

# Adult Education and Lifelong Learning in Southern European Societies

## Educación de personas adultas y aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida en sociedades del sur de Europa

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### Abstract

In a context of generalization of education and centralization of knowledge in today's societies, followed by the «intragenerationality» (Fernández Enguita, 2007) of change, individuals were required to be actively and continuously involved in new stages of education and learning. The right — and the duty — to a relationship with education has been affirmed — beyond initial education and school — which must take place throughout and wide life.

The current «cosmopolitanization» of societies (Beck, 2016), underlines the importance of a transnational analysis, for the understanding of social phenomena. Recognizing the importance of a comparing analysis of adult education in Southern European countries, this article aims for the share of regularities and differences that are found in adult education, training and learning [ALE] systems and in the relationship that adults in each of these countries have with lifelong education.

Because we can only understand the adult's relation with Lifelong Learning [LLL] by previously analysing his social structure [ALE], firstly it will be presented the result of a documental analysis which compares adult education systems in Southern European countries [their history, educational contexts, public policies, provision and promoters]. Subsequently, and through secondary analysis of data from the Adult Education Survey (2016), the relationship with lifelong learning in each of these countries, through participation and its main barriers, will be compared. These comparisons will allow improvement in the effectiveness by reaching the generalization of LLL in the so-called Southern European countries, allowing them to learn with each other's, benchmarking good practices.

### Keywords

Lifelong learning, non-formal education, informal education, adult education, transnational analysis.

### Resumen

En un contexto de generalización de la educación y de centralización del conocimiento en las sociedades actuales, seguido de la «intrageneracionalidad» (Fernández Enguita, 2007) del cambio, se ha exigido a los individuos una participación activa y continua en las nuevas etapas de la educación y el aprendizaje. Se ha afirmado el derecho -y el deber- a una relación con la educación -más allá de la educación inicial y la escuela- que debe tener lugar a lo largo y ancho de la vida.

La actual «cosmopolitización» de las sociedades (Beck, 2016), subraya la importancia de un análisis transnacional, para la comprensión de los fenómenos sociales. Reconociendo la importancia de un análisis comparativo de la educación de adultos en los países del sur de Europa, este artículo pretende compartir las regularidades y diferencias que se encuentran en los sistemas de educación, formación y aprendizaje de adultos [EA] y en la relación que los adultos de cada uno de estos países tienen con la educación permanente.

Dado que sólo podemos entender la relación del adulto con la educación permanente [AP] analizando previamente su estructura social [EA], en primer lugar se presentará el resultado de un análisis documental que compara los sistemas de educación de adultos en los países del sur de Europa [su historia, contextos educativos, políticas públicas, oferta y promotores]. Posteriormente, y a través del análisis secundario de los datos de la Encuesta de Educación de Adultos (2016), se comparará la relación con el aprendizaje permanente en cada uno de estos países, a través de la participación y sus principales barreras. Estas comparaciones permitirán mejorar la eficacia alcanzando la generalización del AP en los denominados países del sur de Europa, permitiéndoles aprender los unos de los otros, haciendo un benchmarking de buenas prácticas.

### Keywords

Aprendizaje permanente, educación no formal, educación informal, educación de adultos, análisis transnacional.

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## 1. Metamorphose: the challenge of the speed of change in western societies

The sociological analysis of social change outlines the particular configurations of the transformations that took place during the emergence of the so-called advanced industrial nations, accounting for the complexity of these processes.

More than identifying its outlines, it is necessary to understand the impact of the speed of this social change on the daily lives of individuals. In post-industrial societies, the unprecedented circulation of information and the transformation of knowledge into a resource under which Western societies began to structure and organize themselves, was happening under the aegis, globally recognized, of the need for continuous adaptation, individual and collective, bringing to the centre of the social stage, as key instruments, education and learning (Fernández Enguita, 2007; Ávila, 2008; Jarvis, 2004). With this speed of change in fundamental aspects of life in society [family, politics, economy, work, culture, social relations] occurring within the same generation, individuals began to confront with the limits of initial education and the need for constant learning (Fernández Enguita, 2007). Whether enjoying the times of a transition phase or being confronted from one moment to the next with deep changes — e.g. the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic — it is a multidimensional phenomenon and occurs either in demography and forms of social interaction, in the regional, national and global market and in work organisation, or in the emergence of new forms of communication and access to information, configurations of family and interpersonal relationships with profound impacts on the configuration of all social dimensions.

Thus, we are witnessing a metamorphosis (Beck, 2016) in real time, a process that goes beyond change and, at the same time, understands it in its multiple forms, the so-called era of side effects that challenges our way of being and thinking about the world. Confirming the unexpected as an integral part of the contemporary social reality, new learning stages — alternating or concomitant with work — are urgently required, understanding the diversity of individuals' contexts [family, professional, leisure, civic] and accompanying their whole life cycle [without an age limit]. It has therefore become necessary to learn *throughout life*.

The innate human condition of learning is recognised, although the type of learning and knowledge [as resources for action] necessary for full integration into Western societies has been redefined. For example, recent studies on the European Union have corroborated the importance of the educational dimension in the social mobility of individuals, particularly with regard to professional insertions and the distribution of resources, with greater opportunities for access to skilled professions and higher incomes being associated with higher levels of education, which confirms a relationship between social empowerment and education (Martins *et al.*, 2016: 280) and reveals an organisation of the European social structure dependent and focused on qualifications and knowledge.

In order to evaluate the relevance of the use of the Southern European typology in the context of LLL and ALE, through a comparison between four of the countries that make up this typology (Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy), this article aims to show the differences and similarities between these countries in relation to LLL and ALE.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology used in this comparative study between four countries commonly referred to as Southern European countries: Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy, comprised the use of two different techniques:

an intensive documentary analysis of the most recent reports around Lifelong Learning and Adult Education and Training, followed by an analysis of the adult education and training and LLL systems of each of these four countries, especially their history, educational context, public policies, promoters and learning modalities; Subsequently, the data from the Adult Education Survey (2016) were quantitatively analysed, with the aim of apprehending and comparing, through participation and its main obstacles, the relationship of these four countries with Lifelong Learning.

### 3. Lifelong learning and adult learning and education: what does it mean, and why it matters

The concepts and principles of LLL that have resulted from the texts developed since the 1970s [UNESCO, Lifelong education; OECD, Recurrent education] and which according to some authors were at the genesis of the restructuring of education, have left a globally recognised view on the three main attributes of lifelong learning (Desjardins *et al.*, 2006: 19):

- 1. It is *lifelong* and concerns everything from cradle to grave.
- 2. it is *life wide*, recognizing that learning occurs in many different settings.
- 3. it is focused on *learning*, rather than limiting itself to education.

Currently, and without much change to what was already configured in previous documents, some discourses on LLL and on ALE are more focused on the individual and on the development of their individual potentialities, while others focused on the economy and on professional and social integration/inclusion, influencing the global and European policy guidelines and the work developed in the academy, shaping the discourses of individuals on education in Western societies. In order to identify and update the vision about this kind of learning that should happen throughout the lifetime, the last documents and reports about this subject were collected and analysed. The analysed documents, as we can see in Table I, were produced by the international reference international organisations: OECD, UNESCO, European Commission, Cedefop. The aim is to capture and compare their current views/focus/function on LLL and ALE, identifying the predominant ideology [economic; labour; political, personal/social development or holistic].

