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# Implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning in Portugal and Slovenia<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** In this paper, we analyse the implementation of the *Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning* (hereafter 2011 Agenda) in the period 2012–2020 in two European Union (EU) member states: Portugal and Slovenia. Theoretically, our discussion draws on studies researching European governance in adult learning. At the same time, empirically we perform a comparative analysis between the two countries and discuss similarities and differences in terms of adult learning (AL) policy ideas, activities of national coordinators for the implementation of the 2011 Agenda, and AL related European Social Funds projects. Our findings indicate that the normative vision of 2011 Agenda is well embedded in both countries' policies, that national coordinators undertook various activities to implement 2011 Agenda, and that EU funds play a key role in funding and directing both countries' AL systems.

**Keywords:** European agenda for adult learning, Portugal, Slovenia, governance mechanisms, policy instruments

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## Introduction

The role of the European Union (EU) in adult learning (AL) policymaking has received significant attention in the field of adult education in the last two decades (e.g. Field, 2018; Holford et al., 2014; Milana et al., 2020). The EU is identified, among others, as one of the intergovernmental organisations that promote particular discourses and policies of AL and stimulates international *policy transfer* (Mikulec, 2018, 2021). Although AL policies have no legal effects on member states due to the principle of subsidiarity, they are exercised and supported through “soft law”, different governance mechanisms, and policy instruments (Milana & Klatt, 2020). Nevertheless, while the role of the EU in AL policymaking, as well as other intergovernmental organisations, received considerable attention in the scientific community, less is known about the traveling of policies from the EU to the national level and their real impact on member states policies and practices that go beyond discursive dissemination and implementation (cf. Crossley, 2019; Jakobi, 2009; Lima et al., 2022).

Therefore, by elaborating on governance mechanisms and policy instruments used during the implementation of the *Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning* (hereafter 2011 Agenda) (Council of the EU [CEU], 2011) in the period 2012–2020, the paper aims to trace its impact in two EU member states: Portugal and Slovenia. We do that by analysing the translation of ideas from 2011 Agenda to national AL policies, as well as through activities undertaken by both countries “National Coordinators for the Implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning” (NC-EAAL) networks funded by Erasmus+<sup>5</sup> and AL projects (reforms) funded by European Social Fund (ESF) that supports employment-related projects and investments in Europe’s human capital. The paper explores the following two research questions: (1) How was the 2011 Agenda implemented in AL policies and practices in Portugal and Slovenia? To what extent were ideas from 2011 Agenda translated into national policies and practices of both countries?

In the following, we first briefly introduce the theoretical framework. Next, we outline our methodological approach and provide an analysis of the Portuguese and Slovene implementation of 2011 Agenda. In the final section, we discuss the identified similarities and differences. Our findings indicate that the normative vision of 2011 Agenda is well embedded in both countries policies, that NC-EAALs undertook various activities to implement 2011 Agenda, and that EU funds play a key role in funding and directing of both countries AL systems.

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<sup>5</sup> NC-EAAL are designated by each country to facilitate cooperation between European Commission and European countries in implementing the EAAL. NC-EAAL sets out a work programme with specific actions their organisation is going to take to implement the EAAL in their country (Milana & Klatt, 2020).

## The EU and AL Policymaking

The EU, the successor of the European Economic Community established in 1957, and renamed in 1967 as the European Community, was established in 1993 when the Maastricht Treaty came into force. It has a primarily continental European reach and is one of the key agencies contributing to the formation of European (adult) education policy. Although the genesis of European education policy can be traced back to 1957, it was not until 1996 – the European year of lifelong learning (LLL) – that the EU began to devote more attention to AL. From then on, the EU became an increasingly influential actor in the norm and standard setting for AL and/or LLL. However, while the commitment to LLL has improved the status, importance, and visibility of AL in the EU, it has also primarily strengthened the economic objectives and instrumental conceptualisation of AL and emphasised human capital and the vocational perspective of LLL (see Holford & Milana, 2023; Mikulec, 2018, 2019; Rasmussen, 2014).

For the purpose of governance of European AL policy, the European Commission (EC) adopted an open method of coordination (OMC), which is “the means of disseminating best practices and achieving greater convergence in key EU objectives” (European Council, 2000, article 37). The OMC was introduced to improve the effectiveness, coordination and measurability of the outcomes of LLL policies. The OMC works in addition to other traditional legal frameworks and it establishes a new form of multilevel educational governance in which informal normative pressures and the EC’s agenda attempt to direct reforms in the area of LLL. It is exercised in the form of “soft law” (e.g. recommendations, guidelines, resolutions, conclusions, indicators, benchmarks, and statistical data) and implemented via established networks (Lawn & Grek, 2012). However, although soft law does not constitute an external imposition of norms but is based on the voluntary and gradual implementation of the recommendations from the member states, the EU strives to establish monitoring mechanisms through benchmarks and indicators at the European level, to measure and compare the progress of member states, and to disseminate desirable AL ideas and concepts (Mikulec, 2021).

