
Macro (Systemic)	Territorial Alignment	• Focus on sustainability of results • Linking local actions to EU frameworks	• Codification of tacit knowledge • Higher capacity to attract hard-to-reach users • Connection to transnational networks

Source: author’s own elaboration.

3.1. Analysis of the empirical findings

The empirical architecture summarised in the matrix allows for a deep, non-linear interpretation of the results. At the *Micro-level*, the data extracted from the *In-itinere Reflective Logbooks* confirm that the encounter with alterity acts as a powerful pedagogical disruptor. The educators’ initial reaction to alternative, non-hierarchical learning environments was not one of immediate acceptance, but rather one of critical resistance (the *disorienting dilemma*). However, the systematic practice of reflective journaling, functioning as a structured device for *Work-Integrated Learning* (Dreyer, 2015), allowed participants to elaborate on this emotional and cognitive conflict. This process catalysed an epistemological shift: the concept of “error” was structurally re-coded from a negative performance indicator into an essential pedagogical resource for self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975). Upon return, this translated into concrete classroom modifications, with educators implementing active, non-formal dynamics that enhanced the engagement of vulnerable adult learners.

At the *Meso-level*, the semi-structured interviews conducted three months post-mobility shed light on the organisational dynamics of transferability. The data reveal that systemic innovation is an inherently contested process. Returning professionals frequently experienced a tension between the innovative methodologies they intended to introduce and the pre-existing bureaucratic routines of the home institution. To overcome this inertia, the project activated collaborative debriefing protocols that led to the formation of internal “communities of practice”. Within these spaces, returning staff shared digital and interactive tools, effectively breaking down

the departmental silos that traditionally fragment adult education centres. As a result, individual transformative experiences were codified and integrated into the institution's ordinary governance, directly impacting user orientation and curriculum design.

Finally, at the *Macro-level*, the evidence demonstrates that when international mobility is supported by a rigorous reflective methodology, it ceases to be perceived as an isolated episode of educational tourism. The analysis indicates a significant correlation between structured post-experience reflection and the long-term sustainability of the project's outcomes. By translating the "tacit knowledge" acquired during mobility into clear institutional assets, the *ADU-RE* project provided a standardisable framework for professionalising adult educators. This structural improvement ultimately strengthens the institution's capacity to engage "hard-to-reach" learners and aligns local grassroots practices with the macro-systemic quality standards established by the European Education Area.

4. Conclusions and transferability perspectives: mobility as a systemic lever

The analytical scrutiny of the *ADU-RE* project allows for broader epistemological and political conclusions regarding the function of transnational mobility within the current architecture of Adult Education (AE) in Europe. The authentic value of the Erasmus+ programme does not reside in the automated production of professional growth. Instead, as demonstrated by the empirical findings, it depends heavily on the institutional capacity to transform individual, localised experiences into a collective, metabolic asset through pedagogical osmosis. Moving "beyond the journey" requires analysing mobility not as an isolated biographical event, but as a circular, reflective process capable of challenging and restructuring deep-seated professional epistemologies.

The fieldwork offers a crucial methodological insight: the transferability and scalability of learning outcomes are never spontaneous or deterministic byproducts of spending time abroad. On the contrary, sustainability is a strictly conditional outcome. It requires an intentional, rigorous research-intervention design that positions reflexivity at the absolute core of both the *in-itinere* and post-experience phases (Schön, 1993). The success of the *ADU-RE* framework lies precisely in its structural management of the "crisis" triggered by the encounter with alterity. Rather than allowing the *disorienting dilemma* (Mezirow, 1991) to induce defensive cognitive closures or professional alienation, the implementation of systematic debriefing and collaborative reflective tools - such as the *In-itinere* reflective logbooks grounded in work-integrated learning models (Dreyer, 2015) - transformed this friction into a generative resource for the entire learning community.

In this light, recent research on higher education and staff development indicates that individual transformative outcomes become structurally sustainable only when backed by dedicated institutional infrastructures. Just as *Teaching & Learning Centres* (TLC) function within academic networks to translate individual pedagogical innovations into shared, faculty-wide competences (Fabbri et al., 2022), adult education providers must establish internal reflective frameworks to internalise the outcomes of European mobility. Without these organisational pillars, the strategic hybridisation of practices risks being neutralised by bureaucratic routine or administrative inertia (Senge, 1990).

Consequently, the transferability perspectives identified in this study suggest that this multi-level reflective model can be successfully exported to alternative regional and national training systems. It offers a standardisable and quality-assured response to the urgent need for the professionalisation of adult educators (Federighi, 2019). In an era dictated by complex environmental and technological transitions, pedagogical resilience must be stripped of its celebratory rhetoric and treated as an objective, measurable capability. This capability allows institutions to navigate pervasive digitalisation and social vulnerability, transforming systemic external pressures into concrete opportunities for localised educational cohesion.

Looking toward the future, transnational mobility within the Erasmus+ framework must be reaffirmed as a highly strategic tool for the co-construction of an active, critical, and non-rhetorical European citizenship. Overcoming physical borders between member states serves a deeper pedagogical function: it acts as a precursor to dismantling the mental boundaries, ethnocentric assumptions, and rigid professional routines that historically fragment the AE sector.

The critical trajectory outlined by the *ADU-RE* project establishes a clear priority for the next decade. The fundamental challenge for educational governance is no longer a simple, quantitative inflation of mobility flows. Rather, the objective must shift toward guaranteeing that the “islands of innovation” generated by individual mobile practitioners can structurally federate into a sustainable “systemic archipelago”. Transformative learning must cease to be an elite exception tied to sporadic international experiences. Instead, it must become the institutional and methodological norm of lifelong learning policies, anchoring the professional growth of adult educators to a deeply conscious, shared European educational space.

Notes

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Beyond language boundaries: an Italy–Spain comparative Erasmus+ study on L2 assessment and certification for adult migrants

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Keywords

Adult education, Language assessment, Migrant integration, Affective filter, Erasmus+ job shadowing.

Abstract

This comparative study analyses the assessment procedures of L2 language certifications for adult migrants, which act as high-stakes legal prerequisites for civic integration. Through an Erasmus+ mobility comparing the CPIA system in the Italian region of Lazio and the Spanish Andalusian model (provided by EOIs), a systemic dichotomy emerges. Spain guarantees formal equity through standardised testing. Conversely, Italy presents territorial fragmentation but leverages andragogical flexibility and institutional proximity, which are crucial for lowering the migrants' "affective filter" and reducing performance anxiety. The research advocates for an integrated European assessment model that merges Spanish measurement rigour with the Italian learner-centred approach. Balancing evaluation transparency with the mitigation of psychological vulnerabilities is essential to transform language testing from a bureaucratic obstacle into an equitable pathway for active citizenship.

1. Introduction

Teaching a second language (L2) to adult learners with a migrant background represents one of the most complex challenges for European educational systems today. Indeed, linguistic-communicative competence has progressively taken on a role that goes far beyond the mere relational and subsistence dimension, becoming a true legal "border": achieving specific levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020) constitutes an unavoidable regulatory requirement for obtaining a residence permit and citizenship in various Member States. In this scenario, Adult Education is called upon to perform a crucial and delicate task, operating with a user base often characterised by social vulnerabilities, past traumas, and heterogeneous educational needs.

To analyse how language policies and transnational mobility can impact daily educational practices, this paper takes the context of the South Pontino area (Lazio, Italy) as a privileged vantage point. Specifically, the research focuses on the Provincial Centre for Adult Education (*Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti*, CPIA) 10 of Formia, which currently operates over a vast interprovincial area including the learning centres of Formia, Minturno, Terracina, and Fondi. According to the Report (De Gironimo, 2020) relating to the school year in which the Erasmus+ project under study was launched, the socio-economic context of reference features a very high incidence of foreign citizens. Mostly from South Asia and North Africa, the learners are predominantly employed in the agricultural sector and the tourism-tertiary industry. To cope with such a diverse student body, which in the 2019/2020 school year approached one thousand individuals, the CPIA 10 adopted a flexible educational structure: teaching abandons the rigidity of traditional classes to be organised into level groups, teaching periods, and individualised "learning agreements" (*patti formativi*), aimed at validating prior informal and non-formal learning.

In order to respond to this complex multicultural challenge, the institution undertook its first Erasmus+ KA1 project (2019-1-IT02-KA104-061881), entitled *Competences for the CPIA*, aimed at staff training and the exchange of good practices within a European context. The implementation of the project collided with the COVID-19 emergency; hindered by global health restrictions, the teachers had to postpone the physical mobility, resorting, between March and April 2021, to an online course on the concepts of Interculturalism and Global Citizenship Education, delivered by the European Territorial Centre (Calabria region). This virtual phase proved strategically useful, supplying the CPIA with the international contacts necessary to organise subsequent on-site visits.

Thanks to this network, the physical job shadowing mobility in Spain finally materialised in the autumn of 2021. In Estepona (Andalusia), the Italian delegation explored an entire ecosystem dedicated to adult education, interfacing with the IES Mar de Alborán, the CEPA Los Reales, and the Official Language School (*Escuela Oficial de Idiomas*, EOI). It was precisely the direct observation of Andalusian practices that triggered a reflective process on the procedures used in Italy for language certifications. The gap between the rigorous standardisation of the Spanish system and the marked organisational flexibility of the Italian Prefecture tests generated a clear desire to investigate the phenomenon, later elaborated academically by the research of Rizzo (2022).

Methodologically, this qualitative comparative case study draws on empirical data gathered during the Erasmus+ mobility at the EOI of Estepona. Data collection involved analysing certification exams (*Pruebas Específicas de Certificación*) and evaluation rubrics, integrated with unstructured interviews with Spanish examiners. Concurrently, a documentary cross-analysis examined national policy frameworks: the Andalusian *Guía de las personas candidatas* (Junta de Andalucía, 2025) versus the Italian ministerial *Vademecum* (MIUR, 2010) and decentralised Prefecture guidelines. Data were thematically coded into three categories: procedural standardisation, formal equity and the impact of the testing environment on the learners' "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982). Relying on this framework, the following sections demonstrate how transnational exchanges can actively transform organisational cultures, contributing to a fairer and interconnected European Education Area (European Commission, 2019).

2. Language certification as a threshold function in inclusion pathways

Over the last two decades, language testing policy has shifted from an educational diagnostic tool to a high-stakes mechanism of migration control (Shohamy, 2001). Originally conceived as a descriptive tool to harmonise the teaching and assessment of language skills at the European level, the CEFR itself has undergone a functional metamorphosis, progressively assuming a selective and normative value. International literature also highlights the ethical implications of this paradigm, questioning the fairness of subjecting vulnerable adult migrants to standardised high-stakes testing without accounting for their social and emotional fragilities (McNamara, Knoch, & Fan, 2019). Consequently, scholars emphasise that assessment for migrants must balance psychometric validity with social justice, warning against the uncritical use of CEFR levels for immigration purposes (Deygers, Zeidler, Vilcu & Carlsen, 2018). Governing this crucial transition, the Association of Language Testers in Europe defines the rigorous ethical and qualitative standards for high-stakes language testing (ALTE, 2016). Through these protocols, achieving specific proficiency levels (particularly A2 and B1) now serves as a prerequisite for the civic and political integration of third-country nationals.

This paradigm shift institutionalises language assessment, transforming L2 teachers and institutions in charge of Adult Education (such as CPIAs in Italy and EOIs in Spain) into gatekeepers and guarantors of civil rights (Novello, 2009). A comparative analysis of the Italian and Spanish regulatory contexts (Rizzo, 2022) presents the picture of two nations that, despite sharing the same European roots, adopt different assessment architectures.

In Italy, the legislature has structured a step-by-step integration pathway, wherein language proficiency takes on increasing weight. Starting with the Consolidated Immigration Act (*Testo Unico sull'Immigrazione*, Legislative Decree 286/1998) and, subsequently, with Presidential Decree 179/2011, the State introduced the Integration Agreement (*Accordo di Integrazione*), a pact stipulated between the migrant and the institutions, based on a rigid credit system where the acquisition of Italian language certification plays a leading role in preventing point deduction and residence permit revocation. More specifically, as established by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) in 2010, the June 4 Decree binds the issuance of the EU long-term residence permit to the passing of an A2-level language test, the management and administration of which are delegated at the provincial level precisely to the internal commissions of the CPIAs.

Subsequently, Law 132/2018 (known as the “Security Decree”) raised the bar for legal integration, making the possession of a formal B1-level certification mandatory for the granting of Italian citizenship. Unlike the A2 test, this assessment is not entrusted to the CPIAs, but is the exclusive prerogative of the university certifying bodies gathered in the CLIQ2 consortium (established in 2012 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, MAECI). Thus, a “dual-track” system takes shape in the Italian context, alternating between provincial school management and academic consortium management; a setup that sector literature criticises for its fragmentation in guaranteeing a fair and uniform threshold of linguistic integration across the entire national territory (Deiana, 2021; Rocca & Scerra, 2019).

In a mirroring but procedurally more cohesive manner, the Spanish legal system subordinates regularisation processes (the so-called *arraigo*) and the acquisition of nationality to the passing of rigorous linguistic-cultural proficiency exams governed by strong institutional centralisation. To obtain citizenship, Spanish legislation requires passing the *Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera* (DELE) exam at the A2 level or higher. Unlike the fragmented Italian mosaic, the DELE is delivered globally by a single major institution, the Instituto Cervantes (2020), guaranteeing a strict standardisation. This language diploma must be accompanied by the passing of the Constitutional and Socio-Cultural Knowledge of Spain test (*Conocimientos Constitucionales y Socioculturales de España*, CCSE), aimed at certifying the assimilation of Spanish civic values.

Parallel to this global certification architecture, a crucial educational and assessment role at the territorial level is played by the EOIs. These state public institutions are not limited to providing courses, but they issue the *Pruebas Específicas de Certificación* (PEC): high-profile official language certifications, standardised at the regional level and preparatory for academic and professional integration. This outlines a governance model that, as will be seen in the following section, contrasts with the fragmented flexibility of the Italian system.

3. The Andalusian ecosystem and the assessment paradigm

The job shadowing at the EOI of Estepona (October 20–22, 2021) revealed a dichotomy in the governance of language testing, which can be summarised by “centralisation versus fragmentation”. This divergence is not merely an administrative detail, but it directly impacts the treatment of learners and the validity of the evaluation. The two systems strike a different balance between procedural standardisation and institutional proximity, affecting both comparability and learner experience.

In the Spanish context, adult learner assessment adheres to institutional centralisation, as evidenced by the *Guía de las personas candidatas* (Junta de Andalucía, 2025³). The PECs are not developed autonomously by individual schools; rather, they are designed centrally by the *Dirección General de Ordenación y Evaluación Educativa*. The Andalusian policy outlines a standardised architecture

(which also includes the evaluation of “Mediation”, in line with the CEFR Companion Volume). Tests are administered simultaneously, on the same day and time, across all EOIs within the Autonomous Community. To ensure objectivity, oral exams require the presence of two examiners (an interviewer and a silent co-assessor equipped with strict observation rubrics, or *hojas de observación*), while written exams undergo double-blind grading.

Conversely, the architecture of the Italian Prefecture Tests (used for A2 level proficiency) rests on territorial fragmentation. An analysis of the regulatory framework, specifically the Decree of June 4 (Ministry of the Interior & MIUR, 2010), confirms the bureaucratic nature of the system. While the digital convocation process is regulated via the Prefectures, the regulatory framework delegates the physical drafting of the test, the administration criteria, and the final assessment to the discretion of individual CPIA commissions. These commissions, composed of teachers appointed by the School Principal, are responsible for designing and preparing the exam materials. Although the ministerial *Vademecum* provides national guidelines –such as an 80% passing threshold and a weighted distribution across listening (30%), reading (35%), and written interaction (35%) (MIUR, 2010) – operational implementation is at the provincial level. Provinces may issue local informational documents, such as the guidelines drafted by the Prefecture of Latina (2024), which evidence a decentralised workflow. As noted in literature, delegating test design to individual CPIAs creates operational variations across territories (Deiana, 2021), potentially causing difficulty levels to fluctuate geographically. Consequently, a migrant’s probability of success may depend on the province where the exam is taken. Thus, while the Andalusian centralised model ensures regional uniformity, the Italian decentralised setup introduces localised adaptations that, while flexible, present inherent challenges for national assessment standardisation.

This dynamic replicates itself on an international scale when analysing the Spanish language certifications. As highlighted by Rizzo (2022), the Spanish system reiterates its centralisation by relying on the standardised certifications (DELE and SIELE) provided by the *Instituto Cervantes*: a single institutional pivot offering a cohesive framework that is uniformly valid worldwide.

By contrast, while the multifaceted offerings of the Italian CLIQ consortium allow adult migrants to choose exams suited to their cognitive styles, they accentuate assessment differences. Certifying bodies like CELI and CILS (issued by the Universities for Foreigners of Perugia and Siena, respectively), despite CEFR alignment, present different syllabi, durations, item types, and grading weights. They even diverge on the rules of “skill capitalisation” (the ability to retain passing scores): for instance, while CILS allows candidates to save successful modules (corresponding to specific language skills) and retake only the failed ones, CELI generally requires the entire macro-section (written or oral) to be repeated if a single skill is not passed.

4. The affective filter: reflections from bidirectional job shadowing

The KA1 job shadowing mobility experience in Estepona did not solely represent a moment of educational observation, but rather acted as a genuine trigger for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) within the teaching staff involved. A critical review of the systemic divergences between Italy and Spain demands, at this point, a deep pedagogical reflection on the emotional factors of learning. Data gathered from the job shadowing and interviews with EOI instructors suggest that highly standardised, simultaneous testing environments may inadvertently increase performance anxiety among vulnerable migrants. As observed, while the centralised Andalusian model is notable for its assessment rigour and formal equity, placing it within the complex reality of Adult Education reveals a critical issue regarding the emotional and psychological factors of learning. Subjecting learners – often carrying past traumas, characterised by low levels of schooling, or marked by severe socio-economic vulnerability – to a state exam perceived as hyper-structured risks drastically raising their “affective filter” (Krashen, 1982). This

performance anxiety can inhibit the real communicative skills acquired by the individual, precluding their access to civil rights and European citizenship. However, field observations indicate that the Italian approach leverages institutional proximity to mitigate learner vulnerability, serving as an andragogical facilitator (Knowles, 1975).

In Italy, this assessment-related tension is evident in the CPIAs, where the user base is effectively divided into two categories. On one hand, internal learners benefit from a bond of trust with the teacher, which mitigates performance anxiety. These learners regularly attend literacy courses to achieve the A2 level – a binding requirement for obtaining the EU long-term residence permit – and the final exam represents the culmination of an inclusive educational journey. On the other hand, external candidates approach the institution just for the Prefecture Test. This second category, whose digital booking process is managed by administrative intermediaries such as CAFs (Tax Assistance Centres) or welfare institutes (*patronati*), is disproportionately affected. It is precisely for these external users, placed into an unfamiliar exam setting experienced as a mere bureaucratic formality, that the “affective filter” may rise to critical levels, compromising the validity of the linguistic measurement.

At this critical juncture, the Italian CPIA system, despite its procedural fragmentation, reveals a pedagogical strength: its relational flexibility. The andragogical and reassuring environment of the CPIA – where the learner often knows the examiners, operates in classrooms structured for small level-based groups – acts as an emotional facilitator (Knowles, 1975). This learner-centredness in the assessment and educational process was widely recognised by the Andalusian colleagues during their return mobility to Italy (April 2022). In terms of transferability, this pedagogical osmosis suggests the thoughtful integration of Andalusia’s elements of formal guarantee (such as objective assessment rubrics and double-blind grading) within the traditional Italian framework of inclusion. This combination confirms that effective evaluation must necessarily balance measurement rigour with careful attention to the cognitive and affective processes of the learner (Serragiotto, 2016).

5. Conclusions

The transnational mobility experience of CPIA 10 of Formia demonstrates how an Erasmus+ project can transcend the boundaries of methodological updating for teachers to transform into a policy-relevant comparative European framework. By comparing the Andalusian educational ecosystem with the Italian territorial reality, this study decoded a crucial nexus: the assessment framework of L2 language certifications is no longer perceived as simple certificates of proficiency, but high-stakes legal “borders” for accessing citizenship rights (Council of Europe, 2020). A dichotomy emerges between the two operational paradigms, which are seemingly antithetical but actually complementary. The Andalusian model guarantees a procedural uniformity and formal equity that the Italian decentralisation struggles to maintain. However, the institutional proximity and flexibility of the CPIAs serve as andragogical resources (Knowles, 1975) for protecting the emotional stability of migrants and lowering their “affective filter”. This mitigates the risk that the rigour of highly standardised exams might exacerbate performance anxiety and translate into an insurmountable barrier.

The ultimate value of this transnational exchange does not lie in the uncritical adoption of a foreign model, but rather in the construction of a virtuous assessment synthesis. The challenge for relevant institutions is to integrate Andalusia’s standardised assessment protocols within the learner-centred and relational framework that characterises the Italian approach. Only by guaranteeing assessment transparency across the national territory while protecting the psychological vulnerabilities of the migrant learner can educational systems be considered truly equitable. In this perspective, the Erasmus+ experience has acted as a catalyst for academic research and classroom innovation, confirming that a genuine European Education Area (European Commission, 2019) takes shape precisely where institutional rigour meets human inclusion, transforming language from a bureaucratic obstacle into an equitable pathway for civic integration and active citizenship.

Notes

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² Quality Italian Language Certification, issuing the CELI, CILS, PLIDA, and CERT.IT exams.

³ The 2025 Andalusian guidelines are used as the most up-to-date regulatory reference.

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From the Canary Islands to Finland: a comparative perspective on adult learner well-being through Erasmus+

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Keywords

Adult education, Learner well-being, Student dropout, Assessment stress

Abstract

This article examines the transformative impact of the Erasmus+ KA122-ADU project “New Horizons”, carried out by EOI Siete Palmas (Canary Islands). Addressing the challenges of early school leaving and assessment-related stress in formal adult language education, a job shadowing mobility was conducted at Liberal Adult Education centres in Helsinki, Finland. Using a methodology based on reflective practice (Schön, 1983) and systematic observation tools, the Spanish state certification model was contrasted with the Finnish approach, which prioritises well-being, active citizenship, and pressure-free learning. The results demonstrated that integrating “micro-changes” in the classroom and prioritising intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) significantly improved the learning ecosystem. Far from being a purely individual experience, the mobility fostered transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) at an institutional level. This has resulted in a comprehensive revision of syllabi, the dissemination of best practices among the teaching staff, and the establishment of a permanent European cooperation network.

1. Introduction: from the southwest to the northeast of Europe

The Official School of Languages (EOI) Siete Palmas, located on the island of Gran Canaria, is a vibrant yet complex educational centre. Our students are not traditional students; they are adults who arrive in our classrooms carrying the backpack of their daily responsibilities. The reality we observe day by day is that of individuals who balance language learning with demanding workdays and family responsibilities.

This life burden generates an evident phenomenon: emotional exhaustion and stress. Learning, which should be a space for growth, sometimes becomes just another “obligation”, which puts the mental health and motivation of our students at risk. To this complex balance between work and family life is added an academic factor that frequently acts as a potent stressor.

Specifically, EOI students face a dense and constant evaluation structure that demands mastery of five distinct skills: comprehension of written and oral texts, production and co-production of written and oral texts, and mediation. The repetition of these exhaustive tests at multiple times during the course, added to the final exams and the demanding certification tests that follow national standards, generates a perception of “continuous examination”. This load not only exhausts the adult student’s available time but often displaces the pleasure of learning towards an evaluative tension that becomes a psychological barrier, contributing to burnout and, ultimately, to school dropout. In fact, there are students who attend class and do not show up for any exam because they do not want to relive the stress they felt when they were in compulsory education. Following the principles of Knowles’ andragogy (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005), adult learning should tend to be self-directed and focused on real-life problems, something that current evaluative stress blocks.

Closely related to this emotional exhaustion and stress, we face a challenge shared by many adult education centres in Europe: a progressive decrease in enrolment and a dropout rate that calls for reflection. We identified that the traditional model of language teaching is no longer sufficient to retain an exhausted student body. The challenge is evident: we needed to modernise our methodology and transform the classroom into a sanctuary

of well-being, not an additional source of anxiety. With this diagnosis, from this ultra-peripheral south of Europe, we set our course towards the north. We chose Finland as a destination for observation (Job Shadowing) -specifically the Helsingin työväenopisto (Helsinki Adult Education Centre)- not only for its educational prestige but for its holistic approach to well-being. Our main objective was to observe what responses were offered for stress reduction and the creation of positive learning environments. The educational offer of that centre is a mosaic of diversity that includes everything from arts and crafts to computing, physical exercise, and current affairs lectures.

