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The OECD solutionism and mythologies in adult education policy: skills strategies in Portugal and Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

The role of international governmental organisations (IGOs) in global policymaking has received significant attention in the field of adult learning and education (ALE) in the twenty-first century, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was recognised as one of the most influential IGO due to its skill surveys – such as the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). However, while the majority of empirical studies in the field have focused on the analysis of PIAAC data, little attention has been given to the influence of the OECD *skills strategies* on the development and/or improvement of national ALE systems. This study addresses this gap in two OECD member states – Portugal and Slovenia – by applying the ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ approach to policy analysis and using the theoretical concept of myth in defining policy problems. Our findings indicate that although both countries’ ALE systems differ, they share problem representations that reinforce several policy myths: ALE is a solution to tackle socioeconomic problems; unemployment is a problem of low-skilled adults; the learner-centred approach is a way to raise participation in ALE, and improved governance is a means to advance national ALE systems.

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Adult learning and education policy; adult learning and education systems; policy myths; OECD; skills strategies

Introduction

In this study, we discuss how the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), through its *skill strategies* conceptualise adult learning and education (ALE) systems in one South (Portugal) and one Central (Slovenia) European countries. We understand ALE as ‘all forms of education and learning that aim to ensure that all adults participate in their societies and the world of work’ (UNESCO 2016, 6). Furthermore, ALE systems can be defined as ‘the mass of learning opportunities available to adults, along with underlying structures and stakeholders that shape their organisation and governance’ (Desjardins 2017, 2).

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The OECD is one of the most influential international governmental organisations (IGO), with its unique role in governance by comparison in the field of education that generates, among others, global ALE policies. The role of the OECD in ALE policymaking has received much attention (cf. Milana 2012a; Field 2018) and many studies recently have focused on the analysis of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) data (Desjardins 2017; Grotlüschen et al. 2019; Valiente and Lee 2020). However, little attention, we believe, has been given to the influence of skill strategies on the national development and/or improvement of national ALE systems. These are OECD assessments on ‘skill challenges and opportunities (...) [that aim] to help countries to build more effective skill systems through tailor-made policy responses’ (OECD 2021a), which OECD prepares in cooperation with national governments. In their preparation, these reports involve a wide range of representatives from State-dependant, profit-making and non-governmental organisations. This process suggests shared participation of a wide range of policy and educational actors. According to Centeno (2017), it is an effort to produce successful policy documents, acquire legitimacy and enjoy wide circulation of reports that resonate with national interests.

The role of the OECD in global ALE policies has rightly been criticised due to its narrow conception of ALE throughout life arising from human capital theory (HCT) and neoliberal frameworks (Valiente and Lee 2020). However, little attention has been given to the content of OECD reports on skill strategies and to the way national ALE systems are considered in these reports, especially if one has in mind the importance of these reports in policies in Portugal and Slovenia. Therefore, this study aims to address the following research questions: How are the ALE policies in Portugal and Slovenia conceptualised through the lens of the OECD skill strategies? How is the governance of the ALE systems in both countries understood through the lens of the OECD?

In the following, we first briefly introduce the role of IGOs in ALE policymaking and the role of the OECD in setting skills strategies, then outline our methodological approach and analyse skill strategies in Portugal and Slovenia. In the final section, we discuss four problem representations that reinforce several policy myths on the ALE policy role. We conclude with an alternative view on ALE policymaking.

The role of IGOs in ALE policymaking

Due to globalisation processes, IGOs play an increasingly crucial role in the formation of global ALE policies. The IGOs are agenda-setters – addressing political problems on a global level and creating global public policies. They have been identified as central actors for policy diffusion, able to transfer policies between countries (Jakobi 2009). As discussed by scholars in the field, education policy has become internationalised and a product of IGOs (e.g. OECD, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the European Union (EU)), which have a global or continental reach. They strive to promote precisely-defined discourses and policies in the field of ALE, although their formal mandate is generally limited. This means that ALE policy is increasingly integrated into complex relationships between the supranational and national levels, as an exchange of policies between global networks of people, ideas and practices. In addition, IGOs as influential actors framing ALE and lifelong learning (LLL) are changing policies and promoting policy transfer in desirable

directions: towards evidence-based educational practices, measurement of the effectiveness of education and goals relating to competitiveness and employability in the twenty-first century (Field 2018; Holford, Milana, and Mohorčič Špolar 2014; Mikulec 2018).

