Pedagogia oggi

L'istruzione superiore per adulti e studenti non tradizionali: opportunità mancate e direzioni future in Europa

Higher Education for Adults Learners in Europe: Missed Opportunities and Future Directions in the 21st Century

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OPEN ACCESS

Siped Società Italiana di Pedagogia

Double blind peer review

Citation: Piazza, R. & Matei, L. (2025). Higher Education for Adults Learners in Europe: Missed Opportunities and Future Directions in the 21st Century. *Pedagogia oggi*, *23*(1), 91-98. https://doi.org/10.7346/PO-012025-11

Journal Homepage
https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/siped

Pensa MultiMedia / ISSN 2611-6561
https://doi10.7346/PO-012025-11

ABSTRACT

Higher education (HE) witnessed transformative progress in Europe since 1999-2000. However, not all areas have benefitted equally, as in the case of HE for adult learners. Innovative and impactful developments can be documented, such as regarding degree models, quality assurance, student mobility, HE qualifications, the fundamental values of HE and transnational education. For most of this period, the political and policy climate at the European level has been supportive for HE, nurtured by European Union (EU) strategies, European Higher Education Area initiatives, and a combination of powerful policy narratives, such as knowledge society, neoliberalism, European integration, and democratization. Against this mostly positive background, the present article documents the reality of a lack of significant progress in the specific area of HE for adults and uncovers the reasons for this.

Dal 1999-2000 l'istruzione superiore in Europa ha registrato sviluppi significativi, con innovazioni rilevanti nei modelli di laurea, nell'assicurazione della qualità, nella mobilità studentesca, nei titoli e nei valori fondanti dell'istruzione superiore, inclusa l'istruzione transnazionale. Questi cambiamenti sono proseguiti anche dopo la crisi del 2007-2009, nonostante il calo del sostegno pubblico in molti Paesi. Il contesto politico europeo si è mantenuto favorevole, grazie alle politiche dell'UE, al Processo di Bologna e a narrazioni come la società della conoscenza, il neoliberismo e l'integrazione europea. Tuttavia, non tutti i settori hanno beneficiato allo stesso modo di questo slancio: l'istruzione superiore per adulti continua a rappresentare un'area marginale. Questo articolo documenta l'assenza di progressi significativi in questo ambito e analizza le ragioni di tale stagnazione.

Keywords: adult education, european higher education, education policy, lifelong learning, policy narratives

Parole chiave: educazione degli adulti, spazio europeo dell'istruzione superiore, politica dell'istruzione, apprendimento permanente, narrazioni politiche

Received: April 14, 2025
Accepted: June 06, 2025
Published: June 30, 2025

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Introduction

The topic of higher education (HE) for adult learners is seldomly addressed in the scholarship of European education policies in the 21st century. This lack of attention in scholarship, we posit, reflects the modest standing of adult learning in HE policies themselves.

The present article documents and interrogates this situation. Future directions of development that can be anticipated in HE for adult learners are also addressed.

Several areas of HE witnesses remarkable, even unprecedented developments since the turn of the 21st century, supported by daring and innovative policies. No such developments can be identified in the area of HE for adults. Our research invites the conclusion that HE for adult learners tends to fall between the cracks of policy areas such as HE in general, LLL, adult education and, to some extent, vocational education and training and broader social policies. This, we maintain, is the main explanation for the lack of significant progress in the area.

The analysis in the present article is based on an extensive document analysis. We build a novel analytical framework to scrutinize how progress happened in certain areas of HE but not in others. This analytical framework is articulated around the notions of policy frameworks, models, tools and instruments in HE, and policy narratives.

In the present study, by adult learners we understand

> a diverse group – typically age 25 and older – with a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds, adult responsibilities and job experiences. They typically do not follow the traditional pattern of enrolling in postsecondary education immediately after high school. They often return to school to stay competitive in the workplace or prepare for a career change. And they usually study on a part-time basis (…) while maintaining work and family responsibilities. (SREB, 2025).