Unlike the rigid structure of the Official Schools of Languages, the Finnish model bets on a non-formal and highly flexible teaching. The curriculum is not a static dogma, but a living organism that constantly adapts to the interest of the students and the social demand of the moment. In operational terms, this flexibility translates into an offer of semester courses with a light teaching load (one weekly session of a maximum of two hours), ideal for the profile of the adult who seeks to learn without the pressure of a suffocating academic calendar.

Accessibility is another of its strongholds: fees are generally cheaper than those of the Spanish EOIs, thanks to the fact that the system is heavily subsidised by the City of Helsinki, prioritising the right to learning over economic profit. The continuity of the groups is subject to a democratic and direct success metric: attendance and satisfaction. A course must maintain a minimum of 10 people to be renewed, and the evaluation questionnaires at the end of the semester are decisive. This system generates a natural incentive for the teacher to create a positive and dynamic learning environment, where the student's well-being is the guarantee of the continuity of the teaching project.

2. Methodology: a systematised gaze upon the classroom

In order for the observation in Finland to be truly fruitful, we designed a methodological roadmap based on cooperation and data systematisation. The process began months before the trip through close coordination with the person in charge at the host centre, Tuula Wright, whose collaboration was fundamental in aligning our expectations with the reality of the Finnish system. As a result of this prior dialogue, we made adjustments to our initial schedule, adapting it both before departure and during the stay itself, which allowed us to reorient ourselves towards the practices that were most relevant to the context of EOI Siete Palmas. The primary tool for observation was an assessment table (see ANNEX) specifically designed for this project. We were not just looking to watch, but to measure and analyse. This instrument allowed us to record critical variables in a structured way, such as the *learning ecosystem*, by analysing the atmosphere and classroom layout; we quantified *motivational dynamics* by recording active procedures and the degree of student involvement; and we broke down *methodological aspects*, with special emphasis on the balance between inductive and deductive approaches, the promotion of creativity, and the constructive treatment of errors. Finally, the table allowed us to rate the *integration of ICT*, ensuring that the use of technological means was optimal and functional for the proposed pedagogical objectives.

Data systematically collected through the assessment tables reveal an educational ecosystem where student motivation is consistently high and intrinsic, linked to personal and social enjoyment rather than the pursuit of certifications. The classroom atmosphere is recurrently described as a "psychological refuge" and "pleasant", supported by a participatory and flexible methodology that prioritises functional communication and creativity over the rigidity of a static curriculum. A fundamental finding is the absence of evaluative tension, characterised by non-punitive error treatment, the total absence of homework, and the elimination of pressure from official exams, which serves to protect the learner's emotional state. Finally, the use of ICT is integrated in a functional and simplified manner, always remaining subordinate to maintaining a relaxed and secure learning environment.

This data collection was not an isolated process; it was enriched by strategic meetings at the beginning and end of the stay with Tuula Wright, as well as sessions with the visited teachers, depending on their hourly availability. This exchange of impressions at the end of each day allowed us to validate our observations and delve into the “why” of their practices, transforming mere observation into a reflective professional dialogue.

3. Similarities and differences: a comparative analysis of the systems

After the observation days in Helsinki, the analysis of the collected data revealed an educational reality where similarities act as a common base that gives meaning to the comparative analysis, while differences provide us with information to achieve the transformation we seek.

3.1. Similarities: Shared Challenges

Despite the geographical distance and cultural differences, the comparative analysis revealed that EOI Siete Palmas and Helsingin työväenopisto operate on very similar pedagogical foundations. These coincidences not only validate our current practices but also facilitate the transfer of strategies between both systems.

In both contexts, language teaching has ceased to be a watertight compartment. Especially at basic levels, we observed a natural integration of essential skills such as digital literacy, media education, and study techniques. The language thus becomes the vehicle to develop global competence, preparing the adult learner for the challenges of today's society.

Furthermore, the organisation of the educational offer follows very close patterns. Both systems commit to the coexistence of face-to-face courses and hybrid models – in our case, blended or completely online – seeking to adapt to the complex agenda of the adult student.

We share a critical administrative reality: although attendance is voluntary, the continuity of the groups is directly linked to the number of active students, which makes retention a strategic priority for both institutions. The profile of the student who comes to our classrooms is quite similar. We find groups characterised by high heterogeneity, with enormous diversity in terms of age, prior training, and personal goals. Although in the Finnish context we observed a greater presence of retirees, the pedagogical challenge remains the same: managing diversity within the same session. To address this complexity, both systems focus on two fundamental aspects:

Fostering autonomy: we encourage students to engage in self-reflection and to take responsibility for their own learning trajectory.

Social and practical dimension: there is a conscious effort to create a pleasant social atmosphere in the classroom, shifting the weight from theory towards practical and functional communication that is useful and motivating for the student.

3.2. Differences

While the pedagogical bases are shared, the greatest gap between both systems lies in the ultimate purpose of teaching and the management of academic pressure. It is in these differences where we find the keys to the Finnish “well-being model” that motivated our mobility.

The most important difference is observed in the main objective of the training. While in our context the curriculum is strongly marked by grammar and vocabulary, in the Helsinki centres the classes act as a vehicle to explore citizenship, critical thinking, personal well-being, and Finnish culture. The language is not just the end, but the means for personal enrichment.

Another fundamental difference relates to the administrative structure of both the courses and regarding evaluation and promotion.

- Grading vs. Attendance: unlike our assessment tests with progress evaluation and achievement evaluation (both through objective tests) along with certification tests, in the centres we visited there are no official level certificates. Students receive a diploma of attendance or completion issued by the centre itself, radically eliminating anxiety over linguistic certification.
- Evaluation and error: practical use and enjoyment are prioritised over the systematic correction of errors. In fact, there is no formal evaluation of comprehension or learning, which radically transforms the classroom ecosystem.
- Time management and homework: sessions are organised in 45-minute blocks (computing as one hour of teaching dedication), under a clear philosophy: no stress, no pressure, and no homework.

This regulatory framework leads to a much more relaxed methodology centred on personal enjoyment. According to Sahlberg (2015), Finnish success is based on “teaching less to learn more” and replacing accountability with trust in the educational process. In the adult education centres we visited in Helsinki, we observed these particularities:

Intrinsic motivation: students do not seek a qualification for their CV but are moved by a hobby, cultural interest, or social need. This generates a deeply collaborative classroom environment. Use of Materials and ICT: The use of textbooks is reserved mainly for the highest levels, and the use of ICT is fully subordinate to facilitating this relaxed and practical atmosphere.

This comparison allowed us to understand that Finnish success does not necessarily reside in “what” is taught, but in “how” the emotional state of the learner is protected. While in our context the evaluative structure can become a barrier, in Helsinki the architecture of the system is designed so that learning is a refuge from daily stress.

4. Impact: from individual experience to transformation

The mobility carried out under the “New Horizons” project has provided us with a privileged perspective on the philosophy and professional dynamics of adult education centres in Helsinki. Far from being a mere individual observation trip, this experience has crystallised into several fundamental learning outcomes that are already impacting the day-to-day life of our institution.

The first major impact has been the expansion of our theoretical and cultural framework. We have deepened our knowledge of the Finnish model of adult learning and its pedagogy, but we have also reinforced our European identity. The stay allowed us to reflect on the European Union and shared European values, understanding adult education as a pillar for active and democratic citizenship. Another of the most significant achievements has been the development of our critical reflection. As Donald Schön (1983) maintains, the ability to reflect on one’s own practice is essential for teacher development; in our case, the exercise of comparing Finnish structures with our own internal organisation allowed us to identify areas for improvement that previously went unnoticed.

- Systematised analysis: the use of the assessment table and structured note-taking were key tools for analysing pedagogical similarities and differences objectively.
- Post-observation dialogue: the professional conversations held after the classroom sessions were fundamental to validating our impressions and delving into the “why” behind each strategy.

The mobility has had a positive impact on our intercultural awareness. The interviews held with the Finnish teaching staff not only improved our professional dialogue skills in a foreign language but also enriched mutual understanding and allowed us to appreciate different ways of understanding the teacher-student relationship. Finally, upon returning to EOI Siete Palmas, this knowledge has not remained stagnant. Following Mezirow’s

theory of Transformative Learning (1997), the participating teachers have immediately incorporated the philosophy of well-being as a driver for learning improvement. We are aware that, in the short term, there are structural limitations to modifying the official evaluation system; however, we have validated that well-being does not depend solely on the regulations, but on daily practice.

At the classroom level, we are implementing systematic micro-actions aimed at mitigating student evaluative anxiety. These interventions reflect the key principles of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

First, a more purposeful structuring of learning time through the scaffolding of tasks and flexible pacing, enhances adult learners' sense of autonomy over their own progress.

Outside the classroom, this flexible pacing is operationalised by replacing rigid deadlines with multi-day submission windows, allowing adult learners to balance their academic workload with professional and personal commitments. Within this framework, out-of-class activities are framed as optional yet highly recommended pathways for sequencing and consolidating learning, rather than punitive requirements, supported by a policy that openly embraces late submissions without academic penalty.

In tandem with these administrative adjustments, in-class practices are driven by flexible, differentiated task designs. For instance, when assessing mediation competence through text comprehension, students are granted the autonomy to choose their preferred mode of production: submitting a written text, recording a voice message, or delivering an oral explanation to their peers. Similarly, listening comprehension is facilitated through the use of QR codes, enabling students to engage with audio materials individually and fill out an information grid at their own pace without the requirement of completing the entire matrix. Additionally, reading comprehension is organised as a self-paced, multi-text circuit where each student reads a different short text individually, moves to a central area to pair up with the next available peer to orally exchange summaries, and iteratively repeats the cycle with a new text as many times as their reading speed allows. Collectively, these comprehensive practices shift the instructional focus from rigid compliance to adaptable, student-centred learning flows, effectively reducing evaluative pressure while reinforcing autonomy.

These micro-actions implement self-paced formative assessment (Chandran & Hashim, 2021), allowing students to direct their progress according to their own learning rates. This fosters autonomy in mixed-ability classrooms by shifting from rigid requirements to student-centred learning flows.

Second, a constructive treatment of errors directly bolsters adult learners' perception of competence; by reframing mistakes as formative development indicators rather than punitive failures, we reduce the stress associated with academic vulnerability. In practice, this is implemented through three interconnected strategies. We use an anonymous error pool where common linguistic deviations from student productions are analysed collectively. Class observations revealed a significant reduction in evaluative anxiety through this practice, as students frequently feel secure enough to openly claim authorship of the discussed mistakes, transforming the error into a shared learning asset.

Feedback on written compositions eschews traditional numeric grading in favour of formative error coding and analytic indicators (e.g., categorising grammar and spelling across qualitative descriptors from 'excellent' to 'needs improvement'). Students are then granted the opportunity to rewrite and resubmit their work based on these scaffolding prompts.

Out-of-class essays are compiled chronologically in a personal learning journal. Over the course of the academic year, this cumulative portfolio serves as a tangible, physical record of their progress, shifting the focus from immediate perfection to visible, long-term linguistic evolution.

Finally, fostering a social climate of mutual support satisfies the fundamental need for relatedness. Qualitative data gathered through our observation matrix confirms that these micro-changes structurally alter the learning

ecosystem, demonstrating that it is possible to transform the classroom into a secure learning environment – a psychological refuge – even within highly demanding, certified systems.

Beyond the implementation of these micro-changes at the classroom level, the mobility has fostered broader institutional actions, including:

Institutional dissemination: the results have been formally shared in department meetings and with the teaching staff, fostering a necessary debate on the flexibilization of our didactic and classroom planning.

International networking: we have consolidated a permanent institutional contact network with the host centre in Helsinki. This strategic networking ensures that the door to future cooperation, joint projects, and new exchanges remains open, strengthening our vocation as a European centre.

In conclusion, this project has demonstrated that by observing “new horizons”, we not only learn about other systems but also gain the clarity necessary to transform our own, always prioritising the well-being and integral growth of our students.

5. Final reflection

Based on this comparative analysis, we propose the following lines of action for the future of adult education in our context:

- Flexibility of the offer: explore the creation of monographic “language for leisure” courses or short-term workshops that do not depend on final certification, emulating the success of Finnish leisure courses.
- Integration of digital and media competence: not as a separate subject, but as the natural vehicle for learning, as observed in the basic levels in Helsinki.
- Prioritisation of mental health: include the emotional well-being of the students as an observable item in the quality of our didactic planning. This approach aligns with the findings of Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019), which demonstrate that enjoyment and anxiety are independent emotional dimensions; therefore, pedagogical planning must proactively foster enjoyment rather than simply aiming to reduce stress.

Ultimately, the success of our institution will not be measured solely by the number of certificates issued, but by its capacity to retain motivated students who see the school as a space for personal growth and not an additional source of anxiety. The trip to Finland has taught us that looking towards the educational “North” does not imply the literal replication of policy frameworks; rather, it underscores the necessity of prioritising human well-being as a foundational element of educational practice.

In short, “New Horizons” has proven to be a transformative process. We have learned that while we cannot change the national certification structure, we do have the power to cultivate classrooms that function as supportive and low-anxiety learning spaces. By integrating well-being as a transversal axis, the institution not only addresses student retention and motivation but also aligns itself with a more inclusive, humane, and standardised European adult education framework.

Notes

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Appendix A

Table 1 - Assessment table.

ASSESSMENT TABLE	LEVEL:		
	DATE:	TIME:	
TEACHER:			
DESCRIPTION	SKILLS:		
	DURATION:	GROUPING:	
STUDENT MOTIVATION	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
ACTIVE PROCEDURES TO FOSTER MOTIVATION			
CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE			
Observations:			
METHODOLOGY	OPTIMAL	ACCEPTABLE	COULD BE IMPROVED
PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY			
DEDUCTIVE/INDUCTIVE METHODOLOGY			
PROMOTION OF ORAL/WRITTEN EXPRESSION			
PROMOTION OF CREATIVITY:			
TREATMENT OF ERROR:			
Observations:			
NEW TECHNOLOGIES	OPTIMAL	ACCEPTABLE	COULD BE IMPROVED
RESOURCES USED:			
UTILISATION:			
Observations:			
EVALUATION	OPTIMAL	ACCEPTABLE	COULD BE IMPROVED
Observations:			

Bridging formal and non-formal adult language education: Erasmus+ job shadowing at VHS Frankfurt within RIA-AE

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Keywords

Adult education, Erasmus+ mobility, Generative AI, Language learning, Sustainability.

Abstract

This article presents a qualitative exploratory case report based on an Erasmus+ job shadowing experience carried out at the Volkshochschule Frankfurt am Main, Germany, from 20 to 24 April 2026. The mobility was undertaken by the Head of the German Department at the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas de Castelló, Spain, and is analysed within the RIA-AE framework as a reflective process linking observation, pedagogical innovation, and potential institutional action in adult education.

The study examines selected practices observed in a German non-formal adult education context and considers their relevance for a formal public language education institution in Spain. Attention is paid to European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, especially multilingual competence, digital competence, literacy, civic participation, and sustainability. Data were collected through classroom observations, professional discussions, review of teaching and institutional materials, and reflective field notes. The findings suggest that guided use of generative AI, literacy-oriented methodologies, authentic oral interaction, and visible eco-social measures may offer useful insights for adult language education. However, the article does not advocate the direct transfer of the German model to the Spanish context. Rather, it argues that such practices can inform contextual adaptation, professional development, and reflection at EOI de Castelló. Given the short duration of the visit and the single-case design, the conclusions are exploratory.

1. Introduction and contextualisation: a transnational comparative perspective

Assessing the impact of Erasmus+ mobility in adult education requires attention not only to individual professional development, but also to the institutional, regulatory, and pedagogical contexts in which observed practices take place. Educational institutions do not operate in isolation; their teaching models, forms of organisation, assessment procedures, and capacity for innovation are shaped by national and regional frameworks. From this perspective, short-term job shadowing experiences can offer opportunities for comparative reflection, particularly when they bring different adult education traditions into dialogue within a shared European policy space.

This case report examines an Erasmus+ job shadowing experience carried out at the Volkshochschule Frankfurt am Main, Germany, from 20 to 24 April 2026. The sending institution was the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas de Castelló, Spain. The visit is analysed as a qualitative exploratory case study within the RIA-AE framework, used to identify observed practices, interpret their relevance, and consider transferability to the home institution.

The comparison between the Spanish Escuela Oficial de Idiomas model and the German Volkshochschule model is relevant because both institutions contribute to adult language education, although from different structural positions. The Spanish EOI network represents a formal public system of specialised language education. It is regulated by national and regional legislation that aligns official certification with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) and defines curricula, school management, and enrolment procedures. EOIs therefore operate within a standardised framework in which certification, curriculum planning, and assessment play a central role.

In recent years, the Valencian EOI system has undergone organisational changes, including the integration of online language provision into the physical school network and the adjustment of access and management procedures in response to student demand and public resource allocation (Generalitat Valenciana, 2025, 2026). These reforms have created challenges and opportunities for EOI de Castelló, which must ensure quality, accessibility, and pedagogical coherence while adapting to new conditions.

By contrast, the German Department at the VHS Frankfurt operates within a non-formal, decentralised adult education model closely linked to integration policy. Under the supervision of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the VHS provides integration courses that combine language learning with civic orientation (Bundesamt für Migration & Flüchtlinge, 2025). These courses are not primarily designed as academic certification pathways, but as instruments for social participation, linguistic inclusion, and civic integration. This orientation influences classroom priorities, learner profiles, teaching materials, and the relationship between language education and everyday life.

The case is located within current debates in adult education. Job shadowing can be understood as situated professional learning that enables educators to observe practices in context, compare institutional cultures, and reinterpret their own teaching environment. Adult learning theories emphasise autonomy, experiential learning, relevance to real-life needs, and the social dimension of learning. In addition, the emerging use of generative artificial intelligence in language education raises questions about learner autonomy, digital inclusion, feedback, literacy, and ethical guidance, especially for adult learners with uneven digital or linguistic profiles (European Commission, 2020).

Against this background, the article explores how selected practices observed at the VHS Frankfurt may inform reflection and potential innovation at EOI de Castelló. Rather than proposing direct transfer from one system to another, the study examines which elements may be adaptable, under what conditions, and with what limitations. The analysis focuses on digital and literacy competences, multilingual and oral interaction, departmental organisation, and institutional sustainability and inclusion.

2. Methodological approach and empirical data

This article is based on a qualitative exploratory case study derived from an Erasmus+ job shadowing mobility carried out at the VHS Frankfurt from 20 to 24 April 2026. The aim was not to produce generalisable findings, but to document, interpret, and critically reflect on selected practices observed in context. The study therefore adopts a descriptive and interpretative perspective.

The RIA-AE framework (RIA-AE Network, 2024) was used to connect three dimensions: the identification of pedagogical and organisational practices observed at the host institution; the analysis of their relevance in relation to adult learning, inclusion, digital competence, and institutional sustainability; and the consideration of their potential transferability to EOI de Castelló. Transferability is understood here as contextual adaptation rather than direct replication.

Data were collected during five days of fieldwork. Data were collected from four sources: classroom observations, professional discussions with staff, document review, and reflective field notes. Classroom observations focused on teaching strategies, learner interaction, materials, digital tools, classroom management, and literacy development. Particular attention was paid to oral communication, vocabulary acquisition, basic literacy, digital support, and the use of generative AI in adult language learning contexts. These observations were recorded in a daily field journal containing descriptive notes and preliminary analytical reflections.

Professional discussions with members of the German Department and administrative staff provided contextual information about course organisation, enrolment procedures, teacher coordination, learner profiles, and

institutional constraints. These exchanges were semi-structured professional conversations rather than formal recorded interviews. Document review included worksheets, learning plans, classroom resources, online materials, and institutional information related to integration courses (Volkshochschule Frankfurt am Main, 2025). These documents helped clarify links between language learning, civic participation, and everyday needs. Finally, the author's reflective field notes were used to interpret the observed practices from the perspective of a teacher and Head of Department in the formal public language education system of the Valencian Community. This positionality is relevant because the study compares two adult education models: the formal and certification-oriented EOI system in Spain and the non-formal, integration-oriented VHS model in Germany. The author's institutional position is acknowledged as a possible source of interpretation bias.

The analysis followed a thematic procedure. After the mobility, the field notes, professional discussions, and reviewed materials were organised around categories linked to the European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning and the RIA-AE framework. The main categories were digital and literacy competences, multilingual and oral interaction, departmental organisation, and institutional sustainability and inclusion.

The observations also showed that the VHS Frankfurt operates within a structured BAMF integration course system, with language instruction up to B1 level and civic orientation. Access to courses is linked to eligibility procedures established by the German migration and integration policy. By contrast, EOI de Castelló operates within a formal public language education system, with academic-year courses, official levels, assessment procedures, and certification requirements. This shows that observed differences are not merely pedagogical, but also legal, institutional, and social.

3. Key findings: transformative processes and competence frameworks

The analysis of the fieldwork was organised around selected areas connected to the European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (Council of the European Union, 2018). These areas were treated as interrelated dimensions of adult language education. The findings are presented as situated observations rather than generalisable conclusions.

3.1. Digital, Literacy and Citizenship competences: generative AI for social inclusion and learner autonomy

One relevant observation concerned the way digital tools were integrated into literacy-oriented language learning. In the classes observed, technology was not treated merely as an additional resource, but as a means of supporting learners in dealing with communicative and civic tasks. This was significant in groups where learners experienced difficulties with written texts, administrative communication, or basic literacy.

In some classroom situations, teachers introduced Microsoft Copilot as a guided tool to support comprehension and language production. The use of generative AI was scaffolded by the teacher and linked to everyday linguistic needs. Learners practised basic grammatical structures, transformed them into simple prompts, and used the tool to help interpret complex administrative texts, such as official letters from local authorities. In this context, digital competence was connected to literacy, social participation, and learner autonomy.

This suggests that generative AI may offer relevant possibilities for adult language education when carefully mediated by teachers. Rather than replacing pedagogical guidance, the tool appeared to function as support for understanding authentic texts and developing confidence in written communication. From the perspective of the RIA-AE framework, this practice may be interpreted as an example of innovation emerging from practical classroom needs. However, since learner progress was not measured, these findings should be understood as indicative insights rather than evidence of proven effectiveness.

3.2. Multilingual competence: course typology, lexical urgency and oral interaction

The observations revealed differences in language acquisition conditions between the VHS Frankfurt and EOI de Castelló. One important aspect was the organisation of integration courses according to learners' literacy profiles, including courses for literate adults, functional literacy groups, and courses aimed at learners requiring alphabetisation support. This structure made it possible to adapt teaching strategies and materials to different literacy profiles.

In literacy-oriented groups, teachers used tactile, visual, and kinaesthetic resources to support sentence structure and word order. For example, learners manipulated physical word cards or blocks to construct sentences and visualise syntactic relationships. These practices appeared useful for learners who needed concrete and accessible forms of support when approaching written language.

Vocabulary acquisition was another central element. In the VHS context, many learners needed German for immediate everyday purposes, including communication with institutions, access to services, employment-related situations, and social interaction. As a result, vocabulary work was often connected to urgent communicative needs. The multilingual composition of the classroom also had a pedagogical effect: since many learners did not share a common language other than German, the target language often became the main medium of communication. This contrasts with the situation at EOI de Castelló, where learners frequently share Catalan or Spanish. Although the contexts differ, the VHS model offers useful points of reflection on how to increase authentic oral interaction and strengthen target-language use.

3.3. Entrepreneurship and departmental management: autonomy, course materials and external standardised testing

The organisational model of the German Department at the VHS Frankfurt differs substantially from the departmental structure of Spanish public language schools. The VHS operates within a decentralised adult education framework, and instructors work as freelance professionals. This arrangement appears to provide teachers with considerable pedagogical autonomy, although it may also create challenges in relation to coordination and shared departmental planning.

Quality assurance is supported through common external references. The use of approved course materials contributes to curricular coherence across the integration programme, while external standardised examinations provide a common assessment target. For EOI de Castelló, this model cannot be transferred directly, since the school operates within a statutory public framework with regulated curricula, formal assessment procedures, and established coordination mechanisms. Nevertheless, the observation of the VHS model may encourage reflection on teacher autonomy, shared materials, flexible course organisation, and common quality standards.

3.4. Institutional sustainability and structural inclusion: a holistic eco-social approach

The field observations extended beyond classroom methodology to include institutional practices related to sustainability, accessibility, and social inclusion. These aspects are relevant because adult education institutions communicate values not only through curricula, but also through the organisation and everyday use of physical spaces. At the VHS Frankfurt, several visible practices reflected an eco-social institutional culture. These included water-saving measures, filtered water dispensers, incentives for reusable cups, and other measures designed to reduce unnecessary resource consumption. Sustainability also appeared as a recurring topic in teaching materials and in the civic orientation component of integration courses.