As shown by researchers (Milana & Klatt, 2020; Milana et al., 2020), 2011 Agenda went through three historical periods. In the first, pre-foundations stage (1996–2005), EU sets grounds for the establishment of AL as a policy domain marked by the 1996 *European Year of lifelong learning*, *Memorandum on lifelong learning* in 2000 and Council’s *Resolution on lifelong learning* in 2002. In the second, foundation stage (2006–2010), AL became “a clearly defined policy domain” (Milana et al., 2020, p. 239) marked by the EC’s *Adult Learning: it is*

*never too late to learn* in 2006) and the Council's *Conclusions on adult learning of 22 May 2008*, among others. While in the third, consolidation stage (from 2011 onwards), which is marked by acceptance of *2011 Agenda*, AL remains a clearly defined policy domain, but with its own "modus operandi" and its own legal, epistemic, and procedural functions (Milana & Klatt, 2020, p. 59; Milana et al., 2020, p. 241).

The normative vision of 2011 Agenda is shaped by the following ideas: to secure access to high-quality learning opportunities for adults; to develop a new approach based on learning outcomes and learner responsibility and autonomy; to foster greater awareness among adults that learning is a lifelong endeavor; to encourage the development of effective lifelong guidance systems and systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning; to ensure the comprehensive provision aimed at acquiring key competences; to ensure flexible learning pathways (including in-company training and workplace-based learning); to promote the role of social partners and civil society in articulating training needs for adults; to make well-developed learning provision for seniors (active and healthy aging); and to promote AL as a means to increase solidarity between age generations and cultures (CEU, 2011, pp. 3–4).

Short-term priority areas of 2011 Agenda for 2012–2014 invited member states to make LLL and mobility a reality, to improve the quality and efficiency of AL, to promote equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship through AL, to promote creativity and innovation of adults and their learning environments, and to improve the knowledge base on AL and monitoring the AL sector (CEU, 2011, pp. 5–6). In 2015 new priority areas were set (till 2020), which included better governance of AL (coordination and coherence with other policy areas), increased supply and take-up of high quality provision (literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, outreach and guidance), flexible and wider access to learning (workplace learning, use of ICT, second chance opportunities), and better quality assurance (policy monitoring, data gathering, education of adult educators) (EC, 2019, p. 4–5).

Finally, while 2011 Agenda works through OMC, it is also based on core *governance mechanisms*, that aim towards concrete policy objectives, such as standard-setting (normative actions and common goals), capacity-building (good practices helping implement policy solutions), elite learning (changes of the value system of national actors), and financial redistribution (include conditionality to support reforms). These governance mechanisms are supported by several *policy instruments* that strive to achieve concrete policy outcomes. These include: (1) coordinated working groups and networks established and coordinated by the EC (e.g. Working Group on AL, NC-EAAL); (2) mutual and peer-learning ar-

rangements for representatives of member states and EC staff; (3) data generation (qualitative and quantitative data, such as, for example, European Adult Education Survey); (4) benchmarks that are agreed at European level (e.g. 15% of adults participating in LLL by the end of 2020); and (5) funding schemes, such as ESF, Erasmus+ and the Europe Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) (Milana & Klatt, 2020, pp. 61–72; Milana et al., 2020, pp. 241–242).

## Methodology

For the comparative empirical analysis, we selected Portugal and Slovenia, both of which are EU member states. These are semiperipheral countries (Sousa Santos, 1993) in the EU, which have different histories, welfare regimes, and AL systems (Desjardins, 2017). After World War II the Portuguese history relates to the significant social changes after 1974 – the establishment and consolidation of a democratic regime and the further integration into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986, while in Slovenia it is related to the establishment of a socialistic state – being part of Yugoslavia until Slovenia declared its independence in 1991. Nowadays, both countries are democratic republics with a high degree of centralised governance and coordinated market economies (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, p. 113). However, observing both countries from the welfare state regimes, Portugal mainly represents the “Mediterranean” regime, which is characterised by medium income protection and less developed active labour market policy, while Slovenia represents the “continental” regime, which is characterised by good income protection with medium developed active labour market policy (Roosmaa & Saar, 2017).

Both countries experienced EU political and economic pressures, such as imposed structural adjustment and austerity measures after the 2008 economic crisis, which severely affected public funding and led to the privatisation of higher education and AL (Antunes, 2016; Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016). Furthermore, in AL both countries depend on the funding provided by the ESF, as national funds declined or never were that relevant, such as in Portugal. Nevertheless, both countries in the period 2012–2020 show low participation rates of adults participating in LLL and high inequality in participation (OECD, 2019).

In a comparative analysis, we juxtaposed two country cases following Egetenmeyer’s (2020) proposed steps of descriptive and analytical juxtaposition (data collection, searching for common features) and analytical interpretation.

Three different comparative categories were developed to guide our comparison: (a) AL policy ideas; (b) NC-EAAL activities; and (c) ESF AL projects.