**Table I. Key ideas about LLL and ALE: OECD, Cedefop, European Commission, EU Council and UNESCO**

ENTITY/YEAR	DOCUMENT TITLE/SOURCE	KEY IDEAS	WHY DOES IT MATTER?
OECD (2021)	Learning for life - <a href="https://www.oecd.org/education/learningforlife.htm">https://www.oecd.org/education/learningforlife.htm</a>	The demands of the 21 <sup>st</sup> century is forcing us to rethink learning. If improving literacy worldwide was the focus of 20 <sup>th</sup> century education, it is perhaps <b>now more about lifelong learning and equal opportunity.</b>  Education does not necessarily guarantee you a job, or the job you want, but in good times and bad <b>the higher your education level, the less likely you are to be unemployed.</b> The more educated you are, <b>the better prepared you are to reinvent yourself over the course of your career.</b>  Education does not make everyone equal but it can go a long way toward providing <b>equal opportunity.</b>	Economic and Labour (EL)
OECD (2020)	Increasing Adult Learning Participation: Learning from Successful Reforms	Policymakers have long recognized that adults' participation in learning is <b>key to unlocking the benefits of a changing world of work.</b>	Economic and Labour (EL)

ENTITY/YEAR	DOCUMENT TITLE/SOURCE	KEY IDEAS	WHY DOES IT MATTER?
OECD (2019)	Getting Skills Right: Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems	<p>The world of work is changing. Digitalisation, globalisation and population ageing are having a profound impact on the type and quality of jobs that are available and <b>the skills required to perform them</b>. The extent to which individuals, firms and economies can reap the benefits of these changes will <b>depend critically on the readiness of adult learning systems to help people develop and maintain relevant skills over their working careers</b>. (...)</p> <p>Training content should more strongly align with the skill needs of the labour market.</p>	Economic and Labour (EL)
CEDEFOP (2020)	Perceptions on adult learning and continuing vocational education and training in Europe (vol1)	<p>Adult learning and continuing vocational education and training <b>are essential do developing a well-trained workforce whose skills are constantly developed and used</b>. They are central to lifelong learning, enable adults to acquire the knowledge, skills and competences they need to manage changing jobs and lives. They also support employment, competitiveness and innovation.</p>	Economic and Labour (EL)
European Commission (2019)	Achievements under the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning: Report of the ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning (2018-2020)	<p>Adult learning, as understood in the EU, covers the entire range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities — both general and vocational — undertaken by adults after leaving initial education (e.g. high school or college). <b>Adult learning can have different purposes for a learner</b>. It can be undertaken for the development of a personal business, to obtain work, to develop in a current or future role, for personal growth, or a mix of these and other reasons. Adult learning brings considerable benefits for learners themselves, for employers and for the wider community. Adult learning contributes to all policy areas covered by the European Commission as all depend to some degree on the skills of people. Skills are needed to implement European strategies related to for instance jobs, growth and investment; innovation; greening Europe; making Europe more democratic; making Europe more social and just.</p> <p>The <b>benefits for learners</b> are <b>Economic</b>: better quality work, higher income and improved employability; <b>Wellbeing</b>: improved general wellbeing and health; <b>Social</b>: improved engagement in community and civic activities.</p> <p>The <b>benefits for employers</b>: Companies improve their competitiveness, productivity, innovation and profitability; Higher motivation of the workforce. The <b>benefits for the community</b>: greater economic competitiveness and higher GDP; positive effects on health, the environment and community integration.</p>	Economic and Labour (EL) Personal, social and citizenship development (PSCD)
EU Council (2016)	Council recommendations, 19 December 2016 on up-skilling pathways: new opportunities for adults	<p>In today's society it is imperative that all individuals are equipped with a broad set of <b>skills, knowledge and competences, including sufficient levels of literacy, numeracy and digital competences to enable them to realize their full potential, play an active role in society and assume their social and civic responsibilities</b>.</p> <p>Job offers require an ever-higher level and an ever-wider range of skills. <b>In the future, there will be fewer low-skilled jobs on offer</b>. The vast majority of jobs will require some degree of digital skills, and there will be more and more low-skilled jobs for which some core or generic skills (such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork and emotional intelligence) are required.</p>	Economic and Labour (EL) Personal, social and citizenship development (PSCD)

ENTITY/YEAR	DOCUMENT TITLE/SOURCE	KEY IDEAS	WHY DOES IT MATTER?
UNESCO (2020)	Embracing a culture of lifelong learning – Contribution to the Futures of Education initiative	Increasingly, the global community acknowledges that lifelong learning — available to all, at every stage and in every sphere of people's lives — is <b>key to addressing the multiple challenges faced by humanity. Lifelong learning fosters people's capacity to deal with change and to build the future they want.</b> This is profoundly important given the disruption and uncertainty resulting from the familiar threats and opportunities of demographic change, the climate crisis, the rapid advance of technology and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. The growth of populist politics, the deliberate spread of disinformation and the resulting threat posed to democracy highlight the crucial role of lifelong learning in <b>fostering active, informed citizenship.</b> Lifelong learning also <b>improves employability and entrepreneurship through skills development and creativity, enhances public health and well-being, and builds more cohesive and resilient communities.</b> Lifelong learning is, in short, an important contributor to <b>sustainable development, globally, and at national and local levels.</b>	Holistic (H) (economy, health, personal development, environment sustainability, well-being, citizenship...)
UNESCO (2019)	4th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education	<p>Leave no one behind. That was the resounding message of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It enjoined Member States to <b>'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'</b> through SDG 4, and stressed the interconnected nature of the goals. The SDGs must, in other words, be addressed in a sensitively holistic way if they are to fulfil their potential to transform the lives of the most vulnerable and excluded people on the planet. <b>Adult learning and education (ALE) has a crucial role to play in this, supporting the achievement of not only SDG 4 but also a range of other goals, including those on climate change, poverty, health and well-being, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, and sustainable cities and communities.</b></p> <p><b>A new vision of adult learning and education and the acknowledge of its importance in meeting contemporary educational, cultural, political, social and economic challenges.</b></p> <p><b>Adult learning and education should contribute to the revitalization of learning in private, community and economic life in ways that would equip people with the capabilities to take control of their destinies. Rale recognizes the value and relevance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for ALE, which are seen as holding great potential for improving access by adults to a variety of learning opportunities, resulting in greater equity and inclusion.</b></p> <p>At the centre is a shift from a narrow preoccupation with adult education to a much broader understanding of the field, in which <b>learning has become as central to the discussion as education.</b></p>	Holistic (H)

The first note that emerged from these reports is an apparent dilution between what is understood by LLL and ALE, a situation that can easily be seen in the table above. Regarding in the identification of the principles guiding LLL and ALE, according to the reports of the European Union (CEDEFOP, European Commission, EU Council) and the OECD, it is possible to attest the transversal prevalence of an instrumental and economic vision on LLL and ALE, with discourses mainly centred on the acquisition of skills for the labour market, career progression and the development of a global, digitalised and competitive economy. However, it should be noted that despite the unequivocal presence of an economic and employment focus in EU documents — specially Cedefop [proficiency, innovation, competitiveness,

productivity, more and better jobs], there are also mentions of the impact of LLL and ALE on the personal, social and political development of individuals [development of their potential, their citizenship and active participation in the community, health, accountability...] and also on the full implementation of EU strategies related to increased investment, innovation, environment, democracy and social justice.

With a vision that has remained under a humanistic orientation, UNESCO's view on LLL and ALE currently reflects a holistic vision, understanding the full extent of its impact on the goals to be set economy, demography, health, personal development, empowerment, sustainability, well-being, citizenship and environment sustainability.

The most recent reports appear as guides for action, sharing good practices and recommendations for improvement, without giving a prominent place to the theoretical discussion on the principles and concepts of LLL. Although on ALE and especially in the documents produced by the EU, the need for a [re]definition of concepts is acknowledged:

*«... a harmonised definition of adult learning with clear demarcations is not available [if it is possible to develop at all] making comparisons across countries difficult.»* (European Commission, 2019: 36).

Indeed, recognising its heterogeneity they tried to define comparable structures [provision] to assess the available data provided by the various surveys, in an analysis of strengths and weaknesses intending to contribute to a broader knowledge of the different realities of adult education and learning, both in terms of participation, funding, provision modalities, dissemination and publics to whom it is addressed (UNESCO, 2019).

Nevertheless, in all documents regardless of the entity/organisation, we can acknowledge the recognition granted to learning and education as necessary tools to face the day-to-day challenges that result from the speed of transformations in societies organised and structured around knowledge, turning qualifications into resources in which it is urgent to invest in order to develop:

*«The global community acknowledges that lifelong learning — available to all, at every stage and in every sphere of people's lives — is key to addressing the multiple challenges faced by humanity.»* (UNESCO, 2020).

*«Adult learning brings considerable benefits for learners themselves, for employers and for the wider community. Adult learning contributes to all policy areas covered by the European Commission.»* (European Commission, 2019).

Knowing the key ideas on lifelong learning and ALE in the world and in Europe will allow a better understanding of the structures of LLL and ALE in the so-called Southern European countries.

### 3.1. Definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning and education

LLL and ALE have three key concepts related to the kind of education and learning activities they

refer to [formal, non-formal and informal]. At European level there are two main reference works (Eurydice, 2011: 18) on the definition of formal, non-formal and informal education: the Cedefop glossary (2004/2008) and the Eurostat handbook Classification of learning activities (CLA, 2006). Despite of these too, we can also add the recent 4<sup>th</sup> GRALE proposal for this definition. Knowing these concepts allow us to analyse the information contained in this article with greater acuity.