Social inclusion was visible in the organisation of the building and its services. Accessibility measures, clear signage, and inclusive practices contributed to an environment in which institutional care was made visible. One

example was the presence of signs welcoming assistance dogs. Another observation concerned the canteen, which operated as a social enterprise employing staff with diverse neurological and functional profiles.

EOI de Castelló already has several sustainability-related features, including solar panels, recycling bins, and other elements aimed at promoting energy efficiency. However, the comparison with the VHS Frankfurt suggests that further low-cost measures could be considered, such as clearer institutional signage related to accessibility, explicit references to assistance animals in internal regulations, and awareness-raising actions concerning water use and everyday sustainability.

4. Transferability, action plan and limitations

The observations made during the mobility do not imply that the VHS model can or should be directly replicated at EOI de Castelló. The two institutions operate within different educational traditions, legal frameworks, and learner contexts. Nevertheless, several practices observed in Frankfurt may inform possible lines of action if adapted carefully to the Valencian EOI framework.

The first possible line of action concerns AI-supported language learning building on current European approaches to digital transformation in education (European Commission, 2020). Subject to institutional approval, EOI de Castelló could develop a short pilot module focused on “AI Literacy for Daily Life” within basic-level courses, particularly in Spanish and Valencian as foreign language tracks. Learners could practise simple prompts to understand authentic texts such as local notices, utility bills, or administrative messages. A second possible line of action relates to internal professional development. The school could organise a seminar focused on literacy-oriented strategies, vocabulary work, oral interaction, the pedagogical use of AI, and the challenges of adapting practices from non-formal to formal adult education contexts. A third possible line of action concerns institutional sustainability and inclusion, including multilingual eco-tips, clearer accessibility signage, and explicit provisions regarding assistance animals where appropriate.

These proposals should be understood as starting points for reflection rather than fixed implementation plans. Their feasibility depends on institutional priorities, available resources, legal requirements, and the needs of adult learners at EOI de Castelló. From the perspective of the RIA-AE framework, their value lies in the possibility of transforming observation into context-sensitive institutional learning.

This study has limitations. First, the fieldwork was limited to a five-day visit, which does not allow longitudinal analysis of institutional processes or learner outcomes. Second, the study focuses on a single host institution and therefore its findings cannot be generalised to all Volkshochschulen or adult education systems. Third, the data were collected through qualitative methods and do not include quantitative learner data, formal assessment results, or systematic measurements of pedagogical impact. In particular, the observed use of generative AI was not evaluated through pre- and post-tests, learner surveys, or longitudinal tracking. Consequently, no definitive claims can be made regarding its effect on language development, learner autonomy, or digital competence.

A further limitation concerns the author’s positionality. The interpretation of the observed practices is shaped by the author’s professional background as a teacher and Head of Department within a formal public language education system. Finally, the structural differences between the Spanish and German systems must be considered. The EOI and VHS models differ in terms of legal regulation, funding, learner profiles, institutional mission, and assessment requirements. For this reason, the practices observed during the mobility cannot be directly transferred without careful contextual adaptation.

5. Conclusions

This qualitative exploratory case study has examined an Erasmus+ job shadowing experience at the Volkshochschule Frankfurt am Main as an opportunity for professional reflection, institutional comparison, and pedagogical learning in adult language education. By bringing into dialogue the Spanish formal public language education model represented by EOI de Castelló and the German non-formal integration-oriented VHS model, the study has highlighted structural differences and areas of shared educational concern.

The analysis suggests that Erasmus+ mobility may serve as a valuable framework for observing situated practices and identifying possible lines of innovation in adult education, consistent with the objectives of the Erasmus+ programme (European Commission, 2021). However, the findings should not be understood as evidence of direct transferability between the two systems. The EOI and VHS models operate within different legal, administrative, financial, and pedagogical frameworks. Consequently, the practices observed in Frankfurt require careful interpretation and contextual adaptation before they can inform institutional action at EOI de Castelló.

Within the RIA-AE framework, the mobility experience can be understood as a process linking observation, reflection, and potential institutional development. The practices observed at the VHS Frankfurt, particularly those related to literacy support, multilingual interaction, guided use of digital tools and institutional sustainability, provided reference points for considering how adult language education institutions may respond to contemporary challenges such as learner autonomy, digital inclusion, civic participation, accessibility, and sustainability.

The observed practices suggest that tools such as Microsoft Copilot may support adult learners in engaging with authentic texts, administrative communication, and personalised language practice when appropriately guided by teachers. Nevertheless, given the limited scope of the study, these observations should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive. Further research would be necessary to assess the long-term pedagogical impact of such tools on learner autonomy, language development, and digital competence.

The case also points to the educational value of literacy-oriented methodologies, real-life vocabulary work, and authentic oral interaction. While the sociolinguistic context of EOI de Castelló differs from that of the VHS Frankfurt, these observations may inform future pedagogical reflection on how to increase target-language use and connect classroom activities more explicitly with adult learners' communicative needs.

From an institutional perspective, the study suggests that sustainability and inclusion can be understood not only as curricular topics, but also as visible elements of school culture and daily organisation. The eco-social practices observed at the VHS Frankfurt offer useful examples of how educational institutions may promote accessibility, environmental awareness, and social responsibility through small-scale, practical measures.

Overall, this case report suggests that transnational professional mobility can contribute to institutional learning when accompanied by structured reflection and sensitivity to context. The Erasmus+ job shadowing experience at the VHS Frankfurt did not provide a model to be replicated directly, but rather a set of situated practices that may inform pedagogical discussion, professional development, and future pilot actions at EOI de Castelló. In this sense, the study supports an understanding of transferability as a reflective process of adaptation.

Notes

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"Tu duca, tu signore, tu maestro": an abductive competence model for E+ trainings on sustainability

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Keywords

Erasmus+ mobilities, EU youth policy, Youth worker, Adult training, Rural activator.

Abstract

Erasmus+ has deeply impacted European lives, yet assessing its effectiveness is an arduous task, particularly in the adult education field: learning impact depends inherently on the actual competences targeted by the training, and in turn on the actual learner's job. When the latter is missing, as in lifelong learning, impact assessment shifts from being complex to being indeterminate. This paper disentangles the problem in two steps: first, using the example of the "Socratic evolution" of youth work in the EU, it contrasts it with the adult field, illustrating how complexity is tackled by inductive and deductive paradigms. Then, it proposes an abductive, situated model derived from the experience of the E+ Pilgrimage to Sustainability KA153-YOU mobility. Drawing on Dante's tripartite characterisation of Virgil – Duca, Signore, Maestro – the model is a manageable tool for designing and evaluating transformative mobilities in youth. In the second step, it tentatively applies the same model to the domain of adult education. Drawing from the experience of the E+ Architecto-Nemata KA210-ADU training focusing on the figure of the Rural Activator, it suggests that the 3 dimensions can be of use to trainers and evaluators alike even when we're dealing with a lower level of institutionalisation, where "job" and "job design" are constructs of more difficult operationalisation and indeterminacy is lurking.

1. Introduction

Asked to identify just one element of the European project which impacted lives across the continent, most EU citizens will point to Erasmus+. Today, E+ operates throughout the entire fabric of EU society: schools, universities, vocational education, and, more recently, adults of all ages and backgrounds. The popular Erasmus Programme (without a +) originated in the youth field², so looking at the original domain of Youth may help to address the challenges of the younger field of adult education (pun intended). The longevity of Youth Mobilities (sic) saw EU institutions engage in decades of institutionalising efforts, with many layers of policies, regulations, and assessment techniques – particularly around the Youth Worker. By looking at this particular domain, we can effectively tackle the challenges of impact assessment in Adult Education, where constructs such as "job", "job design", and "performance" are more elusive.

This paper offers a novel perspective to training design and assessment drawn from the realm of youth work and applicable to the adult field. Its theoretical and methodological reflections stem from the experience of an E+ KA153 youth-worker mobility completed in 2026 and called Pilgrimage to Sustainability, and are currently being tested in an ongoing E+ KA210-ADU training called Architecto-Nemata.

In the first paragraph, the paper reviews an important political and epistemological shift occurred in Youth in the last decades and draws a comparison with adult learning, suggesting that the adult field has undergone the same evolution occurred in the youth field while lacking the latter's frame of reference represented by the actual job of the Youth Worker. As a consequence, assessment turned from complex to potentially indeterminate. The paper illustrates then how this "Socratic shift" has engendered inductive and abductive approaches to youth worker skills and competences; then, by drawing from both a theoretical elaboration as well as from Dante's Divine Comedy,

it presents an abductive model based on 3 orthogonal dimensions: Relational (Leader), Contextual (Lord) and Knowledge (Master). In conclusion, the model is applied to the training design within the adult training for Rural Activators currently being implemented in the Architecto-Nemata project.

2. From Konrad Lorentz to Socrates: the evolution of the youth worker in EU policy

Looking at the youth field to address impact assessment in adult education may seem paradoxical; yet, the contradiction is only apparent: decades of EU institutional activity around youth produced an impressive level of formalisation (policies, regulations, conventions, methodologies, techniques) in a domain where learning is mostly non-formal, turning evaluation in a rather complex endeavour, based on plenty of multi-dimensional inputs – a situation that is a good source of inspiration to tackle the (significantly fuzzier) task of adult impact assessment, where the focus on “transformational” competences (Mezirow, 2000) such as “learning to be” generates a similar complexity. Filled to the brim with transformative or aspirational performance dimensions, youth work helps us understand assessment complexity in lifelong learning, and, maybe, give us some insight in the problem of indeterminacy caused by learners who are not, on average, holding predefined jobs or organisational positions. Indeed, this is the central thesis of the present paper.

Over the decades, policy and pedagogical goals in Youth increased in complexity, evolving from a narrow, vocational, socialisation to a holistic, “Socratic” guidance of the young citizens. At its outset, EU Youth goals had a clearly functional orientation: providing young people (and youth worker professionals) with the “knowledge, skills and competences” necessary for the labour market³. Over time, the goal morphed into a more ambitious vision: since young people face complex transitions such as the one from dependency to autonomy, Europe should help the young become “architects of their own lives” and contributors to social change⁴ – a drift from a Lorentzian imprinting (Lorenz, 1970) to a full-spectrum Socratic education (Plato, ca. 380 BCE/2002), from focusing on specific labour market outcomes to affecting social, political, and personal self-realisation.

This drift obviously affected the role of the youth worker, which went from a simple “Informational Relay” (facilitating the upward and downward exchange of information between institutions and youth) to a complex, multi-dimensional, professional “Socratic Task” – a mediating role translating lofty, aspirational goals into actual training performance dimensions. By 2015⁵, the youth worker had become a creator of “spaces” and “bridges” for young people – a role that evokes the figure of Virgil in the Divine Comedy, someone to look up to for guidance through the uncertainties of life: “per quello Dio che tu non conoscesti / acciò ch’io fugga questo male e peggio / che tu mi meni là dov’or dicesti”⁶. Time brought about further expansions: human rights, pluralism, and inclusion⁷, turning youth work into a space for “self-analysis, reflection, and emotional development” (Basarab & O’Donovan, 2020).

From a design and evaluation perspective, the leap from Lorentzian imprinting to the Socratic model is huge. Indeed, youth workers today manage a vast array of dimensions: Administrative, Educational, Social, Inspirational. At these professional coordinates, the “Virgil analogy” operates in full: we just need to read the 2nd Canto of Inferno to uncover youth work dynamics in Middle Age Europe: lost in the dark forest, Dante meets Virgil who promises to lead him in a mobility across the dire straits of Hell, to which Dante replies:

*“Tu m’hai con disiderio il cor disposto
sì al venir con le parole tue,
ch’i’ son tornato nel primo proposto.
Or va, ch’un sol volere è d’ambedue:
tu duca, tu signore e tu maestro”⁸.
(Dante, Inferno II)*

At this juncture, adult learning does not look much different since comparable "Socratic" goals apply, as defined by the EU Commission in 2001: "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective⁹". The crucial difference lies in whether a mediating figure (the youth worker) is present or absent from the learning environment – a job whose task (and therefore performance dimensions, pedagogic goals, and assessment tools) is to enact the aspirational goals of guiding Europeans across the "dark forest of life". In Youth, job design vectors provide a key resource in the challenging task of (designing and) assessing training. In Adult education, the lack of a comparable *terra ferma* becomes a potential source of indeterminacy: the black hole of assessment. A good example of the dire straits of assessment can be found at the opposite extreme, that of ageing education (Boffo, 2022): in such an existential, philosophical and deeply metaphysical territory, to keep ourselves attached to the ground we are obliged to recur to labour market metaphors, "thinking ageing [in terms of] *competences* to life and of life...[of] stories lived and narrated [as a] *medium of exchange* to keep belonging to the world" (Boffo, 2022, p. 9). It is obviously left to the reader to ask herself if this is a path she wants to take – as trainers and evaluators, however, we are called upon to provide solutions to the assessment problem; and clearly, as the "extreme" case of ageing suggests, the current predicament stems from a single cause: the implosion of the world of work and the progressive disappearance of the job and the labour market as the primary, crucial, connection anchoring training to assessment. Paraphrasing Archimedes of Syracuse, we could say: "Give me a job to relate the training to, and I will be able to assess the Earth" – indeed, give me *anything* resembling a performance construct to be able to come up with ways to assess impact.

Bringing the Youth field to bear on the debate presents a clear benefit: it helps us to see clearly in which direction we can find clues and resources for the daunting task of assessing impact in lifelong learning. "Aspirational policies and pedagogies" notwithstanding, evaluating the effectiveness of training for youth workers is doable because the context provides us with specific skills and competences to be developed by training in order to increase the performance of the youth worker *profession*. True, the task is all but straightforward: the landscape of youth work competences is so densely populated by diverse policy references, methodologies, and epistemological positions that it mirrors Jorge Luis Borges' *The Aleph*: a single point from which an entire, dizzying universe is visible. Yet, complexity can be navigated and – as any chess player knows well – it is definitely more approachable than indeterminacy.

Lifelong learning presents instead elements of indeterminacy which turn it into a rather tough assessment cookie. A couple of examples may illustrate the conundrum.

Donald Schön's concept of *reflection-on-action* (1983; 1987) is a perfect example of impact assessment within a potentially indeterminate set of learning outcomes: the professional reflects on the results of her own actions to evaluate what happened, why it happened and how to improve in the future – yet, a key element that is missing from our standpoint of (baffled) external impact assessors is *the agent herself!* In other words, within the context of Schön's reflective practice, assessment is doable because and insofar it takes place within the very learning subject – a condition we generally don't have in the impact assessment of EU mobilities (or do we? More on this below).

Similar observations about Mezirow's *Transformative Learning* (2000): as long as the critical inquiry occurs *within the learner*, assessment is a non-issue and, just like with Schön, a third party can operationalise it as "improvement in the professional practice" (again, note the centrality of *labour market constructs*, often missing in lifelong learning). In other words, the *vertigo* of impact assessment in adult learning is caused by at least two concurrent factors: the lack of "anchors to the ground" (such as job performance or professional proficiency) on the one hand; on the other, the soaring high of the learning environment towards the indeterminate skies of

"a pedagogical, ethical and political depth, reaffirming the value of training as a right, as care of oneself and of others, and as possibility of individual and collective transformation" (Boffo & Formenti, 2025, p. 6).

Let us leave it at that, for now; and let's go back to a context where both factors are present: youth worker mobilities.

3. Skills and competences as the starting point for evaluating mobilities: the youth worker example

Youth worker skills are a good example of managing complexity without falling into indeterminacy; a broad review of the Competence landscape categorises models as either *deductive* or *inductive*.

In the *deductive approach*, high-level policy goals "cascade" them into practical HR frameworks (job descriptions, performance dimensions), then into pedagogical goals and finally into evaluation tools. As an example, the *Council of Europe's Youth Work Portfolio* (2015) categorises competences emphasising the non-formal dimension bridging policy and practice through the concept of the *Function* (essentially, performance constructs). In the 2025 issue, it includes *Core Functions*, *Individual Functions* and *Collective Functions* defining 11 sub-functions, 44 competences and 144 (one-hundred-forty-four!) distinct triplets of *Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes* (KSA). While this deductive method offers a meticulous translation of policy into "practical" items, it creates vertigo for practitioners, managers, and above all evaluators. The chess metaphor is still valid though: it may be Herculean, yet the evaluation task can in theory be taken to its end: by picking, one by one or in groups, the specific competences the evaluator can devise ways to measure before-and-after the training.

At the opposite side of the spectrum, *inductive approaches* work "from the ground up", generating empirical taxonomies connected back to policy. The *Salto-ETS Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally* (MYWWI)¹⁰ "slices the competence elephant" by assuming away layers of complexity through boundary conditions: focusing only on the international dimension of youth work; and targeting only competences that are specifically relevant to training design, in a "layman's perspective" which is intentionally non-exhaustive but very effective. Here, the cat catches the mouse regardless of its colour: the MYWWI is not intended as a "must-have" list of competences, but a basic framework focused on the design and evaluation of learning mobility projects. This bottom-up approach results in a taxonomy of 9 competence areas, each articulated through specific KSAs: Facilitating Learning, Designing Programmes, Managing Resources, Collaborating in Teams, Communicating Meaningfully, Displaying Intercultural Sensitivity, Networking and Advocating, Assessing and Evaluating, and Being Civically Engaged. Although devoid of a theory linking the 9 dimensions, the MYWWI offers a logical articulation of youth work and a manageable evaluation tool.

It is worth recalling that a large part of complexity is generated by the epistemological drift to the *Socratic perspective* (empowering the young to take charge of their own lives in the "dark forest" of adulthood), which places the youth worker in a semantic *Catch-22* analogous to Watzlawick's *Be Spontaneous paradox* (Watzlawick, 1983) or Bateson's *Double Bind* (Bateson, 1972): making someone "take charge" is inherently contradictory; it implies that becoming autonomous involves submitting to external guidance. This linguistic paradox has a very, very real consistency for all those operators involved on a daily basis with youth – a painful cry that (at least in Italy) we hear over and over inside countless Socio-Cultural Circles, Church Oratories and the like, particularly among the marginalized, the peripheral, the remote (Pope Leo's 2026 reference to *existential peripheries* comes to mind here): on one hand, if you leave young people to their own devices, very often that is exactly what you obtain – literally: young people with their own (electronic) devices. On the other hand, if you propose (something) you run the risk of (being perceived as) imposing, thus, again, achieving nothing. I've personally heard such situations

being described as "a desperate need". In the learning relationship, you solve the "be spontaneous" paradox like in the analyst-patient or in Zen master-apprentice dyad: by embracing it; psychological autonomy involves and stems from submitting to the Analyst; enlightenment involves submitting to the Zen Master. Recognising the inherent contradiction is crucial to the training evaluation task, and it is made possible because of the mediating role of the Youth Worker – the missing link in the assessment of lifelong learning processes. Let's keep this absence in mind, while we see how assessment complexity can be managed, in practice, within Youth Worker mobilities.

4. "Tu duca, tu signore, tu maestro": an abductive competence typology

In the KA153-YOU training *Pilgrimage to Sustainability*, we devised a "situated competence typology" geared towards the design and evaluation of youth workers mobilities. Shoplifting from the ETS-Salto supermarket (and acknowledging that all-weather, all-terrain models run the risk of not being useful for any one specific task), we started with two *boundary conditions*: a pragmatic approach (the competence model should describe the actual youth worker job, so to design a training programme amenable to evaluation); a *focus on a specific topic and situation* (the topic of Sustainability, and the geography of Central Italy).

Two features emerged from the conceptual work: abduction and heuristic value. *Abduction* is a back and forth between induction and deduction: generating theoretically valid orthogonal dimensions of training effectiveness, while grounding the model in an empirical reality. *Heuristic Value* is a desirable feature: competence models must quickly orient training design through the use of few, evocative dimensions.

Pilfering from the *Divine Comedy*, we turned Dante's tripartite characterisation of Virgilio (as "*Duca*", "*Signore*" and "*Maestro*") into a set of Weberian ideal-types (*Leader*, *Lord*, and *Master*) representing 3 orthogonal dimensions focusing on distinct classes of skills:

1. the *Relational dimension* (Archetype of the Leader): leadership, inspiration, motivation, empathy, communication, etc. The "*Duca*" is the one who "con-ducts" others. Along this vector, learning implies operating on behavioural responses, attitudes, and values, and therefore calls for immersive, experiential, pedagogies capable of mobilising the entire system of mind-emotions of the participant in the context of the interaction with other human beings. Here, learning occurs through imitation, emotional involvement, and immersive methods such as theatre that help the participant "dive" into unconscious contents (Fanelli, 2024);
2. the *Contextual dimension* (Archetype of the Lord): being able to manage physical, social, and psychological spaces such as the local community, the team of the youth worker, cultural spaces inhabited by youth workers and young people, and more importantly, their inner spaces, bodies, emotions and minds. Along this vector, "learning" involves practicing – a "situated learning" with unique challenges and problems, eminently practical, organisational, sometimes managerial, but also physical. The archetype invokes the concept of *ownership* of (and connection to) the "land" – intended both literally (as a physical geography) as well as metaphorically (the people who inhabit it and the body-mind-emotion system inhabited by the person). In its pure medieval form, the Archetype of the Lord brings into focus the Responsibility of the Lord towards his/her "subjects", as well as a Stewardship duty towards them". The word "community" is key here – in Latin, *cum munus*: sharing "an obligation, responsibility, or civic burden" to return what one has received. Here, learning occurs through a practical, hands-on approach that may be provided by an *Action Learning* approach (Fanelli, 2025) and by arts and mindfulness activities.
3. last, the *Cognitive dimension* (Master): disciplinary, sectorial, administrative/organisational and normative/legal knowledge of youth work – learning along this axis is more aptly achieved algorithmically,

through the conventional, cognitive-based training methods. This is also situated, albeit not in a physical space but within the specific discipline(s) or sector(s) where the youth worker operates, with their own codes of conduct, accepted practices, organisational, administrative and legal frameworks – there's quite a difference between a sports instructor and an educator for young people struggling with substance abuse; each of these domains brings along its specific set of rules, technical expertise, recognition bodies and tools, and the like – and "learning the ropes" involves, quite literally, internalising sets of notions and their relationships. Developing Knowledge works very well with conventional, cognitive-based, frontal, pedagogy, or maybe Socratic questioning.

In sum, each dimension implies (and calls for) a different pedagogy and different assessment philosophies and techniques. Incidentally, these dimensions are directly applicable to adult learning, for example to achievements in Life skills, Digital Skills, or Green Skills, or Re-skilling or Upskilling altogether – the absence of a mediating figure such as the Youth Worker may at first trigger some head-scratching but as it will be shown below, this issue can be overcome. The resulting model is presented in figure 1.

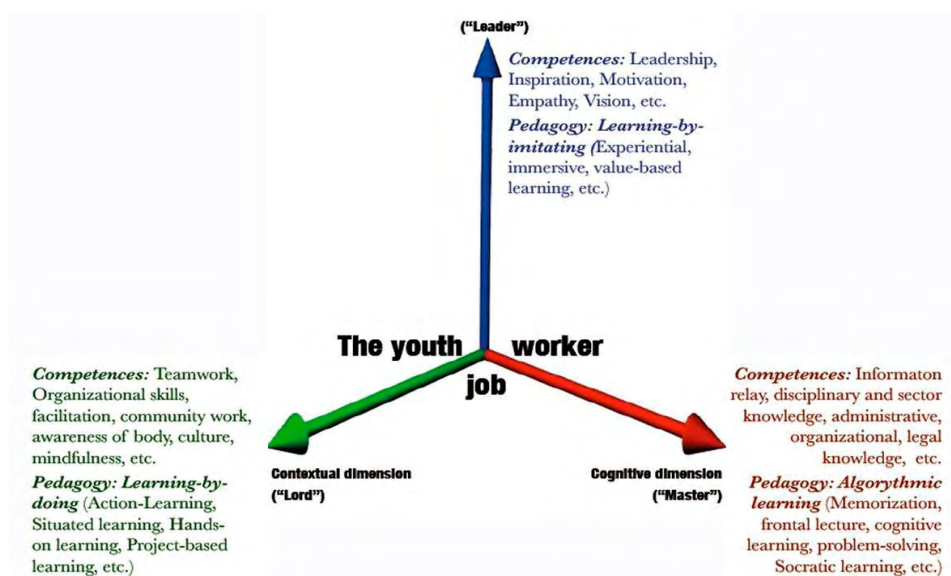


Figure 1 - An abductive model of the youth worker job.

Source: author's own elaboration.

5. Letting go of the life buoy: applying the abductive model to lifelong learning in the adult sector

In training design and assessment, the Youth Worker plays the role of the Libretto in an Opera: it helps us to follow and to understand what's going on. The anchor is the connection between a set of competences (however aspirationally defined) and a set of performance dimensions: we can assess the effectiveness of the mobility *because* we know, unambiguously, that the goal of the training is to enable the Youth Worker to do her job. The "chain of custody" is intact.