As regards the selection of sources, we analysed official national AL policy documents (e.g., National Assembly, 2013; Qualifica, 2023a, 2023b), official data and reports from websites about NC-EAAL activities and ESF AL projects (ACS, 2023a, 2023b; ANQEP, 2015, 2017; CPI, 2023; Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional, n.d.) as well as scientific journal articles about AL in Portugal and Slovenia to improve the reliability and objectivity of the comparisons made. All sources analysed relate to the period of 2011 Agenda implementation in the years 2012–2020 in both countries.

## Portugal

Portugal is a country in southern Europe with a population of almost 11 million people. It's located on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean and all borders are made with Spain. The Governance of AL is divided between two main ministries, The Ministry of Education and The Ministry of Labour. AL policy was adopted after 1999 and was strongly influenced by EU LLL guidelines and ESF. Two new forms of certified provision, such as recognition of prior learning (RPL) and AL training courses, have been developed, to widen access to education and training and to raise school education attainment of the adult population (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, p. 115). Therefore, since 2000, Portugal developed several measures to get higher levels of qualifications for the adult population (Lima, 2012). In 2007, the National Qualifications System (NQS) (ANQEP, 2023d) was established in Portugal to promote, coordinate, and enhance vocational education and training (VET) programs, as well as improve the overall qualifications levels of both the youth and adult population. Nevertheless, Portugal continues to have one of the highest proportion of adults in the EU, aged between 25 and 64, who have not completed upper-secondary education (in 2020, 44.6%), along with high levels of the population's illiteracy.

### *AL policy ideas*

In 2015, the Socialist government approved a new policy for AL named “Qualifica Program” with the main goal of qualifying half of the active Portuguese population (Corcetti & Loretto, 2020). The Qualifica Program “is a program aimed at adults with incomplete education and training courses and aims to improve the qualifi-

cation levels of adults, contributing to the progression of the population's qualifications and the improvement of individuals' employability" (Qualifica, 2023a). Furthermore, it also aims towards increasing digital and functional literacy and reducing illiteracy rates, aligning training provision with labour market needs, facilitating tailored training pathways, and promoting the greater investment of adults (especially low qualified) in education and training pathways (OECD, 2022). Within the scope of the Qualifica Program, a national network of specialized centres (i.e. Qualifica Centres) for the qualification of adults was created which have wide coverage of the national territory and which are promoted by different types of entities (e.g., regular schools, training centres, city councils). These entities provide an individualized public service to adults, allowing the definition of the most appropriate qualification path for each specific situation, depending on the characteristics of each person, their educational and professional background, and their ambitions and expectations (Qualifica, 2023b).

Aligned with the establishment of the ANQEP is also the *National Qualifications System*. This aims at young people and adults and: (a) fosters design and update of the National Qualifications Catalogue (an instrument that regulates non-tertiary level dual certification qualifications); (b) regulate and streamline the offer of VET with dual certification, the offer of specialized artistic education and the system of recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC), of both school and professional scope, aimed at adults; (c) promote and guarantee the necessary information and guidance devices, the complementarity and flexibility of education and professional training systems and the quality of the aforementioned offers, in conjunction with the other entities responsible for these matters; (d) coordinate the design of pathways, curriculum development and specific methodologies for double certification VET and the RVCC processes; participate in the development of initial and continuous training references for teachers, trainers and other professionals involved in the qualification; contribute to the international comparability of qualifications and to mobility between youth and adult VET systems, through representation and cooperation mechanisms at European and international level (ANQEP, 2023).

### *NC-EAAL activities*

In Portugal, ANQEP aims to enhance local engagement and collaboration in the field of adult learning by establishing a diverse network of Qualifica Centres. These centers encompass various entities such as Employment and Vocational Training Centers, VET Centres, Public Schools, Professional Schools, and other relevant

organizations. The goal is to foster stronger connections and partnerships with community associations, municipalities, educational and training providers, as well as employers. This approach encourages a multi-stakeholder approach where local communities, educational institutions, and employers work together to promote and support AL initiatives. By increasing collaboration among these entities, ANQEP seeks to create a more comprehensive and effective AL ecosystem that addresses the specific needs of individuals and local communities (Teixeira, 2020).

The main activities undertaken by NC-EAAL, for which ANQEP is in charge, are related to the implementation of various projects and activities (EC co-financed 75% of the work activities for the years 2012/2013, 2014/2015, 2016/2017, 2018/2019 and 2020/2021). In order to promote AL in the period 2012–2020, ANQEP has undertaken various initiatives. These include: (1) conducting workshops and seminars with stakeholders targeting labour market needs (DGERT, 2023), (2) running the Portuguese part of the online EPAL platform (ANQEP, 2023c); (3) investing in better AL quality by providing relevant and learner-centered programs, supporting educators, recognizing prior learning, and ensuring alignment with labour market needs (Godinho et al., 2016); (4) awareness-raising activities for adults through webinars, contests (e.g. Concurso Todos Contam), conferences (e.g. Conferência Nacional de Ensino Profissional and open days (e.g. Dia do Ensino Profissional) (ANQEP, 2015, 2017); (5) dissemination activities that serve as repositories of information and resources related to qualification and vocational education; and (6) providing support to Qualifica Centers and engaging in transnational cooperation (Corcetti & Loretto, 2020).