**Table II. Definitions of formal, non-formal education and informal learning: Cedefop, Eurostat and UNESCO**

	<b>FORMAL EDUCATION</b>	<b>NON-FORMAL EDUCATION</b>	<b>INFORMAL LEARNING</b>
<b>Cedefop (2008)</b>	Taught in an organised and structured context. Explicitly conceived as learning. It generally culminates in validation and certification and is intentional.	Integrated into planned activities not explicitly designated as learning activities. Intentional.	Not organised or structured. Resulting from the activities of daily life. Usually, unintentional.
<b>Eurostat (2006)</b>	Taught in the system of formal education institutions (including the dual system). It constitutes a continuous sequence of education. intentional.	Inside and outside educational institutions. Organised and continuous activities. Does not necessarily follow the scale system. Variable duration. Intentional.	Less organised and structured than non-formal education. Intentional. Eurostat distinguishes within informal learning that which is random and unintentional, excluded from statistical observation.
<b>4<sup>th</sup> GRALE (UNESCO, 2019)</b>	Takes place in an education or training institution that is a part of the formal education system of a country. It is structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support. Leads to certification.	Is provided outside de regular programmes of the formal educational system. It is typically offered in the form of short courses, workshops or seminars. Many happen in the workplace, in community centres or through the activities of civil society organizations and groups. Is intentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification. It is structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support.	<b>Purposeful:</b> includes forms of learning that are intentional or deliberate but are not institutionalized. It may include learning activities that occur in the family, workplace, community and daily life on a self-directed, family-directed or socially directed basis. <b>Incidental or random:</b> forms of learning that are not designed to bring about learning. May occur as a by-product of day-to-day activities. Although this kind of learning falls outside the public policy sphere and is not usually addressed in statistics on participation in adult learning and education, it cannot be ignored. The issue of looking at everyday life as the curricula of incidental learning become this: what opportunities does a person's lived life afford?

The differences between the classifications illustrate the complexity of the LLL and the ALE concept, referring to differences between countries in the classification [formal or non-formal] of learning activities and in their educational systems. It is still a challenge to use these classifications in the field, as there are many grey areas between them, typical of an exercise that aims to be able to cover as many realities as possible in a single definition. Nevertheless, these definitions should help us to better understand the LLL and ALE reality of the four countries chosen for this comparing exercise.

#### 4. Southern European countries: adult education systems and lifelong learning enrolment

Why should we talk about the countries of Southern Europe? It is an analytical category based on the supposed sharing of some features and characteristics between the countries that make it up [economic, social, educational]. These countries also share cultural roots anchored to the plural Greek and Latin legacy, and a geopolitical location which over the centuries has seen them alternating from central to marginal positions. (Palomba & Cappa, 2018: 437). Nevertheless, it is important to reflect on the fact that this designation has been used as a *fast track* for a [depreciative] differentiation in relation to the rest of the group that makes up so-called Western Europe. Implicit in this division is an idea of periphery, of a backwardness in relation to economic, social and educational parameters of European countries considered more advanced. It has been attributed to these countries a set of structural gaps to be solved so that they

may overcome the distance that separates them from the rest of Western Europe. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (cit in Palomba & Cappa, 2018), there is a marginalisation of the South easily identifiable in policy reports, and other documents that seems to reveal a kind of internal colonisation within Europe, guided by the idea of the existence of only one Europe and only one western modernity, which has become more visible during the recent economic crisis that particularly affected these countries.

The area loosely indicated as *Southern Europe*<sup>2</sup>, includes Portugal, Greece, Italy and Spain. It has been attributed a set of political and cultural affinities, especially at European level, between those countries, but there is never a perfect overlapping. When analysed more closely this classification leaves out everything that distinguishes them, their singularities and aspects that can help to better understand their differences when compared. For example, Italy, Spain and Portugal are Latin, but Greece is not; Greece is Mediterranean, but Portugal is not; while the authoritarian regimes of the 20th century in Portugal, Spain and Greece lasted until the 1970s, in Italy it was abolished after the II World War; its integration into the EU occurred also in distinct phases [1958 — Italy as a founder country; 1980s — Portugal, Spain and Greece]; Religiously, while in Greece the orthodox church is dominant, in Portugal, Spain and Italy it is the Catholic church that holds a very strong force and tradition. The public systems, including education, in Italy and Spain are partially organized by regional structures, and in the last few years there is a higher governmental instability in Greece and Italy (Abrantes *et al.*, 2016: 502). All these unique factors have obviously influenced education policies and systems, and LLL and ALE are no exception, as we will see.

#### 4.1. The Structure of the Southern European Education Systems

Specifically, in relation to these countries education systems, the OECD diagrams<sup>3</sup> give an account of differences in their formal education structure: from initial education to adult education. For example, the case of the age/level of compulsory education, the division between levels of education, ages or even the ALE substructures of each country alongside the levels of compulsory education in place.

A closer look at the four OECD diagrams of these southern European countries, specifically on ALE, highlights the case of Greece where formal adult education only comprises ISCED 1 and 2, while in the remaining countries it comprises from ISCED 1 to ISCED 3. The universalisation of education embodied and instrumentalised through compulsory education also differs slightly between the four countries. At opposite points is Greece and Portugal, in Greece compulsory education starts at age 4 [since 2018/2019] and ends at age 14/15. Compulsory education is 10/11 years corresponds to ISCED 2, and in Portugal compulsory schooling is 12 years [since 2009], starting at age 6 and ending at ISCED 3, or 17/18 years. Italy and Spain have somethings in common regarding compulsory schooling: e.g. in Italy compulsory education is 10 years, and takes place between the ages of 6 and 16, corresponding to ISCED 3. It covers the whole first cycle of education and two years of the second cycle. The last two years of compulsory education can be attended either in an upper secondary school or within the regional vocational education and training system. In Spain, compulsory education is also 9/10 years, starts at age 6 and ends at age 15/16 and also corresponds to ISCED 3. It should be noted that although three of these countries have compulsory education corresponding to ISCED 3,

<sup>2</sup> The option not to include France in this set comes in alignment with the option of some of the most recent comparative studies in Southern European education (Palomba & Cappa, 2018), which considers it to be an exception country that has been trying to find its own place in Europe.

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2020) <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/>.

there are significant differences between them in the organisation of the structure of formal education, which causes the level they report to be different.

**Regarding ALE**, when analysing the **Portuguese education system**, we observe the existence of a sort of subsystem (Capucha, 2013) that follows the 4 levels of the system and formal education [ISCED 1, 2, 3 and 4]. This subsystem is made up of several modalities of formal education addressed to adults, comprising different target groups, which seek to respond to the qualification needs of individuals aged 18 years or more.

**For Greece**, ALE also appears as a substructure [like the special needs education], which seems to follow outside the formal education system, comprising only ISCED 1 and 2. Because they do not have a tradition of providing non-formal adult education, and also because of a compulsory education that ends in the ISCED 2, we can understand the lack of provision beyond the low secondary.

**In Spain**, ALE goes from ISCED 1 to ISCED 3 and is for adults aged 18 and over and exceptionally for workers aged 16 who are unable to attend school on a regular timetable and for federated athletes.

**Concerning Italy**, ALE is also a substructure of the formal education system, includes all activities aimed at the cultural enrichment, requalification and professional mobility of adults. The ‘school education for adults’ only provides activities for the acquisition of a qualification as well as to literacy and Italian language courses. They provide adult education and serve people aged 18 and above with low levels of education, regardless of their nationality.

The analysis of the provisions on formal adult education showed how national education systems conceive of them as ‘outside’ structures, as a subordinate and secondary track of the educational community. Although when we look at the structure of adult education in European countries, we have to bear in mind the heterogeneity between them besides the difference already identified on its formal education systems, as it involves other strategic actors apart from education, because it is an offer that also comprises non-formal education. However, it should not stop us from reflecting on the “unoccupied” place as a dimension of the formal structure, especially in countries where the fight against the qualification deficit of the population has been a long and difficult process [as it has in Portugal].

Beyond this place apart from the system, the report of the European working group on adult education (European Commission, 2019) refers to the existence of differences between countries, which seem to be explained by the greater or lesser historical investment in the initial education of children and young people. In countries with a higher investment in initial education, the provision for adults is diluted and it is not possible to find specific devices/programmes for this audience. On the other hand, in countries that have faced the challenge of early school leaving and low qualifications of their population, adult provision and programmes are more easily detected, although they continue to be outside the national education system and are spread across a myriad of dimensions: employment, social intervention, citizenship, culture, etc. *No adult learning system is perfect, and all countries face challenges* (OCDE, 2019).