In the field of adult learning, particularly *lifelong* learning, we swim in the open sea – the higher challenge signaled by the very vocabulary we use: rather than *evaluate the effectiveness* of the training, we *assess its impact*; instead of "giving a value", we "estimate the blow"; instead of the accountant, we invoke the planetary geologist (or

maybe the claims adjuster). How can we evaluate the effectiveness of a mobility aimed at developing life skills such as the *LifeComp* framework (Sala, Punie, Garkov & Cabrera Giraldez, 2020), or *GreenComp* (Bianchi, Pisiotis & Cabrera Giraldez, 2022) for that matter? At a surface level, we now have a *Schrödinger's Cat* catching the mouse: it simultaneously catches it and misses it, all the more so when we operate within a holistic, learner-centred, lifelong perspective intended to foster personal fulfilment, active citizenship, and labour market resilience.

The direction where to look lies, as with the Youth Workers, in *adding context*: situating the assessment in a specific place and time. As argued by Bandura (1997, 2006) about the measurement of self-efficacy (the belief in one's ability to perform a skill), measurement must occur *with respect to a specific context and tailored to specific skills or situations*. Assessment starts then with "slicing the elephant": adding boundary conditions, using action-oriented prompts, including graduated challenge levels. This is also in line with both Schön's and Mezirow's views: observing learners in action through different contextual challenges; developing longitudinal observations; adopting multiple methods; finding links with real-life tasks within the learner's life; allowing the learner to express her voice; bringing inside assessment the life goals of the learner herself.

As an example, our currently ongoing E+ KA210-ADU *Architecto-Nemata* project aims to train adults to develop skills of *Rural Activation* - regenerating unused buildings or spaces in rural areas through social innovation in order to activate EU rurality. In this project, we applied the *Duca-Signore-Maestro* typology to training design for rural activators, generating actual performance dimensions and training topics, competences and, potentially, assessment constructs in a complex situation devoid of an actual, formalised, job. Yet, the experience can already bring to the fore useful suggestions. The first one is the need of "anchors to reality": in the case of *Architecto-Nemata*, this is represented by the inclusion of a strict selection criteria: participants could be admitted only if they brought their own Rural Activation projects on which to work. Adult training, in other words, fully assumes its *situated character* (in line with Bandura, Schön, and Mezirow) by generating an anchor within the life of the learner herself – an anchor that plays the same role of the Youth Worker within Youth Mobilities. The learner's project is where *Architecto-Nemata* will look first and foremost for impact constructs. Secondly, we adapted Dante's model to the domain of rural activation by invoking the 3 medieval sources of the Catholic Church's power: *Magisterium*, *Auctoritas*, and *Potestas*, generating pedagogical goals for *knowledge* relevant to the rural activation task (e.g. urbanistic regulations, financing schemes, budgeting rules, EU frameworks, etc.), for the growth of *auctoritas* (e.g. being able to generate trust within the community and the team) and for the acquisition of *Potestas* (e.g., different ownership rights over buildings and spaces). The *Architecto-Nemata* experience is currently ongoing, so the assessment data must be postponed to a future contribution; yet, hopefully, the reader is already able to grasp the main message: both training design and assessment within the adult field can benefit from cross-fertilisation with the youth field.

6. Conclusions. A final summary

Just like Dante looked at Virgil, this paper looks at learning as developing the qualities of "*Duca*", "*Signore*", and "*Maestro*". The *Divine Comedy* itself is the story of an encounter between a young person and a youth worker (or a trainer and an adult learner): lost in a frightening forest and abandoned to despair on a "deserted beach", Dante meets Virgil who guides him to the gates of purgatory¹². Likewise, lost in the dark forest (dealing with racism, climate crisis, substance abuse, or whatnot), the learner meets a trainer offering help and guidance.

In the modern learning relationships, things happen just like in the 13th century: in order for "the bridging function" to happen, and for the path to autonomy to be embarked upon, one must accept the guidance of the other – s/he must be open to trust. Nothing happens without this *ouverture*.

In the *Commedia*, Dante falls victim to his fears, and soon withdraws from his previous commitment until, spurred

by Virgil's words, he explicitly relinquishes his autonomy: "with your words you have so much disposed my heart with desire", he tells his guide, "that I went back to my original idea (i.e., getting out of hell); let us go, because both of us have just one will: you're my leader, my lord and my master": "*tu duca, tu signore, tu maestro*".

For any meaningful learning relationship to develop, each of the two learning parties must accept the *double interaction* (Bateson, 1972) as needed. No longer separated, the two parts now constitute a *dyad*: a unity where the end result no longer depends on any one of the two parts but on their relationship, and on the path which the two agents will embark upon together.

The paradox of autonomy is successfully overcome through a terrifying word: submitting. Not to another person's will. Not to another person's power. Not to authority.

Quite the contrary, this is an act of *submitting to the relationship of trust* that has been established within the dyad. A submission that can be withdrawn at any time and that remains temporary – an act of accepting interdependence and human connection as the stepping stones to real adult autonomy.

For us, trainers and assessors, a similar submission is required: once we accept that "the [learning] environment emerges as a living space, co-designed, where learning is intertwined with active citizenship, sustainability, and the construction of possible futures" (Boffo et al., 2025, p. 6), we are called upon to rethink assessment altogether.

Notes

¹ Angelo Fanelli (Ph.D., University of Florida, Università di Bologna) lives and works in Umbria since 2008 as a coach, consultant & trainer after 15 years as an international researcher in the field of leadership, management & human resources. In 2009, he founded Libero Pensatore APS focusing on cultural heritage and sustainability. Since 2020, he's been involved in Erasmus+ projects on sustainability, soft skills, mental health.

² 2002/C 325/01 European Union – *Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and of the Treaty establishing the European Community* (2002), Official Journal of the European Communities. It cannot escape the reader's attention how, just 23 years ago, the emphasis was on European Communities.

³ *Decision No. 1301/2000/EC on "Youth Community Action"*.

⁴ 2018 preamble of the *European Youth Strategy 2019-2027* (2018/C 456/01).

⁵ 2015 *European Youth Work Convention*.

⁶ *And I to him: "O Poet, I beseech thee, / even by the God it was not thine to know, so may I from this ill and worse escape, / conduct me thither where thou saidst just now, that I may see Saint Peter's Gate, and those / whom thou describest as so whelmed with woe". / He then moved on, and I behind him kept.* <https://www.ebooksbrasil.org/adobeebook/ladivina.commedia.pdf>, p. 5.

⁷ 2020 *European Youth Work Agenda*

⁸ *Thou hast with such desire disposed my heart / toward going on, by reason of thy words, / that to my first intention I've returned. / Go on now, since we two have but one will; / thou Leader, and thou Lord, and Teacher thou!" / thus addressed him; then, when he had moved, / I entered on the wild and arduous course.*

⁹ COM(2001) 678 final, *Communication from the Commission: Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*.

¹⁰ https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4385/ETS_Competence_Model_Youth_Workers_final_2023.pdf.

¹¹ This description may raise some eyebrows among the readers: I'm not trying to bring back patriarchal models of life, quite the opposite. I am invoking the heuristic power of three medieval concepts, and consciously using them as archetypes in an analogic manner in order to solve a practical problem – that of designing training programmes.

¹² So as to exclude manipulative, salvific and cult-like interpretations of the trainer's role, we should recall that Virgil explicitly tells Dante that he is *prohibited* from leading him all the (stair)way to Heaven: because of his imperfections, Virgil's role will be limited to the gates of purgatory; somebody else (Beatrice) will be in charge of the next leg of the path.

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L'impatto di Erasmus+ nell'educazione degli adulti su organizzazioni e partecipanti: una lettura comparativa tra Paesi

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Keywords

Erasmus+, Educazione degli adulti, Inclusione, Mobilità europea, Empowerment.

Abstract

This article analyses the impact of Erasmus+ mobility in adult education, focusing on the effects on both participants and the organizations involved. Drawing on three experiences in Maspalomas (Gran Canaria) and Rijeka (Croatia), the paper highlights how these programs positively impact individual empowerment, relational well-being, and the development of transversal skills. They also foster the process of sharing and inclusion, especially among vulnerable adults, people with disabilities, and individuals experiencing social vulnerability. The experience also demonstrates that the educational value of mobility is not limited to professional and linguistic learning, but impacts broader personal, social, and identity dimensions. From an organizational perspective, Erasmus+ strengthens institutions' project-design skills, expands collaborative networks, and stimulates critical reflection on educational practices observed in diverse European contexts.

1. Introduzione

Al termine di ogni mobilità Erasmus+ emerge con chiarezza l'esigenza di riflettere sul reale impatto educativo dell'esperienza vissuta, verificando in che misura gli obiettivi progettuali siano stati raggiunti e quali aspetti possano essere ulteriormente migliorati. In questo senso, la valutazione non riguarda soltanto l'esito formativo immediato, ma anche la coerenza complessiva dell'esperienza con i principi dell'educazione inclusiva e dell'apprendimento permanente.

Nel contesto europeo contemporaneo, l'educazione degli adulti assume un ruolo centrale non solo per la promozione ed acquisizione di competenze professionali, ma anche per il sostegno all'autonomia personale, alla partecipazione sociale e al benessere psicologico delle persone fragili. Tale prospettiva acquista particolare rilievo quando i percorsi coinvolgono adulti con disabilità cognitive, sindrome di Down, disturbo dello spettro autistico ad alto funzionamento, anziani fragili, ex detenuti o persone in condizioni di vulnerabilità sociale.

2. Quadro teorico

La letteratura scientifica internazionale sottolinea che l'educazione degli adulti deve fondarsi su approcci esperienziali, relazionali e partecipativi. Malcolm Knowles, già famoso ed esperto educatore degli adulti Statunitense, con la sua teoria dell'Andragogia (Arte e scienza di aiutare gli adulti ad apprendere), evidenzia che l'adulto deve comprendere la motivazione dell'apprendimento ed apprende in modo più efficace quando l'esperienza formativa è collegata alla vita reale, quando viene valorizzata l'autonomia e quando il soggetto partecipa attivamente al processo di apprendimento. Nel modello andragogico è centrale la considerazione degli adulti come *learners*, soggetti in apprendimento, che hanno delle specifiche prospettive individuali, dove il docente è un facilitatore, consulente e favorisce lo sviluppo di capacità di apprendimento autodiretto e di acquisizione di competenze.

A tali principi si collega l'apprendimento esperienziale di David Kolb (1984), pedagogista statunitense, secondo il quale la conoscenza si costruisce attraverso il ciclo esperienza-riflessione-rielaborazione-applicazione. Nel caso di adulti con disabilità cognitive o fragilità relazionali, queste metodologie risultano particolarmente efficaci perché sostengono il coinvolgimento emotivo, la motivazione intrinseca e la costruzione di competenze utili nella quotidianità.

Inoltre, gli studi sull'Inclusive Adult Education mostrano che contesti cooperativi e interculturali possono contribuire a ridurre l'isolamento sociale e a rafforzare il senso di autoefficacia. In questa direzione si collocano anche le riflessioni di Paulo Freire (1970) sull'educazione dialogica e rivolta soprattutto alla categoria degli emarginati sociali, e di Jack Mezirow (1991), sociologo statunitense, noto per la sua teoria sull'apprendimento trasformativo che consiste nel cambiare la propria visione del mondo mettendo in discussione convinzioni ed esperienze passate.

Il percorso di trasformazione si sviluppa attraverso l'Autoconsapevolezza, l'esplorazione di nuovi comportamenti, la costruzione di nuove competenze, l'applicazione delle nuove prospettive nella vita quotidiana.

Si richiamano inoltre le teorie di Albert Bandura (1997) sull'autoefficacia, generata dall'osservazione che gli uomini fanno e della successiva imitazione dei modelli osservati.

Tutte le suddette teorie sono richiamate nel presente contributo come cornice interpretativa delle esperienze descritte.

3. Metodologia

Il contributo si basa su un'analisi qualitativa e riflessiva di tre mobilità Erasmus+ realizzate nell'ambito del progetto 2025-1-IT02-KA121-ADU-000323873 promosso dall'Associazione Happy Bridge ODV. La prima mobilità ha coinvolto il gruppo Staff a Gran Canaria, mentre le successive mobilità hanno interessato il gruppo Learners, con partecipanti provenienti da contesti diversi e caratterizzati da differenti livelli di fragilità.

La raccolta delle osservazioni è avvenuta attraverso la partecipazione diretta alle attività, il confronto tra i membri dei gruppi, l'osservazione dei contesti ospitanti e la riflessione sulle ricadute educative e organizzative delle esperienze. L'impianto del testo privilegia quindi una lettura interpretativa dell'esperienza, con attenzione sia agli aspetti formativi sia agli effetti sulle relazioni, sull'auto percezione dei partecipanti e sul funzionamento dell'associazione promotrice.

4. Mobilità staff

La prima mobilità si è svolta a Gran Canaria, nella località di Maspalomas, con un gruppo Staff composto da sei partecipanti. L'esperienza era stata preceduta da una visita preparatoria finalizzata alla definizione del programma insieme all'ente ospitante, il CEPA di Maspalomas. La settimana di formazione, realizzata dal 2 al 7 marzo 2026, si è concentrata sull'educazione degli adulti e sulla rieducazione delle persone detenute attraverso il potere trasformativo della cultura.

La delegazione comprendeva professionisti provenienti da diversi ambiti dell'istruzione e del supporto sociale, tra cui docenti della scuola serale per adulti, una ex docente ed ex Ambasciatrice Erasmus, un tecnico informatico, un Funzionario socio pedagogico del Carcere di Rebibbia e la scrivente, già docente in ambito carcerario, Ambasciatrice Erasmus e Presidente dell'Associazione Happy Bridge ODV. Le attività si sono svolte sia presso il CEPA (Centro di Educazione degli Adulti) di San Bartolomé de Tirajana sia attraverso visite esterne a istituti penitenziari, associazioni del territorio e siti culturali.

Presso il CEPA è stato possibile osservare un modello educativo in cui inclusione e scambio interculturale occupano una posizione centrale. Lo scambio di materiali e simboli rappresentativi delle rispettive realtà ha costituito un momento significativo di condivisione e di costruzione di identità europea. L'esperienza ha inoltre compreso un

laboratorio artistico di pittura e découpage, nel quale la dimensione creativa ha favorito l'espressione personale e la partecipazione di tutti ed eliminando qualsiasi differenza tra i partecipanti.

Tale approccio è proseguito anche nelle classi di spagnolo avanzato, dove la partecipazione alle attività di lettura e interazione con gli studenti del CEPA ha trasformato la lezione in uno spazio di inclusione sociale. In questo quadro, l'esperienza ha mostrato come la pratica manuale e la riflessione linguistica possano integrarsi in modo efficace, soprattutto quando si lavora con adulti fragili o con bisogni specifici.

Altamente significativa è stata la visita agli Istituti penitenziari di Las Palmas che ha consentito allo staff della nostra associazione di acquisire informazioni utili in merito a modalità gestionali del sistema carcerario spagnolo e poterle confrontare con quelle italiane.

5. Mobilità Learners

Le successive mobilità hanno coinvolto il gruppo dei Learners, composto da sei partecipanti e due accompagnatori per ciascun gruppo. I partecipanti includevano persone con disabilità, tra cui una persona con sindrome di Down e una con ritardo cognitivo, oltre ad adulti con fragilità economiche e sociali, anziani fragili ed ex detenuti.

Le attività, realizzate a Rijeka e Maspalomas, si sono concentrate sull'apprendimento linguistico, in particolare dell'inglese e dello spagnolo, ma anche su esperienze laboratoriali artistiche, utilizzo delle tecnologie e conoscenza delle culture locali. La varietà del gruppo si è rivelata un punto di forza, poiché ha favorito un clima collaborativo, coeso e partecipativo.

La presenza di persone con disabilità ha contribuito a rendere l'ambiente più accogliente e attento alla relazione, stimolando ascolto, aiuto reciproco e cura dell'altro. In questa prospettiva, il gruppo eterogeneo ha rappresentato non un ostacolo, ma una risorsa educativa. Le attività culturali e le visite ad associazioni impegnate nel sostegno alle categorie fragili hanno inoltre permesso di osservare modalità diverse di gestione del volontariato sociale nei Paesi coinvolti.

6. Impatti sui partecipanti

L'impatto delle mobilità non può essere valutato soltanto in termini di competenze linguistiche o professionali. Esperienze di questo tipo incidono infatti anche sulla dimensione personale, relazionale e identitaria dei partecipanti, attivando processi di empowerment difficilmente ottenibili attraverso percorsi formativi tradizionali.

Per molti adulti, soprattutto in condizioni di fragilità sociale o relazionale, la mobilità rappresenta una prima occasione concreta per uscire dal proprio contesto abituale e confrontarsi con ambienti culturali differenti. Questo passaggio contribuisce a rafforzare la percezione di sé, il senso di autoefficacia e la disponibilità ad affrontare nuove sfide.

Dal punto di vista educativo, le mobilità hanno favorito lo sviluppo di competenze trasversali fondamentali: autonomia, adattabilità, problem solving, gestione delle relazioni interpersonali, capacità comunicative e cooperazione anche attraverso gli strumenti digitali. Anche sul piano emotivo si è osservato un cambiamento significativo, con una maggiore apertura verso gli altri, un miglioramento dell'autostima e una riduzione del senso di isolamento sociale.

7. Impatti sulle organizzazioni

L'esperienza Erasmus+ ha avuto ricadute positive anche sull'Associazione promotrice. La progettazione e la gestione delle mobilità hanno rafforzato le competenze organizzative, digitali e progettuali dell'ente, migliorando la capacità di costruire partenariati internazionali e di sviluppare reti europee di cooperazione.

Le mobilità hanno inoltre aumentato la visibilità dell'associazione sul territorio, favorendo nuove adesioni e consolidando il senso di appartenenza dei soci già coinvolti. La disseminazione delle esperienze attraverso

incontri, visite, racconti dei partecipanti e strumenti digitali ha contribuito a diffondere una visione dell'educazione degli adulti centrata su inclusione, apprendimento permanente e partecipazione attiva.

Un ulteriore elemento rilevante riguarda il confronto tra partecipanti dello Staff operanti in ruoli diversi nello stesso contesto ma spesso con visioni divergenti, i quali al termine della mobilità hanno assunto un comportamento meno rigido e maggiormente autocritico. La visita agli Istituti penitenziari è stata in tal senso molto significativa per tutti i membri dello Staff, ma soprattutto per gli educatori e per il personale di Polizia Penitenziaria. L'incontro con metodologie differenti e con sistemi formativi meno rigidi e meno formali, più orientati al benessere e all'autonomia di apprendimento della persona, ha permesso allo Staff di ripensare in modo critico alcune modalità operative adottate nei contesti locali.

8. Discussione

Le esperienze osservate confermano che l'educazione degli adulti può assumere una funzione profondamente trasformativa quando viene costruita attorno ai principi dell'inclusione, della partecipazione attiva e del benessere relazionale. Erasmus+ non rappresenta soltanto uno strumento di apprendimento internazionale, ma anche un dispositivo capace di promuovere autonomia, empowerment e riconoscimento sociale.

Nel caso degli adulti con disabilità cognitive o vulnerabilità sociali, la partecipazione a contesti interculturali protetti e cooperativi favorisce lo sviluppo dell'autostima, delle competenze relazionali e del senso di appartenenza. In questo senso, l'esperienza conferma quanto sostenuto dalla ricerca pedagogica contemporanea: gli adulti apprendono in modo più efficace quando sono coinvolti emotivamente, quando possono sperimentare concretamente ciò che apprendono e quando l'ambiente educativo valorizza la persona nella sua globalità.

L'esperienza nei contesti penitenziari spagnoli ha inoltre mostrato come ambienti dignitosi, laboratori creativi e incentivi concreti possano incidere positivamente sui percorsi di rieducazione e reinserimento sociale.

9. Conclusioni

L'esperienza Erasmus+ descritta evidenzia come l'educazione degli adulti possa svolgere una funzione trasformativa individuale ma anche sociale quando si fonda su inclusione, partecipazione e benessere relazionale. Le mobilità internazionali non sono soltanto occasioni di apprendimento professionale e linguistico, ma veri percorsi pedagogici capaci di rafforzare autonomia, empowerment e riconoscimento sociale, soprattutto nelle persone più fragili.

La possibilità di vivere contesti interculturali cooperativi contribuisce a sviluppare autostima, competenze relazionali e senso di appartenenza comunitaria. In questa prospettiva, Erasmus+ si conferma uno strumento importante per la costruzione di una cittadinanza europea inclusiva e per la promozione del diritto all'apprendimento permanente per tutti.

Note

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EVLE: functional literacy, inclusion and European citizenship in adult education

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Keywords

Functional literacy, Road safety education, Social inclusion, Digital competence, Erasmus+.

Abstract

This article analyses the EVLE project (Educación Vial, Leo y Escribo / Road Safety Education, I Read and I Write), an Erasmus+ initiative developed by CEPER CEHEL (Granada, Spain) to improve functional literacy, autonomy and inclusion among adult learners, especially migrant groups and people at risk of exclusion. The innovative nature of EVLE lies in the use of road safety education as a meaningful pedagogical context in which language learning and citizenship are linked to the real need for safe mobility. The methodological framework is based on three pillars: functional literacy, the use of easy-to-read materials to ensure cognitive accessibility, and a digital dimension based on interactive resources such as HSP and ExeLearning. The impact of the project is assessed through the multilevel approach of the RIA-AE framework, showing transformations among learners and teachers at the micro level, in the identity and curricular organisation of the centre at the meso level, and in the transfer of a local need into a multilingual European proposal at the macro level, developed with partners from six countries. Finally, the article includes a critical reflection on the challenges of transferability, such as the complexity of multilingual easy-to-read materials, disparities between national traffic regulations, and the workload placed on teachers. In conclusion, EVLE shows that connecting the real needs of adult life with European cooperation can generate transformative learning that strengthens learners' social participation and autonomy.

1. Introduction

Adult education currently faces challenges closely related to functional literacy, social inclusion, digital competence, attention to the migrant population and equal access to lifelong learning opportunities. In many educational contexts, these needs do not appear in isolation but are linked to real situations of everyday life: understanding basic information, communicating in the environment, moving around safely, accessing services, dealing with administrative procedures or participating actively in the community.

From this perspective, literacy is no longer understood only as the acquisition of academic content, but rather as a practical tool for personal autonomy, social inclusion and citizen participation. This vision is especially relevant in adult education, where learning becomes meaningful when it connects with the immediate needs of adult learners and with their real experiences, in line with UNESCO's approaches to lifelong learning, inclusion and social participation (UNESCO, 2021).

The EVLE project – *Educación Vial, Leo y Escribo / Road Safety Education: I Read and I Write* – emerges within this framework as an Erasmus+ proposal aimed at integrating functional literacy, road safety education, easy reading, digital resources, social inclusion and active citizenship. Its starting point is a simple but transformative pedagogical idea: road safety education and everyday mobility can become particularly useful learning contexts for working on linguistic, social, digital and citizenship competences with adult learners.

The analysis of this experience is situated within the RIA-AE framework on the impact of Erasmus+ in adult education, which distinguishes different levels of impact – sector, organisations, professionals, participants and territory – and allows EVLE to be interpreted as a process of educational and institutional change.

EVLE does not emerge as an isolated initiative, but as the result of more than two decades of educational work developed at CEPER CEHEL, an adult education centre located in the region of La Contraviesa and the coast of Granada. This trajectory includes previous experiences in functional literacy and road safety education aimed at adult immigrants (Ruiz González, 2004).

This environment, characterised by geographical dispersion, cultural diversity and a significant presence of migrant population, has led the centre to design educational responses linked to the real needs of adult learners: learning Spanish, understanding basic documentation, accessing employment, social integration, personal autonomy and obtaining a driving licence.

In rural or semi-rural areas such as La Contraviesa and the coast of Granada, mobility is directly related to personal autonomy and access to employment. For many adult learners, especially immigrant students or those with low qualifications, obtaining a driving licence is not only an administrative goal, but also a tool for travelling, working, accessing services and participating more independently in community life. Therefore, road safety education becomes a particularly meaningful learning context: it allows language, reading comprehension and citizenship to be worked on from a real, close and recognisable need.

Over the years, CEPER CEHEL has developed contextualised methodologies aimed at immigrant learners, adults returning to education, young people with low qualifications, people at risk of social exclusion and learners interested in improving their personal and professional competences. This trajectory has been recognised through different awards and projects linked to inclusion, the teaching of Spanish, educational innovation, curriculum development and the use of technologies applied to education, including the Antonio Domínguez Award and experiences such as “Aula de Español” or the teaching of Spanish from an intercultural approach through the driving licence (Ruiz González, 2004).