1. An analytical framework for exploring developments in European HE

The period since 1999-2000 was not a time of an uninterrupted triumphant march forward in HE, with only great achievements. Yet, it marked unprecedented innovation compared to past moments in European history and other regions of the world. Many of them were positive (Matei, 2015), to the point we can talk about transformative progress.

What were these developments exactly? How can they be studied and explained? What made them possible and influenced them?

These questions have been studied extensively. We summarize here the answers and extract a novel analytical framework that can be applied rigorously to the broader subject itself (HE developments in Europe) and more specifically to the area of HE for adult learners.

The list of innovative and impactful new developments in HE includes:

– *new structure of degrees* (BA-MA-PhD). Master's degrees, for example, were virtually unknown in Europe before 2000. Today almost all universities offer them. This was a sea change;
– *new degree models*. New normative projections for different types of degrees have been put forward. For example, the Salzburg Principles of Doctoral Education (EUA, 2015) contributed to what can be called a European model of doctoral education;
– *models of quality assurance (QA)*. European countries adopted a common model for QA in HE, the Standards and Guidelines for QA in the EHEA (2005; 2015). Moreover, a pan-European institution was created in 2008 specifically for QA, the European Register for Quality Assurance[1];
– *student mobility*. Student and, to some extent, staff mobility is another significant development. It was a major goal of the HE reforms in Europe and a key motivation for the Bologna Process. Expanded student mobility was made possible by the creation of support infrastructure and funding (*e.g.,* the

1 https://www.eqar.eu/, accessed on 10/04/2025

Erasmus Programme) and by new regulations, regarding for example the recognition of studies and qualifications;
– *governance models*. As an example, Europe developed a new and highly consequential model of university autonomy beginning in 2007 (Matei, Iwinska, 2018). More recently, extraordinary efforts have been made to address the crisis of academic freedom in Europe (Matei, 2024). This includes identifying and defining for the first time a set of fundamental values of HE shared nominally among all 49 countries of the EHEA (Russia and Belarus are currently suspended; Matei *et alii*, 2024), along with explicit and shared governmental commitments for their protection and promotion. The idea of a common governance framework anchored on "fundamental values" has also been taken up by the EU, currently developing legislation for academic freedom;
–*institutional models*. As an example, the European Universities Initiative stimulated the emergence of a new model of university, genuinely transnational and European, including legally (Matei, Becker, 2022);
– *tools or instruments*. New and innovative tools or instruments were created, such as the European Cred-Transfer System (ECTS) or the Diplomat Supplement.

Many more items can be added to the list. We propose to organise and scrutinise these developments using an analytical framework comprising the following:

Policy frameworks. Policy frameworks as general structures encapsulated in documents and established practices that provide a guiding architecture for policy action in one or more areas (Lakhno, 2023). We posit that relevant policy frameworks emerged during this period taking the form of "areas": the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) launched in 2010 as a result of the Bologna Process (launched in 1999)[2], the European Research Area (ERA - launched in 2000)[3] and the European Education Area (EEA - launched in 2017-18).[4] A European LLL Area was planned but not realised. Within these "areas" (or policy frameworks), specific *strategies and policy initiatives* have been adopted. A particular sectoral strategy relevant in this context is the European Strategy for Universities (2022)[5].

HE models. As shown in the list above, these can be models of curriculum, pedagogy, governance, funding, degree and institutional, etc. By "models" we understand integrated normative projections for the organisation of activities in given areas, including technical parameters (such as the number of credits for a certain type of degree, for example) and principles (*e.g.,* principles for doctoral education).

Tools or instruments. Most of these developments included new tools and instruments, like the diploma supplement or transferable credits. The distinction between models and tools is sometimes difficult to make: a model can become a tool when it has an immediate, instrumental applicable value, rather than being a construct that guides action. The ECTS can be viewed as a model of organisation of the curriculum or a tool for student records and promoting mobility, for example.

Institutions. New institutions have been created at the European level, sometimes against the odds of restrictive legislation, such as the European Research Council, the European Institute of Technology or EQAR.