## 4.2. Adult education in southern Europe countries: contexts, policies and programmes, strategic actors and types of provision

To further compare the adult education and training systems of these countries, available and more recent information on these [sub]systems was analysed: history, objectives and strategies, distribution of responsibilities, programmes, modalities, providers, policy priorities and reforms. Despite the forces of globalisation and the impact of neo-liberal policy agendas, there are still considerable patterns of variation in national policies. Each country seems to develop its strategy while respecting both general EU guidelines and its specific national contexts.

### 4.2.1. The history of adult education and the current population education attainment

Looking for **the history of ALE** in these four countries through available information (Eurydice, 2021) further distinguishing factors between them were founded. With the most recent history **Italy** have running, since 1997, a system of adult education organized by the Local Permanent Centres [CTPs] [evening courses at upper secondary education institutions]. In 2007, was launched a reform of the adult education system that started in 2012 and ended in 2015/2016. The reform replaced the name *adult education with school education for adults* [IDA], referring to a more limited domain of the educational activities aimed at the acquisition of a qualification with the purpose of raising the educational level of adult population. The same reform also established the Provincial Centres of School Education for Adults [CPIAs], that among with the upper secondary schools for the second level courses replaced the existing CTPs and evening courses. The CPIAs are autonomous education institutions organized in networks and have the same degree of autonomy as mainstream schools [premises, staff and government bodies]. Courses provided by CPIAs are open to people aged 16 an above.

**In Portugal**, one of the core objectives of the revolution of 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974, was the democratization of education and improving the Portuguese populations general levels of qualifications has been a key goal of education policy in recent decades. Although the concern with adult qualifications started earlier [1950] even without the expected results, it is in the period 2000/2011 that a new paradigm for ALE emerges, followed by a phase of setbacks between 2012-2014 (Araújo, 2015: 353-392). In 2005, the New Opportunities Initiative, had an unprecedented impact on the qualification of the Portuguese adult population (Capucha, 2013). Currently, and since 2016, Portugal, trying to keep a performance close to that of the New Opportunities Initiative, concentrates its offer in specific centres for guidance, referral and adult education called Qualifica Centres, although on a smaller scale and keeping some difficulties in attracting certain publics (the poorly educated - too many changes of names and structures made it difficult for adults to access the offers). The National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education [ANQEP, I.P.] and the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training [IEFP, I.P] are bodies with responsibilities in ALE.

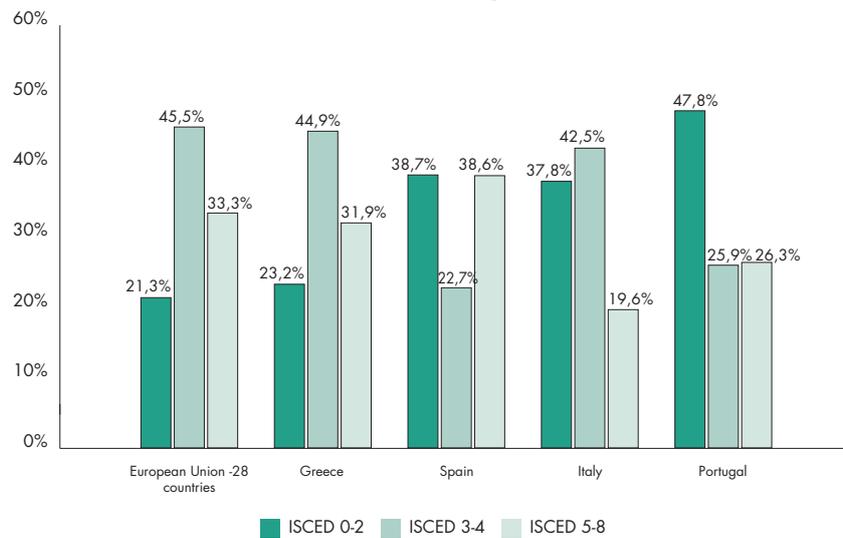
Without a long tradition in non-formal adult education in **Greece** one can find one of the longest histories of adult education. The first attempt to introduce adult education in Greece dates back to 1929, and since then a number of policies, strategies, bodies and structures were activated with a vision of expansion. In 2003 Adult Education centres and schools for parents were founded, in 2010 the National Qualification Certification Body [EOPP] was established.

Some name replacing and merging occurred during 2011 and 2014. Since 2000, Greece adopted a holistic concept of general adult education which includes all type of organised learning activities addressed to adults that seek to: enrich their knowledge, develop abilities and skills, grow their personality and develop active citizenship. A large number of institutions, fully or partly subsidised by the state, provided general adult education. In 2016 a reform in governance was established with the 3879 Law - Validation of qualifications of Adults Educators: in order to participate in adult learning programmes of the Ministry of Education. (European Commission, 2019: 30). In 2020 is running a holistic reform of Vocational Education and training and Lifelong Learning, and the Secretariat General for Vocational Education and Training, Lifelong Learning and Youth/Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs are reorganized to support the new policies.

The oldest history of ALE is from **Spain**, the origins of adult education in Spain date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were the term began to appear in education legislation at the same time with adult education projects popular universities, cultural, political, working-class, and religious associations, or municipal schools for adults. Until de 1970s, the focus was adult vocational training and literacy [campaigns], and the provision was regulated by the General Education Act. In 1990 the Act on the General Organization of the Education System developed the concept of lifelong learning, turning it a principle of the education system. The aim of adult education is to offer people over 18 years the possibility to acquire, update, complete, or expand their knowledge and skills for their personal and professional development. The provision of adult education is shared between education authorities regulated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport in the Autonomous City of Ceuta and Melilla, and by the Departments for Education of the Autonomous Communities within their area of management, that regulate adult education provision. The provision offered by Employment authorities is regulated by the Ministry of Employment and Social Security, with the collaboration of the State Public Employment Service, and the Autonomous Communities and their own regional employment services. Local authorities get involved in the organization of the training provision, especially through popular universities.

A synthetic portrait on educational attainment of the population of each of these countries showed even further differences between them in the relationship with formal education reflected on the education attainment [Graphic 1].

**Graphic 1. Population by educational attainment level (%), 2019  
from 25 to 64 years**



Source: Eurostat, last update 21-04-21.

For example, education attainment in Portugal is traditionally lower than the EU average. The share of people with low-level or no qualification is still the highest [47,8%] in EU-28, and the share of those with medium-level qualifications, although it has significantly increased, is still the second lowest [25,9%] within the four countries of Southern Europe and in the EU-28, and the same situation applies to higher education.

In Greece the level of participation in formal education is generally high. Greece has already achieved early school leaving goals. Yet, the national average masks significant variation between geographical regions, types of schools, gender and social groups. Even with reduced spending on education, Greece has achieved progress in terms of educational attainment, and placed education as part of a national growth and development strategy. The share of those with medium level qualification [44,9%] is slightly lower than the EU average [45,5%], while the share of tertiary graduates (31,9%) is very close to the EU average [33,3%].

Education has also high value in Italy, however, the share of population aged up to 64 with higher education [19,6%] is below the EU-28 average [33,3%]. Italy is also one of the four countries, along with Portugal and Spain, with the highest level of people with low-level or no qualification [37,8%]. There are some contradictions in the relationship between the education and training system and the production system. An example is the low presence of qualified labour in the production system, due mostly to the still fairly low number of graduates compared to other European countries.

The share of the adult population aged 25 to 64 with high-level qualifications [ISCED 5-8] [38,6%] is higher **in Spain** than in the EU-28 [33,3%]. However, the share of those with medium-level qualifications [ISCED 3-4] is the lowest [22,7%] in the EU-28, while the share of those up to 64 with no or low qualifications is 38,7%, being also one of the highest in the EU.

When we compare the history of the ALE system of each of these countries with the education levels of their population, we realize that there are several differences and some controversies.

For example, if on the one hand we can find in countries with a recent history of ALE and still very dependent on EU funds, high values of their population with low or no level of qualification, on the other hand the country whose history of adult education is the oldest among the four countries also shows high values of a poorly educated population [Spain]. Thus, both in Greece and Spain, although it is possible to find some values above or close to the European average at medium and high levels of schooling [ISCED 5-8; ISCED 3-4], values below the European average are also present which seem unrelated to the long experience of ALE and the incorporation of adult education in the education systems [Spain].

It is confirmed especially between Portugal and Spain, but also in Italy, the existence of a deep educational inequality among adult populations. These inequalities are multicausal and have repercussions on other dimensions of inequalities (Martins *et al.*, 2018) and on the structures of these countries. The impacts of inequalities are felt especially in participation in lifelong learning activities which strongly depends on the quality of individuals' initial learning (Capucha, 2018).

