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Made in the EU: Dual Europeanisation and the rhetorical construction of adult education (2000-2022)

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Abstract

This paper addresses the processes involved in the Europeanisation of adult education, with a particular focus on the limitations of EU policies aimed at increasing adult participation in education and learning. Mobilising relational, multidimensional Europeanisation perspectives as tools for understanding, the research is methodologically supported by the analysis and discussion of documentary and statistical data. The Portuguese case study illustrates the emergence of dual Europeanisation processes in education through national policy options, trajectories and outcomes. This study offers new insights into the role of national contexts in influencing the evolution of European policies. It elucidates the ways in which EU guidelines are either absorbed or accommodated, as well as instances of transformation, inertia or retrenchment in the pursuit of European targets for adult participation in education across member states. This analysis sheds light on shortcomings of outcomes achieved in about two decades of (rhetorical?) construction of European adult education policy.

Keywords: adult education, European education policy, Europeanisation, participation in education, lifelong education and learning

Introduction

The European Union (EU) initially established policies pertaining to participation in education through the implementation of the Education & Training 2010 (ET2010) Programme, within the framework of the lifelong learning strategy, as an instrument contributing to the global reform programme of the Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010). That framework expresses ‘policy concerns on the need to widen access and participation by policy makers at national and European levels [...] largely for economic reasons to enhance the skills of the workforce in a competitive global world’ (Merrill et al., 2024, p.



7). The ET2010 Programme was succeeded by the Education & Training 2020 (ET2020) Programme and the more recent European Education Area (2021-2030) (EEA2030) Initiative, and all three strategic frameworks set objectives and benchmarks, through the *open method of coordination* of policies, which in turn feed the European dimension of national education policies. Three of the initial six benchmarks, pertaining to *early school leavers*, *completion of upper secondary education* and *lifelong learning*¹, are concerned with policies of participation in education and are common to ET2010 and ET2020². Twenty years on (European Commission, 2023c; Eurostat, 2023f; Eurostat, 2023g), the targets set by these European education policies of participation in education have been achieved, by the EU and Portugal, with the exception of *adult participation in learning*³. This paper intends to discuss some of the Europeanisation processes involved in the shortcomings of the EU policy aimed at enhancing the participation of adults in education and learning.

The so-called Portuguese case⁴ in education is interesting because, having been an isolated case in the EU at the turn of the century with very low levels of formal education among both its young and adult populations, it has now achieved (and even surpassed) the European participation targets and the average rates observed for youth education, but not for adult education. This approach enables an analysis of the Portuguese case of Europeanisation in participation policies for education targeting young people and adults. It may help to articulate arguments that shed light on aspects of the failure of the European policy to improve adult participation in education.

This study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What is the Portuguese case of Europeanisation of public policies of participation in the field of education, both for young people and adults?
- (2) What factors and processes have marked these more than twenty years of European policy to expand adult participation in lifelong education?

This study adopts a theoretical-methodological approach to the analysis of education policies combining the *policy cycle approach* (Bowe et al., 1992; Ball & Avelar, 2016) with the *multiscalar governance* proposal (Dale, 2005). The *context of influence* and the supranational scale of EU policies are discussed, as well as the national dimension as an instance of policy translation and interpretation. This *multiscale, multi-actor* perspective of education policy analysis provides the framework for an empirically based analysis, supported by secondary sources. These include documentary/bibliographical sources, which provide a socio-historical context, and official statistical data, which describe the empirical educational phenomena under analysis.

Next, we begin by highlighting perspectives on Europeanisation, with a particular focus on the field of education; in a second stage, the national mediation in contradictory directions of European education participation policies and the fabrication of a generational divide, between levels of education of young and adult population in Portugal, are substantiated on the basis of documentary sources and official statistics. Finally, the asymmetrical stagnation of adult participation in education and training in the EU context over several decades is discussed as a partial result of the Europeanisation process.

This study provides new knowledge about the contribution of the *national* dimension or mediation of the European priority of expanding adult participation in education and training. The Portuguese case illustrates contours of the fabrication of Europeanisation processes in education through national mediations: policy options, processes, trajectories, outcomes. The paper brings to the fore the *absorption*, *accommodation* or even *transformation* centred on EU guidelines as feeding, respectively, a (s)low,

moderate or substantial change in existing public policies, practices or institutions, or the *inertia* or *retrenchment* in the pursuit of European targets for adult participation in education in many Member states; this argument is an attempt to shed some light on the poor results of almost two decades of (rhetorical?) construction of European adult education policy.

(Relational, multidimensional) Europeanisation perspectives as tools for understanding

The debates surrounding the *Europeanisation* of public policies raise the most acute questions about the contours of the field of study itself, as well as the analytical rigor and relevance of the concept for delimiting phenomena, grasping sociopolitical relations, ‘understanding the multifaceted and continuously developing process’ (Grek & Russel, 2024, p. 216; Radaelli, 2000; Dale & Robertson, 2009). Some research suggests that in education, as in other fields, when debating *Europeanisation*, it is important to analyse the implications not only of the interconnections between European and national priorities, options, guidelines and political institutions (Andersen & Eliassen, 1993), but also of the creation of a European education sector and a European education policy (Dale & Robertson, 2009).