### *ESF AL projects*

The data from European structural and investment funds (ESIF) 2014–2020 show that Portugal received 36 987 764 846 € from which 24,7% or 9 150 840 778 € belonged to ESF. Among 15 ESIF themes, “education & vocational training” was the second highest-scoring theme in Portugal (EC, 2023a).

In Table 1, the data about the name of the project, its main aims, financial value, and co-financing institution (providing 15% or 20% of funding, while 80% or 85% is provided from ESF) are gathered. As Table 1 shows, a range of new developments and reforms were undertaken, addressing various aspects such as improving adult literacy, the development of basic skills, supporting RPL arrangements, the enhancement of employee competencies, and the implementation of upskilling programs for adults. However, when we look at the financial values of the projects, we can conclude that the projects that are related to the improving competencies of employees for work-related reasons are the dominant ones.



**Table 1.** Overview of ESF AL projects in Portugal

<b>Project</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Financial Value</b>	<b>Co-Financing Institution</b>
Learning System – Direct Management (2011–2020)	Apprenticeship programs enabling individuals to acquire academic and professional certifications, facilitating their entry into the workforce.	89 896 750,97 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Learning System – External Entities (2011–2020)		442 626 370,87 €	
Learning System – Balances (2011–2013)		723 476,72 €	
Youth Education and Training Courses (2011–2020)	Addressing deficiencies in qualifications, both academic and professional, by imparting academic, technical, social, and interpersonal skills (facilitating individuals entry into various career opportunities)	6 408 584,91 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Technological Specialization Courses (2011–2020)	Courses providing non-higher education and training at a post-secondary level and aiming to cater the requirements of the business sector by producing intermediate-level professionals who possess the necessary skills to adapt to the ever-evolving job market and contribute to its ongoing growth and development.	11 190 381,22 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Tender Procedure Trainers (2013–2020)	Recruiting workers to establish a public employment relationship.	95 299 592,79 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Centers for Qualification and Professional Education (2015–2016)	Opening of New Centers for Qualification and Professional Education	3 436 158,98 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Recognition and Validation of Skills (2011–2013)	Aims to elevate the qualification levels of adults by recognizing and validating the professional skills they have acquired throughout their lives in various contexts. It also serves as a new training opportunity for individuals who have not completed or discontinued formal education at an early stage.	11 961 172,56 €	Ministry responsible for Education

<b>Project</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Financial Value</b>	<b>Co-Financing Institution</b>
Training in Basic Skills (2020)	Enables the acquisition of fundamental skills in reading, writing, numeracy, and information and communication technologies essential for enrolling in an adult education and training course (EFA courses) or being referred to a RVCC for basic-level skills.	161 522,98 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Active Life – Qualifica + (2020)	Courses aim to facilitate the reintegration of unemployed individuals into the job	1 031 649,74 €	
Active Life – Qualifica + – External Entities (2020)	market by providing expedited enrolment in short-term training programs. The primary objective is to encourage and support swift integration	1 522 154,87 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Active Life – Qualified Employment – Direct Management (2014–2020)	into these courses, enabling participants to enhance their employability and seize new job opportunities.	198 654 991,66 €	
Portuguese for All Program / Portuguese as a Host Language (2013–2020)	Aims to facilitate the integration into the labor market and the assertion of social rights by offering free Portuguese language courses. These courses aim to help individuals improve their language skills.	2 566 499,62 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Modular Training (2017–2020)	It enables the adult Portuguese population to update and enhance their theoretical and practical knowledge, thereby raising their educational and professional qualifications.	4 581 478,91 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Modular Training – Employed Assets (2013–2016)		17 274 020,38 €	
Modular Training – Active Life – External Activities (2013)		5 390 934,85 €	
Modular Training – Active Life – Direct Management (2013)		25 334 628,32 €	
Algarve Training Program (2013–2020)	Aims to promote the advancement of qualifications and employment opportunities for workers in the Algarve region who have fixed-term or temporary employment contracts. It involves providing	5 063 475,79 €	Ministry responsible for Education

Project	Aims	Financial Value	Co-Financing Institution
	financial support for training activities and facilitating the conversion of these contracts into permanent ones or renewing them for a minimum duration of 12 months.		
Qualification-Employment Program (2011)	The primary objective of this program is to enhance the skills of registered unemployed individuals, ultimately promoting their successful integration into the labor market. The program achieves this by collaborating with training entities to deliver a combination of theoretical training and practical hands-on experience within a real work environment.	1 583 975,46 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Training Voucher (2012–2020)	It is a direct funding mechanism that supports training initiatives provided to individuals registered within the network of Employment Centers and Employment and Vocational Training Centers operated by the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training.	6 222 340,18 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Active Life – Qualified Employment – External Entities (2014–2020)	These initiatives aim to facilitate the re-entry of unemployed individuals into the job market by providing expedited enrolment in short-term training programs. The primary goal is to encourage and support swift integration into these courses, enabling participants to enhance their employability and seize new job opportunities.	33 051 754,04 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Active Life – Young (2015–2020)		22 942 681,96 €	
Young + Digital Program (2020)	The program focuses on acquiring specialized skills in the digital field and aims to enhance the professional competencies of young adults, ultimately improving their prospects for employment.	231 698,57 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Upskills (2020)	The UPskill Program has the objective of retraining individuals, whether unemployed or underemployed,	482 636,26 €	Ministry responsible for Education