Furthermore, as Jakobi (2009, 34–36) argued, IGOs promote policy transfer and influence national policy development through the following identifiable instruments: (a) discursive dissemination – establishing ideas for national agendas, (b) standard setting – recommendations, benchmarking and explicit aims, (c) coordinative functions – instruments of surveillance monitoring progress towards policy aims, (d) technical assistance enabling states to set and achieve policy aims, such as happens with OECD and (e) financial means aimed at eliciting specific behaviour (establishing programmes or institutions). However, it must be acknowledged, as the work of policy mobility emphasises (Ball 2016; Gulson et al. 2017; Lewis 2021; McKenzie 2017), that policy transfer is not taking place in a seamless, linear way from global to local environments. Rather, policies are (re)assembled in particular ways, places – inside and outside of government and the nation state – and for particular purposes, while the interdependency of actors and movement of ideas shape policy problems and solutions. Therefore, policies are not just transferred across time and space, but are also transformed and (re)made as they travel and move in processes of enactment. Policies are ‘made-up’ locally as well and shaped by ideas, different actors, networks, organisations, data, conferences, meetings, etc., that all influence policy uptake and its development.

Elaborating further on discursive dissemination, the discussion of ideologies in ALE has benefited from different approaches (Entwistle 1989). Van Dijk (2006, 120) defined ideology as a set of ‘foundational beliefs that underlie the shared representations of specific kinds of social groups’. In policy analysis, these beliefs include, for example, ideas and ideals (Nemeth and Pöggeler 2002), values (Mikulec 2018) or/and myths (Jansen and Wildemeersch 1998). In critical terms, ideologies are instruments of domination, following persuasion or dissuasion in a prescriptive format, alienating human awareness (Althusser 2014). Policy discourses can rely on ideology/ies, reinforcing myths (Van Dijk 2006). According to de Neufville and Barton (1987, 182), in the policy domain, myths ‘provide analogies which help make sense of events and provide simplification of a more complex reality’. Therefore, the importance of myths in the definition of policy problems comes from the shared image of what is wrong and what is right in the present and how the future might be different. In this sense, myths in policy perform necessary and creative functions in shaping problems’ definition, gathering by this means public support. Hence, myths might introduce dysfunctions and ambiguity in the political process, such as in policy problems’ definition.

To synthesise these theoretical inspirations for the purpose of our research, we emphasise the following. (1) The OECD skill strategies represent an example of ALE policymaking that can influence national development and/or the improvement of ALE systems. (2) To achieve this aim, the OECD mostly uses instruments of discursive dissemination, standard setting and technical assistance. (3) ALE policies, i.e. OECD skills strategies, are (re)assembled in particular ways (that reflect also local contexts), places (taking place inside and outside of government and the nation state), and for particular purposes (among others, governance of the ALE systems). (4) The OECD policy discourses are important ideological tools as problems’ and myths’ definers, as these discourses stress specific realities through ‘evidence-based policy’, to mask other (relevant) realities. (5)

Behind identified policy problems (what is wrong) and given solutions (what is right) of the OECD ALE policymaking are myths that are linked to the predominant IGOs neo-liberal guidelines of competitiveness, employability and effectiveness.