It is a widely accepted argument that member states of EU, and a large array of subnational (collective/individual) actors, interpret, modify or set preferences when building European policies, goals or guidelines ‘in accordance with their traditions, institutions, identities, and resources, thereby limiting the degree of convergence and homogenization’ of institutions, policies, and processes towards a common European model (Jambrovic & Maresic, 2020, p. 9). In this sense, some researchers observe ‘partial’ and/or ‘clustered convergence’ (Jambrovic & Maresic, 2020, pp. 25-26), with *absorption*, *accommodation* or even *transformation* centred on EU guidelines, according to a low, moderate or substantial change in existing public policies, outcomes, practices or institutions; *inertia*, even resistance can feed divergence between member states (Börzel & Risse, 2000; Klatt, 2023). This is why the national dimension and mediation of European policies are understood as processes of translation and recontextualisation (Jambrovic & Maresic, 2020; Börzel & Risse, 2000; Klatt, 2023; Ball & Avelar, 2016), that is, political processes mobilising resources (from interest coalitions to interpretative communities, the economic structure or institutional pathways) rooted in the national space. Thus, even discursive and goals convergence is often accompanied by policy responses, trajectories and results constructed from the particular context of each member state.

‘[E]uropeanization on move’ or ‘the power of ideas’ problematise that more formal model perspective and the predominantly teleological view, underscoring the sociopolitical processes and the spread of practices and ideas (Baer, 2020; Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022; Ostrouch-Kamińska et al., 2021). When it concerns human rights, identity (trans)formation or citizenship practices and movements, like adult education and learning (Barros et al., 2021; Frias et al., 2022; Doutor & Alves, 2024), it is important to observe and question reality movement, mobilising an enlarged network of theoretical tools. This is more so as far as several actors at both national and European level can, as argued through recent research, work ‘together to increase their chances to influence Communitarian policies’ paralleled with the fact that ‘neither EU institutions (e.g., the Council of the EU) or Member States (...) are completely independent actors, nor are they monolithic actors’ and they ‘can operate according to different logics to steer the

policy process and setting of Communitarian agendas' (Milana & Mikulec, 2023, pp. 224-225).

It is important to note that, within the framework of the discussion outlined here, the term convergence is taken in the descriptive sense, to designate the approximation to European reference parameters for indicators defined within the scope of structuring European educational policies in the last few decades: the Education & Training 2010 (ET2010) and Education & Training 2020 (ET2020) Programmes, and the more recent European Education Area Initiative (EEA) (Commission of the European Communities, 2002; Council of the European Union, 2009, 2021). As argued, 'a Europeanization process in education, a distinctive spatial, political, and scientific process', seriously means that 'questions can be asked about the significance of national policies when a transnational policy emerges with its own policies, agencies, and indicators. What is implied about the convergence of educational systems in Europe?' (Grek and Lawn, 2009, p. 52). It is admissible that, as Dale points out, 'there is little sign of convergence between nation-states in their decisions and responses to the common challenges that they face' (2005, pp. 130-131), without this meaning that what they make decisions about, or what is excluded from this prerogative, constitute domains in which there is room for the exercise of an 'autonomous agency'⁵, on the part of nation-states. Thus, the ability to define the (*globally structured*) *agenda* for education integrates the protagonism of powerful supranational actors, in *contexts of influence* of the *policy cycle*, as well as other policy-making frameworks that articulate multiple scales, in which local, subnational, national and global actors, spaces and dynamics are reciprocally constituted (cf. Bowe et al., 1992; Ball & Avelar, 2016), in such a way that 'policies, processes or practices, (...) can vary quite independently of each other' (Dale, 2005, p. 144).

The concept of *Europeanisation* has been invoked in the literature to describe these sets of processes. However, both from an analytical and empirical standpoint, we are dealing with distinct, albeit connected, socio-political phenomena and relations. Today, they are inseparable processes, suggesting a relational and multidimensional approach, allowing for an understanding of education policies as dynamic realities that comprise multiple scales and dimensions, and considering the European and national spaces as interdependent processes, relations and dimensions that are mutually constitutive. Throughout this fabric, 'the boundaries between the European, national, and local levels are overlapping and fluid as Member States' governments and administrations also relate to European level actors' (Sorensen & Eeva, 2024, p. 167). Thus, it is possible, using a two-way approach, to understand the features and the dynamics of creation of a European education sector and a European education policy, as well as to analyse the options and priorities of the national education policies within that framework. In the field of adult education studies, there is a substantial body of research that examines the processes of developing a European sector and policy (see, for example, Holford & Milana, 2014; Milana & Mikulec, 2023). The mobilisation of resources, as well as the translation and interpretation work, within this framework of guidelines, goals and targets, carried out at national, local and institutional levels, have also been extensively studied (see, for example, Mikulec & Krašovec, 2016; Doutor & Guimarães, 2019).

In this multidimensional relational perspective, in the following section, we call for the Europeanisation of (adult) education for over two decades as a *context of influence* (Bowe et al., 1992; Ball & Avelar, 2016). We admit that this scenario of political action constitutes an important source of discourses, purposes and concepts, which animate national options and courses of action; in this sense, we observe, document and substantiate specific processes of national mediation (transformation, commitment, accommodation, reluctance or inertia) towards European educational policies. As noted

before, the empirical basis of this study is: (i) the official public statistical data organised in Table 1 and 2, and provided by the sources systematically listed in the respective caption and throughout the paper; (ii) the adopted strategic frameworks ET2010, ET2020, EEA2030 and, in particular, the benchmarks and indicators agreed upon by the EU authorities and member states, within the scope of such programmes. Focusing on the *context of the results/effects* (Ball & Avelar, 2016) of European education policy in its own terms, that is, the benchmarks adopted by the EU member states for participation in education, the discussion in the following two sections illuminates the manifestations of dual Europeanisation in Portugal and suggests the hypothesis of a rhetorical construction of adult education for all, in Portugal and in the EU.