Project	Aims	Financial Value	Co-Financing Institution
	in various fields of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The program relies on active participation from companies operating in the national market, as they identify specific technological areas and job vacancies based on their genuine talent requirements.		
Adult Education and Training Courses (2011–2020)	These courses enable the enhancement of the educational and professional qualifications of the adult Portuguese population, thereby improving their employment prospects.	462 926 060,98 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Professional Internships in Public Administration (2012–2019)	Professional Internships programs for AL that aim to provide adults with opportunities to gain practical work experience, enhance their skills and improve their employability.	102 561 789,08 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Professional Internships – Port. 129/2009 (2013)		777 316,33 €	
Professional internships (2017–2018)		57 521 377,73 €	
Professional Internships – Employment Qualification (2012–2013)		98 716,16 €	
Professional Internships Levels III and IV (2012–2013)		358 501,13 €	
Internships Employment (2012–2019)		826 292 615,72 €	
Heritage Internships (2013–2015)		1 369,04 €	
Reativar (2015–2019)		9 053 990,33 €	
Active Young Employment (2015–2019)	Promotes the development and professional integration of young adults who have not completed compulsory education. Its primary objective is to facilitate their further educational and professional qualification processes, ultimately improving their employability conditions.	3 397 311,32 €	Ministry responsible for Education

Project	Aims	Financial Value	Co-Financing Institution
Arts and Crafts Training (2016–2019)	Aims to provide training for individuals seeking employment in a specific sector (focuses also on promoting and selling handcrafted products).	48 607,49 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Employment + Digital (2020)	Training projects tailored to the specific needs of the targeted workers and their respective industry sectors.	71 020,24 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Extraordinary Support for the Maintenance of Current Employment Contracts (2020)	Aims to support the enhancement of workers' professional qualifications, ultimately improving their employability.	1 898 818,82 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Extraordinary Training Plan (2020)		592 088,92 €	
Extraordinary Support for the Progressive Resumption of Activity – Training (2020)	Provides support for the development of workers' professional qualifications, with the goal of increasing their level of qualification and enhancing their employability whenever feasible.	151 420,88 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Shared Management Centers – Professional Training (2011–2012) (2020)	The program's objective is to plan, implement, support, and evaluate initiatives for initial or ongoing professional training. This includes activities related RVCC of skills, all with the aim of developing qualified human resources, fostering employment, enhancing the value of companies, and promoting regional and local socio-economic development.	172 964 014,00 €	Ministry responsible for Education
Actions and Cooperation with Other Entities (2011–2012) (2020)	Actions and Cooperation with Other Entities (aiming at promoting qualification and VET)	20 289 228,30 €	Ministry responsible for Education

Source: Adapted from Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional (n.d.).

## Slovenia

Slovenia is a country located in Central Europe with a population of 2.07 million. It became a member of the EU in 2004. After independence in 1991, the Slovenian government introduced an array of systemic measures that gave a new

impetus to the development of AL policy and infrastructure, among others, special laws (in 1996 and 2018) regulating non-formal AL and public interest in AL as well a law on national vocational qualifications (NVQs), and the government adopted national programmes for AL (one covering period 2004–2010 and second covering period 2013–2020). AL policy in Slovenia, i.e. *Resolution on the Master Plan for Adult Education in the Republic of Slovenia* (ReMPAE) (National Assembly, 2013), strives to balance personal, social, and economic goals through the following: non-formal education (programmes for literacy skills, active citizenship, social cohesion, information, and communication technologies), formal education (programmes for improving formal education attainment of adults) and AL for the labour market (programmes of active labour market policy and NVQs) (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, pp. 115–116; Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016, pp. 155–157).

### *AL policy ideas*

The general framework of ReMPAE (National Assembly, 2013) recognises that globalisation processes and socio-economic changes, such as the economic crisis, unemployment, and an aging population, make it necessary for Slovenia to invest in human capital. LLL is seen as the primary method for all individuals in a society to gain employability. In this context, the ReMPAE emphasises that Slovenia must contribute to the implementation of recommendations and goals from the “ET 2020” and “Europe 2020” strategies, with emphasis on common European indicators and measurable outcomes (the core two indicators state that by 2020 19% of adults will participate in LLL based on Labour Force Survey and 45% of adults will participate in LLL based on Adult Education Survey) that enable comparisons between EU member states in AL (p. 13). The ReMPAE identifies three main groups of problems, which are congruent with the 2011 Agenda (and Europe 2020): the level of education and its quality, participation, and justice in AL, and systemic issues (such as inadequate financing of general (non)formal education and weak stakeholder’s cooperation). Following this framework, the ReMPAE emphasises that: substantial additional effort is required to ensure second-chance measures and key competencies (reading, numeracy and digital skills) for different target groups; new approach in AL, based on learning outcomes and learner responsibility and autonomy, should be a priority; AL qualifications should be recognised within the European and national qualifications framework and the national system for validation of non-formal and informal

learning established; LLL career guidance and counselling in AL are being established; quality (professional staff training, quality standards) and awareness raising activities (learning festivals and parades, LLL weeks) in AL will be improved (pp. 14–19).