#### 4.2.2. ALE programmes, provision and providers in Southern European countries

Concerning to governance, and to policy frameworks «adult learning still tends to be more characterized by fragmentation than alignment. This in part reflects the complexity of the sector and the distribution of responsibilities in it» (European Commission, 2019: 40). Regarding to **the latest programmes of ALE** in the Southern European countries, we find adult ALE offers/programmes under the umbrella of lifelong learning strategies (Greece and Italy) and/or the promotion of adult qualification (Portugal). Greece, Italy and Portugal present an offer specifically addressed to adults, under the designation of centres — Qualifica Centres, Lifelong Learning Centres, Provincial Centres of school Education — and under the scope of programmes that are in different phases, some in expansion/transition, others in consolidation. It should be noted that in the specific case of Spain the offer is quite extensive and diverse than the others and it does not take the form of programmes.

**Table III. Currently ALE Programme(s) in Southern European countries**

COUNTRY	YEAR	CURRENT ALE PROGRAMME(S)
Portugal	Since 2016	Qualifica Programme was implemented with the aim of improving the qualification levels of adults, is based on a qualification strategy that integrates educational and training responses and various instruments that promote the qualification of adults, involving a wide network of operators. It aims to respond to the need for qualification of the Portuguese population that still presents a significant qualification deficit that conditions the country's development. It aims to bring Portugal closer to the convergence goals in terms of LLL with the average of the European Union countries. The Qualifica programme is an integrated strategy for adult training and qualification, since 2020 there are 310 Centres in the country (ANQEP, I.P., 2020).
Greece	2013-2016 Since 2020	Between 2013 and 2016 were functioning Lifelong Learning Centres, leading to a positive attitude towards learning, providing adult education programs. There is a new phase underway which aims to continue and expand the lifelong learning centres. Since 2020 is running a <i>holistic reform</i> of Vocational Education and training and Lifelong Learning, and the Secretariat General for Vocational Education and Training, Lifelong Learning and Youth/Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs are reorganized to support the new policies.
Italy	Since 2015	Were created in Italy the Provincial Centres of School Education for Adults (CPIAs) a network of schools for adult learners for AL created at provincial level in each region. A total of 130 CPIA were established in all the regions of the country involving over 1 200 technical/professional schools. (European Commission, 2019: 52-53). Currently a reform in governance in LLL System established by Law (92/2021, Legge Fornero) understand Lifelong Learning as an individual right, introduces validation certification of non-formal competences and stimulates the construction of territorial networks (i.e. at the regional level) (European Commission, 2019: 30).
Spain	Currently	Adult education continued to be provided in different type of institutions depending on whether it is offered by education or employment public authorities currently there are about 2 416 public adult education institutions (specific adult education institutions; adult education classrooms integrated into duly authorised mainstream educational institutions — primary or secondary schools, or municipal councils and local corporations), and also private educational institutions promoting adult education activities. A total of 13 820 entities provide adult education and training related to the employment authorities programme distributed across the different Autonomous Communities. Following the ministerial restructuring in January 2020, the Ministry of Education and Vocational training has undertaken the proposal and implementation of the Government's policy on Vocational Training in the education system, as well as for unemployed and employed citizens, including national and regional calls, when these correspond to any training linked to certificates of professional experience, as well as dual Vocational Training in the area of education.

Indeed, currently the only country that seems to distinguish itself with a more consolidated offer of adult learning and education activities is Spain. The absence of reference to LLL or ALE specific programmes, anchored on the above-mentioned information on the history of its adult education system, allows to put into perspective the existence of a continuous structure independent from European funds to function.

It has been recognised in the most recent ALE report that the funding of adult education focused on time-bound programmes or initiatives/projects is still very much dependent on the EU, which seems to explain the volatility and instability of the policy frameworks of adult education in all European countries, as there is no policy continuity (as found in Spain) that is realised with the same aims (European Commission, 2019). In this sense, Portugal and Italy have been the countries with the highest funding which may help to understand their historical volatility regarding adult education, as they are according to these documents the two countries with the most recent history of adult education of the four countries referred here as Southern Europe.

At a closer look, within each ALE programme or structure in each of the countries mentioned here, we find the **providers** [the structures that each country has organised to manage ALE] and the type of education-oriented activities each country offers [**provisions**] According to Eurydice (2021), in general the supply of ALE in each country is organised as follows: Basic Skills; Transition to the labour market; Recognized qualification; Other types of publicly subsidised for adult learners and Liberal [popular] adult education.

Although basic skill provision is available in most countries, the ways in which this is organized differs across countries. A good example of this is the case of **Liberal adult education**, which is not a common offer in the four countries [e.g., Italy and Portugal]. On the other hand, offers related to the labour market exists in all the four countries. We only can find recognized qualification in Portugal and Italy. In **Italy and Greece**, specific adult education programmes for obtaining a qualification of upper secondary education are lacking, which means that adults need to enrol for classes within the initial schooling systems (European Commission, 2019: 44).

A curious fact has to do with the perception of higher education as an adult-oriented offer, which makes the offers integrated in the ALE system of each country differ. For example, the only country to include higher education in the ALE provision is Greece. In the specific case of Portugal, although this offer has now provided an access route for people over 23 years, the [during the working hours] timetables practiced by universities are still an obstacle to the participation of adults in higher education, mainly in the bachelor's degree [ISCDE 6].