The context of influence and the national mediation of European education policies: Disparity in trajectories and results

The ‘Portuguese educational realities’ and the Portuguese ‘case’

The dynamics generated around the Lisbon Strategy and the adoption of the lifelong learning strategy articulated a ‘shift’ to a ‘new arithmetic of inequalities in education at the European level’ to anchor the ‘European social investment strategy’ (Normand, 2021, pp. 361, 365-368). In a context in which the project of economising education (Antunes, 2016) will become programmatically and explicitly hegemonic, ‘the rhetoric of the EU 2020 benchmarks and the common priorities of EU policy frameworks and programmes in the field of education policy’ had gained momentum by ‘shaping the agenda setting to re-imagine education as a tool for economic policies’ (Eeva, 2021, p. 14). In this framework, following the turn of the 21st century, the open method of coordination (OMC) of policies developed to respond to the Education & Training 2010 (ET2010) Programme shines an intense light on the Portuguese case of low qualifications among the active population⁶. We should understand this: the diagnosis had been known for, at least, more than 10 years (Carneiro et al., 1988). It included the perception that raising the education levels of the young population would have a minimal impact on the population's average educational levels, given the demographic realities of a drastic reduction in the weight of new generations, the prolongation of work activity and an increase in average life expectancy. Furthermore, as has been widely documented, for example by Nóvoa (2005; see also, Carvalho et al., 2019), the prevalence of an argument built around Portuguese *backwardness* is a centuries-old constant in the debate on (educational) realities and proposals and projects for change in Portuguese society. This is not unrelated to, among other historical realities, the structural positioning of Portuguese social formation in the interstate system (Ramirez & Boli, 1987), often featuring as (one of) the poorest of the rich countries in modern, wealthy western Europe.

Studies on Portuguese society suggest lines of analysis and interpretation of such societal dynamics and political options:

1. First, the perspective of an *unfinished modernity* (Abrantes, 2012) which finds support in the idea of the prevalence of a *programmed obscurantism* involving Portuguese elites and decision-makers (Melo, 2004);
2. Second, the understanding that the Portuguese semi-peripheral condition also involves an *articulated discrepancy* between patterns of reproduction and social consumption close to countries at the centre of the world system and the EU, and

a retrograde norm of production close to countries on the periphery and semi periphery of the world system (see Santos, 1990; Santos & Reis, 2018)⁷;

3. Third, the multiple structural asymmetries of Portuguese society (Mauritti, et al., 2019), now reproduced by meandering pathways that articulate educational mobility with social reproduction between generations (Martins et al., 2016).

Valente and Wochnik (2008), when discussing the Portuguese case, to answer questions about dynamics of convergence/divergence and reforms of national vocational training systems driven by European education and training policies, argued with some factors to which this exceptionality of the Portuguese case (of low qualifications of the population, in particular its very long duration) can be attributed. Thus, ‘the Portuguese realities’, when referring to the schooling processes and education levels of the population, also point to a conglomerate of socio-institutional traits and societal options such as: educational policies; the socioeconomic and business landscape and structure; the individual demand for continuing education and training.

In this sense, one may evoke the centuries-old *disinvestment* manifested in the very low average level of education and very high rate of illiteracy among the Portuguese population during most of the 20th century (Martins et al., 2016); the most recent educational policies already in democracy, whose failures to comply with the right to education remained active, and very slowly have been overcome, with sequels and gaps; a school of masses belatedly consolidated simultaneously with its crisis (Stoer, 1994); the slow growth and stagnation of secondary education during nearly 30 years of democracy (Antunes, 2019); and the blocked project of a permanent public policy and structure for adult education and training (Melo et al., 2002; Lima, 2007). Conversely, the perpetuation of an economic, productive and business structure and fabric based on sectors in which low added value products, low wages and qualifications prevail has implications for the scarcity of incentives and rewards for individual demand for continuous education and training, particularly among those in employment in the lowest-paid occupational roles⁸. The persistence of this last structural feature has fuelled the adverse qualified emigration of young Portuguese professionals for more than a decade and highlights asymmetries, gaps and imbalances in Europeanisation processes (King, 2019).

Given this very brief contextualisation of Portuguese *educational realities* – including the Portuguese *case* of very low levels of educational attainment throughout the 20th century – what is suggested by the results observed in the framework of European policies on participation in education since the turn of the century, which, as argued above, have been a powerful *context of influence* on national policies (‘Europeanisation’)?

National mediation and the dual Europeanisation of education in Portugal

In this section, I will address the research question concerning the Portuguese case of Europeanisation of public policies of participation in the field of education, both for young people and adults. As previously stated, I will focus on the *context of the results/effects* (Ball & Avelar, 2016) of European education policy in its own terms, that is, the benchmarks adopted by EU member states for participation in education.

It can be argued that observing the *outcomes* of national public policies on participation in the field of education, both for young people and adults (5th column of Table 1), for the five benchmarks and indicators (1st and 3rd columns of Table 1; and 4th column) adopted by the EU member states for participation in education (2000-2022) (2nd column), allows us to identify the *trajectory* (of convergence or divergence) of the

aforementioned outcomes. Furthermore, it enables us to discern the processes of inertia, absorption, accommodation or transformation, centred on European guidelines (*Europeanisation modalities*) (6th column of Table 1), according to the degree of change in existing national outcomes, which can be low, moderate, substantial or non-existent (Börzel and Risse, 2000; see also Dobrić Jambrović & Marešić, 2020).