### *NC-EAAL activities*

The NC-EAAL project in Slovenia runs from 2012 on, aims toward the popularisation of 2011 Agenda’s “key messages and educational policy measures at EU and national level”, and intend to raise awareness of the importance of AL and LLL, as well “opportunities available for the adult population” (ACS, 2023a).

In the period 2012–2015 the focus was on awareness-raising activities, such as: (a) learning parades (days of learning communities), i.e. a series of one-day festivals and professional events that took place each time in different places across the country; (b) promotion videos, i.e. good practice examples of non-formal AL programmes for vulnerable groups (young adults, unemployed, migrants and rural population) that promote adult basic skills and key competences; (c) e-learning corner that offer web-resources for self-directed online learning, as well information about online education offer; (d) and Web-based ICT materials, such as Learning Parade E-bulletins (ACS, 2023a).

In the period 2015–2017, the focus of NC-EAAL project broadened in scope. Firstly, due to the need for coordinated and effective implementation of the 2011 Agenda, stakeholder’s based “Coordinating Board for Adult Education” was set in 2015; however, this met only two times and never came into practice. Secondly, a new “Adult Learning Awareness Raising Strategy” was set along with six thematic action plans (e.g. effective outreach activities, the role of adult educators in the AL awareness process, effective media and visual promotion, increased role of learners in awareness raising processes) contributing to a widened approach to awareness raising on AL and LLL. Thirdly, events for promoting adult skills (and other key competencies) continued and were also linked to wider European (i.e. annual conference of European Basic Skills Network) and national (21st Adult Education Colloquium) conferences; however, the events more specifically focused on key competences for “improved employability” and “active involvement in learning communities”. Finally, Web-based ICT materials, such as Learning Parade E-bulletins, YouTube videos about skills, competencies, and AL on European and national levels, infographics about vulnerable groups characteristics in AL (ACS, 2023a).

Finally, in the period 2017–2020 different consultation events took place under the “Upskilling Pathways” initiative<sup>6</sup>, as well as two national AL conferences. Furthermore, “Upskilling Pathways e-portal” was set up where existing policy measures and examples of good practice are presented, while Web-based ICT materials continued to be published as well (ACS, 2023a).

### *ESF AL projects*

The data from ESIF 2014–2020 show that Slovenia received 5 665 174 886 € from which 16,1% or 911.666.998 € belonged to ESF. Among 14 ESIF themes, “education & vocational training” was the eighth scoring theme in Slovenia (EC, 2023b).

In this period, 14 ESF projects directly supported AL development; 4 from *Cohesion policy 2007–2013* under the priority area “Operational Programme for Human Resources Development” and 10 from *Cohesion policy 2014–2020* under the priority area “Knowledge, skills and Lifelong Learning to enhance employability” (Republika Slovenija, 2022). In Table 2, the data about the name of the project, its main aims, financial value, and co-financing institution (providing 15% or 20% of funding, while 80% or 85% is provided from ESF) are gathered<sup>7</sup>. As Table 2 shows, new development and reforms were related to diverse topics, such as adult literacy and basic skills development, establishing approaches (system) for RPL, investments in professionalization of adult educators, enabling guidance and counseling services for adults, improving competencies of employees, and establishing programmes for upskilling of adults. However, when we look at the financial values of the projects, we can conclude that the projects that are related to the improving competencies of employees for work-related reasons are the dominant ones.

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<sup>6</sup> The *Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New opportunities for adults* (CEU, 2016) is the main legislative proposal of the *Skills Agenda for Europe* in the field of AL targeting low-qualified and low-skilled adults. The initiative is a key building block of the *European Pillar of Social Rights*, which promotes equal rights to quality and inclusive education, training and LLL, in order to support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems. The Recommendation aims to help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or acquire a broader set of skills and competences by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent (cf. Clancy et al., 2020).

<sup>7</sup> However, it should be noted that this is our reconstruction of implemented ESF projects and might not represent a full and comprehensive list of all ESF projects in the given time period, because data about AL ESF projects are unsystematic, sometimes unclear and not publically available through common online platform or document.