**Table IV. Currently ALE Providers and Provision in Southern European countries**

COUNTRY	PROVIDER	PROVISION
Spain	Provision of ALE depends on two different types of institutions: <b>Education authorities</b> (1) and <b>Labour authorities</b> (2) (public authorities, business organisations and trade unions, companies, private vocational training integrated in institutions)	<p>Low educated adults (1); Supply training (2); Others (3); Liberal (popular) adult education (4):</p> <p>(1) <b>Low educated adults:</b> Basic education for adults: initial education and secondary education for adults; also have offers to Vocational secondary education for adults: Basic vocational training; and Language education: Basic User Level (A1 and A2); Is also a strong offer from this provider the Recognized qualification during adulthood: Post-compulsory education – advanced Vocational training; Lower Compulsory Secondary Education - examinations to obtain a qualification; Examination for accessing studies leading to an official qualification (advanced vocational training cycles; advanced artistic education; university); Examination to obtain a language certificate;</p> <p>(2) <b>Supply training</b> - programmes for people with special training needs or for those experiencing difficulties in entering the labour market or in the acquisition of professional qualifications; training to the unemployed: Work-linked training (workshop-schools, trade training centres, employment workshops); and other types of public provisions for adult – Demand Training (on-the-job training actions and individual training permits); Supply training (programmes for employed workers); Training actions for public officials of the public administrations.</p> <p><b>Others (3)</b> - Apart from offering courses for migrants and adults from underrepresented groups, programmes have been established to widen participation of adults living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.</p> <p>Centre for the Innovation and Development of Distance Education, in order to facilitate de access to adult education they have available distance learning provision for adults, for people over 18 years – Distance Secondary Education for Adults and Bachillerato. Some Autonomous Communities established within their area of management specific distance education institutions for adults. A large number of institutions participate in the implementation and maintenance of this project.</p> <p>Since 2014, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training has the web portal <i>Aprende a lo largo de la vida</i>, with information and guidance about lifelong learning (learning opportunities nearby, learning resources, proposing of training pathways).</p> <p>(4) <b>Liberal (popular) adult education:</b> present at a local level including rural areas: specific adult institutions; popular universities; social initiative institutions; trade unions; neighbourhood associations; local corporations; universities for adults.</p> <p>There is also a <b>wide range of Spanish courses</b> for foreigners included in the training offer of adult education centres at varying levels of language literacy. (European Commission, 2019, p. 45).</p>
Greece	ALE is also provider through various channels and institutions: Formal Education System (1); Post- lower Secondary education and training (2); Post-secondary vocational training (3); Public Lifelong Centres (4); Programmes for adult learning provided at municipality level (5); Higher Education Institutions programmes (6).	<p>Basic Skills (1); Transitions to the Labour market (2); Liberal (popular) adult education (3), and other publicly subsidised for adult learns (4).</p> <p>(1) <b>Basic skills:</b> Second chance schools - Digital skills training is a component of basic education offered in Second Chance Schools.; Vocational Training Schools/ESK and Vocational Apprenticeship schools/EPAS of OAED to Post-lower secondary; Epangelmatika lykeia – EPAL Vocational Education upper secondary schools and ENEEGy-L Special needs vocational lower-upper secondary education schools; Post-secondary Vocational Training with Institutouta Epangelmatikis Katartisis Vocational Training Institutes; post-secondary – Apprenticeship Programme.</p> <p>(2) <b>Transition to the labour market</b>, includes Vocational Training Voucher (unemployed individuals of various professional fields).</p> <p>(3) <b>Liberal (popular) adult education</b> has Public Lifelong Learning Centres/KDVM (continuous vocational training; reskilling; upskilling; general adult education and career guidance and orientation) and Lifelong learning programmes at municipalities (adults unemployed and employed; regardless of gender, attainment level, country of origin, religion, place of residence; young people, students; independent learning classes for vulnerable social groups – Romani, prisoners, Muslim minorities, migrants, disable).</p> <p>(4) <b>Other publicly subsidised for adult:</b> Hellenic open University, which provides Bachelor degrees (ISCED 6), Master's degree (ISCDE 7); PhD Degree (ISCED 8); Certificate of Undergraduate Education; Postgraduate Education Certificate; Certificate of Attendance of a Subject Unit.</p>
Portugal	The main provider is the National Agency of Qualification and Vocational Education (ANQEP, I.P. - under the authority of Ministry of Education alongside the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, and also the Ministry of Economy and Digital Transition) with specialized adult qualification centres: Qualifica centres, that can be set up by public or private bodies (providers) such as public basic and upper secondary school clusters or non-clustered schools (1), directly or partially managed vocational training centres from the network of the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP, I.P.) (2), companies and associations or other bodies with significant territorial or sectorial importance and proven technical capacity regarding their sectors and users (3). Although other kind of provision like popular education is also part of ALE provision it does not figure on the official documents (Eurydice, 2021; European Commission, 2019)	<p>Basic Skills (1); Upper Secondary education completion pathways (2); Recognized qualification (3); Transition to the Labour market (4); Other adult education provision (5); Other types of publicly subsidised training for adult learners (6).</p> <p>(1) <b>Basic Skills:</b> Basic competences programme (reading, writing, calculation, etc.) aiming the subsequence integration into basic education level adult education and training courses, or basic level of recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC). Portuguese as host language (migrants).</p> <p>(2) <b>Upper secondary education completion pathways:</b> adults who have not complete a maximum of six subjects/year of the upper secondary level courses they attended, whose curricula is extinct.</p> <p>(3) <b>Recognised qualification:</b> Adult education and training courses (EFA Courses) taught by entities included in the network of training providers within the National Qualifications System (SNQ). They can or not have a technological and practical training in work context. They can be Basic EFA Courses (ISCED 1 and ISCED 2), and Upper secondary level EFA courses (ISCED 3).</p> <p>(4) <b>Transition to the labour market:</b> Certified modular training, that can be used as credits for obtaining one or more qualifications and allow the creation of flexible pathways. It is given by bodies on the training network that are part of the SNQ – basic and upper secondary schools, vocational training and retraining centres that are directly managed or run according specific protocols. Others can be private or corporative education establishments.</p> <p>(5) <b>Other adult education provision:</b> as part of informal and non-formal learning there are Senior Citizen Universities (people over 50 years) with a range of programmes with theoretical and practical classes.</p> <p>(6) <b>Other types of publicly subsidised training for adult learners:</b> Recurrent education (Ensino Recorrente) at upper secondary level; Recurrent upper secondary distance learning (ESRad), is modular and uses b-learning method. Young +Digital programme, to unemployed adults (18-35 years) registered in the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP, I.P.).</p> <p>Short term ICT training is offered as part of basic education for low-qualified adults. (European Commission, 2019, p. 46).</p> <p>The adult education and training offer also contemplates the modalities Ensino Recorrente (continuous learning)</p>

COUNTRY	PROVIDER	PROVISION
Italy	The main providers are the Provincial centres for adult education (Centri Provinciali per l'istruzione degli adulti-CPIAs). Upper Secondary Schools.	Basic Skills (1); Recognised qualification (2); Transition to the labour market (3); Other types of publicly subsidised provision for adults (4); <b>(1) Basic Skills:</b> First level courses organised into two teaching periods (first-cycle certification; certification on basic competences acquired at the end of compulsory education with reference to the activities foreseen in the curricula common to all branches of technical and vocational studies). Literacy courses and Italian language courses target to foreign adults. <b>(2) Recognised qualification:</b> Upper Secondary Schools offer second-level courses (technical, vocational, artistic upper secondary education certification). All courses can be personalised according to an individual formative agreement upon recognition of adult's knowledge, and formal, informal and non-formal competences. <b>(3) Transition to the labour market:</b> CPIAs are also responsible for providing education and training that help adults acquiring knowledge, skills and competences for the labour market. <b>Provision of liberal (popular) adult education is not available at national level.</b> <b>(4) Other types of publicly subsidised provision for adult education:</b> courses in the detention centres.

Besides provision, is important to ensure an effective outreach and widening access and each country has been doing it also in different ways. For instance, in **Spain** the initiative *Aula Mentor* has actively reached out to adults living in remote areas trough online learning platforms. Successful cases can also be found, including the often-praised Qualifica programme in **Portugal** aiming to raise adult's skills as well as to recognized them, and counselling and guidance is also one of their main objectives to provide and inform adults with tailored learning pathways. In **Greece**, more attention to lifelong guidance and counselling has been mentioned for future reforms (European Commission, 2019: 48).

According to the latest report on ALE (2019) a commitment with flexibilization of education pathways to increase access is being taken by Italy were innovative and flexible ways of learning have been implemented at regional level [although they have not been collected into a national database], and by **Portugal** which provides modular courses to adults and offers flexible pathways to adults, not only in relation to education and training, but also in relation to the validation of skills (European Commission, 2019: 56-57).

The differences between these countries can also be observed in the differentiated focus of each one in the priority given to language learning [native language and foreign language], or to the new digital technologies and to information literacy, whether it concentrates on the lower levels of education or on the higher ones, organising an offer that despite resulting from common general guidelines [EU], is materialised on the field through different measures/programmes and offers, taking into account each country's starting point in terms of qualification of its population and its political priorities.

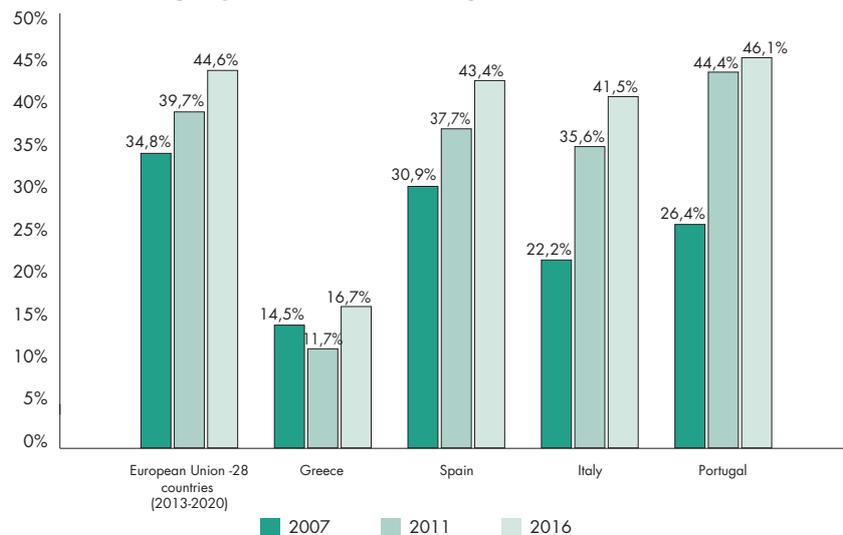
## 5. Participation in LLL activities in Southern European countries

In a diachronic analysis of participation in LLL activities (formal and non-formal education), for the population aged 25-64, in the Southern European countries, in comparison with the EU average, what we find is a clear trend of increasing levels of participation in LLL, in all 28 countries of the European Union including these four Southern European countries. With Portugal [46.1%] leading the way in 2016, showing a participation rate in education and training above the European average [44.6%], this upward trajectory is also relatively similar among Spain [43.4%] and Italy [41.5%].

It should be noted, nevertheless, that Portugal, among these three countries, was the one that least increased its participation between 2011 and 2016, which can be easily explained by the most recent economic crisis and the political change that extinguished an Adult Education programme [*Novas Oportu-*

idades] responsible for the significant increase in participation in LLL activities observable between 2007 [26.4%] and 2011 [44.3%]. In the specific case of Greece, despite a slight increase in participation, mainly between 2011 [11.7%] and 2016 [16.7%], it has remained significantly below the European average and below the other three countries portrayed here. The setback observed in participation in LLL activities between 2007 [14.5%] and 2011 [11.7%] may be explained through the multiple impacts of the strong economic crisis experienced by the country.