The analysis of statistical data on Portugal's situation with regard to European policies on participation in education (2002-2022) reveals a generational divide between the population aged 25-64 and those aged 20-24, with the former displaying lower levels of educational attainment than the latter (see Table 1)⁹ and problematises the political choices that generate that duality of outcomes.

Table 1. Indicators and targets of European education and training policies and the Portuguese case of dual Europeanisation (2000-2022). Source: Developed by the author based on statistics from Eurostat (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d)

Statistical indicators	European public policy	European benchmark	European average rate	Portugal	Trajectory/Modality of Europeanisation ¹
Early school leaving (18-24 years)	EEA Initiative 2030 (EEA2030) UE2020 Strategy/ Programme E&T 2020 (ET2020)	< 9% (2030) 10% (2020)	9.6% (2022) 9.9% (2020) 16.9% (2002)	6% (2022) 8.9% (2020) 45% (2002)	Convergence/ <i>Transformation</i>
Population with at least an upper secondary education (20-24 years)	EEA2030 UE2020 Strategy/ ET2020	 85% (2020)	83.6% (2022) 84.3% (2020) 79.6% (2011)	89.3% (2022) 85.3% (2020) 64.6% (2011)	Convergence/ <i>Transformation</i>
Population with tertiary educational attainment (25-34 years)	EEA2030 UE2020 Strategy/ ET2020	45% (2030) 40% (2020)	42% (2022) 40.5% (2020) 23.1% (2002)	44.4% (2022) 41.9% (2020) 15.3% (2002)	Convergence/ <i>Transformation</i>
Population with, at most, lower secondary educational attainment (25-64 years)			20.5% (2022) 21% (2020) 27% (2011)	39.7% (2022) 44.6% (2020) 65.4% (2011)	Divergence (compared to the European average)/ <i>Absorption</i> or <i>Accommodation</i>
Adult participation in learning in the past four weeks (25-64 years)	ET2020 EEA2030	15% (2020) 47% (2025) ²	11.9% (2022) 9.2% (2020) 5.3% (2002)	13.8% (2022) 10% (2020) 2.8% (2002)	Divergence (considering the 2020 European benchmark)/ <i>Absorption</i> or <i>Accommodation</i>

¹ According to the above-mentioned analytical proposal of Börzel and Risse (2000), and Jambrović and Maresic (2020).

² Nowadays, in the strategic framework of European Education Area (2021-2030), a new benchmark and indicator has been adopted: 'At least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months, by 2025'. See European Commission (2023b).

According to the data organised in Table 1, and considering the typology of modalities of Europeanisation of national education policies proposed by Börzel and Risse (2000; see also Dobrić Jambrović & Marešić, 2020), we could argue that Portugal, during these twenty years, has followed a dual path, in view of the accorded European benchmarks: (i) the *transformation* of young people's education levels and (ii) the *accommodation* or moderate change in the education levels of the adult population.

So, a Portuguese case with unique contours has been designed by European participation policies in education developed since 2000, with the open method of coordination within the scope of the ET2010 and ET2020 Programmes and the EEA (2030) initiative: at first, atypically low levels of schooling among the population, followed by a continued and now achieved *convergence* with European averages and targets, with regard to reference parameters and indicators adopted in relation to young people's educational levels, as can be observed in Table 1; yet continued *divergence* with European averages and targets, regarding the parameters and indicators of schooling levels and participation in education of the adult population and, consequently, regarding the Portuguese population in general (Eurostat, 2023c, 2023d, 2023h) (see Table 1). And, in this context, the Portuguese case takes on contrasting tones, with the attribution and claim of success and exemplary persistent improvement for two decades, with regard to the initial education of young people (Teodoro, 2022). Such performance will contradictorily highlight and hide the indelible deficit generated by the *structural invariant* (Lima, 2007) of lacking a permanent, global and integrated public policy and system (Melo et al., 2002), capable of responding to social needs and aspirations, with a view to fulfilling the fundamental right to education of the adult population (Fragoso & Fonseca, 2022).

Even a brief glance at the 50 years of democracy since April 25 of 1974, is enough to confirm the thesis advanced by educational activists and academics, according to which

the considerable discontinuity of adult education policies [...] is due to the absence of a minimally stable guiding thread in educational policies. Political-educational logics, priorities, organizational and administrative dimensions, even conceptual elements, change frequently, interrupting or abandoning certain policies to make way for others and so on. (Lima, 2007, p. 72)

The 'intermittency of policies', the absence of an '(institutional and budgetary)' public system, the fragmentation of the field and demobilisation/demotivation 'of audiences and actors' (Canelas & Ramos, 2019, p. 62) continued to be repeatedly evoked (see also Barros, 2016; Capucha, 2018).

Meanwhile, the 'structural invariant' of the 'lack of consensus' and 'policy discontinuity' is also explained by the divergence between 'different approaches to the educational and cultural promotion of adults: permanent education, second-chance schooling and professional training for the job' (Melo, 2017, p. 3).