These experiences made it possible to verify that many adult learners, especially immigrants, showed greater motivation when language learning was linked to functional situations related to mobility, road signs, traffic or preparation for the theoretical driving test. Road safety education thus offered a recognisable, practical and meaningful context for working on vocabulary, reading comprehension, oral communication and decision-making.

In this sense, EVLE represents the natural evolution of a consolidated line of work at CEPER CEHEL: starting from the real needs of adult learners in order to build useful, accessible and socially meaningful educational proposals. The difference is that, through Erasmus+, this local experience is expanded, systematised and projected towards a European and multilingual dimension (Ruiz González, 2026).

2. EVLE as a framework for innovation: functional literacy, easy reading and European cooperation

The EVLE project is structured as a framework for educational innovation based on the connection between functional literacy, easy reading and digital resources. These three elements do not work independently but are integrated around a common context: road safety education as a functional space for learning.

Functional literacy constitutes the pedagogical axis of the project. In EVLE, reading, writing, understanding and communicating are not abstract objectives, but competences applied to real situations of everyday life. Interpreting a sign, understanding a traffic rule, identifying a hazard, finding one's way during a journey, reading an indication, planning a route or communicating in an emergency are examples of learning processes that connect directly with the personal autonomy of adult learners.

This approach is especially suitable for people with diverse educational backgrounds, previous experiences of school failure, reading comprehension difficulties or language barriers. By starting from recognisable situations,

learning becomes more meaningful and increases motivation, participation and the perception of practical usefulness. Road safety education thus ceases to be a specific content area and becomes a cross-curricular pedagogical resource that makes it possible to work on language, coexistence, citizenship, safety, responsibility and social participation.

The second key element of the project is easy reading. Many participants in adult education face obstacles derived from linguistic complexity, technical vocabulary, limited previous literacy or unfamiliarity with certain administrative and social codes. For this reason, EVLE incorporates adapted materials based on criteria of cognitive accessibility, clear language, visual support and comprehensible organisation of information.

Easy reading does not mean lowering educational expectations but facilitating access to learning. It enables people with different levels of linguistic or reading competence to participate actively, understand the content and progress in their learning process. This perspective connects with the idea of education oriented towards the development of capabilities and lifelong participation (Delors, 1996). In this sense, EVLE is committed to real inclusion: it does not simply offer the same materials to all learners but adapts resources so that they can be used by adult learners with diverse needs.

The third component is the digital dimension. EVLE incorporates open educational resources, interactive activities, visual materials, multimedia content and tools such as H5P or ExeLearning. These resources make it possible to diversify methodologies, encourage participation, adapt learning rhythms and strengthen the digital competence of adult learners. In addition, the digitalisation of materials facilitates their reuse, updating and transfer to other educational contexts, reinforcing a conception of lifelong learning that is open, inclusive and supported by accessible resources (UNESCO, 2021).

The innovation of the project lies precisely in the combination of these three elements: functional literacy, easy reading and digital resources. Road safety education acts as the guiding thread that gives coherence to the whole. Through it, learners not only acquire vocabulary or rules, but also develop competences to function better in their environment.

The European dimension reinforces this approach. EVLE is developed through the cooperation of a transnational consortium that makes it possible to transform a local experience into a multilingual, open and transferable proposal. Each partner contributes a complementary perspective linked to adult education, vocational training, employability, educational technologies, interculturality, migrant integration or social inclusion. This collaboration prevents the materials from being a simple subsequent translation and promotes a shared construction from the outset, adaptable to different languages, educational systems and social realities.

In this way, functional literacy linked to road safety education does not respond only to a local need of CEPER CEHEL, but to challenges present in many European contexts: integration of the migrant population, improvement of basic competences, social inclusion, safe mobility, access to employment and citizen participation.

EVLE thus shows that Erasmus+ should not be understood only as a mobility or exchange programme, but as an opportunity to transform educational practices, build common methodologies and generate open resources capable of adapting to different realities.

3. Transformative impact: from the curriculum to the professional culture of the centre

3.1. Impact on the centre and curricular organisation

The impact of EVLE at CEPER CEHEL is not limited to the creation of teaching materials or participation in a European initiative. Its main contribution is that the project is progressively integrated into the pedagogical dynamics of the centre and contributes to reorganising its educational practice. EVLE acts as an axis that

connects lines of work already present in adult education: the teaching of Spanish, functional literacy, road safety education, digital competence, social inclusion and active citizenship.

From a curricular point of view, the project makes it possible to incorporate road safety education as a functional context for working on basic competences in adult education. The learning situations are built around content that is close to learners: signs, rules, journeys, vehicle documentation, safety, first aid, sustainable mobility, travel planning, civic coexistence and communication in practical situations. In this way, the curriculum moves closer to the real needs of adult learners and turns learning into a tool for improving reading comprehension, expanding vocabulary, developing oral communication, strengthening personal autonomy and fostering social integration. EVLE also provides a progressive structure through learning situations and materials adapted to different levels. In Work Package 02 (WP02), a multilingual road safety education kit is developed for level A1, with an interactive dictionary, a glossary of at least 1,000 words and 18 learning situations related to the Highway Code. From the point of view of impact, this package provides a common basis for initial literacy in road safety education, especially useful for adult learners with a low language level or reading comprehension difficulties. The combined use of images, audio, basic vocabulary and easy reading facilitates access to essential concepts and offers teachers reusable, accessible materials adapted to different learning rhythms.

A specific example of this approach is Learning Situation 17 (L.S. 17), “Accidents”, used as a visual and interactive resource. Based on concepts such as accident, pedestrian accident, collision, hit-and-run, injured person, bleeding, vital signs, reflective vest, helmet or emergencies, learners work on functional vocabulary related to road safety and first aid through images, simple definitions, examples and supporting audio.

Another example is L.S. 11, devoted to traffic rules and right of way. Through crossroads, roundabouts, pedestrians, cyclists, emergency vehicles, tunnels and level crossings, learners work on vocabulary, reading comprehension, oral expression and decision-making in real mobility situations. The guide organises these contents into three sessions with guided reading, visual materials, simulations, practical cases and self-assessment.

WP03 extends this basis towards a multilingual course on road safety education and civic integration at B1 level. It includes 24 learning situations and activities related to road safety, civic coexistence, communication, digital skills, orientation, employability and social participation. In this way, the project moves from initial literacy towards broader training linked to active citizenship.

As qualitative evidence of impact, the workshops developed in WP03 have made it possible to take EVLE beyond teaching materials. Activities on first aid, preparation for journeys, communication, safe mobility and road safety education have encouraged the participation of adult learners in real contexts, connecting language learning with personal autonomy, safety and coexistence.

WP03 also includes L.S. 01, “Knowing my car” (B1), focused on the parts of the vehicle, basic maintenance and the check before driving. Through visual activities, practical cases, simulations and oral production, learners work on specific vocabulary, functional comprehension and responsible driving habits linked to road safety.

3.2. Impact on teachers and professional culture

The impact of EVLE on teachers can be observed in the collaborative development of teaching and digital materials: interactive glossaries, HSP activities, subtitled videos, audios, questionnaires, gamification activities, visual materials, easy-to-read resources and interactive proposals. These products not only expand the centre’s bank of resources but also require the teaching team to review accessibility criteria, adapt language, sequence content and adjust activities to the different profiles of adult learners.

This process has strengthened teachers’ methodological and digital competence. The creation of learning situations, interactive activities and multilingual materials has involved a process of design, review and adaptation

that goes beyond the simple use of already existing resources. Teachers act as creators, adapters and evaluators of materials, which strengthens a more reflective teaching practice connected with the real needs of learners. The impact can also be seen in the professional culture of the centre. EVLE is incorporated into coordination and training spaces already consolidated at CEPER CEHEL, especially school-based training and working groups. These spaces allow the project not to depend on individual initiatives, but on a shared dynamic of analysis, development, review and improvement. In this way, Erasmus+ ceases to be perceived as an external activity and becomes integrated into the ordinary educational practice of the centre.

3.3. Transformative impact of EVLE from a multilevel approach

The impact of the EVLE project can be interpreted from the multilevel approach of the RIA-AE framework (Buiskool et al., 2024), which makes it possible to analyse the effects of Erasmus+ in adult education on three complementary levels: micro, meso and macro.

At the micro level (Buiskool et al., 2024), EVLE directly benefits adult learners, especially vulnerable people, through working groups of approximately 20 participants per classroom and a methodology connected with real situations of everyday life. Road safety education becomes a functional context that links learning to a real need for autonomy and social participation. The impact on teachers is also located at this same level, consolidating the methodological and digital competences analysed in the previous section, as they evolve from the application of resources towards the expert creation of accessible materials that respond to the real diversity of the classroom.

At the meso level (Buiskool et al., 2024), EVLE strengthens the pedagogical identity of the centre by formally integrating into the curriculum a trajectory of more than two decades in functional literacy and social inclusion. The project makes it possible to structure this previous experience into a shared pedagogical proposal, facilitating teacher coordination through spaces such as school-based training and working groups. In these settings, teachers not only adapt materials, but also consolidate a collaborative professional culture that places accessibility and innovation as pillars of the ordinary educational practice of CEPER CEHEL.

At the macro level (Buiskool et al., 2024), EVLE projects a response born from a local need towards adult education in Europe as a whole. By focusing on learning mobility – a challenge shared by many territories with migrant or dispersed populations – the experience becomes fully transferable. In this way, Erasmus+ acts as the bridge that allows a methodology of functional literacy, tested in a specific environment, to be validated and adapted as a useful tool for inclusion in other countries, consolidating the centre's internationalisation strategy in rural settings (Ruiz González, 2026).

4. Conclusions and future projection

EVLE represents an experience of good practice that goes beyond the mere creation of teaching materials. Its value lies in its ability to integrate a consolidated trajectory of functional literacy into the organisational culture of the centre, demonstrating that road safety education is a meaningful context for working on essential competences. From this perspective, the project responds not only to an educational need, but also to a social need linked to the autonomy and inclusion of adult learners, following the impact and transfer evaluation models for social inclusion proposed by De Greef et al. (2010).

However, the critical analysis of the experience reveals that the transferability of this model is not without challenges. The disparity between national traffic codes, the risk of literal translations that ignore the pragmatics of language, the difficulty of consolidating stable groups and the digital divide affecting certain sectors of learners are real barriers that condition the success of the project. Likewise, maintaining easy-to-read criteria

and updating digital resources imply a teaching workload that requires stable institutional support in order to guarantee the long-term sustainability of the results.

The future projection of the project is oriented towards the consolidation of these practices in the ordinary curriculum of CEPER CEHEL and the opening of new collaboration networks to adapt the methodology to other adult education contexts.

Ultimately, EVLE shows that literacy should not be understood as an end, but as the driving force of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). By connecting the classroom with learners' real mobility needs, the project not only strengthens personal autonomy and road safety, but also redefines the identity of adult education as a key tool for social inclusion and active citizenship.

Notes

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Erasmus+ as a framework for professional development of second chance school teachers: the case of KA1 mobility project

Ivan B. Šarčević

Keywords

Erasmus+ KA1, Teachers' mobility, Professional development, Second Chance School

Abstract

In recent years, the topic of professional development for teaching staff in primary, secondary and adult educational institutions has become one of the most important topics within numerous Erasmus+ projects. Schools of various types across Europe use KA1 projects for the mobility of their teachers, with the aim of directing professional development towards an active approach in which teachers themselves become decision-makers, rather than merely consumers of template-based and unchangeable programmes. In the case of the Second Chance School in Serbia, this field note describes the experience of a specific type of educational institution that recognises participation in Erasmus+ KA1 projects as an alternative approach to developing learning and teaching skills at both individual and institutional levels.

1. Introduction

The literature on the impact(s) of Erasmus+ mobility projects on non-academic staff has grown since 2024. Recent studies examine the impact of KA1 and/or KA2 projects in primary and/or secondary schools on teachers' professional development (Martins, Tinoca & Alves, 2024; Tampouras & Philippou, 2025; Zevgitis & Emvalotis, 2025), whilst some focus on Adult Education (AE) at national level (Mikulec & Kristl, 2025) or local level (Šarčević, 2025).

As shown in the comparative report by the RIA-AE network (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024), the topics that have attracted the most attention since the organisation began participating in Erasmus+ projects in 2018 are as follows: digital skills, inclusion and diversity, professional development, and networking/learning partnerships with other organisations.

Educators recognise that changing the routine of attending training courses to an active, direct approach to deciding what teachers need for their professional development is a major advantage of KA1 mobility projects (Šarčević, 2025). School practitioners prefer to learn through examples of good practices. This could explain the growing number of KA1 and KA2 projects in which individuals and institutions engage in this very approach to learning and professional development.

The Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE) is a way to connect with other professionals and organisations in AE (Šarčević & Šarčević, 2023), although teachers in Serbia are still not sufficiently familiar with its possibilities (Šarčević, 2024). This platform is used not only for networking and sharing best practices with the European community of educators in AE, but also as a means of finding partners for international cooperation and creating content about completed projects.

In this field note, I will reflect on the experiences of teachers who participated in a one-year Erasmus+ KA1 project. My intention is to highlight the possibility of using Erasmus+ projects as a framework for enhancing the professional development of teachers in adult education, specifically in the case of the Second Chance School (SCS) in Serbia, which has limited experience in developing and implementing this kind of project.

2. Professional development of teachers in the Republic of Serbia

Professional development (PD) is not only a right, but also a continuous obligation for all teachers working in basic adult education, that is, Second Chance (Šarčević et al., 2023), as is the case for those engaged in primary or secondary education (defined by the same or similar laws and regulations). A mandatory component of PD is professional training, which is carried out through various activities. These activities are divided into two main groups:

1. *PD outside the (school) institution.* This recurring process, year after year, includes training programmes delivered online or in person, and various forms of professional events (congresses, conferences, symposia, and others), approved by the Serbian Ministry of Education and the Institute for the Advancement of Education and Training;
2. *PD within the (school) institution.* These are individual, team or group activities that teachers prepare and carry out at school.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus exclusively on the second group of PD activities. The reason lies not only in the fact that there are only a few accredited training courses for teachers in Serbian AE (Šarčević et al., 2023), but also in the resulting consequence: practitioners are turning to PD activities that they can choose – those that offer greater meaning and benefits for their practice and future professional careers.

PD within the institution encompasses a range of diverse activities. Some of these are relatively straightforward and can be carried out by a teacher on their own (for example, demonstrating learning methods and techniques, or presenting a new textbook), while others require careful planning and collaboration with other teachers and institutions. One can participate in the following activities: research, educational projects within the institution, mobility projects, professional and study trips and visits, international programmes, conferences and networks, professional learning communities. Activities relating to developing partnerships with other institutions and the development of horizontal learning practices are further examples of activities that lead to PD of practitioners within the institution. “In the context of AE, staff mobility refers to teaching, undertaking training or participating in job shadowing in other countries to improve the quality of teaching” (Mikulec et al, 2025, p. 635).

An integral part of teachers’ PD in Serbia is also career progression through the four levels of the pedagogical counsellor title. In order to advance in their career, it is highly recommended that teachers participate in international projects. As previously stated, mobility projects and international programmes are recognised activities in teachers’ PD. Obvious examples of international teacher mobility are projects within the Erasmus+ programme (Šarčević, 2024).

“Ultimately, PD is increasingly pursued as a holistic, situated, and relational process, intimately connected to teachers’ evolving understandings of themselves and their roles within broader educational and societal structures” (Tampouras et al., 2025, p. 70). Therefore, I argue that it is necessary to analyse the experiences of different types of schools in mobility programmes, as this approach allows Erasmus+ to be used as a new or alternative framework for teachers’ PD, instead of the current one-size-fits-all model.

3. The effect of previous experience(s)

In the previous two Erasmus+ projects in which staff from the Serbian SCS participated in mobility, various activities led to the professional development of both the staff who went abroad and those who did not.

Those projects were carried out between 2017 and 2019 and involved different participants (one head teacher, three subject teachers and one class teacher) and different topics (Project 1: interdisciplinary planning and project-based teaching; Project 2: prison education). Project 1 was the first Erasmus+ project for which the school applied

and received a grant. Project 2 was run by another organisation in Serbia and involved four European countries (two teachers from SCS were subsequently added as members of the mobility team). What all participants in these two projects had in common was a positive experience of collaborating with partner organisations abroad. There is an EU-level indicator that 89% of organisations that participated in the Erasmus programme intend to participate again (Buiskool et al., 2024), while in a non-EU context a Turkish study reports positive teacher attitudes towards projects if they have previously been abroad as part of the project (Çimşir, 2024).

Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that previous experience played a part in applying for the latest KA1 teacher mobility project in the Serbian SCS. It involved collaboration between beneficiary (Serbian) and non-beneficiary (Italian) partner organisations and more participants from the school's staff than in the previous two projects. It took more time to prepare the project application, but in a way, it also made its writing easier. A new school team (Project Team) was formed, which is a significant innovation in the implementation of future and current projects. Its task was to find a suitable partner for collaboration based on previous positive experiences, using available resources (online platforms). The project coordinator's previous experience of using the EPALE platform proved to be of great importance in preparing the project application, as well as in the later stages of the project's implementation.

4. Togetherness of the KA1 project and teachers' PD activities

In order to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of the teachers who participated in the mobility, I triangulated data from several different sources: final project report, face-to-face interviews, teacher's personal notes, and Participant Report Form.

This KA1 (KA122-ADU) project included four major phases:

1. Planning;
2. Preparation;
3. Teacher mobility;
4. Implementation phase.

Although the teaching staff mobility occurred in the third phase, numerous activities related to the mobility itself were also carried out in the other phases. For example, in phases 1 and 2, the planning and preparation for the mobility included the selection of a location abroad and a suitable partner for collaboration, informal language preparation for the period of mobility (English and Italian), proposal for course content, transfer arrangements for teachers, without which the mobility would not have been possible.

In the remainder of this section, I will describe the activities, phase by phase, that led to opportunities for teachers' PD and compare them with the conclusions and suggestions from other studies on Erasmus+ projects.

Phase 1 – Planning

The first phase encompassed a series of PD activities at the school before the project was approved for funding and before the mobility took place. These included drafting the project application, dividing tasks, planning activities, holding Project Team meetings and consulting with the foreign partner organisation. While drafting the project application, an advert was created for the EPALE platform with the aim of finding potential partner(s) from different European countries. From the proposals received from Croatia, France, Turkey and Italy, an organisation based in Italy was selected due to its training content being tailored to the objectives outlined in the project application. The basic details of a potential collaboration were agreed by email, which included the selection of two training courses for five teachers from SCS and the approximate timing of the mobility.

Achieving success in the project requires good cooperation among all partners before, during and after the process (Alonso de Castro & García-Peñalvo, 2023).

The expected impact of this project included:

- cross-curricular planning;
- increased teacher motivation for teaching and knowledge acquisition;
- increased self-confidence;
- further cooperation with the partner organisation and the expansion of the international collaborative network with AE institutions.

“One effective way to implement the cross-curricular approach is to participate in Erasmus+ projects” (Çimşir, 2024, p. 368). This approach naturally builds upon the interdisciplinary lesson planning the school developed during its first Erasmus+ project. Mikulec and Kristl (2025) reported on the impact of Erasmus+ on increasing confidence and enhancing various skills among professional staff, and particularly highlighted the development of international competencies.

Phase 2 – Preparation

Since the start of the school year, teachers have been running exemplary lessons and extracurricular activities (PD within the institution) using modern web tools and applications with which they already have some experience. For example, Quizizz was used as an important digital tool in classroom teaching. Adult learners of varying literacy levels (grades 1-4) used this tool on desktop computers during Serbian language lessons. Quizizz has already proven its value for language and literature learning in a school setting (Garzon & Inga, 2023). It can be used in a gamified online mode to activate and further motivate students, but also as a means of assessing what has been learned, for example, a printed version of a short test.

I was the coordinator (contact person) of this KA1 project. Initially, my responsibilities involved regular contact with the partner organisation from Italy and arranging various elements of the collaboration. However, those tasks soon expanded into areas that were not even foreseen in the project application. I was involved in the following activities:

- Project announcement via a broadcast on the local TV station and during an EPAL webinar;
- Correspondence with other potential partners for international cooperation;
- Coordinating activities with other school teams (e.g. Professional Development Team);
- Attendance at online meetings with the Tempus Foundation (responsible for approving and monitoring the implementation of Erasmus+ projects in Serbia);
- Notifying the project advisor of the project’s progress, amendments and additions to the documentation, and its posting on two electronic platforms;
- Ongoing communication with the Foreign Exchange Payments Authority (transfers for accommodation and teacher course fees);
- Creating a Data Protection Statement for mobility participants;
- Assisting with the completion of individual applications for the Europass Mobility Document;
- Writing an article for an international journal on the effects of KA1 teacher mobility on professional development;
- Other tasks – creating an Erasmus+ space for the dissemination of project results, writing blogs for the EPAL platform, involving other teachers in various training sessions, incorporating digital competences into annual and monthly plans, writing school reports.

As Zevgitis and Emvalotis (2025) pointed out, the burden of implementing European partnerships falls to the greatest extent on the shoulders of the school coordinator. In other words, the coordinator is involved in all phases of the project (Tokgöz & Korucu, 2024). All the aforementioned tasks of the project coordinator have contributed to PD within the institution, although the benefits are disproportionate to the amount of time spent on their completion.

Phase 3 – Teacher mobility

This phase is described in more detail in another article by the author of this field note (Šarčević, 2025). However, it is important to note that teacher mobility is the core PD activity of this KA1 project. It is evidenced by two documents: Europass Mobility Document (formal) and a certificate of training attended issued by the host organisation (non-formal).

Instead of describing the content of the course on game-based, online, and outdoor teaching and learning, I decided to use previously collected qualitative data from the mobility participants themselves (interviews, personal teacher notes, Participant Report Form) to illustrate the authentic experience of a one-week training session in Italy.

Face-to-face interviews. To analyse in depth the experiences of teachers during mobility, I asked them to share their personal impressions. Their answers show that the true value of this Erasmus+ project goes beyond digital inclusion. It is the willingness of teachers to learn in a new setting and discover their strengths and weaknesses, thereby showing that they are active agents of change in their PD.

Reflecting on his recent experiences, the teacher becomes more motivated to try new approaches in his practice. Such reflection sometimes leads to revealing insights, as was evident in the response of one of the teachers:

I didn't even know I knew English so well until I went there. (T.1)

Intercultural exchange on a daily basis contributed to the expression of creativity and greater willingness to participate in group activities. This is supported by the answer of another teacher about the experience during mobility:

I found the communication with the members of the other team from France interesting. I would like to single out the fact that we were not constantly in a closed space, but we visited some places nearby and talked with the locals. (T.2)

Teacher's personal notes. One subject teacher recorded the activities each day during the mobility, and one of those notes was sent to the host organisation for the further promotion of their training activities on social media. The following is a brief excerpt:

We were quite enriched by the unusual town of Davoli where we found out a lot about the region's history but also met two incredible artists and their amazing work. Our hosts were more than kind and supportive throughout our stay, offering useful information, keeping to the schedule while being open and flexible. We wish to express gratitude also to the members of the German and French team for a positive atmosphere and exchange of experiences. (T.3)

Beneficiary organisations from other countries have strengthened their international networks and improved their project management through Erasmus+ mobility (Buiskool et al., 2024). Also, these projects help educators to develop an international perspective on contemporary educational practices and encourage them to learn foreign languages (Çimşir, 2024).

The document called the *Participant Report Form (KA1 – Learning Mobility of Individuals)* is an electronic form that teachers were required to complete individually after the mobility. By ticking the boxes for the offered answers about the benefits during the mobility period, the teachers prioritised improving their practical and

organisational skills in their current job, as well as enhancing their PD and career opportunities, over improving their knowledge of the subject they teach. These views are in line with those from Portugal, where teachers consider Erasmus+ projects to be very important for their professional careers (Martins et al., 2024).

Phase 4 – Implementation phase

Following the mobility, a whole series of activities that were part of PD within the institution were implemented at the school. These activities included: lectures and workshops for other school staff, collaboration with teachers who did not participate in the mobility on lesson preparation, preparing new lesson plans with an emphasis on developing digital competences, dissemination and evaluation of the project's results.

In order to improve the quality of the teaching process, teachers are encouraged to use contemporary digital tools to which they are not accustomed, both inside and outside the classroom. The game-based activities and outdoor teaching methods that teachers learned abroad are being implemented in the school's local community. Through direct interaction among adults with diverse prior experiences, new ideas and solutions are generated, which have had a positive impact on the motivation of both learners and teachers.

In a separate chapter of the Final project report, several challenges that occurred during the project's implementation are listed:

- Limited support within the institution;
- Bureaucratic hold-up in the transfer of funds;
- Inadequate functionality of the *Erasmus+ Space* tool within the EPALE platform;
- Inadequate user interface of the *Beneficiary Module* platform;
- *Privacy and Personal Data Protection Statement*. No document form was provided on any of the websites relating to the implementation of the Erasmus+ project.