Policy narratives. A combination (with shifting configurations) of powerful policy narratives has supported, even triggered these developments (Matei, 2015): knowledge society, Europeanisation, neoliberalism, and democratisation. Their strength and influence varied at different times. Some lost force (*e.g.,* democratization and Europeanisation), while new narratives, such as populism and securitisation, have emerged in the second part of the period.

How do policy narratives work and why is it important to bring them into this discussion?

We can illustrate with the example of the first decade of the period, when the EU adopted the Lisbon Agenda (EU, 2000) as its overarching strategy until 2010. The Lisbon Strategy had a major impact on HE policy in Europe. In turn, it was significantly influenced by the policy narratives listed above. In 2000,

2 https://ehea.info/, accessed on 10/04/2025
3 https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/our-digital-future/european-research-area_en, accessed on 10/04/2025
4 https://education.ec.europa.eu/, accessed on 10/04/2025
5 https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf, accessed on 10/04/2025

the EU committed to becoming the world's most competitive economy by 2010 and achieving full employment within this timeframe, with these goals being pursued via building a knowledge e0conomy and society (Matei, 2015). The core idea was that economic competitiveness and social cohesion can be achieved through knowledge production (research), transmission (education), dissemination and use (innovation). Accordingly, it was agreed that the EU needed to develop research on unprecedented levels, which became a key political priority. This led to the creation of the European Research Area, a sectoral policy framework, which supported a set of concrete initiatives, including research framework programmes with significant budgets[6] or new organisational models and governance in research.

The Bologna Process was launched in 1999 aiming at the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA, formally launched in 2010). Although the EHEA is broader than the EU, including nominally almost all countries of Europe and the EU Commission, it emerged to a large extent as a coordinated effort to pursue a similar goal as the ERA: building a knowledge economy and society.

In both cases, other policy narratives were also at play, neoliberalism for example. Within the Lisbon Strategy, the EU wanted to become the most competitive economy in the world (a clear neoliberal principle). As it was thought that size matters to competitiveness and efficiency (another neoliberal principle), broad European integration became a prominent objective. In this regard, HE was perceived as an avenue for building a large European labour market, rather than nationally fragmented, to compete with other economies such as the US or China. To achieve this, not only transnational integration was promoted, but also inclusiveness. Calls for the inclusion of women or marginalized groups in HE and science became prominent, at least in part justified by neoliberal economic considerations: a larger European labour market with better educated knowledge workers means higher competitiveness. Neoliberal principles had a significant impact in the field of knowledge production and dissemination as well. For example, in both the EHEA and ERA universities were asked to be more competitive, directly adapt to market needs and support industrial innovation.

Democratisation and Europeanisation have also played a role in shaping policy frameworks. The Erasmus Programme, for instance, was used to encourage student mobility and educate them in a democratic European perspective. A major aim of Erasmus was to "use" HE to build a European *demos* (a people), not just an *ethos* (sharing common European values; Matei, 2015)

This direction of travel at the intersection of knowledge society, neoliberalism, democratization and Europeanisation was challenged by a shift in the dominant policy narratives after the Great Recession of 2007-2009. Populism and nationalism started to oppose democratization and Europeanisation. While new narratives became quite influential in European politics in general, they have not completely replaced the earlier ones in HE.

2. Falling between the cracks: HE for adult learners in the European education policy landscape

This analytical framework can be used to study evolutions in HE for adult learners as well.

As pointed out by influential reports, adult education, including HE for adult learners, has not been a success story in Europe (OECD, 2019, Eurydice, 2021). Our analysis here supports the same conclusion.

Several policy frameworks had the potential to support advancement in this area, but they failed to do so for various reasons that will be investigated bellow. This is what we call missed opportunities. Also, there has been very little innovation in terms of adapted tools for this area. When new tools (such as individual learning accounts) have been proposed, they remained largely theoretical. In addition, there has been insufficient conceptual and strategic clarity in this area, contributing to policy drift and inaction. For example, the answer to the question whether universities must care about adult learners was often unclear. HE institutions and policy makers tend to forget and need to be reminded that HE institutions are adult education institutions as well (Jefflén 2019).