As is revealed by the analysis of the data in Table 1, the Portuguese case is therefore also a unique case of the fabrication of a generational fracture due to the duality of national political options regarding convergence/divergence with quantitative reference standards and European realities in education. The aforementioned outcomes, as evidenced by the official data and subsequent analysis, illustrate that Portuguese governments (institutions, actors, and other resources) have actively mediated European education and training policies: in Portugal, a notable trajectory of *change and convergence* with European benchmarks can be observed with regard to the education levels of the younger population (2002-2022), stimulated by European policies of participation in education; however, this is not the case with regard to the indicators relating to the adult population (2002-2022). Even more so as there is a naturalisation of a perspective and an orientation of action in which 'The adult population itself has lost its identity, ending up conceptually rejuvenated by reference to 'second-chance education' for young adults and restricted to the 'active population' for the purposes of 'professional qualification'.' (Lima & Guimarães, 2018, p. 615). This cleavage is to be expected taking into account the factors and options for public education policies mentioned above; against all evidence, including demographics, those have set a

trajectory of persistent absence of permanent public policy and system, as far as the adult population is concerned. The data presented in Table 1 show that the *divergence* of the structure of low levels of education of the Portuguese adult population is maintained compared to the generality and the average of the EU countries. In this way, over the two decades covered by the analysed data, we observe a low or moderate change in the levels of educational attainment and participation of the adult population, which, as argued above, suggests the absorption or accommodation of European guidelines and targets (Börzel and Risse, 2000; see also Dobrić Jambrović & Marešić, 2020). This pathway of Europeanisation appears to combine the national appropriation of the discourses and objectives of European policies, which are focused on increasing adult participation in lifelong education, with the prevailing pattern of the national education system. As previously discussed, for adult education, these characteristics include a 'lack of consensus', 'policy discontinuity' and the absence of an 'institutional and budgetary' public system.

Europeanisation, contradictory agendas and outcomes: State commitment and participation in adult education

Routes of Europeanisation of adult education

The evolution of socio-political relations pertaining to the Europeanisation of education can be examined through a two-way approach, which offers insights into the development of a European education sector and policy while also enabling the analysis of national education policies. Educational researchers agree on the following points: (i) The 1970s saw the inception of EEC intervention; (ii) this was further advanced through the implementation of community action programmes from the mid-1980s onwards, fostered by the Single European Act and the Single European Market; (iii) the Maastricht Treaty (1992) marked a shift in the EU's engagement with education, after article 126 of the Treaty gave the EU responsibility in this domain, a mandate that has been expanded; and (iv) in this second phase of the Europeanisation of education, a Community agenda and policy on education and training were established, and have remained in place, since 1999. These have been developed under the auspices of the Community institutions and have been informed by the Bologna Process, the Copenhagen Process, and the Education & Training 2010 (ET2010) Programme (Antunes, 2006; Rasmussen, 2014a). Subsequently, the Education & Training 2020 (ET2020) Programme was developed, followed by the European Education Area (EEA2030) Initiative, which was launched in 2021 and will run until 2030.

It has been argued that the process of Europeanisation of education, which has been underway for more than two decades, has resulted in two growing trends. On the one hand, the political and economic centrality of education, training, and learning has been emphasised through the adoption of *lifelong learning* as a flagship project, and the development of the ET2010 and ET2020 programmes under the Lisbon Strategy and EU 2020 agenda. At the same time, the Bologna Process and the Copenhagen Process were instrumental in the establishment of the European Education Area with market-oriented regulatory processes and instruments. These include a degree structure, a credit system, a European Qualifications Framework and quality assurance systems (Antunes, 2016). From this perspective, the processes of Europeanisation of education contribute to and are shaped by a *globally structured agenda for education* (Dale, 2000; Antunes, 2006). This agenda stems from the actors, resources and pathways required and available,

particularly in EU and national instances. The centrality of education has resulted in the high priority given to *participation*, and in a path towards the *democratisation* of education, which has been long sought by those aspiring to realise the right to education as a public good anchored in the public sector.

These decades of Europeanisation, as a process and project of development of the aforementioned trends, have been marked by disputes and tensions surrounding education. These debates centre on its role as a fundamental human right, a marketable commodity, an economic and employment policy, and a policy for the creation of 'Europe' (see Lawn & Nóvoa, 2005; Antunes, 2006, 2016).

Europeanisation does not necessarily result in the *convergence* of national education policies. Moreover, policy options are not exclusively guided by political authorities (Holford & Milana, 2014). Instead, national, institutional, and practical mediations appear to play an equally significant role in shaping education alongside the European policy framework (Rasmussen, 2014b; Cavaco et al., 2014).

In a recent paper, Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2018) argued that, as a *common good*, adult education appears to be a *reality* only in a limited set of four EU countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Luxembourg); in nine (Austria, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Norway, and Spain) of the twenty-four member states studied it appears to be *achievable* or even a *possibility* (in the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia) and, in other countries, it presents itself as an *ambiguous* (Belgium, Malta, Slovakia), *problematic* (Italy and Greece) or *invisible* (Romania) horizon. In line with what had been discussed, the authors argue 'that the extent to which adult education as a common good is accomplished in a given society/country reflects its accessibility, availability, affordability and the social commitment to its functioning and that it depends on a country's specific institutional arrangements' (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018).

In examining the constitution of adult education as both a field of intervention and a component of the European education sector and policy, the two trends mentioned above have been identified and documented: (i) the centrality of adult education/widening participation, together with (ii) the development of policy instruments and the constitution of adult education as a market. This pathway of Europeanisation of adult education has been proposed, with four moments identified so far (while a fifth is possible): 1) the *thematization* of adult education as a Community intervention area; 2) adult education as a *dimension of lifelong learning*: the Education & Training 2010 Programme; 3) the *European agenda* for adult education - quality and participation; 4) between *political centrality and absence of policies?*, and 5) a *new opportunity* for Adult Education? (Antunes, 2020).