OECD, ALE and skills strategies

The OECD was established in 1961 to improve the economic and social well-being of people through the promotion of its policies. By the end of 2020, the OECD had 37 members (OECD 2021b), including countries with different socioeconomic situations and cultural values. The OECD is a pluridimensional organisation with a complex organisational structure and more than 3,300 staff members (Centeno 2019). This comprises of: the overarching decision-making body, i.e. the Council, chaired by the Secretary-General; more than 300 committees (expert groups) covering areas of policymaking; and the Secretariat, i.e. OECD Directorates, providing the expertise for policymaking (evidence and analysis) in different policy areas. Moreover, this organisational structure is supplemented by special bodies, advisory committees and special entities, such as, for example, the *OECD Centre for Skills* (SKC), which works horizontally with different Directorates within the OECD (OECD 2019b).

In 1967, the *Centre for Educational Research and Innovation* (CERI) was established, which proved to be ‘the birth of the OECD’s education policy area’ (Centeno 2019, 65). Within the CERI, the OECD started to ‘formulate policy proposals, in which both policy problems and solutions were offered’ (78). In 2002, a separate *Directorate of Education* was established, while in 2012 this was renamed the *Directorate for Education and Skills* (DES) due to the launch of the OECD Skills Strategy (Rubenson 2015, 183). Today’s DES, of which CERI is part of, has three main objectives: (1) to ‘assist OECD and partner economies in planning and managing their education systems’; (2) to help learners understand their learning needs; and (3) to ensure that educators obtain knowledge and skills for their better practices (OECD 2019b, 90). The director of DES and special advisor on education policy to the Secretary-General is Andreas Schleicher. Furthermore, SKC as a special entity plays an important role too as it works with countries to improve the governance of their skills systems through: national skills strategies, vocational education and ALE, and skills analysis (OECD 2019b, 128).

Overall, the OECD is one of the major actors in driving global (adult) education policy (Jakobi 2009; Sorensen, Ydesen, and Robertson 2021) due to its policy ideas (fostering the construction of educational norms), policy evaluation and data generation (promoting governance by comparison) (Ydesen 2019). Global (adult) education policy is framed predominantly through the lens of HCT theory, from its early focus on recurrent education to today’s skill agenda.¹ This sees ALE as an investment with associated costs and benefits, able to ‘boost skills and, in turn, employability, productivity, wages and growth’ (Desjardins 2018, 213; cf. Valiente and Lee 2020, 157). The OECD was founded by member countries and does not distribute financial resources to its members, which means that it does not build its power and influence through financial mechanisms, but does so through its capacity to produce authoritative standardised knowledge. This knowledge has a ‘taken-for-granted’ status, produced through educational benchmarking with the help of skill surveys, such as PIAAC (Field 2018; Rubenson 2015; Sorensen, Ydesen, and Robertson 2021). The OECD is typically referred

to as an IGO with ‘ontological authority’ able to ‘identify common problems and map out a range of appropriate solutions’ (Rautalin, Syväterä, and Vento 2021, 8).

In the last decade, and under the results of the PIAAC survey, seventeen countries – among them Portugal and Slovenia – established closer collaboration with SKC under OECD ‘Skills Strategy Projects’ initiative. They did that to get ‘tailored policy recommendations for building more effective skill systems that promote employment, productivity and social cohesion’ (OECD 2020, 1). Skills projects are designed ‘in close collaboration with national project teams’ (2). Hence, the OECD Skills Strategy team produced a *Skill Strategy Diagnostic Report* alongside preparing *Skill Strategy Implementation Guidance* reports for both countries. All four reports are published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD and within the OECD programme ‘Building Effective National Strategies’. In the heart of the skill strategy endeavours is the OECD commitment to build a whole government approach to skills and engage all relevant stakeholders to ensure ownership. Overall, skill strategy reports can be placed in the OECD policy recommendation framework, which became a main purpose of the organisation reporting with the new millennium (Rautalin, Syväterä, and Vento 2021).