Quite similar to these challenges, Greek educators highlighted negative attitudes from colleagues and limited support from school management, demanding administrative procedures (approvals and permits for mobility), and heightened teacher workload as examples of barriers (Zevgitis et al., 2025).

5. Conclusions

The findings of studies from EU and non-EU countries on the numerous benefits of participating in Erasmus+ projects are confirmed in this field note. A clear bottom-up approach is evident, where the PD of individuals (teaching staff) leads to the enhancement of the educational institution (school) they represent through international cooperation.

In the case of the SCS from Serbia, progress has been made at an institutional level in improving the quality of the teaching process and implementing innovative methods in the curricula. The school has gained international visibility through collaboration with European partners and the dissemination of project results. The most significant impact of the KA1 mobility project has been achieved at an individual level – teachers are more motivated to learn and apply new methods and technology in their teaching. The mobility participants and other teachers carried out various activities that contributed to their PD. Although the effects of these activities are primarily viewed through the lens of the project's objectives, it is clear that additional effects also occur. These can be an important guide for creating new or alternative frameworks for the PD of educators in adult education.

As the benefits and obstacles in implementing Erasmus+ projects are similar in different countries, a recommendation for further development and greater participant involvement could be to remove barriers and to recognise teachers' efforts in projects as a specific form of PD that leads to greater recognition in career progression.

Notes

¹ Ivan B. Šarčević is an educator in basic education of adults, a pedagogical counsellor, and an independent scholar based in Obrenovac, Serbia. In the spirit of this project, the free version of the AI-based platform DeepL was used to translate the non-quoted sections of the text. E-mail: onegt65@gmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4607-1164>.

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The Erasmus+ TOP project: job shadowing at school

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Keywords

Job shadowing, Peer observation,
Professional development,
Feedback, Mobility.

Abstract

This article explores job shadowing as a strategic tool for teachers' professional development, focusing on the emotional dynamics it generates. Despite its benefits, job shadowing often faces resistance due to concerns about being judged and a culture of professional individualism. Being observed may create self-consciousness but also a sense of vulnerability, while observing colleagues can be perceived either as a burden or a valuable learning opportunity. To address these challenges, the Erasmus+ project TOP – Teacher Observation Pedagogy/Together Observing Peers, involving partners from Spain, Italy, Slovenia, and Ireland, aims to make job shadowing a structured and intentional practice through the development of an observation toolkit for language teachers who teach adults. By promoting reflective collaboration, TOP seeks to foster a mindset that values peer observation as a key element of teacher professional growth in the European educational context.

1. An Erasmus+ project focused on job shadowing

In many professional settings job shadowing is becoming increasingly popular. You might hear about job shadowing when you start an internship at a new workplace, during the onboarding process, or again when you are suddenly plunged into a new role in the same organisation where you have been working for years. Job shadowing has proven to be an effective tool for training, retention of new talents, employee engagement, and performance improvement.

As Ieva Margevica-Grinberga (2024) argues, job shadowing is fundamentally grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, according to which "knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" and "immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194).

But what do we mean by job shadowing when it concerns teachers and teaching? And what kind of emotional response does it arouse among teachers? And moreover, which tools can support observation?

This article seeks to answer these questions while introducing the Erasmus+ TOP Teacher Observation Pedagogy / Together Observing Peers project, which builds on job shadowing. The project is co-financed in the Erasmus+ programme, action type KA210-ADU - Small-scale partnerships in adult education (KA210-ADU). It started on 1 September 2024 and lasted 24 months. As described in the project website (Pirola, 2026), TOP aims to develop an observation tool that facilitates and supports more effective and intentional job shadowing experiences for teachers among adult education institutions across the EU with a focus on language teaching. Partner organisations of the TOP project are: Escuela Oficial de Idiomas de Maspalomas (Spain, project leader), Center za dopisno izobraževanje Univerzum (Slovenia), John Daly Atlantic Language Galway Ltd (Ireland), and CPIA 5 Milano (Italy).



Figure 1 - TOP project dissemination activities at CPIA 5 Milano.

Source: photograph by C. Meneguzzo (2026).

2. An overview of job shadowing in the Italian education system

As part of the Italian school system, I will begin with some remarks on job shadowing in Italian state schools, where it is mandatory for newly appointed teachers during their probationary year. This peer observation lasts at least 12 hours, forms part of the compulsory 50-hour induction programme, and is regulated by DM 226/2022². In principle, job shadowing could also support the continuous professional development of experienced teachers. In practice, however, its use beyond the probationary year is neither systematic nor widespread. While some schools recognise its value, implementation depends largely on available resources, school culture, and local priorities. This lack of popularity of job shadowing at school is due to a combination of cultural, organisational, and practical factors. Here are some of the most likely reasons:

- an individualistic teaching culture which may discourage the sharing of classroom practice
- lack of specific training in observation and constructive feedback
- time constraints and heavy administrative workloads which make it difficult to find time for mutual observation
- little institutional recognition and the absence of incentives
- the lack of strategic integration of peer observation into school improvement and professional development plans.

This brief overview shows that making full use of job shadowing as a professional long-term training tool in schools will be a long and challenging process.

3. Dealing with emotions

As Szarzyńska (2025) explains, job shadowing in an international setting is an exceptional opportunity for professional and personal development, but it can also present psychological challenges, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and the stress of being in a foreign environment.

However, some feelings associated with job shadowing may transcend the international dimension, constituting the emotional foundation of the encounter and exchange with a fellow teacher. The following section focuses on this emotional layer, characterised by the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory reactions associated with

peer observation³. To do this, I will start with a very basic statement: observation is made of being observed and observing. Let's take a closer look at both sides of the coin and try to understand how teachers feel during these activities.

Let us begin by examining the experience of being observed. In her webinar Lightfoot (2023)⁴ offers a sort of brainstorming on the variety of reactions connected with being observed. I will attempt to delve deeper into this dimension.

As newly hired or recently appointed teachers, being observed by a more experienced colleague often feels like being evaluated or judged, but also helped and supported. We know observation is motivated by the fact that we need to integrate into a team. Therefore, despite the potential discomfort it may cause, we are confident that it can help us develop. Moreover, when the observed teacher is less experienced, there is generally more openness, as one is implicitly engaged in self-improvement and professional growth.

Looking at it from the point of view of the tutor committed to supporting a new colleague, when we are being observed by a less experienced colleague (or someone we consider to be less experienced, rightly or wrongly), we maintain a certain ease. At the same time, though, we are aware we are under a magnifying glass, and things we had previously taken for granted might suddenly become less certain, less obvious - sometimes even less clear to ourselves. What once seemed settled now needs to be made explicit, or even justified. And our self-confidence might not come out of it unscathed, especially if we are not particularly willing to change – something which tends to happen if we see ourselves as more competent than the observer.

In both these cases, even if we call it “peer observation”, the relationship implied is the one between a tutor and a tutee: it can be positive, useful, and constructive, but is not properly perceived as genuinely equal by either the “job shadower” and the mentor.

When we are observed by someone we consider an actual peer, a colleague with strengths and weaknesses similar to ours or different from ours, but with years of experience under their belt, it is either because we need someone else's opinion about how we operate or because the observer has asked for our opinion. We either need a so-called “critical friend” or are asked to act as one, someone able to give advice and supportive but honest feedback on some peculiar problem or area. In this case, we get the feeling of being under examination and thoroughly analysed.

This is the perfect scenario for doubts to arise - and they certainly will: we will question our teaching choices, the techniques we use, our classroom management, and even how we present ourselves to students. For sure, we will be forced (finally!) to view ourselves from the students' perspective, knowing that a good observer will also adopt their point of view. But there's more: we are observed by someone else and simultaneously we see ourselves in action as we act. We are both observing ourselves from the outside and performing at the same time. This creates a sort of estrangement and as far as I'm concerned, being observed makes me far more aware of how I behave in the classroom. The other teacher's eyes are a sort of multiplier of my self-perception. This can be highly productive, but also very demanding as it pushes to question, confirm, or reject well-established practices.



Figure 2 - TOP project dissemination activities at CPIA 5 Milano.

Source: photograph by C. Meneguzzo (2026).

Let us now turn to the experience of observing. Observing a more experienced colleague is part of our training as new hires. In this case, we feel the need for it and are open to observation as a way to develop our skill set. We are confident that we'll take away something useful and practical - even if we're not sure what exactly it will be. As Kolb & Kolb (2005, p. 200) remind us while talking about Situated Learning Theory: "learning spaces extend beyond the teacher and the classroom. They include socialisation into a wider community of practice that involves membership, identity formation, transitioning from novice to expert through mentorship". We could say that, alongside the official job shadowing, there is also a subtler form of observation taking place. This concerns the implicit aspects of any workplace: its underlying values, expectations and attitudes, its internal dynamics. While observing, we are broadening our understanding of the school context. From those who have been part of a workplace for a longer time, we receive a kind of map, and we will then interpret it through our own perspective. Observing a less experienced colleague in their trial year could fall within our role as tutor. In this case, it is a defined task that we fulfil and we may also be paid extra for that. But the real question is: how should we provide feedback? Observing an actual peer tends to remain much more undefined: it is a more ambiguous and complex situation. Are we observing because we want to learn something or because our colleague needs our advice? Or both? Sometimes it can feel like a burden and often takes time outside of working hours, and we are not always sure whether we really need or want it.

Without doubt, as Corrigan (2025) observes in her article, "observation alone is not enough. The real value comes from reflecting on what was seen and considering how to apply these insights to one's own teaching". Yet this is precisely what gives mutual observation its great potential and makes it valuable for continuing professional development.

4. How to prepare for observation

How can we make observation as smooth and effective as possible? Observation requires clarity, engagement, and empathy, as well as preparation in which both observer and observee agree on what should be observed. We often observe in order to better understand specific aspects of practice, but this raises the question: what exactly do we want to improve? Focusing on precise elements can make observation more purposeful (British Council, 2012). Indeed, as emerges from Fuentes (2023)⁵, Morales identifies the absence of a clear focus in peer observation as one of the most significant pitfalls in the implementation of this practice.

In this regard, a structured observation grid can be extremely useful. It provides key points and guiding questions that foster reflection. Reviewing it in advance helps even less experienced observers shape their expectations and consider aspects they might not usually attend to, broadening their focus beyond habitual perspectives. Once priorities are identified, it is important to recognise that they may not emerge spontaneously in the lesson. For this reason, pre-observation discussion is essential: if a colleague knows what we are focusing on, they can help highlight it. Going through the grid together increases mutual awareness, supports preparation, and combines external observation with self-assessment. It also establishes a collaborative agreement, reinforcing the idea that both parties are working toward shared solutions. This makes observation more natural and less judgmental (Lightfoot, 2023)⁶.

Yet what happens if the aspect we intend to observe does not appear in the lesson? A grid shifts observation from spontaneous “watching” to a more structured and intentional process, while still preserving the serendipitous value of observation. So even when the specific element we want to observe is missing, the grid helps us focus on other aspects. Or paradoxically, it could happen that what we look for is actually present, the grid may reveal that the lesson’s true strength lies elsewhere. And to our great surprise, we might also discover that what we truly need to improve lies in a different direction from what we initially set out to observe.



Figure 3 - TOP project meeting at Center za dopisno izobraževanje Univerzum in Slovenia.

Source: photograph by P. Sternad (2026).

5. What follows observation

After the observation, it is also useful to have a moment of reflection in which observer and observee can discuss their experience. This is the stage for feedback, which confirms the mutual value of the observation. The observee needs feedback, whose nature is particularly important (Howard, 2019)⁷.

Feedback is most effective when it is requested (and agreed upon in advance), specific, well-justified, and constructive capable of fostering dialogue (Howard, 2019)⁸. The observation grid, by guiding a structured approach, also supports the formulation of concrete feedback, grounded in observed actions rather than in subjective impressions. It helps identify both strengths and areas for development. “Mistakes” can thus be reframed as open questions, and they begin to resemble what they truly are: opportunities for improvement through constructive exchange.

Feedback gives shape and substance to the dialogue the observation has initiated.

6. The TOP project in action

From the considerations above, the usefulness of a shared tool for job shadowing for language teachers clearly emerges. The TOP project aims to enhance the quality and impact of staff mobility within the Erasmus+ framework, particularly in relation to job shadowing, reducing the risk that mobility becomes merely a travel experience rather than a genuine professional growth opportunity for institutions and teachers.

At the time of writing this article, the TOP project has already completed its core phase, following preparation and kick-off steps.

The kick-off phase consisted of both a transnational meeting in Ireland and a capacity-building event - a teacher training course that also involved project managers. This first in-person meeting took place in March 2025 in Galway at the Atlantic Centre of Education, partner of the TOP project.

For the managers, this initial phase aimed to pool their existing resources and experiences across partners. They focused on the development of a shared taxonomy (Bleichenbacher, Goullier, Rossner & Schröder-Sura, 2019), agreed on the methodology for subsequent stages, and established common principles for job shadowing in language classrooms.

For teachers, this early team-building phase provided a training ground for fostering openness, exchange, and collaboration. They were directly involved in job shadowing, strengthening their observation skills and learning how to give and receive feedback from colleagues.

Once back at their organisations, the partners designed questionnaires, mainly observation grids on the basis of criteria outlined during the meeting, and applied them through internal job shadowing sessions among colleagues. Project managers also took part in this activity, and supported and monitored this initial trial phase through regular online meetings.

From the foregoing considerations, it emerges that developing a shared tool to improve the use of job shadowing during Erasmus+ mobilities requires local testing. An important spillover effect was that partner organisations strengthened their internal job shadowing practices, using them as a laboratory to refine their observation grids and assess their effectiveness before applying them in international mobility.

As a result of this first trial phase, partners observed an increase in teachers' awareness of the full potential of job shadowing. Moreover, internal job shadowing proved to be an effective tool for disseminating the project's outcomes step by step, allowing colleagues to see firsthand what participants had learned during their mobility and how they integrated these experiences into their teaching practice.

During the second meeting in Slovenia in October 2025, partners compared the results of their initial local testing and co-developed a shared observation kit reflecting the main stages of the observation process:

1. Pre-observation: familiarising with the context and agreeing on the observation focus.
2. Observation: the peer observation session.
3. Post-observation: collaborative feedback.

The observation kit was further enriched by the inclusion of a student observation grid, enabling learners to observe the teacher during the lesson. This co-creation phase continued through several online working sessions, during which the tools were further developed in order to be retested locally.

Internal job shadowing within the TOP project was thus used iteratively to validate at the local level the decisions taken during partners' meetings. The results of local observations were then brought back for discussion at the international level, enabling the observation kit to be progressively refined and enriched by the experience and perspectives of all partners.

According to Lightfoot (2023), observation, when carried out effectively, provides opportunities both for peer-learning and for self-learning, thanks to the reflective process a teacher can go through⁹. Indeed, engaging in job shadowing helped teachers become more discerning observers, first and foremost of themselves as active agents responsible for their own professional development, capable of identifying and reflecting on their own weaknesses and strengths, while drawing useful insights from their colleagues' practice. Internal job shadowing also trained teachers to be observed, perceiving their own vulnerabilities as open to improvement through honest and empathetic feedback from the observer, and recognising the value of sharing their own competences with peers.

After local piloting, partners met again in March 2026 for a final co-creation session in Gran Canaria, hosted by EOI Maspalomas, the project leader. Two students from CPIA 5 Milan took part in this co-creation step, were involved in observations and could contribute their perspectives to the development of the toolkit.

Internal job shadowing was complemented by international job shadowing, providing a further opportunity to test the observation tools. Mobility raised additional questions, as observation in an international context might differ in some respects from local practice: the language is different, preparation and observation time may be more limited. These contextual differences and the comments gathered from users in the piloting phase were discussed. The team also adopted the World Café method (The World Café Community Foundation, 2026) to collect solutions, which informed a new refinement of the toolkit.

The participants discussed all the critical points and, for each of them, agreed on solutions, evaluating the pros and cons of the proposals.

During the meeting, the project managers reviewed and refined the TOP project website.



Figure 4 - TOP project World Café session at EOI Maspalomas

Source: Photograph by C. Monti (2026).

7. What lies ahead

At this stage there is still room for fine-tuning the observation kit, while most of the efforts will focus on collecting best practices and showcasing them during the final mobility meeting and public event, planned for October 2026 in Milan, and on the project website¹⁰.

8. Conclusion

Having a reliable observation kit at hand is crucial. It will certainly not remove all the obstacles that job shadowing faces - at least in the Italian context - but it can help increase the number of positive experiences and thus contribute to shifting a mindset that is still rather hesitant to adopt this valuable practice more widely as part of in-service teacher professional development.

And the hope is that, at the international level, a well-designed peer observation kit for language teachers in adult education will support organisations in strengthening the positive effects of Erasmus+ mobilities aimed at the development of the European education area.

Notes

¹ Cristina Meneguzzo, is an Italian L2 teacher, with A023 teaching qualification, at CPIA 5 Milano, an Adult Education Centre serving the Milan area.

² Peer-to-peer activity for tutor and tutee consists in 3 hours of shared planning, 4 hours of observation of the tutee in the tutor's class, 4 hours of observation of the tutor in the tutee's class, and 1 hour of evaluation of the experience.

³ The following notes do not stem from a structured investigation but rather from informal exchanges with colleagues and, to some extent, from my personal experience. So it is certainly possible that other teachers might offer differing emotional responses.

⁴ Webinar from 5:30 to 7:30.

⁵ Interview from 8:00 to 9:50.

⁶ Webinar from 25:00 to 26:00.

⁷ Webinar from 7:25 to 8:00

⁸ Webinar from 24:55 to 26:00

⁹ Webinar from 16:30 to 17:10.

¹⁰ For more details visit TOP website <https://topk2erasmus.eu/>.

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EOI de Collado Villalba and Extensión de San Lorenzo de El Escorial's Erasmus+ experience

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Keywords

Erasmus+, Adult education, Lifelong learning, Mobilities, Participation.

Abstract

This paper shows the experience gained from participating in the Erasmus+ Key Action 1 for Adult Education. Since our Erasmus+ accreditation in 2022, subsequent year projects have been awarded. The main aims were to empower students by promoting language and culture; to improve our teaching practice and digital competence; and to attend to diversity. The activities carried out and the resulting outputs and outcomes are illustrated. The ways in which Erasmus+ opportunities were communicated and participation was promoted are described, and the impact and the project's sustainability are explained. Student and teacher mobilities have been the main focus of the projects, but our role as host organisation was significant. The outcomes involve a more participative mindset in the students and teachers. The motivational and transformative learning goes beyond the mere teaching and learning of languages. Similar European institutions may benefit from our experience.

1. Introduction. Our schools

This is the third year our school organises short-term mobilities for both students and teachers. The Erasmus+ experience has resulted in one of the most valued extracurricular activities in the school. Ours is a public (administration-run) language school in the north-west of the Madrid region with two different headquarters: the main one in a busy industrial town, Collado Villalba, and the other one located in a World Heritage Site, San Lorenzo de El Escorial. Students and teachers from both schools have benefited from the opportunities that the Erasmus+ grant has offered.

Official Schools of Languages are a particular kind of schools in Spain, devoted mainly to the teaching and learning of modern languages, namely English, French, German and Japanese in EOI Collado Villalba and San Lorenzo de El Escorial; while in other schools from the region of Madrid and throughout the country languages such as Spanish for foreign speakers, Italian, Portuguese, and a host of other European and world languages are taught. These schools play an essential role in teaching languages to people from all walks of life, as well as in approaching other cultures and offering the opportunity to learn minority languages (Liñán Maza, 2020). Official Schools of Languages have as their main aim to achieve the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages' goal of helping learners develop effective language proficiency and achieve personal development (Council of Europe, 2020).

Through Erasmus+ opportunities the school has promoted the Council of Europe recommendations encouraging education authorities at a national, regional and local level to create favourable conditions for the use of the CEFR as a tool for plurilingualism; to facilitate cooperation among educational institutions between member states; to provide recognition of foreign language qualifications; to guide students in their learning process so that they feel encouraged to acquire plurilingualism as a means of knowledge building and skills development, thus enhancing social cohesion and intercultural understanding; to adopt a learner-focused, action-oriented, competence-based approach when teaching languages; to take into account the social and cultural dimensions of language learning; to regard the languages taught as part of a wider whole while considering students' particular needs and the general needs of modern European societies; and to relate the school's teaching to the CEFR in a transparent way (Council of Europe, 2008).

In October 2022 the school staff agreed on starting the process to apply for an Erasmus+ accreditation as a way to provide students and teachers with better future professional prospects after identifying the need for internationalisation; the participation in the Erasmus+ programme would improve students' abilities to interact and cooperate with people from different cultures; and it would help teachers develop innovative approaches to their teaching practice (Álvarez-Domínguez, 2023). The goals were then established to promote participation and inclusion among all the members of our institution, but mainly among students, focusing on those with a disadvantaged situation.

Action was taken and an Erasmus+ Commission was established in the school with members of the teaching staff who contributed to the completion of the application form. The application form included the goals of empowering our students by the promotion of language and culture learning; improving our teaching practice and the digital competence of our school's students and teaching staff; and attending to the diversity present in our classrooms, focusing on our students' individual and specific needs. The application was submitted to the Spanish Service for the Internationalisation of Education (its acronym in Spanish is SEPIE - *Servicio Español para la Internacionalización de la Educación*). The funding from the European Commission through the Erasmus+ accreditation and Project would grant the organisation of different internationalisation activities and student and teacher mobilities that would constitute the beginning of a European venture.

2. As a sending organisation

It is the students who are to benefit the most from the school's participation in Erasmus+. The main aim is that the students improve their linguistic, digital, civic and literacy competences, focusing on those with fewer opportunities because of disabilities, unemployment, or social background so that they get the necessary skills and knowledge they would not otherwise achieve. By doing so the students' social and professional prospects may improve both in Spain and in the rest of the European Union. One of the project's goals is to promote the awareness of European citizenship and the values it represents: sustainability, inclusion and diversity so that the students become active agents through civic participation.

From the first year that student mobilities were arranged the students' interest has been high and has increased every year. The students have had the chance to improve their linguistic skills and to boost their confidence by experiencing the language in a real-life context abroad during their mobilities. One of the aims has been to favour those students who might otherwise not have the chance of travelling abroad to practise the language they are learning at the school. One of the requirements is a motivation letter written by the students themselves to express the reasons for their application. Most of them coincide in their expectations, as they hope this experience will enrich their lives and open their minds, by offering them the chance of meeting new people and to see themselves overcoming challenging situations beyond their comfort zone. From what the selected students have expressed after their mobilities, it is clear that their expectations have been met and even exceeded.

To date nine short student mobilities have taken place, with 28 students participating in mobilities thanks to the grants awarded by the European Commission. Apart from this, 22 members of our teaching staff have taken part in job shadowing activities, training courses or in mobilities as accompanying teachers.

The first partnership was established with schools we had had previous contact with, but subsequent host partners have been found through the platform EPALE, either by replying to a partner request message posted by our organisation or by replying to a post found there. Some others have been found through a thorough mailing process requesting collaborators. Videocall meetings have been held with partner schools and organisations to discuss the programme prior to the mobilities both as sending and as hosting organisation.

Mobilities have been offered for students learning English, German and French in our schools, and new multilingual mobilities are being planned. The countries the school has visited are Denmark (Aarhus Statsgymnasium), Finland (Valkeakoski Opisto), France (Lycée Jean Zay), Germany (VHS Bingen), and Lithuania (Senjoru Pasaulis). The students have attended lessons in these organisations, they have taken part in cultural activities, concerts, volunteering actions, sports activities. One of the aspects that they have highlighted about their mobility is that they have experienced life as locals, rather than as tourists. They have established links with foreign peers and some of them are still in touch with them.

To measure the impact of the project on the students who participated, online surveys developed by the school were sent and filled in by the students. It was important for the school to find the strengths and weaknesses of the pre-mobility, during-the-mobility and post-mobility activities. The graph in Figure 1 shows the questions related to pre-mobility aspects.

Most participants in the four mobilities expressed their satisfaction in terms of communication prior to the mobility, most of them considered that the information and communication process had met their needs.

As for the feedback requested related to the activities and the logistics during the mobility, in Figure 2 the students' answers show again a high level of positiveness. Perhaps their opinion varies when it comes to the activities the host organisation offered them, but it is a matter of personal perception. Figure 3 reflects the students' answers related to financial aspects after the mobility. All the students, except one, considered the grant covered all their expenses and they found the process of reimbursement adequate.

Perhaps more relevant are the answers they provided when asked for their open opinion, of particular interest are the following students' comments: *"the information provided was appropriate and the staff in the EOI were always willing to help if any doubt arose"*; *"all the expenses have been covered, which allows any person to participate, regardless of their spending power, which is an aspect to highlight"*; *"this has been a truly enriching activity, please continue applying for and taking part in the Erasmus+ programme"*.