It has been argued that, after more than 25 years of *Europeanisation*, adult education remains a fragile priority, without political weight to overcome obstacles such as the precariousness of public policies and structures or the fragmentation of measures and educational responses with a one-dimensional *mandate* of residualist instrumentality. The growing centrality of adult education (thematization, lifelong learning dimension, European agenda, a new opportunity...) is associated, in this path of Europeanisation, with the asymmetrical stagnation (among EU member states) in the participation of the adult population in lifelong learning, and with the persistent *incapacity*¹⁰ of the measures taken by countries to achieve the objectives defined in this area (Antunes, 2020). Consecutive researchers reinforce 'the need for an integrated approach to the analysis of participation in adult learning, incorporating the influence of factors at different levels' (Ilieva-Trichkova & Boyadjieva, 2024, p. 14).

Officially recognised in 2019 in documents from the European Commission (European Commission, 2019), the fact that certain member states have opted for the sidelining of adult education goes back to the *policy cycle* (the different contexts of action) (Bowe et al., 1992; Ball & Avelar, 2016) of European policies (Europeanisation). In that sense, and strongly correlated with these outcomes, a particular form of Europeanisation emerges in the background: the absence of a systemic approach and the temporary and fragmented funding of adult education and training, which in themselves constitute a mode of policy development typically disseminated and imported within EU policy intervention (Mikulec & Krašovec, 2016; Tuparevska et al., 2020; Klatt, 2023). As a supranational regional organisation, the EU filters and conveys a *globally structured agenda for education* (see Dale, 2000), also through the European adult education policy; the *national mediation* of this one (*Europeanisation*) is carried out through existing national institutions, priorities, actors, projects and other resources, or those that can be generated. Interpretation, translation and articulation of problems, solutions, institutional models, norms and standards involved in that European policy generate *globally structured* national (regional, local, institutional) policies for adult education.

A notable exception: The asymmetric stagnation in adult participation in education

At the same time, the singular Portuguese case illustrates the relevance of the new world educational order (Field, 2000; Laval & Weber, 2002; Antunes, 2007), including multiscale contexts of political action: both the European and national dimensions of education policies vehiculate and filter political agendas (priorities, guidelines, problems, solutions, models of institutions or projects). In this sense, the Portuguese case highlights the recontextualisation of European policies and the global-local nexus, illuminating what is also a notable exception in European education policies¹¹:

1. The stagnation of European average adult participation rates in lifelong learning, with the
2. Failure of the European policy to increase adult participation in education and training, which
3. Reproduces asymmetries in adult participation in lifelong learning over twenty years and two programmes, ET2010 and ET2020, highlighting national specificities and growing disparities between EU member states.

Thus, as can be seen from Table 1, between 2002 and 2022, the average annual growth (0.33 percentage points (pp)/year) of the *European rate of adult participation in learning in the past four weeks (25-64 years)*¹² fell far short of achieving the European benchmark 2010 (12.5%) or 2020 (15%). Not only that, but the gap between member states exponentially widened as well: from 17.4 pp in 2002 to 34.5 pp of difference between the lowest (1.7%) and highest (36.2%) participation rate among EU27 member states in 2022¹³. It should be underlined that this is not about comparing totally different realities, the EU15 of 2002, the EU27 of 2011, the EU28 of 2013 or the EU27 of 2022. The point proposed strictly considers the values of the above-mentioned indicator, observed over the 2002-2022 time series, for each of the 27 countries that make up the EU27 (from 2020). It can be seen that, until 2022, in those very different contexts, unlike most referred targets of European education, the Union hasn't reached the agreed outcomes for adult participation in education and training; and the gap within the EU has widened.

Revisiting the aforementioned research question, what can help us understand this notable exception with regard to the Europeanisation of education policy, as expressed by the benchmarks adopted for the development of ET2010 and ET2020 programmes and strategic frameworks?

I will now examine the official data on the *outcomes* of national public policies regarding adult participation in learning, focusing specifically on the relevant European benchmark. This analysis will cover the period under review (refer to the 2nd and 3rd columns of Table 2) and will assess whether these outcomes converge or diverge from the ET2020 benchmark (4th column of Table 2) and the EU member states' average (5th column of Table 2). Additionally, for each member state, the *modality of Europeanisation* (inertia, absorption/accommodation, or transformation) can be identified (1st and 6th columns of Table 2) based on the pace of change (non-existent, low, moderate, or substantial) in the national results (3rd column of Table 2).

Table 2. Participation of adults in learning in the EU Member States - changes since 2002 and the modalities of Europeanisation. Source: Developed by the author based on statistics from Eurostat (2023e)¹