**Table 2.** Overview of ESF AL projects in Slovenia

Project	Aims	Financial value	Co-financing institution
Literacy development and assessment and recognition of non-formal learning 2011–2014	Developing basic skills, key competences, and assessment and recognition of non-formal knowledge and experiences of adults	518.300 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Education and training for adult education professionals 2011–2014	Developing AL knowledge and competences for different groups of adult educators through basic and advanced training	610.000 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Introduction of the model of identifying and validating non-formally acquired knowledge in adult education 2012–2014	Enabling adults to validate knowledge and experience they acquired along their life path together with a validation consultant and to give these knowledge visibility and value	650.380 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Survey of Adult skills PIAAC 2013–2015	Identification of adult competences (literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills in technology-rich environments) necessary for the job market and active participation in society	1.339.000 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Competences of adult education professionals 2016–2018	Development of competences of professional associates and managers in entrepreneurship, LLL and lifelong career orientation	3.400.000 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Professional Support in the Area of Basic Adult Competences Development 2016–2022	Development of basic skills and literacy of adults, improved employability, personal development, quality and counselling work in AL	1.893.375 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Professional support to information and guidance activities and validation of non-formal knowledge 2016–2021	Improving the competences of employees to reduce disparities between their qualifications and labour market needs through validation of non-formal and informal knowledge and development of effective approaches to information and guidance for less educated, older than 45 years employed adults	809.000 €	Ministry, responsible for education

Project	Aims	Financial value	Co-financing institution
Specializations and upskilling after obtaining secondary or higher professional education and retraining for employees in healthcare, culture and regulated professions in other fields in the years 2016–2022	*(data not available)	3.682.800 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Development and support for the upskilling of qualifications and specializations and upskilling after acquired education 2016–2022	*(data not available)	118.223 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Raising the professional competence of teachers in 2016 – 2022	Improving the competences for the implementation of the pedagogical process and connecting the learning content with examples from practice	3.000.000 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Raising the quality of the validation system of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge 2016–2022	Development of new methodology for validation of non-formal and informal knowledge	1.217.167,80 €	Ministry, responsible for labour
Competence Centers for Human Resources Development 2016–2022	Training of employees for improving their competences, productivity, creativity and innovation, and strengthening the competitiveness of the Slovenian economy	12.620.000,00 €	Ministry, responsible for labour
Raising the level of education 2016–2022	Increasing the involvement of adults in LLL and improving the competences that adults need for the labour market, greater employability and mobility	5.484.570,37 €	Ministry, responsible for labour
Non-formal education and training 2017–2019	Encouraging training of employees for competitiveness and employability (increasing the competence and mobility of employees) and strengthening the competitiveness of employers	2.100.000 €	Ministry, responsible for labour
Comprehensive Support for Actively Ageing Workforce 2017–2022	Prolong the work activity of older employees by strengthening their competences, eliminating stereotypes about older employees and empowering employers to manage an aging workforce	29.936.237,21 €	Ministry, responsible for labour

Project	Aims	Financial value	Co-financing institution
Development of programs for upskilling in continuing vocational education and training in 2017–2022	Development of new publicly recognised continuing vocational and training programs	484.106,20 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Strengthening the competencies of professionals in the field of managing an innovative educational institution in the period from 2018 to 2022	Development of competencies needed by AL professionals due to constant changes in the nature of their work	2.813.809,99 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Implementation of continuing vocational education and training programs in the years 2018–2022	Increasing the involvement of employees in continuing VET programs and improving their competences due to the needs of the labour market, greater employability and mobility between areas of work	16.815.893,80 €	Ministry, responsible for education
Encouraging persons facing the loss of employment into labour market measures 2018–2022	Inclusion of persons who are about to lose their jobs in measures on the labour market through comprehensive support (providing information, motivation, career counselling, trainings, education)	4.000.000 €	Ministry, responsible for education

*Source:* Annual programme of adult education (APAE), 2014, 2016; ACS, 2023b; CPI, 2023; Republika Slovenija, 2022; SRIPS, 2023.

## Comparison and Interpretation

Portugal and Slovenia are both small economies and semiperipheral EU countries. As such, they are both strongly influenced by the EU in terms of economic policies, as well as broader LLL policies aimed at adapting adults to the needs of the labour market (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, p. 117; cf. Holford, 2023, p. 7). Based on this background and analysis of two country cases, we can present the following findings regarding the implementation of the 2011 Agenda in Portugal and Slovenia.

First, we can acknowledge that the normative vision (policy ideas) of 2011 Agenda is well embedded in AL policies of both countries as emphasis is given to: learning outcomes based approach and learner responsibility and autonomy; AL qualifications linked to national and European qualifications frameworks; functional system for the RPL; improved qualifications levels of adults; employability

and aligning training provision with labour market needs; increased functional and digital literacy; and awareness raising in AL. Therefore, identified instrumental and vocational conceptualisation of 2011 Agenda (Holford & Milana, 2023; cf. Mikulec, 2018; Milana & Klatt, 2020;) clearly entered into AL policies of both countries (Lima and Guimarães, 2018; cf. Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016). However, while in Portugal AL policy greater emphasis is given to reducing illiteracy rates, establishing tailored (flexible) training pathways, and improving qualifications levels of adults through RVCC, due to the high proportion of adults without upper-secondary education and lack of equity opportunities for low-skilled and those without qualifications (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, p. 114; Mikulec & Guimarães, 2022, pp. 8–9), in Slovenia more emphasis is given to the key competences, guidance, and counseling services for adults and high-quality learning opportunities for adults to increase low participation of adults in LLL and enable unemployed to return to the labour market (Mikulec, 2021, p. 47). Furthermore, unlike Portugal, Slovenian AL policy also includes European benchmarks based on LFS and AES data to measure its progress in reaching EU targets.