Figure 1 - Pre-mobility aspects

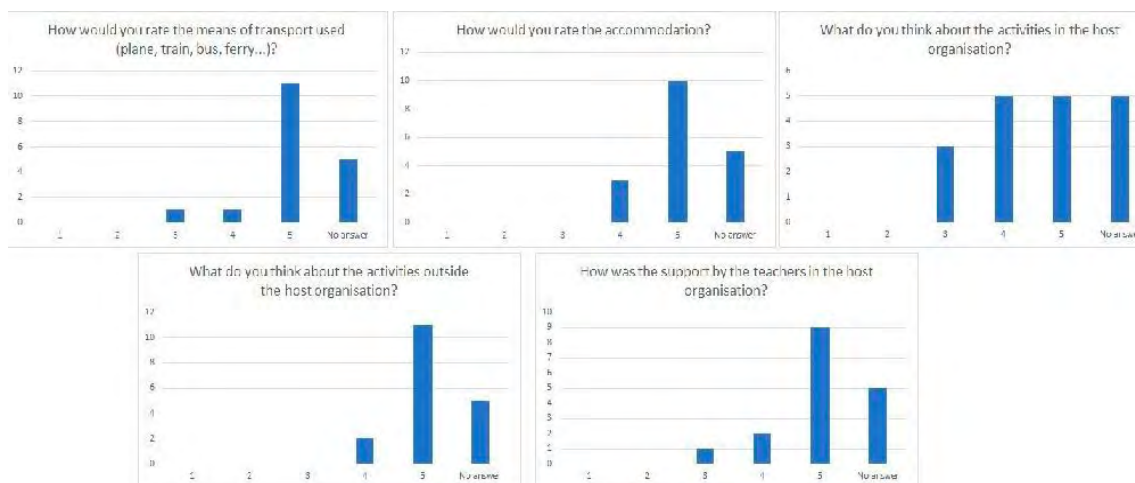


Figure 2 - During mobility aspects



Figure 3 - Post-mobility aspects

These comments do motivate the team in the Erasmus+ Committee to promote the school's internationalisation through these European opportunities. The students' comments align with the conclusions in Nada and Legutko (2022), who highlight the transformative journey of personal growth and transformative learning, including an array of soft skills and competences and an increased sense of European identity as the most relevant outcomes of their Erasmus+ experience.

The students who have participated in a mobility during the current academic year have also taken part in an impact study promoted by SEPIE by taking a survey both before and after their mobility. The results of this study are to be presented by SEPIE on upcoming dates.

As regards our teachers, one of the goals of our Erasmus+ projects is the training of the teaching staff. Firstly, the main goal was the digitalisation of our teaching practice, but there have been training courses and job shadowing experiences dealing with many other topics. Specific training on active methodological approaches that will allow our teachers to improve their digital competence both in onsite, blended and offsite environments has been the main focus. It is our aim to equip our teaching staff with tools to enhance motivation and involvement on the part of our students, so that absenteeism can be reduced and to promote the use of digital tools both by teachers and students. To cater for the diversity of students present in our schools, it is necessary to get training in specific ways to deal with students with learning difficulties or special needs.

Thirteen training activities have been carried out to date, having to do with assorted issues, such as artificial intelligence and digital tools, cultural heritage, classroom management through the arts, emotional intelligence

and 21st century skills or creativity in the classroom. These activities have enabled our school teaching staff to implement new methodologies in their daily teaching practice, to get in touch with peer European teachers and to enhance our teaching skills.

Apart from these training activities several of our teachers have engaged in job shadowing observations in Norway, Turkey, Denmark and Ireland. They have been hosted by adult educational institutions where they have been able to learn about different distance learning platforms, on-site and distance learning, teaching migrant students, different approaches to language teaching, gamification, or literature applied to the teaching of languages. Erasmus+ staff exchanges nurture educational leadership in an increasingly globalised landscape (Ivasciuc et al., 2025) and involve a transformation, not just professional, but personal. During their mobilities our teachers have also been offered a wide variety of cultural activities, like visiting museums, guided tours around the historical parts of the city and tasting traditional food. They have learned valuable intangible lessons from these experiences that have caused an impact not just on the teachers who have participated in the job shadowing activity, but mainly on the students, who have benefited from the knowledge and skills acquired, and the rest of the teaching staff, thus contributing to the continuous improvement of our teaching practice.

3. As a hosting organisation

A total of 52 students from partner schools and organisations have visited our institution and 10 teachers from different schools throughout Europe have visited our schools for job shadowing activities and accompanying their groups of students. In February 2024, our school hosted four teachers from the Nettskolen Troms Centre (Troms, Norway). They spent three days in our school during which they carried out a job shadowing Erasmus+ mobility to learn about our experience on digitalisation and exchange ideas. A presentation about their city and their school were shown to the school's teaching staff and students, in turn they were shown another presentation on the Spanish education system, the digital education platform EducaMadrid and the language distance learning programme 'That's English'. These teachers observed lessons and interacted with students. A collaborative activity was also arranged to have them and the school's teaching staff reflect on digital learning. They were offered a guided tour around San Lorenzo de El Escorial, a World Heritage Site, where one of our schools is located. The school's privileged location offers our guests the chance to witness an important part of the history of Spain when they visit the branch in San Lorenzo de El Escorial. Further ways of exploiting this resource in the future are being considered, as the historical, natural and gastronomic features of the town constitute a noteworthy asset.

In March 2024 teachers and staff from a partner school, VHS Bingen, from Bingen, Germany spent five days in the school for a job shadowing mobility. They carried out different activities with the students and the teaching staff, they took part in the lessons, offering the students a presentation about their school both in German and in English, thus turning the experience into a plurilingual one. Distance learning methodology through 'That's English' was discussed, blended learning was another issue dealt with, and a tandem Project was established that is still current to date between their school's students and the students in EOI Collado Villalba. Apart from visiting different language lessons, they were offered the mandatory guided tour around Collado Villalba and San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

In 2025 a request from the Ministry of Education of Turkey was sent to host three of their adult language education teachers, who visited the schools in Collado Villalba and in San Lorenzo de El Escorial for four days. They had the chance to take part in our English, French, German and Japanese lessons. They had a special interest in low level groups (A1, A2 and B1) and the teaching of oral skills and English through literature. They were offered a cultural programme similar to the one that had been offered to our former visitors as well as a visit to the Valley of Cuelgamuros and downtown Madrid.

By hosting teachers from different schools an important synergy has been created among the participating organisations, which has further developed into involving our students in communicative distance learning activities, such as the Tandem Project first carried out by our German Department, followed by an ePenPal Project launched by the English Department this school year inspired by the former's success. Having the opportunity to share ideas, methodologies and experiences with these teachers allows our teaching staff to grow as teachers and to broaden their minds and horizons. We have been able to experience, as Alves and Escorel (2024) pose, that cooperation through Erasmus+ is an important instrument for mutual understanding and promoting European values through personal involvement when it comes to education. Both our students and partner schools' students have benefited from this interaction and continue reaping the results both in and outside the classroom. The Erasmus+ programme does transcend the context of the school.

Not all of our students can be offered the possibility of travelling via Erasmus+, but an effort has been made to bring Europe to the school's classrooms by hosting student groups from different countries. This has confirmed that Erasmus+ does not only involve the linguistic goal, but also meeting, learning, living and sharing experiences with peer students; it is confirming that there are similar people throughout Europe who have brought their different cultural perspectives into the school's classrooms. Students from a high school in Denmark, from three different adult schools in Italy, from two different schools in Germany, from an adult centre in Finland and from an organisation for seniors in Lithuania have visited us in the three years that our institution has participated in the Erasmus+ adult education projects.

When hosting these groups of students a varied programme of activities has been arranged similar to the programme our students have been offered when visiting other schools and organisations. Thus, they have attended the school's language lessons, with Japanese lessons being some of the most valued activities. The students who have visited our school have shown us presentations on their schools and home towns, they have shared different moments with the local students, there has been mutual rapport through multicultural activities such as quizzes, presentations, games, guided tours and food tastings. Both the students and the teaching staff have acted as tour guides for our guests, taking advantage of our privileged natural and historical heritage in the National Park of the Sierra de Guadarrama and San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

Further collaborations have arisen, as the German Department in our school has arranged the aforementioned Tandem project for their students to stay in touch with those of VHS Bingen and the English Department has, in turn, organised an ePenpal Project with 15 Valkeakoski Opisto students. Both projects are underway and have resulted in a better command of both languages on the part of the school's students, as well as in personal bonds that would otherwise not have happened.

Different dissemination activities are periodically carried out to share the outcomes of the school's participation in the Erasmus+ programme. At a school level, the teachers who have taken part in individual mobilities – training courses or job shadowing activities – have shared their experience with the rest of the teaching staff in our regular staff meetings, as well as in the school's annual magazine, *Papel de Babel*².

It is in the school's annual magazine where information about the mobilities has been published. It is written by and for the school members, as both students and teachers write articles, reviews and reports on the school's activities, among which we can find the Erasmus+ mobilities. Participants' comments on their experience show the significance of this experience on the students, as they explain how they have managed to perform everyday activities in a foreign context, how grateful they feel for having travelled abroad to practice the language they learn thanks to the funding of the European Union, the way they connected with the local students and shared their lessons and free time. All in all, an experience which they recommend future students to experience and which has had a substantial impact on them.

As part of the 'Erasmus Days' celebrations in October, activities such as an exhibition, a round table and testimonials gave our students the opportunity to learn from former participants about what taking part in the programme involves and how to apply for a mobility placement. An Erasmus+ corner has been arranged in both schools where pictures and posters of all the mobilities and all the schools and teachers we have hosted are displayed. The school's website³ is the virtual window allowing the general public to witness the Erasmus+ projects the school carries out every academic year. Chronologically arranged there is information on how to apply for the mobilities, requirements, deadlines, and the pictures and description of all the activities carried out to date. The school is present in different social media networks, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. Information on the school's activities is posted through these media, which is seen by many followers, not just the school's students, but also the general public. They are a means of communication that allows our institution to reach a wider audience and to disseminate the outcomes of the school's participation in the Erasmus+ programme, namely a strong sense of European citizenship and the development of European values. All the students who have taken part in a mobility have been issued a Europass mobility document.

4. Conclusions

The linguistic factor has proven to be just one of the many aspects that students and teachers have highlighted after their mobility. The rest of the Erasmus+ goals:

"to promote learning mobility of individuals and groups, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of education and training; to promote non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of youth" (European Commission, 2025, p. 6) and principles: inclusion and diversity; digital transformation; environment and fight against climate change; and participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement have also been at the core of our Erasmus+ experience. Besides, the informal learning opportunities Erasmus+ brings involve motivational and cognitive processes of paramount importance for learners of all ages in lifelong learning (Cronin-Golomb & Bauer, 2023). The students' reflections upon arrival after their mobilities, as they manifested in their surveys and in reports they wrote for the school's magazine stress their new motivation and soft skills acquired from the experience. The same applies to the teaching staff, who have reported the acquisition of new skills and connections after their job shadowing activities and the training activities undertaken. New opportunities can arise from current and future partnerships and it is our organisation's intention to expand the scope and impact of the school's participation in Erasmus+. Long-term cooperation networks with other European organisations and individuals overcoming spatial and cultural distances in the field of lifelong learning are the next goal. It is now possible to break the barriers of geographical distance and cultural differences (Gadár, Kosztyán, Telcs & Abonyi, 2022) thanks to the funding from the European Union. Spanish Official Schools of Languages in general, and our school in particular, can make a significant impact through the Erasmus+ programme collaborating with all sorts of institutions in Europe, beyond just educational ones. Our experience can be transferred to similar institutions in the field of adult education through the non-formal educational environment of Erasmus+ mobilities.

5. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Spanish Service for the Internationalisation of Education - SEPIE for their support when applying for new projects and sorting out situations. We also appreciate all those people and institutions that have collaborated with our school to date and those with whom we intend to go on creating synergies in the future.

Notes

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² Papel de Babel <https://www.educa2.madrid.org/web/eoi.colladovillalba/revista>

³ EOI Collado Villalba <https://www.educa2.madrid.org/web/eoi.colladovillalba>

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Individualised teaching in adult schools. Innovation project based on the Finnish model for adult students with learning difficulties

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Keywords

Adult education, Learning difficulties, Active methodologies, Finnish education model, Motivation.

Abstract

There is an increasing number of secondary school students with learning difficulties. Consequently, numerous studies have been conducted on the subject in recent years, leading to a multitude of theories. However, the field of adult education has been largely overlooked in this regard, perhaps because current legislation does not require adaptations in these cases.

Participation in the Erasmus+ programme allows us to learn about educational realities in other countries with similar problems and different strategies for addressing them. This is the impetus behind the proposed project: the application of active methodologies in the individualised teaching of adults with learning difficulties.

To this end, we begin with an analysis of these difficulties and the active methodologies applicable to mitigate their consequences. The starting point is the observation of the Finnish model, a pioneer in the widespread application of these teaching methods thanks to their success from the earliest educational levels. Therefore, the application of this project in a centre specifically for adults with a high percentage of students with learning difficulties seems feasible and represents a new and different opportunity for them to access the labour market.

1. Introduction

Adult education is primarily characterised by an enormous diversity. Within the same classroom, students of vastly different ages, backgrounds, interests, prior knowledge, and life experiences coincide. This heterogeneity means that traditional teaching does not accommodate the needs of students, resulting in failure or dropout. This reality demands an urgent change in the teaching-learning methodology in adult education.

There have been many initiatives and attempts at change that have been partially implemented without the expected results: support classes, tutoring, extended hours, progressive introduction of ICT, etc.

The Erasmus+ programme offers the opportunity to learn about other educational systems up close and use them as a model for solving certain problems. Our school carried out two Erasmus+ projects within the Communities of Open Learning in European Adult Education (CoOL) programme. In the first, 2020-1-SE01-KA204-077951, only teachers from adult schools in Finland, Sweden, Slovenia, Belgium and another from Spain participated. In the second, 2022-1-ES01-KA120-ADU-000105276, students took part and it was held at the Finnish school Österbottens svenska kristliga KREDU in Nykarleby, which we had met during the first project. Thanks to these projects, we were able to learn about educational realities with problems like our own and different strategies for tackling them.

In this work we will focus on what we have learned from the Finnish system, both because we have been able to get to know it closely through the Erasmus+ programme as mentioned above, and because Finland is one of the countries at the forefront of educational innovation.

The present innovation proposal consists of a project to transform teaching methodology, modelled on the Finnish system as experienced through the Erasmus+ experiences.

The project is aimed at an Adult Education Centre (CEPA) located in a town in the south-east of the Community of Madrid.

Regarding the students, they generally come from a low cultural and socioeconomic background. They see obtaining the Certificate of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) as a route to finding work; that is, Education is a means rather than an end for them, because of the precariousness they experience. They generally must balance their studies with work, family, etc., which means they face many difficulties in successfully completing their studies. Furthermore, they often have learning difficulties due to various disorders (Specific Learning Disorder, ADHD, anxiety, depression), lack of self-esteem, or lack of study skills.

The centre's qualities for success include a competent and effective management team with leadership skills, and a motivated teaching staff with a strong commitment to supporting students, which is perceived by them as an incentive and a boost to their confidence.

The aspects that can be improved, and towards which this innovation project is directed, are fundamentally:

- The impossibility of offering quality teaching to all students due to their diversity of origin and age, with all that this implies.
- The lack of attention to variables that influence education.
- Inequality in the starting point of their learning process (prior knowledge).
- The scarcity of resources.
- The limited attention given in Adult Education to people with learning difficulties.

2. State of the question

Up to now, many authors from multiple disciplines have warned of the deficiencies in our educational system, emphasising the learning difficulties that have been increasing among our students. Far from being a system that offers opportunities to all types of students, the school has been analysed as a place that reproduces inequalities. The various legislative reforms – from the LGE of 1970 to the LOMLOE of 2020 – have not dispelled these criticisms, which come from sociology, critical pedagogy, philosophy and neuroeducation, among others. In recent years, the proliferation of standardised tests – PISA, diagnostic assessments, revalidations – has revived this critique: authors such as Enrique Javier Díez Gutiérrez warn that the logic of New Public Management transfers business criteria to the classroom, narrows the curriculum towards the measurable, and erodes teacher autonomy.

The neuroscientist Francisco Mora has introduced a different though convergent critique: in *Neuroeducación* (2013), he argues that the school ignores how the brain actually functions, that it only learns what it finds emotionally engaging, and that school organisation – rigid timetables, fragmented subjects, punitive assessment – contradicts the basic principles of learning.

From a philosophical standpoint, Larrosa argues in *La experiencia de la lectura* (2003) for an education centred on experience, slowness and thought, as opposed to the reduction of knowledge to measurable and transferable competences.

All the above positions share the idea that the Spanish educational system tends to reproduce rather than transform existing social structures. The school functions more as a normalising device than as one of emancipation. This does not mean that education cannot be transformative, but rather that transformation requires deep reflection on the aims, content, and forms of the school institution. Thus, in this work, the observation of the Finnish educational system is considered as a driver of that reflection and change through the proposal set out below.

3. Learning difficulties in adults

This innovation project is articulated around two fundamental pillars: the concept of learning difficulties, and a way of mitigating their effects through active methodologies, among which is the Finnish system we take as an example.

According to Kirk and Gallagher, we can speak of difficulties when the following occurs:

- The presence for at least six months of one of the following difficulties: reading of words, difficulties in understanding the meaning of what is read, spelling difficulties, in written expression, in mastery of number sense, numerical data, or calculation and in mathematical reasoning.
- Academic aptitudes are substantially and quantifiably affected below what is expected for the student's chronological age.
- They begin at school age, but do not manifest themselves until the affected academic demands exceed the individual's capabilities.
- They are not better explained by intellectual disabilities, uncorrected visual or auditory impairments, other mental or neurological disorders, psychosocial adversity, lack of proficiency in the language of academic instruction, or inadequate educational guidance.

According to Siemens and Downes, learning and its development is not only the product of personal will, but is also produced thanks to other biological aspects (connections between networks and sets of information). Neuroeducation is a pedagogical science that seeks to draw on neuroscience to offer effective methodologies according to the type of student.

4. The Finnish teaching methodology

The Finnish educational system is founded on equity, non-competitiveness, and the individual development of the student, because each student has characteristics that must be respected to offer them a quality education. These aspects are what have led the Finnish educational system to be among the best in Europe. How do they carry out this form of teaching? They use innovative methodologies such as flipped classrooms or open class, always supported by new technologies. The comparison between the Finnish and Spanish systems highlights some aspects of the former that could be applied to our centres.

The fundamental basis of the teaching system in Finland is involving the student in their own learning. For this purpose, a primary instrument is the use of new technologies. Thus, the role of the teacher is not as we traditionally understand it; teamwork is developed in classes, advised by the class teacher together with a support teacher. Thanks to the autonomy with which schools and teaching teams are endowed, in the above context, individualised attention is possible, and this is one of the keys to the success of the Finnish educational system (Timothy Walker, 2018).

Technology, which as we say is very important, is complemented using traditional materials, as all classrooms have a library with physical books available to all students.

Furthermore, it should be noted that students are not in class for long periods of time; class periods are approximately 45 minutes, with a break between sessions during which students can leave the classroom. This class time is even used to complete "assignments" – they do not call them that – so that they do not take homework home.

As for assessment, there are no exams as we know them. Periodic self-assessments are carried out so that students are aware of their progress and become co-responsible for their education. This responsibility gives them self-confidence and helps in their development and self-esteem.

The Finnish Education Authority (2014) establishes a series of pillars on which the teaching-learning system must be founded:

- Objective: to ensure the necessary knowledge and skills, as well as to promote learning.
- Renewing topics.
- Cross-curricular competences as part of each subject.
- Changing the way schools operate.
- At least one multidisciplinary learning module per year.
- Diversity in student assessment.

Finnish education is based on a systemic approach to education. It is an integrating paradigm since, in its methodological approaches, all aspects that directly or indirectly intervene in education are taken into account. That is, not only the student is considered, but also other conditioning factors such as families, the environment, the individual circumstances of each student, etc. The centre is understood as a system made up of smaller systems that are interrelated so closely that if one element is modified, it affects the whole (Traveset Vilaginés, 2017).

In short, the educational community is conceived as a system with the following characteristics:

- Totality: among the members of this community, a network of relationships is established that makes it conceived as a whole.
- Protection-growth. For the methodology in that system to work, it must evolve proportionally to how the system evolves. If a methodology that worked in the past is repeated as a protective strategy, it may cease to be effective at a given moment, and its use will constitute an error.
- Recurrences occur in changing contexts, so one cannot act on the same problem in the same way every time.

5. Active methodologies

Active methodologies are those that involve the student in their own learning process, making them an active subject of it. Their origin is due to the need to adapt the way of teaching to modern times. One of the keys is self-learning.

These methodologies do not focus only on the teacher and the student but also involve families as a fundamental aspect of learning.

Montessori method

This method was devised by Maria Montessori with the aim of educating children at risk of social exclusion.

This method sets out the following objectives:

- To help the student form their personality through their interaction with the environment.
- To achieve their happiness by making them adapt to that environment.
- To ensure they have full intellectual development by making them a participant in their education, a process in which motivation is of great importance.

Waldorf pedagogy

It was created by Rudolf Steiner in the 20th century. It focuses not only on the academic, but also on the emotional, since the development of social and emotional skills is of great importance. Creativity and

imagination are encouraged, as is connection with nature and art. It is a learning method based on experience and experimentation.

Reggio Emilia pedagogy

This methodology, which developed in the 1940s, also focuses on autonomous learning. Something that stands out is that the key to this learning is communication and collaboration between the student and the teacher, as members of a community in which everyone must feel respected.

Recent initiatives in active methodologies

- *Gamification*: this system is based on the design of playful activities whose structure depends on the training content; therefore, all activities are different. It is very effective with young people and is proving to be very useful in adult education.
- *Flipped Classroom*: the aim is for the student to play a more active role in class. It is the student themselves who internalises the knowledge they put into practice in the classroom, with the teacher as guide.
- *Discovery Learning*: the student becomes responsible for their education and the teacher a guide and facilitator of that process. Through experience, students internalise the content, which is far removed from the traditional purely rote learning system.
- *Design Thinking*: What it adds is the strong emphasis placed on developing skills such as creativity, empathy, autonomous learning and positivity. It basically consists of presenting a problem to students that they must solve through collaboration.

Some successfully implemented initiatives

The most striking ones for their innovative spirit are the following:

ATecA Classrooms: these are Vocational Training classrooms in which, through digitalisation, students can choose autonomous learning in an environment similar to what will be their future workplace.

Applied Scholastics: Its theoretical basis is study technology, which seeks to eliminate three main barriers that prevent any student from learning normally: lack of mass (physical object) of what is being studied; a study gradient (prior skills) that is too high; and words that are not understood or misunderstood in the study vocabulary.

6. Innovation proposal

The innovation plan consists of seven phases:

1. *Presentation phase*. The project will be presented, as an initiative of the centre's management, to the teaching staff. It would be preferable for this to be done at the last staff meeting in June; however, it will need to be repeated at the beginning of the following year due to staff turnover. It is essential to have the consensus of the teaching body as a whole, since this is not an optional methodology; all teaching staff must apply its principles, as otherwise it would not be effective.
2. *Curricular material preparation phase*. The basis of the proposed innovation lies in two fundamental aspects: the widespread use of ICT in the centre, and innovative materials that promote autonomous learning adapted to the diversity of students in adult centres. As for ICT, the use of virtual learning platforms is well known – such as EducaMadrid in our centre – ; but that does not mean their courses are fully up to date, let alone adapted to the methodology we are trying to implement. Furthermore, these ICT resources require a foundation in innovative materials that allow for a logical relationship between the innovative

methodology and the resources used to build learning. Again, it is essential that the management team, from which the promotion of the project originates, knows how to “convince” the teaching staff of its benefits and that they are willing to be part of it. The phase of adapting virtual classrooms and materials requires time and dedication, as it requires a significant review of all content. If teachers do not take ownership of the project, it can never be carried out.

3. Pilot project phase. Its implementation in the third term would be optimal. The new methodology developed by the project will be put into effect initially in selected groups chosen by the teaching staff, those more susceptible to change and more receptive to innovations. Although this is a thoroughly studied project with theoretical foundations and endorsed by other centres where something similar has been carried out, we are working with students, in whom any error would not be beneficial to their learning process. Therefore, with the guidance of the management team and the guidance department, we will try to make a small approximation to what the final phase of the project would be in two or three groups where the trial would be more feasible. It will be carried out with the resources drawn up and approved by each department. At this stage, the joint involvement of the teaching staff is also essential, with frequent meetings where impressions and viewpoints are exchanged (this would effectively serve as a process evaluation). The implementation in the different groups will be done progressively; from the group where success is most assured, to the selected but most uncertain group. There will be specific meetings to analyse how the process is progressing.