6 The EU's 7th research framework programme, which ran from 2007 to 2013, had a budget of about 53.5 billion EUR. The current framework programme, Horizon Europe, has a budget of about almost 100 billion EUR.

a. Overarching policy frameworks

I. *HE frameworks and policies*

European Higher Education Area. The Bologna Process and the EHEA were not indifferent to the issue of HE for adult learners. They placed a strong nominal focus on LLL in HE. The importance of LLL as a policy objective has been reaffirmed several times in the Bologna Ministerial Communiqués, the main policy milestones documents of the Process. To date, the EHEA maintains LLL as a nominal action line or priority[7]. However, the Bologna Process and the EHEA have not instigated significant progress in this area. The discourse was there, but no practical tools or institutions have been created, nor have any major actions been taken. Even the discourse receded after 2012, LLL being combined with and largely taken over by the topic of the social dimension of HE.

This was one of the most prominent missed opportunities, as it was the only major policy framework for HE that paid central attention to the topic of adult learners.

The *European Research Area* was developed for research and innovation, separately from HE. However, it has also supported HE developments, for example through promoting new models of knowledge production and research governance. The EU research framework programmes, like Horizon Europe, have been key in supporting its objectives. For example, they have provided significant budgets to support transborder collaborative university research, thus stimulating more efficient research (in line with the neoliberal policy narrative), but also strengthening the European dimension of HE (Europeanisation). ERA occasionally mentioned the need to involve non-traditional groups, such as older adults, in research and research training, primarily justified by considerations of size of the sector (to have a larger number of active researchers), and also in the context of discussions on 'greying Europe', in this case the idea of keeping highly qualified researchers active, rather than letting them join the growing cohort of retired, and thus inactive, citizens. Unfortunately, these strategic policy considerations have not led to consistent actual activities in the field of HE for adult learners. Overall, the ERA has not had an explicit focus on adult learners.

A *European Strategy for Universities* was launched by the EU in 2022[8] with the aim of «supporting and enabling universities to adapt to changing conditions, to thrive and to contribute to Europe's resilience and recovery» (EU, 2022). One of the outputs of the strategy was the adoption of a European approach to micro-credentials for LLL and employability (EU, 2022a). Micro-credentials might prove to be an effective new tool and pedagogical model for promoting HE for adult learners, filling a long-term gap in this area. This is a rare good news. However, the discussion on micro-credentials in general and for adult learners in HE is still very much at the stage of policy development, with little or no actual implementation so far.

II. *Other education frameworks*

The idea of *European Education Area (EEA)*[9], different than the EHEA and ERA, was evoked at several moments in the past 25 years. In its most recent embodiment, the EEA was officially launched in 2017. The declared overall objective is "to help European Union Member States work together to build more resilient and inclusive education and training systems"[10]. EEA is designed to work in synergy with a recently adopted European Skills Agenda[11] and the ERA to "harness knowledge, making it the foundation of Europe's recovery and prosperity"[12] (we can notice late echoes of the knowledge society narrative). The EEA defines the main fields of education in the EU and sets targets for each: early childhood education and care, school education, HE (target: more than 40% of young adults to acquire a HE qualification), adult

7 https://ehea.info/page-lifelong-learning, accessed on 10/04/2025
8 https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf, accessed on 10/04/2025
9 https://education.ec.europa.eu/, accessed on 10/04/2025
10 *ibid*
11 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en, accessed on 10/04/2025
12 https://education.ec.europa.eu/, accessed on 10/04/2025

learning, and vocational education and training. There are insufficient provisions to ensure a connection between HE and adult learning, meaning that this may once again fall between the cracks. This is further evidenced by the governance structure of the EEA, which includes working groups for each main field of education. HE and adult learning are separated and without references to each other. Moreover, adult learning is defined as "a range of formal and informal learning activities, both general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training[13]", thus leaving out HE, despite mentions elsewhere that seem to imply the contrary: "The working group [on adult learning] facilitates synergies between the education and the research and innovation missions of HE institutions, in the context of the European Education Area and the European Research Area, while ensuring consistency with the European Higher Education Area"[14].