EU Member states	Adult participation in learning in the past four weeks (25-64 years) (2022) (%)	Change since 2002	Convergence with European benchmark ET2020 (15%)	Convergence (or exceeding) European average rate of adult participation in learning (11.9%, 2022)	Modality of Europeanisation ²
Estonia	21.1	15.8 pp/ 0.79 pp/year	2016		<i>Transformation</i>
Slovenia	22.3	13.9 pp/ 0.69 pp/year	2004-2008; 2010-2011; 2021-2022 ³		
Spain	15.2	10.7 pp/ 0.53 pp/year	2022		
Luxembourg	18.1	10.4 pp/ 0.52 pp/year	2015		
Austria	15.8	8.3 pp/ 0.41 pp/year	2017-2018; 2022		
France	13.2 (19.5 by 2019)	10.6 pp/ 0.53 pp/year	2013-2019	2013 (17.8%) 2022 (13.3%)	<i>Transformation?</i> <i>Absorption or Accommodation?</i>
Portugal	13.3	10.5 pp/ 0.52 pp/year	-----	2020 (9.8%)	<i>Absorption or Accommodation</i>
Malta	13	8.6 pp/0.43 pp/year	-----	2017 (10.6%)	
Slovakia Ireland Cyprus Belgium Latvia Italy Czechia Lithuania Germany Hungary Poland Romania Croatia Greece Bulgaria	1.6 to 12.8	0.4 pp/0.02 pp/year to 4.3 pp/0.21 pp/year	-----	-----	<i>Inertia</i>
Sweden	36.2	17.8 pp/0.89 pp/year	Not applicable (n/a)	n/a	n/a
Denmark	27.9	9.9 pp/0.49 pp/year	n/a	n/a	n/a
Netherlands	26.4	10.6 pp/0.53 pp/year	n/a	n/a	n/a
Finland	25.2	7.9 pp/0.39 pp/year	n/a	n/a	n/a

¹ To construct Table 2, we considered the 2002-2022 time series, as the data for all member states for the indicator in question is only available from 2002 onwards.

² See note 13 above.

³ Slovenia reports a slightly unstable rate of participation of adults in education and training, as measured by the indicator concerned, in the time series 2002-2022; for a better understanding of adult education and learning field, system and policy in Slovenia, see Mikulec and Guimarães (2023) and Govekar Okoliš (2024).

Mobilising the typology of Europeanisation modalities proposed by Börzel and Risse (2000; see also Dobrić Jambrović & Marešić, 2020), one could suggest that the European asymmetrical stagnation of levels of adult participation in education, observed in 2022, relates to:

- The very few countries where the agreed ET2010 and ET2020 benchmarks¹⁴ were followed by transformation in order to reach and converge with those European goals (Estonia, Slovenia, Spain, Luxembourg and Austria)¹⁵
- The other very few countries that seem to be following the paths of absorption or accommodation, with (s)low or moderate change, in their approach to the European benchmark and thus reaching or exceeding the European average rate (France, Portugal or Malta¹⁶)
- The situation of most EU member states, which appear to have a significant inertia in terms of adult participation in education and learning, consistently deviating from the benchmarks set over the last twenty years. As the European Commission (2023a) points out in a current report: ‘The first main challenge is uneven implementation progress among Member States, with large discrepancies in upskilling opportunities available for low-skilled adults’ accompanied by ‘the often still small scale and insufficient effective outreach of implementation measures’, and ‘the dominant role of project-based EU funding as opposed to structural domestic funding’ (p. 7).

Closing remarks: Dual Europeanisation and the rhetorical construction of adult education in the EU?

This text examines the process of Europeanisation of education, including the national dimension of educational policies and viewed as interactive dynamics that are mutually constituted. It highlights the complexity of these more than 20 years of European adult education policies and seeks to clarify certain facets of national policy options within the framework of the European dimension of the new world educational order. Analysing statistical data about participation in education, in the context of some benchmarks accorded by EU member states, we could observe and understand disparate processes of Europeanisation and its outcomes in Portugal: the *transformation* in the levels of participation of young people in education contrasts sharply with the (s)low change in the levels of education and participation of the adult population (and the *absorption* or *accommodation* of European accorded objectives). Answering the research questions, we suggest that dual Europeanisation or disparate modalities of Europeanisation are observable in Portugal in terms of: (i) over these more than 20 years, Portuguese governments (institutions, actors and other resources) have actively mediated European education and training policies; (ii) this included compromising with or refusing to, for the young or the adult population respectively, policy options in favor of convergence with agreed benchmarks and targets for participation in education; (iii) a notorious generational fracture was thus fabricated in Portuguese society.

The creation of a European adult education policy and sector over the past twenty-five years appears to be marked by contradictory factors, processes and options: in the foreground, the appreciable hegemony of a residualist instrumental mandate stands out for lifelong education; this action area stays positioned at the centre of the economy and at the top of political priorities, forged in the search for competitiveness, productivity and employability. Secondly, in apparent opposition to this political centrality and priority,

the asymmetrical stagnation of adult participation in education and training in the EU and the persistent incapacity to achieve the defined goals outline the contradictory articulation of Europeanisation processes. The data concerning the participation of adults in learning in the EU member states over the past two decades indicate that only a small number of countries are pursuing a path of *transformation* with notable alterations, and an even smaller number of member states are following an *absorption* or *accommodation* path, with (s)low or moderate change, in order to achieve convergence with the agreed ET2010 and ET2020 benchmarks. In most countries a considerable *inertia* exists with regard to adult participation in education and learning. This is evidenced by a consistent deviation from the benchmarks that have been set over the past twenty years, which have been consistently missed by the majority of EU member states.

These developments point to the hypothesis of a rhetorical construction of adult education within the EU political space¹⁷. This perspective highlights the significant time lag between the expression of interest, intentions, and goals for adult education participation and the enactment of policies capable of achieving them. In this process, the national appropriation of discourses and objectives of European policies, often substantively contradictory in themselves, can combine with the *societal effect* of the *pattern* of the national educational system (for example, the Portuguese case). In this way, varied and moving multi-scale Europeanisations could be generated, from *accommodation* or *transformation* to *inertia*, with political, institutional and socio-historical dimensions in contradiction or conjugation.