4. First evaluation phase. Since the implementation of the pilot project will take place in the third term, a detailed evaluation will be carried out before the last staff meeting of the year, in such a way that both an assessment of the project and the aspects for improvement are brought to light. All this data will be used in the last days of June for the management team and representatives of each teaching department to carry out the appropriate modifications to the project and have it ready for general application in the following year.

5. General application phase for the whole centre. At the first staff meeting in September, the management team will inform the teaching staff of the implementation and evaluation of the pilot project. Similarly, it will inform of the changes made and the timetable for the implementation of the project to the rest of the centre's groups. All of this during the ongoing academic year.

6. Final evaluation phase. In June of the academic year – or in September of the same year – before beginning a new school year with the new methodology implemented, a final evaluation will be carried out as follows: a questionnaire will be given to each teacher to respond to the assessment questions. Finally, once the results have been reviewed and analysed by the management team, a staff meeting will be convened for a joint assessment and to identify aspects to maintain and aspects to modify.

7. Preparation of a final report. With all the experience, a final report will be prepared with the objective of keeping a record for subsequent years of the entire process. Especially in view of possible changes in the composition of the centre, so that if the experience has been positive, it can be repeated. In the final report, it will be explained in detail how the new methodology has been applied, the hypothesis from which we started, and the result.

7. Conclusions

Learning difficulties constitute an area that directly affects students' academic performance and, consequently, is reflected in the increasing dropout rates. Addressing this situation by implementing an active methodology in

the classroom is an endeavour that could yield results in the medium term, provided that teachers are on board. Regarding the general objective that was set as the priority aim of the project, an innovation project has been designed based on active methodologies in an adult education centre whose students generally have learning difficulties. In this way, the starting point has been an examination of the most frequently occurring difficulties, because the hypothesis from which this study departs is that “learning difficulties in adult students are the cause of a large part of the academic failure they experience”.

With the aim of offering a solution to this and putting forward an alternative hypothesis – “by applying an active methodology, adult students with learning difficulties improve their results” – a comparison was made with one of the most reliable educational systems, the Finnish one, in order to try to apply its methodology, as far as possible, to this specific student body. The Finnish system is based on active methodological foundations that were compiled for the elaboration of this innovation project, whose implementation is planned in two phases spanning two academic years. Its subsequent evaluation aims to confirm the hypothesis underlying this study and project.

The ultimate conclusion that can be drawn is that no one knows students and their limitations better than their own teachers. Learning difficulties are not a reality limited to adolescence; rather, if they are not treated or given the necessary support, they persist into adulthood and seriously condition lifelong learning. Therefore, the work of teachers today must be oriented towards solving this type of issue in the academic sphere; this project represents one such attempt.

Notes

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The NEAR project as a model and a method: assessing the impact of Erasmus+ through proximity and narration on adult education in the Naples area

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Keywords

Adult education, Biographical learning, Erasmus+ impact, Narrative proximity, Educational agreements.

Abstract

The NEAR project suggests a change in the approach to assessing the impact of the Erasmus+ programme in Naples which shifts the focus from quantitative indicators to a methodology based on storytelling and proximity. In a context characterised by emerging social vulnerabilities, the model re-imagines transnational mobility as a process of 'biographical learning', capable of highlighting latent skills and reshaping participants' identities. The model's effectiveness is rooted in three interconnected dimensions: Individual transformation (Micro): narrating the travel experience enables vulnerable individuals (inmates, the elderly and students in marginalised communities) to develop self-efficacy and regain their social dignity. Organisational innovation (Meso): the institutions concerned evolve into 'learning organisations' capable of re-purposing assets confiscated from crime and adopting flexible, results-oriented management models. Systemic impact (Macro): through Territorial Education Pacts, the project promotes stable alliances between schools and the third sector and transforms adult education into a driver of urban regeneration and active citizenship. Overall, NEAR shows that pedagogical proximity and active listening are vital scientific tools for ensuring that internationalisation will become a democratic and structural asset capable of surviving individual funding cycles.

1. Introduction

In Lifelong Learning today, the Erasmus+ programme has taken a major step forward toward a sustainable present and future. Far from still being a mere transnational mobility tool, it has now become a complex socio-pedagogical apparatus, a heterogeneous interconnected network of discourses, institutions, administrative structures and a specific educational proposition for producing new patterns tailored to human needs and specific contexts (Milana, Webb, Holford, Waller, & Jarvis, 2018). Erasmus+ acts as a strategic lever for:

- people to update their technical skills;
- educational systems to deeply renew their structures and methods;
- institutions to promote an active and informed citizenship.

In this approach, mobility becomes a space where learners acquire know-how and restructure their own identities in a now multi-shaped European context.

Adult Education (AE) is facing unprecedented challenges today. Considering the future of European Education Space (European Commission, 2025), impact assessment can no longer rely on quantitative indicators only. A strategic framework is necessary to capture qualitative and longitudinal changes, especially in contexts where training remains fragmented. Conventional AE practices strive to respond to the "new social vulnerabilities" (educational poverty, digital isolation and geographic discrimination) characterising the post-Covid-19 period. The Italian NEAR (Narration, Erasmus, Auto-Reflection and Results) Project, which started upon the initiative

of Naples-Area Adult-Education Ambassadors Marianna Capo, Raffaella D'Angelo, Giuseppina Di Ture, Veronica Polese and Lucia Veneruso, aims at bridging the gap between institutional norms and human life experiences. By taking an interpretive view that integrates aesthetic and narrative approaches with the construction of professional identities (Formenti & Luraschi, 2020), the project aims at creating the necessary conditions for adult learners to narrate their own changes, thus turning educational travelling into critical auto-reflection and biographical reward.

Beyond the several acronymic namesakes around, the NEAR model is not a simple monitoring protocol, but an integrated methodological architecture aiming at restoring human experience to its scientific dignity and prestige. For learners often caught between rigid European frameworks and fluent informal learning processes, NEAR proposes a form of participatory "auditing" which turns "cold data" into a lived narrative. Auto-reflection and self-assessment are now fundamental learning principles: no longer a passive user, the learner is the critical protagonist of his/her own growth. In the wake of Merrill and West's social research methods (2009), the model acquires narrative as the prime tool for making tacit skills emerge. Turning the travelling experience into a critical narrative means letting all participants re-appropriate the sense and significance of their own learning process. Telling about one's own journey is a generative process: while narrating their own "biography in progress" (Wieczorek, 2016), people identify the most critical moments, thus consolidating that perceived self-efficacy which is essential for them to obtain their social reward (Azzolini, Marazzita, & Izzo, 2024).

The NEAR model rests upon 4 interconnected theoretical pillars which define the architecture of narrative proximity as a participatory auditing device. These pillars –Biographical Learning (micro-level), Informal and Incidental Learning (learning by friction), Learning Organisation (meso-level) and AE Policy (macro-level) – form a pedagogical ecosystem which has been capable of embedding internationalisation into the social fabric of the Naples area.

Regarded as "transformational science" (Balzano, 2025), proximity in NEAR has gone beyond the merely physical vicinity to become an epistemological attitude. "Inhabiting" territories means recognising the educational value of informal interaction-based learning contexts. The trainer becomes a "contextual facilitator" capable of supervising the quality of the educational bond. He/she will no doubt make sure the learning experience is not perceived as external imposition, but as a deeply-felt response to contextual needs. Thus, proximity is the precondition for trust, which is an essential element for including those adults training circuits have almost always excluded.

The Naples-Area Ambassadors act as real anthropological catalysts between Brussels directives and micro-local realities. They perform a twofold task: a) they operate semantic translations of the Erasmus+ competition notices to make them accessible and interesting to the public and b) they make some active scouting to bring European project management straight into out-of-reach places and contexts.

Through their publicity and mediation, Erasmus+ has made its way into jails, slums and old-people's homes, and has asserted itself as a valuable prospect for reward tailored on the weaknesses specific to the people and contexts in question. These goodwill ambassadors are the human face of the institution, inasmuch as they guarantee that continuous support which turns an isolated project into an organic development route toward social and educational reward.

The practical application of the model finds its utmost significance in the Community-Based Educational Agreements (ActionAid Italia, 2024). Far from being mere bureaucratic agreements, they are participatory governance tools that consolidate stable alliances between schools, non-profit organisations, trade associations and local authorities. By acting as virtual social infrastructures, the agreements guarantee that the new skills and views acquired abroad will accrue to the single mobility project participant and constructively contribute to the

improvement of the whole local area as well (Boffo, Iavarone, Nosari & Nuzzaci, 2023). ActionAid Italia will also provide the Erasmus+ project concerned with the official recognition it deserves. This will no doubt help create a protection and development network that would outlast any possible financing expiration date and promote shared responsibility and a firm commitment to lifelong education.

The research was carried out through a participatory interpretive approach based on a pedagogical proximity and action research perspective. Ours was a field reconnaissance involving projects that started in March and ended in December 2024 (KA122, KA210) within a three-year macro-schedule (2021-2027). The projects were related to Key Actions KA122 (short-term mobility) and KA210 (small-scale partnerships). The results evinced the ambassadors' specific strategic choice: the projects were selected because they met the Naples area's specific needs in critical contexts.

These two types were decided upon for pursuing the following three fundamental objectives:

- a. *dismantling access barriers*: short-term and small-scale formulas ideal for less experienced organisations and suitable for helping participants to win their cultural resistance and gain the necessary confidence during the process;
- b. *focusing on human assets* (Naples - KA122): a challenge on rapid professionalisation and the acquisition of skills that could soon and easily be passed on in dynamic urban contexts;
- c. *community development and resilience* (Salerno - KA210): suitable for a generative usage in the Avellino and Benevento areas as well as for the creation of solid anti-isolation networks.

Table 1 - Summary of Territorial Strategy.

Key Action	Strategic Objective of the Ambassadors	Expected Result
KA122	Making the internationalisation process more democratic	Turning ethnocentric resistance into conscious citizenship
KA210	Deeply rooting innovation into small organisations	Creating an indissoluble bond between project and context

Source: author's own elaboration.

These projects enable facilitators to internationalise people and contexts on a bottom-up basis: it is not all about travelling, but turning the local organisation into a European network hub with a visible and tangible impact crucial to the modernisation of the regional system.

Table 2 - Table of focus groups per geographical area.

Feature	Salerno Focus (28/03/2025)	Naples Focus (31/03/2025)
Territory	Salerno - Avellino - Benevento	Naples - Caserta
Participation	12 participants from 9 organisations in 9 projects	15 participants from 10 organisations in 10 projects
Specificity	Project-context bond	Focus on training organisations and skills learned
Theme Focus	Generative process in the hinterland	Professionalisation and innovation

Source: author's own elaboration.

Data gathering was conducted on two main focus groups, divided by geographic macro-areas and strategic specificities:

- Focus Group 1 (Salerno, 28 March 2025) was at the A. Santucci Library of the University of Salerno. 12 representatives of 9 organisations participated in 9 territorial projects in the Salerno, Avellino and Benevento areas which mostly relied on the deep bond between project and hinterland regeneration.
- Focus Group 2 (Naples, 31 March 2025): was in the Multimedia Room of the Humanities Department of the Federico II University. 15 representatives of 10 leading organisations in the Naples and Caserta areas participated in 10 projects which concentrated on the innovation of training structures and the acquisition of competitive professional skills.

Overall, the research target included heterogeneous groups of high-school worker-students, ex-convicts from social rehabilitation centres, company trainees and university students.

Pursuant to EU Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR), all participants formally authorised the mention and use of their names, personal data and names of institutions involved, as they regarded network transparency and traceability as added values which proved the real impact of regional projects.

Epistemologically, the empirical cases in the manuscript are analytical case summaries. They derive from the systematic cross-examination of final reports KA122 and KA210 and the live biographical narratives from the focus groups. They were collectively validated by the facilitators themselves, who acted as key informants of rehabilitation routes and organic territorial changes.

2. Micro-level: self-revelation and biographical learning

The deepest impact emerges in the individual transformation stories collected within the focus groups in Naples and Salerno, where the journey was described as an epiphanic identity-rupture experience.

The Reward Case – One of the most representative examples is that of a working student at the *Marconi School* in Giugliano (near Naples), whose history was marked by migration traumas and deep social isolation. An Italian-born young man kidnapped by his father and forced to stay in Algeria until the age of 18 saw his return to Italy as a complex identity re-appropriation process. When he took part in an Erasmus+ project in Malaga, Spain, he experienced a real “biography in progress” (as discussed in Section 1). His meeting with diversity acted as a catalyst between:

- the trauma from his parents’ separation and his lack of confidence in the world around him;
- his eventually coming to fully comprehend the universal value of languages and communication.

That boy that lived a marginalised life now works as an international steward for *Ryanair*, as a result of having turned his forced journey into a conscious travelling profession.

Identity and Self-efficacy – The narrative orientation routes analysed in the focus groups confirm that telling about the journey consolidates the learner’s self-efficacy (see p. 2 above). For many of the adults involved, Erasmus+ meant their first time ever out of Italy or on a plane. Although these people initially perceived Erasmus as a privilege of university students, they later experienced their journeys as moments of much greater enrichment than they had expected. Being selected for a European programme gave participants an unexpected shot of self-confidence - they eventually started to feel equal to those students that were always referred to as the most successful.

Discrimination and Inclusion – For the convict women from the *Lazzarelle social cooperative*, “to be able to tell” their own know-how means to renegotiate the stigma and humanise the inclusion route (Benelli & Gijón Casares,

2020). Often victims of economic violence or involved in unpaid illegal domestic work, many of them have ended up in jail totally unaware of their own skills. Through exchanging such good practices as Quadrathlon DuFemm (a programme including sport, mental well-being and empowerment), NEAR has enabled these women to identify hidden skills. Narrative-based orientation has helped them “identify what they can do but cannot properly say they do” – once just prisoners, they are now skilful individuals that can take and keep regular jobs they will have legitimately qualified for.

Active Ageing - The impact of the project has clearly been visible even in the cases of over-65s, who have been able to “dismantle their age stereotypes and start getting creative”. Through 13 training sessions on creativity and transnational exhibitions (in Spain, Ireland and Italy), senior participants have shown one can be a major social actor even late in one’s life. Albeit without any formal language learning, Naples-focus-group over-65s found ingenious communication modes (even gestures), made close friends and destroyed the idea of the elderly as passive subjects excluded from modern life.

3. Meso-level: organisations as presidia of innovation and proximity

While the micro-level is centred on transformation in the individual, the meso-level features the structural analysis of Erasmus+’s catalyst effect on the transformation of the institutions. Once mere bureaucratic-mobility containers, the organisations involved in the NEAR project have now become dynamic learning organisations (Bierema, Fedeli & Merriam, 2025). The Naples-area institutions concerned have created a special space where European innovation is embodied in local daily life. As Boffo et al. theorised (2023), far from still being a mere “passive resistance to shocks”, organisational resilience is also a proactive local-asset-valorising skill and attitude never seen before. Through its transnational osmotic confrontation approach, Erasmus+ simplifies tasks and speeds up routines and procedures - it forces the personnel to measure themselves with European standards and import flexible management models into contexts often hindered by uselessly complex, lengthy and rigid procedures.

Regarding the symbolic value of rewards, a few instances of territorial excellence are worth mentioning. NEAR’s impact is unquestionable in contexts like *Didaxè* and the *Città Nuova Foundation* (in the Caserta and Naples areas respectively), where Erasmus+ has become a means for “territorial claim and reward”. Here, the claim and reward symbolism is clearly visible on two major “channels”:

- the transformation of the assets confiscated and the semantic reconsideration of their functions;
- social tailoring – from exclusion to internationalisation.

Such places as the Cellole villas or confiscated properties in the Caserta area will have their destiny radically rewritten. Once symbols of seclusion, omerta and top-down territorial control, these spaces, thanks to European grants and networks, will turn into vital hubs of an international network. The confiscated asset is no longer a criminal-power warning signal; it is a freedom lab where European institutional reliability emancipates the local community from asphyxial criminal control. The presence of foreign partners in these places acts as a powerful evil-demythifying agent: Europe enters the asset, opens its windows and normalises lawfulness through some sort of transnational cooperation.

Within a confiscated villa, social tailoring is the climax of the above transformation process. No longer a mere normative imposition, lawful action here actually integrates with pedagogical innovation (Rocco, 2023). Once synonymous with exploitation and subsistence, craft work now becomes a European citizenship lab. The tailor’s seams symbolise the mending of a torn social fabric: the women involved produce not only goods, but also new identities – they become world citizens. This shows that “proximity” is an asset rather than a liability. Proximity

is the engine of a global transformation, one which has brought Europe right where the Italian Government seemed to have blatantly failed.

An essential element that the meso-level analysis has evinced is the paramount importance of incidental and informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). NEAR organisations do not improve and progress only through structured courses, but “learn to be” through their daily friction with complexity.

Tacit Knowledge and Operational Resilience: rather than being learned only mechanically in textbooks, skills are also acquired “by chance”, while handling logistic crises or by spontaneous problem-solving activities that might be needed while dealing with foreign partners. This tacit knowledge translates into greater organisational flexibility: the personnel concerned learn to face uncertainty and will most probably transform unforeseen circumstances into learning opportunities. Arranging international meetings successfully in secluded contexts entails emotional and managerial forms of intelligence that will become stable assets for the organisation involved.

Cross-Fertilisation and Green Identity: no longer a mere bureaucratic duty, the integration of “green resources” with sustainable practices is now a strategic choice. Beside its environmental dimension, organisations also discover ecology’s social value. Reducing the social and environmental cost of obsolete structures also means modernising education by introducing digital tools and devices that would be implemented in environmentally and socially-healthy contexts. Horizontal collaboration approaches act as filters within the walls of the institutions concerned. This “cross-fertilisation” process renews the local bureaucracy not only by de-materialising paper documents, but also by making its practices less lengthy and more result-oriented. NEAR organisations end up acting as real “Law Frontiers”: liminal spaces where Eurocracy humanises itself, loses its technical coldness and adapts to the primal needs of complex contexts by acting as a cultural mediator between the old and the new. No longer an isolated one-way administrative entity, the single organisation is now a two-way bridge: a) it brings the Naples hinterland to the hub of EU policies and b) it translates European values such as inclusion and dignity into concrete actions that change the looks of streets and the lives of people.

4. Macro-level: AE policy, systems and future

The step toward the Macro-Level marks the moment when the individual sparks of change - the transformation of participants and the evolution of associations - become an organic system. Not only a traveller’s cheque dispenser, Erasmus+ is also a formidable public policy accelerator. NEAR’s added value really lies in its ability to leave a structural legacy to the context concerned and transform AE into a real tool for social and urban-planning design (see Section 5) – e.g., the *Ribellarci* (Let’s Rebel) project in the Benevento area. Through its action research centred on rivers as the throbbing veins of local communities, the project started as a mere adult learning route and later provided the scientific grounds and civic thrust needed for a municipality near Naples to secure €1.5 million in Eurogrants. Studying the territory means being able to re-qualify it: a forsaken naturalist route coming back to life is the tangible result of an education policy that can turn into “stone and concrete” by bridging the gap between theoretical learning and local development (Rocco, 2023). This macro-Neapolitan vitality finds its rightful correspondence even in international data and figures. The most recent country reports by the European Association for the Education of Adults (2025) reveal surprising data: while Northern European models, like the Finnish one, continue to dominate the formal participation statistics, the Naples area is winning the radical inclusion challenge. NEAR’s strong point is its specific ability to arrive at the hardest hit, those vulnerable adults who are hardly ever reached by any initiative whatsoever. Now this historical gap is being bridged thanks to some sort of proximity pedagogy that can speak various languages and address concrete needs. The real future challenge is to make all these innovations become the “new normality”. AE in the Naples region will be travelling toward ambitious horizons:

1. Restorative Justice, whereby, through “circles of justice”, education can re-sew the seams crime has broken;
2. Regeneration Tourism, which transforms the journey into a reward opportunity for both hosts and guests - using the confiscated assets not only as labs, but also as social housing spaces and job centres, consolidates a view whereby lawfulness produces material wealth and active citizenship (Boffo et al., 2023);
3. Territorial Educational Agreements - the ultimate macro-objective; we no longer want ephemeral measures, but solid alliances that ensure every broken shell (be it an individual weakness or a territorial wound) will be recovered and turned into a pillar for a European Union that is finally equal, resilient, and profoundly humane.

For the sake of accuracy, the NEAR governance has proposed the following analytical schematisation to sever empirical findings from interpretive hypotheses and political implications:

Table 3 - NEAR Summary of Empirical Findings, Interpretive Hypotheses and Political Implications.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS	INTERPRETIVE HYPOTHESES	POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS
<i>Job Opportunities: stable training routes for vulnerable individuals (e.g., the Marconi worker-student who became a Ryanair flight-assistant).</i>	<i>Mobility as an identity-rupture experience: the cultural shock between the participant’s past and present engendered a present reconsideration of past traumas and annihilated the social-stigmatisation fears so typical of the marginalised.</i>	<i>Democratising internationalisation: European AE policies must be structured as bottom-up participation processes – that is the only way to bridge the historic participation gap between Southern Italy and Northern Europe.</i>
<i>Reward and functional re-writing of confiscated assets: transformation of assets historically confiscated from organised crime into lifelong education hubs, social transnational interaction and active lawfulness labs (e.g., the Didaxè Centre in the Cellole villas).</i>	<i>Proximity as an anthropological catalyst: the pedagogical proximity of facilitators and EDA ambassadors as semantic mediators and translators between the formal Brussels directives and the real historical and educational micro-needs within the local community concerned.</i>	<i>Institutionalisation of educational agreements: ineffective temporary or fragmented financing measures must inexorably be ruled out in favour of the structural adoption of stable Community-based Educational Agreements as ordinary local governance provisions.</i>
<i>Generating tangible civic impacts on the territory concerned: field-based action research triggered direct cooperation with local decision-making authorities: it was particularly the case with the Let’s Rebel Project that was centred on the Calore river catchment, whose results provided the town near Benevento with a civic and scientific basis for intercepting and obtaining a €1.5 million environmental re-qualification Eurogrant.</i>	<i>“Learning by Friction”: the development of educational and third-sector institutions is not a mechanical process, but one which consolidates through the assimilation of informal learning and the management of quick frictions and bureaucratic crises that can turn unforeseen circumstances into stable emotional intelligence.</i>	<i>Generative Welfare and Restorative Justice: AE and mobility programmes within regional welfare, regenerative tourism and restorative justice policies must be organically integrated, so as to make lifelong training a fundamental pillar of the health and reliability of European Democracy.</i>

Source: author’s own elaboration.

5. Conclusions: toward a stable AE community

The experience gained through the NEAR project unmistakably shows that impact assessment can no longer be reduced to a mere technical, bureaucratic or statistical exercise. Instead, it constitutes a deliberate pedagogical act requiring active listening and narrative as legitimate scientific research tools. An assessment of this sort cannot fail to valorise biographic transformation processes or to recognise that behind every datum or figure is the pulse of individual change (Bierema et al., 2025). NEAR project outcomes suggest that each individual, often fragmented, experience finally merges into a stable regional AE community. Far from being sheer project accumulation, NEAR's real challenge is to engender a territorial ecosystem that would act as connective tissue between and among the various Provincial AE Centres (CPIA here in Italy), non-profit organisations and local authorities. Then again (see p. 2 above), the main aim is to turn the informal networks that started during the initial project emergency into real permanent social infrastructures which can outlive European financing cycles (Milana & Holford, 2014; Gouthro, 2014). At this stage, capitalisation is the keyword. We should prevent the extraordinary portfolio of skills acquired and the juvenile mobility-triggered de-provincialisation process from disappearing once the enthusiasm for the project wanes. As Boffo et al. (2023) stressed, the resilience of a system is gauged by its ability to retain the value it has yielded. As regards the Naples area in the 2026-2029 period, the challenge will be to institutionalise European Educational Agreements not as virtuous exceptions, but as ordinary governance tools. This will enable the area to move from a mere assistance model to a generative welfare scheme where an individual transformation narrative becomes the empirical basis for future political choices. NEAR leaves us with a precious lesson to learn: Adult education is the very engine of European democracy (Rocco, 2023). Only through a collective structured commitment can AE integrally fulfil its highest mission: humanise inclusion routes, dismantle the walls of prejudice and make each and every citizen – regardless of their life story, provenance or mistakes made – an active and conscious protagonist of a common European destiny.

Notes

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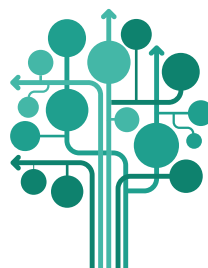
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