Second, NC-EAAL of both countries' undertook various project activities to implement 2011 Agenda in the period 2012–2020 and to popularise 2011 Agenda's key messages. In both countries National Coordinator's focused on: awareness raising activities about AL opportunities; establishing a multi-stakeholder approach to AL governance (although this has been more successfully implemented in Portugal case); and organising (national, European) conferences and workshops on adult skills, key competences and labour market needs. However, NC-EAAL activities also differ in both countries. In Portugal, NC-EAAL focused on better quality provision and supporting EPALE online platform, due to their work in promoting and disseminating EPALE platform within Portugal's adult education community and ensuring the quality of contributions made to EPALE (ANQEP, 2018; EC, 2023c). In Slovenia, greater emphasis was given to the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways initiative due to the low participation of adults in LLL and a high number of adults with low literacy skills (according to PIAAC data, more than 30% of adults have low literacy levels and numeracy skills) (Mikulec, forthcoming). Last but not least, while in Slovenia all NC-EAAL activities are very well documented in written records and promotion videos freely available on NC-EAAL webpage, no such webpage specially dedicated to NC-EAAL activities can be found in Portugal.

Third, Portugal received more funds from ESIF (and among these also more from ESF) than Slovenia. Moreover, "education & vocational training" was the second highest scoring theme in Portugal, while in Slovenia this theme was placed in the middle among priority themes. We believe the reason for this dif-

ference lies in much higher rates of adults (aged 25–64) in Portugal with educational attainment levels below upper-secondary education (47.8% in Portugal, 11.2% in Slovenia) (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2021, p. 30). Nevertheless, as shown by OECD (2019, p. 94), Slovenia and Portugal are the two highest scoring countries regarding the funding of AL system supported by the EU funds: in Slovenia, 57% of total expenditure on AL is funded by ESF, and in Portugal about 40%. With ESF both countries supported the development of AL system and implemented reforms related to improving the competencies of employees for work-related reasons, upskilling of adults, raising adults' levels of professional qualifications, and improving adult literacy and basic skills development (including digital skills). Among these, projects related to the improving competencies of employees or low-skilled adults for work-related reasons are, regarding the amount of funding provided, also the dominant ones. However, in Slovenia, the focus was also on establishing approaches (system) for RPL, professionalization of adult educators, and enabling guidance and counseling services for adults. Overall, in both countries, ESF represents an important support mechanism for achieving European AL goals at the national level and one of the most effective instruments used for policy transfer (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021, p. 117; Mikulec & Jelenc Krašovec, 2016, pp. 165–166; Mikulec, 2021, p. 49).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the impact of 2011 Agenda on AL policies and practices in Portugal and Slovenia. We emphasised that 2011 Agenda works through OMC, is based on governance mechanisms aiming towards concrete policy objectives, and is supported by several policy instruments that strive to achieve concrete policy outcomes. Based on this background we showed: first, that the normative vision (policy ideas) of 2011 Agenda (this being primarily instrumental and vocational) is well embedded in AL policies of both countries; second, that NC-EAAL of both countries undertook various project activities to implement 2011 Agenda and to popularise its key messages; and third, that Slovenia and Portugal heavily relied on the EU funds regarding the funding of their AL systems and that both countries implemented employment-related projects with ESF with the aim to improve competences of employees or low-skilled adults for work-related reasons. Therefore, we conclude that ESF represents a key policy instrument for achieving European (2011 Agenda) AL policy objectives at the national level and also, that this is one of the most effective policy instruments used for policy transfer from the European to the national level.

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## Implementacija Evropske agende za učenje odraslih u Portugaliji i Sloveniji<sup>11</sup>

**Apstrakt:** U ovom radu analiziramo implementaciju Rezolucije Saveta o obnovljenoj evropskoj agendi za učenje odraslih (u daljem tekstu Agenda 2011) u periodu 2012–2020. u dve države članice Evropske unije: Portugaliji i Sloveniji. Naša diskusija se oslanja na studije koje istražuju evropsko upravljanje u oblasti učenja odraslih, dok empirijski izvodimo komparativnu analizu između dve zemlje i raspravljamo o sličnostima i razlikama u političkim idejama o obrazovanju odraslih, aktivnostima nacionalnih koordinatora za implementaciju Agende 2011 i projekata Evropskog socijalnog fonda u vezi sa učenjem odraslih. Naši nalazi ukazuju na to da je normativna vizija Agende 2011 dobro ukorenjena u politikama obe zemlje, da su nacionalni koordinatori preduzeli razne aktivnosti za implementaciju Agende 2011, kao i da fondovi EU igraju ključnu ulogu u finansiranju i usmeravanju sistema učenja odraslih obe zemlje.

**Ključne reči:** Evropska agenda za učenje odraslih, Portugalija, Slovenija, mehanizmi upravljanja, politički instrumenti

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