**Graphic 2. Participation rate in education and training by age in Southern European Countries (%)**



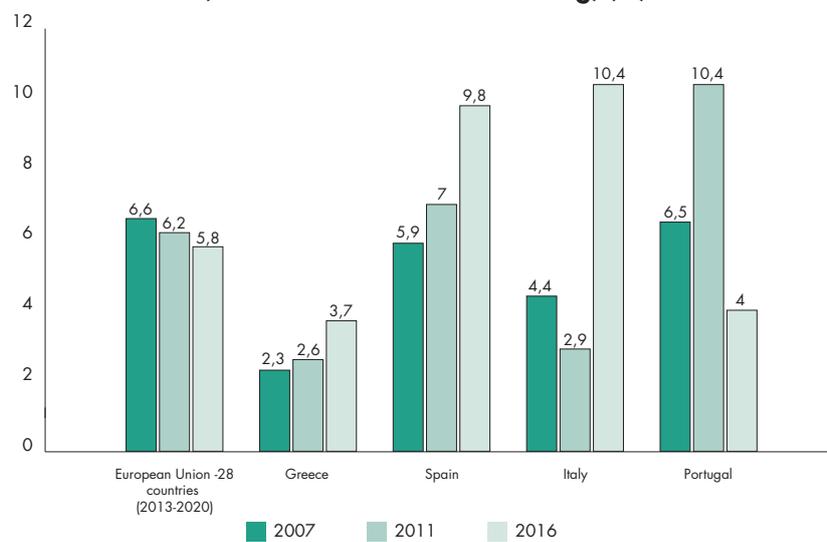
Source: Eurostat, last update 08.02.21

Nevertheless, if when we look at the general data [Graphic 3] of participation in LLL activities by the adult population [25-64 years] of these countries, and despite the dissimilarities and regularities between them, a positive evolution is confirmed, the scenario changes completely when the focus is directed to each one of the LLL modalities. This change occurs especially in formal education, which has a similarly low average participation rate in all 28 EU countries. In 2016, Spain [9.8 %] and Italy [10.4%] stand out in participation in this form of LLL, with values significantly above the European average — even countering a downward trend — with Italy representing the most significant positive evolution over time, which may be the result of the effectiveness of the LLL programmes implemented in the country. Greece again have the lowest participation, despite a slight increase over the years. On this specific point, our attention should focus mainly on Portugal, where the decrease in participation between 2011 [10.4%] and 2016 [4%] should make us reflect on the impact of the extinction of the New Opportunities programme in 2011/2012, and the exclusive reliance on European funds for ALE. The void already identified above, of measures and offers, during the period of time that preceded the extinction of the programme followed by the stigma and discredit that were at the discursive basis of the political arguments for its closure, kept the adults away from formal education and left again on the shelf [in standby] the problem of the Portuguese population's lack of qualifications. Capucha analyses these advances and retreats in the measures to qualify the Portuguese population as the result of an elitist national political ideology (2018: 18). However, this reflection will have to be followed by the need for a positive evaluation of the effects of this programme on the 'return' of adults to formal education, with a significant increase in participation

between 2007 [6.5%] and 2011 [10.4%], placing Portugal above the European average during that period. Even so, there still are a significant part [42%] of the Portuguese adult population that had remained low-educated and that didn't returned to formal education during this same period (Carvalho da Silva & Ávila, in press).

Italy's setback between 2007 and 2011 can be explained by the volatility of ALE offers, which, as in Portugal, depends on European funds, although is a setback preceded by one of the largest increases recorded among the four countries, putting Italy at the top of the podium in the Southern European adult population qualification race in 2016.

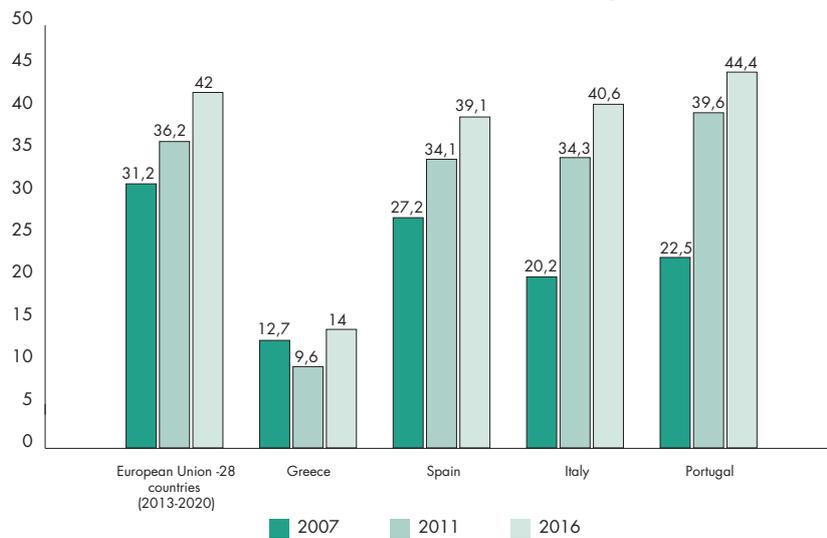
**Graphic 3. Participation rate in education and training by age in Southern European Countries (formal education and training) (%)**



Source: Eurostat, last update 08.02.21.

Focusing on the participation of the adult population in formal education activities [Graphic 4] allows us to see that the increase in participation in LLL recorded in all countries is essentially due to participation in non-formal education. Confirming the increasing trend already identified in all countries, Portugal [44.4%] stands out as the country with the highest value in 2016, the only one above the European average [42%]. The approval of the Labour Code by Law 7/2009 of 12 February and Law 105/2009 of 14 September implemented in 2009, which made continuous training compulsory in companies, have greatly contributed to this figure.

**Graphic 4. Participation rate in education and training by age in Southern European Countries (non-formal education and training) (%)**



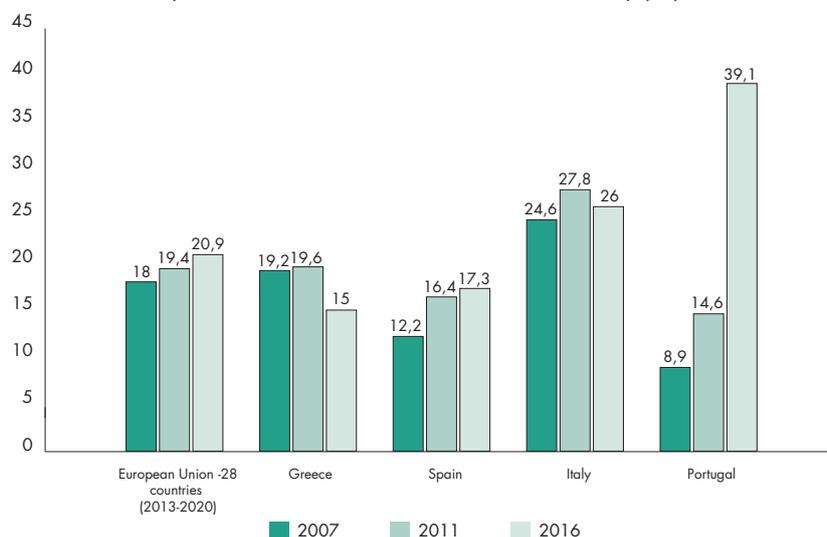
Source: Eurostat, last update 08.02.21.

The highest increase recorded between 2011 and 2016 is also in Italy confirming the success of the ALE programmes. Greece's situation of retrogression between 2007 [12.7%] and 2011 [9.6%] appears again in the participation of the Greek adult population in non-formal education activities, reinforcing this idea of the country's disinvestment in ALE during the period of economic recession caused by the 2008 eurozone economic crisis.

### 5.1. Obstacles to participation in LLL

When analysing the obstacles to participation in LLL activities in the adult population [25-64 years] of these countries, comparing two of the dimensions provided by the Adult Education Survey [wanted but encountered difficulties; did not want], we found a dimension that seems to corroborate the differences between these countries in the relationship with lifelong learning.