The mandate of the working group is ambitious and promising in itself. It is tasked with putting in practice the EU provisions with regard to what we propose to characterize as new models and tools for adult education:

– upskilling learning pathways (EU, 2016);
– individual learning accounts (EU, 2022b);
– micro-credentials (EU, 2022a).

The EU has considered a *European Area of LLL* several times since the early 2000's (e.g. EU, 2001), influenced by the dominant policy narratives of the time. This area was meant to bring HE and adult learning together:

> A European area of lifelong learning will enable citizens to move freely between learning settings, jobs, regions and countries in order to learn. LLL therefore focuses on learning from pre-school to post-retirement ('from the cradle to the grave') and covers all forms of education (formal, informal or non-formal)» (EU, 2021).

Unfortunately, no European Area of LLL was established. This is another missed opportunity.

Dedicated adult education frameworks. It is possible to identify attempts to create European frameworks for adult education specifically, as stand-alone or part of broader frameworks. For example, the *Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century* (EAEA, 2024) proposes the creation of Learning Europe, an adult learning and education area. This is a remarkable initiative, although it is not clear how it will be put in practice. Besides, Learning Europe seems to pay no attention to HE for adults. Instead, it states that adult learning and education is limited to "three key domains of learning and skills. First, literacy and basic skills; second, continuing education and vocational skills; and third, liberal, popular and community education and citizenship skills" (EAEA, 2024).

III. *Other frameworks*

The European pillar of social rights. The adoption of the European Pillar of social rights[15] was endorsed by the European Commission and the European Parliament in 2017. This contributes new dimensions to the European frameworks for adult education, for example within the EEA. A key principle of the Pillar is that "Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market"[16]. This dimension is important, because it points to justifications for adult education that are framed not only in instrumental terms (*e.g.* economic benefits), but also in terms of fundamental rights.

New tools

We have not identified new tools developed to support specifically HE for adult learners. This situation contributed to the lack of innovation and progress in the area. We have been able to identify, however, a

13 *ibid*
14 *ibid*
15 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en accessed on 10/04/2025
16 *ibid*

novel tools for adult education more broadly, such as the individual learning accounts and the micro-credentials. These tools have been proposed only recently in EU policy frameworks. There is a chance that they will be employed in practice, and they could be used for the specific area of HE for adult learners.

c. *New models*

Our analysis shows that innovation in models for adult learner in HE is minimal. The only major development here are the upskilling pathways for adults, which are still in early stages.

One could have expected to see advances in the use of educational technology to improve HE for adult learners, building on good practices from HE during the pandemic. Sadly, this has not been the case.

d. *New institutions*

It is also difficult to identify new institutions created specifically for the purpose of supporting and advancing HE for adult learners.

e. *Policy narratives*

The dominant policy narratives during this time were not sufficiently supportive of HE for older adults. While their varying combinations did support significantly either HE or adult education, they rarely and insufficiently pointed to the relevance of HE for adult learners. At present, the dominant policy narratives are still supportive, for the most, of both these areas. What is missing is sufficient conceptual clarity regarding the need for and benefits of both, and a sufficiently focused policy commitment for the narrower area at their intersection: HE for adult learners.

3. Conclusions: the prospects of HE for adult learners in Europe

This article addresses the question of why HE for adult learners is underdeveloped in Europe compared to other areas of HE.

A novel analytical framework is employed to address this question, using comprehensive document analysis.

Our research shows that the lack of adapted and consistent policy frameworks mostly explains this situation. In addition, HE for adult learners has benefited of no or little innovation regarding adapted institutions, tools or models. Also, while the dominant policy narratives have not been unsupportive of HE and adult education taken separately, they were not supportive of HE for adult learners per se.

Along the way, there were several missed opportunities and false starts in addressing challenges in this area. More recent developments are moderately encouraging: the EEA places a clear focus on both HE and adult education. The challenge will be to stop considering these as separate areas. A set of innovative tools, potentially well adapted, has been proposed that could be applied to HE for adult learners.

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