Notes

- ¹ 'By 2010, an EU average rate of no more than 10% early school leavers'; 'by 2010, at least 85 % of 22-year-olds in the European Union should have completed upper secondary education'; 'by 2010, the European Union average level of participation in Lifelong Learning, should be at least 12.5% of the adult working age population (25-64 age group)' (Council of the European Union, 2003).
- ² Nonetheless, the ET2020 Programme introduces a revised benchmark for lifelong learning: 'By 2020, an average of at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning.' Additionally, the 2010 indicator and benchmark for upper secondary education attainment reappears later with a modified age range (20-24 years instead of 22 years) as a secondary complementary target: 'Population with at least upper secondary attainment (%) (20-24 years)' (European Commission/Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2012, p. 55).
- ³ As mentioned before, adult participation in learning (25-64 age group) is the indicator adopted for *lifelong learning*, a largely debatable decision, which cannot be analysed in depth here.
- ⁴ As highlighted in the Eurostat publication *Educational attainment statistics*, 'The share of people aged 20-24 with at least an upper secondary qualification has been agreed as a supplementary indicator to the EU level target for early leavers from education and training. (...) [between 2012 and 2022] Spain and Portugal reported the largest increases, 15.7 pp and 21.5 pp respectively' (Eurostat, 2023h).
- ⁵ I am grateful to the unknown reviewer for suggesting the use of this or a similar expression.
- ⁶ 'Low qualifications among the active population' is a political-cognitive and normative construction evoked in this discussion to contextualise the intervention of international organisations in defining problems, response models and action frameworks (Dale, 2000; Teodoro, 2001, 2022) that thematise a global agenda and an educational model of global ambition (Laval and Weber, 2002).
- ⁷ These investigations and arguments underline how the adoption of consumption patterns characteristic of countries at the core of the global system would lead to an increase in the demand for education among young people and a corresponding increase in state intervention. The regressive norm of production, more like that observed in the periphery and semi-periphery countries, would serve to perpetuate the archaic economic structure based on low wages and low skills, combined with intermittent state intervention and support for social mobilisation around adult education.
- ⁸ In multiple studies, the majority of adults surveyed state that their professional situation has not changed following the completion of a level of studies (or even a professional qualification) in adult education (e.g., Lima & Guimarães, 2012).

- ⁹ As we can see, there is some variability about the data available in the sense that, according to each European policy, the first data available can refer to a different year (2002 or 2011) (Eurostat, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g, 2023h).
- ¹⁰ *Capacity* constitutes one of the sub-dimensions of analysis of educational policies proposed by Dale and Ozga (1991, p. 14); according to the authors, *capacity* encompasses what is considered *possible* to assume and carry out in education and, together with the *mandate*, configures the *scope* of a given educational policy.
- ¹¹ However, as underlined, ‘the EU has not met its target to reduce *underachievement in basic skills* to less than 15% and little progress has been achieved over the past decade’ (European Commission, 2020, p. 2).
- ¹² On average, over the past 20 years, this rate has grown by 0.33 pp/year. This value is considerably below the 0.54 pp needed to reach the EU benchmark of 15% of adult participation in learning in the past four weeks (25-64 years), by 2020.
- ¹³ See Eurostat (2023e). See the values of the indicator in hand that are available in this time series between 2002 and 2022, for each of the countries that compose the EU27 (from 2020), plus Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey; for these last four countries there are years in which data are unavailable. See also Eurostat (2024).
- ¹⁴ Adult participation in education benchmark for ET2010 programme (12.5%) and for ET2020 programme (15%); see above notes 2 and 3.
- ¹⁵ France could be considered a sixth country to undergo a *transformation* in the participation of adults in learning during the 20-year period of Europeanisation of adult education, from 2002 to 2022. However, its distinctive trajectory, as evidenced by the statistical data, calls for a more in-depth analysis that is beyond the scope of this discussion (see, for instance, Meilland, 2023). It is also important to note that some member states (Sweden, Denmark, Finland or the Netherlands) have already achieved the EU targets for adult learning participation before 2000 (Eurostat, 2023e).
- ¹⁶ Although at first glance Slovakia could be included in this group of countries in 2022, if we look at the development of the level of adult participation in learning in Slovakia between 2002 and 2022, it becomes clear that it is not yet possible to argue that there is a consistent movement towards the European average level of adult participation in learning (Eurostat, 2023e). For a better understanding of adult education and learning field, system and policy in Slovakia, see Lukáč and Lukáčová (2024).
- ¹⁷ I use the expression ‘rhetorical construction of adult education’ in the EU political space by analogy with one of the explanations of the political construction of the mass schooling ‘as part of an endeavor to construct a unified national polity’ (Ramirez & Boli, 1987, p. 3; Soysal & Strang, 1989, pp. 279, 285-286), throughout the 19th century. This argument is proposed to characterise processes in which the announcement of interest in education took many decades to materialise through the increase in participation in education. Portugal is one of these studied cases of ‘precocity and rhetoric’ of declaration of intentions by the State, without the capacity to implement, the universalisation of education (Araújo, 1996). In addition to the official statistical data, empirical studies in different geographies of the EU can be called upon to outline the hypothesis of the rhetorical construction of adult education in the EU, due to the failure, over decades, of increasing adult participation in education and training (see, for example, Sava & Luștrea, 2017; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018, or Campbell, 2020).

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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