**Graphic 5. Population not participating in education or training by main reason and age (Wanted but encountered difficulties) (%)**



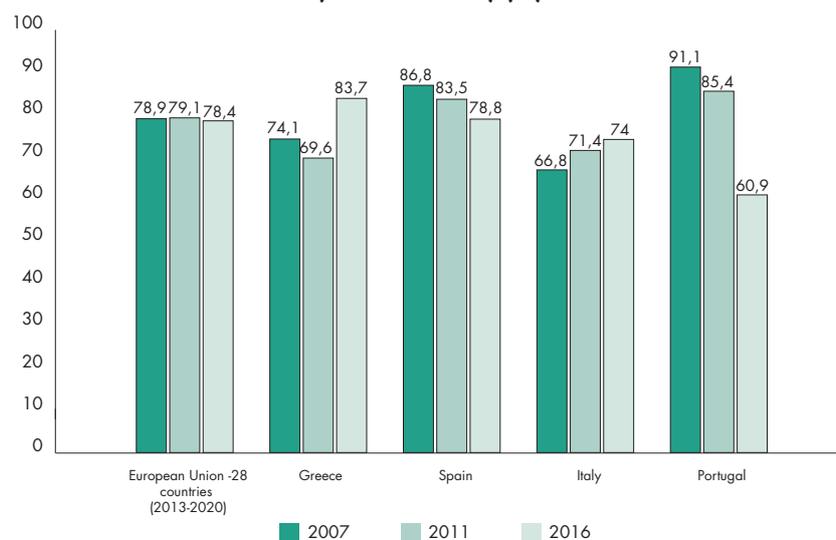
Source: Eurostat, last update 08.02.21.

The highest percentage of adults [25-64 years] who wanted to participate in LLL activities but did not participate [Graphic 5] because they felt it was difficult to do so again places Portugal [39.1%] alongside Italy [26%]. Although in the Portuguese case there was a very significant continuous increase between 2011 [14,6%] and 2016 [39,1%], in the Italian case the increase over time was slight, even counting with a decrease between 2011 [27,8%] and 2016 [26%]. Nevertheless, these are the two countries above the European average of adults who did not participate because they experienced difficulties. Although the difficulties are not objectively associated with any of the possible obstacles [family responsibilities; professional responsibilities; lack of information about the offer; cost; transport/travel, etc.] their significant existence in these two countries should make us reflect again on the impact of the volatility of the offers and programmes within the adult education [sub]system in each country, leaving adults who would like to get involved in LLL ‘adrift’ because they cannot count on a stable and durable structure.

It should be noted that the average number of individuals in this situation in the EU is also high [20.9%], and within these four countries, Greece was the closest to this benchmark over time [19.2%-2207; 19.6%-2011]. However, in 2016 the number of individuals who wanted to participate and did not participate due to difficulties decreased significantly [19,6%-15%], and Greece is currently the country with the lowest figure compared to the European average. In the case of Spain, it has always remained below the average, but has been registering an upward trend over time, bringing the country closer to the current European average.

Looking now at ‘non-participation by not wanting to participate’ [Graphic 6], we find among all EU countries a prevalence of a kind of agency of the adult population with regard to involvement in LLL activities. Free will absent structural constraints? A reflection that should be made by all countries.

**Graphic 6. Population not participating in education or training by main reason and age (Did not want) (%)**



Source: Eurostat, last update 08.02.21.

Among the four countries, we can group on one hand Spain and Portugal as the countries in which we observe a decreasing trend of people who did not participate because they do not want to, and on

the other hand we have Greece and Italy with a progressive increase [not always linear as can be seen in the case of Greece]. Even so, the most significant increase was in Greece [69.6%-83.7%], regarding to the European average it is currently, among the four countries, the one that presents the highest value and, therefore, the most distant from the EU average. At the other extreme Portugal is the country with the lowest value [60.9%], although in 2007 these countries started at exactly opposite ends. Italy emerges as the country that has consecutively remained below the EU 28. Nevertheless, they are in all cases very high values [the majority of the population in all countries] that should be accompanied by a reflection on the conception and understanding of LLL by the adult population in the first instance. The urgency of this reflection will be even greater in cases where the qualification of this population requires double and triple efforts by the countries — this being strongly dependent on LLL and ALE — and also on the relationship between these learning activities [and the type of competences they propose] and the day-to-day demands of individuals in European societies [at work, in civil society, in the exercise of their citizenship, etc.]. The idea of a ‘common good’ which, when we look at these values, seems not to be shared — despite the general increase in participation over the years, especially in non-formal education — should be deconstructed to better understand those who have been left out of lifelong learning, thus depriving themselves of the updating said to be necessary for a full integration in these societies and for countries to keep up with the race of learning societies.

Are we facing the impacts of a meritocratic relationship of the school in the early education phase? Other authors (Lavrijsen y Nicaise, 2017) have referred to the effects of education systems and a negative relationship with school as shared obstacles among adults who do not participate in LLL activities. It is indeed alarming to realise that they can attribute non-participation to their own ‘will’, without being able to grasp the impacts of a learning identity built with numerous scars that result from a system that has made students responsible for failure.

## 6. Final remarks

This article results from a comparison of the ALE and LLL systems of four countries commonly referred to as Southern European countries [Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece]. Aware of the sharing of some characteristics as well as the existence of differences influencing their educational systems, we have tried to identify the similarities and differences within LLL. In an unequal relationship between what seems to ‘unite’ and what ‘separates’ them as regards these countries’ relationship to education [levels of schooling of the adult population; compulsory education], to ALE [history, structure, programmes, offers and promoters] and to LLL [participation and obstacles], it was concluded that it is not possible to refer to ‘ALE and LLL in Southern European countries’, since they do not share enough characteristics.

Differences were found in the educational systems of these four countries, especially in their organisation and compulsory schooling, but in all of them ALE appears as a substructure of that system and is the responsibility of a wide range of actors. With regard to the history of ALE, there are again more differences, with Spain having the oldest structure and Italy the most recent. Nevertheless, Italy and Portugal emerge as the countries most dependent on European funds for their ALE provision and programmes. Regarding the population educational level, again the differences are highlighted, aligned with the EU we have only Greece, among the remaining countries, Portugal presents the highest percentage of adults with low educational level [ISCED 0-2], Italy the lowest values of adults with higher education and Spain the lowest percentage of adults with secondary education.

Looking at the programmes, offers and promoters of ALE in each of these countries and although at first sight there seems to be a standard offer, the way it is organised and materialised differs significantly, e.g. popular education, secondary level offer, higher education, or recognition and validation systems do not exist as an offer available to adults in all countries. Despite sharing common [EU] guidelines the reality is that the structure of ALE is organised according to the priorities of each country, taking into account the importance given to the qualifications of the adult population.

The differences portrayed so far have an impact on the population's relationship with LLL, and although an increase in participation can be seen in all EU countries, there are considerable differences when analysing participation by each of the LLL modes [formal or non-formal]. In all countries the reported increase in LLL participation depends on participation in non-formal education activities. If we look at formal education, in some countries such as Portugal and Greece there are ups and downs in participation, with the impact of the 2008 economic crisis being visible, which may have translated into greater disinvestment [Greece] in this area, and the volatility and extinction of programmes [Portugal]. In other countries, such as Italy and Spain, participation in formal education is above the European average.

Analysing the obstacles to participation, it was once again possible to find differences between countries, with Greece always more aligned with the European averages and Spain in a divergent position, showing a less difficult access to LLL activities. Portugal and Italy showed the highest percentages of adults who wanted to participate but encountered difficulties, exceeding the European average. This may be a clear indicator of the effects of the instability of the ALE 'structure' in these countries, too dependent on European funds.

Through the data on the obstacle 'did not participate, nor wanted to participate' it was possible to attest to the presence of a common feeling of agency in the European adult population, in its relationship with LLL. Are we looking at a population that voluntarily believes in free will free from structural constraints? Opposite trends emerge among the four countries, on the one hand Portugal and Spain with a decreasing line of this type of obstacle, and on the other Greece and Italy showing an increase in adults who did not and did not want to participate in LLL activities. The presence of very high values [the majority of the population] in all countries should make us reflect on the representations and meanings attributed to LLL by the adult population, and on the adjustment between learning and the daily demands of individuals in European societies. Are we facing a gap between the importance given to LLL and the adult population's perception of it? Or is this the impact of a meritocratic relationship of initial education? Could non-participation be understood as free will, leaving out a deeper reflection on the effects of contexts and structures on the construction of a learning identity?

After this final balance of the differences and similarities around ALE and LLL identified between these four countries, selected to represent the subgroup of 'Southern European' countries, the need to distinguish them in order to know them is corroborated. Indeed, this is a complex sector, marked more by fragmentation than linearity, so a case-by-case distinction will always be relevant when analysing phenomena related to LLL and ALE in Europe.

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