Methodology

Selection of country cases

For the comparative empirical analysis of skill strategy reports, we have chosen Portugal and Slovenia, both of which are EU and OECD member states. Portugal became an OECD member in 1960, when the organisation was established and an EU member in 1986. Slovenia became an EU member in 2004 and an OECD member in 2010. These are two smaller and semiperipheral countries in the EU, which have different histories, welfare regimes and ALE systems (Desjardins 2017; Guimarães and Mikulec 2021).

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 in 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. 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, that is characterised by good income protection with medium developed active labour market policy (Roosmaa and Saar 2017). Typically, conservative regimes invest ‘in firm-specific and industry-specific skills, they favour skilled workers and largely ignore the interests of low-skilled and semi-skilled workers’ (263). While the role of the OECD in ALE policymaking and its impact has received much attention in ‘liberal’ (Anglo-Saxons) and ‘social-democratic’ (Nordic) countries, it is less known, especially in relation to skill strategies, to what degree countries from conservative and Mediterranean regimes have been affected by the OECD skill strategies, and to what extent are these shaping the development and/or improvement of the national ALE systems.

Both countries show low participation rates of adults in LLL and high inequality in participation – Portugal facing also high number of adults without upper-secondary education –, while they differ in their development of ALE system. In Portugal, the development of the education system noticed significant changes after 1986, when the basic law of the education system was approved. Within this legal framework the ALE policy included second-chance education in regular schools, which was the object of strong criticism (Lima 2008). In the late 1990s, a different ALE policy was proposed (Antunes and Guimarães 2014). Within UNESCO’s and EU’s LLL guidelines, the new policy (Barros 2009) was adopted, including two provisions still significant for present times: the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and ALE courses. Both allow the possibility for adult learners to get a school education certification and/or a professional qualification. These have been important in two policy programmes: the *New Opportunity programme* and the *Qualifica programme* (under development), based on a national network of ALE centres spread all over the country (Guimarães and Mikulec 2021, 114–115). After declaring independence in 1991, Slovenia introduced an array of systemic measures that gave a new impetus to the development of the ALE system. Special ALE funds were granted in the state budget, new ALE professional bodies and some private ALE providers had been established, new forms of provision were set up (e.g. study circles, self-directed learning centres, LLL weeks, etc.), and special laws (in 1996 and 2018) regulating non-formal ALE and public interest in ALE alongside Adult Education Master Plans were established. The ALE system strives to balance personal, social and economic goals through the following: (1) non-formal education (e.g. programmes for literacy skills and social cohesion), formal education (programmes for improving formal education attainment of adults) and ALE for the labour market (programmes of active labour market policy and provision of RPL) (Guimarães and Mikulec 2021, 116; Mikulec 2021, 7).

In the comparative analysis, we juxtaposed these two national cases following Egetenmeyer’s (2020) proposal steps of descriptive and analytical juxtaposition (data collection, searching for common features) and analytical interpretation. Through these we stress problems and solutions highlighted by OECD that lead to four distinct myths.

Methods and sources

Empirical data were analysed through the Bacchi’s (2009) ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR) approach to policy analysis as a qualitative tool for discourse analysis. WPR draws on ‘several of Foucault’s concepts, most notably governmentality, problematisation and dividing practices’ (Cort, Mariager-Anderson, and Thomsen 2018, 202). In comparison to other two approaches to policy analysis most often used in ALE – i.e. ‘international comparative’ and ‘institutionalistic’ approaches² (Breyer 2020) – the WPR approach focuses on how problems are ‘represented’ in policy and on the deconstruction of a policy, revealing its underlying assumptions and the contingency of concepts used (Bacchi 2009, 16–17). Following the WPR approach we sought to explore how the OECD frames and identifies the *problem* regarding policy proposals – skill strategies³ – and what *solutions* it provides for Portugal and Slovenia. As emphasised by Bacchi (2009, x), ‘it is important to make the “problems” implicit in public policies *explicit*, and to scrutinise them closely’, as policies construct social problems and their

solutions in specific ways. However, the WPR approach goes beyond problems and solutions analysis and comprises the following six questions or steps for contextualising problem representations: (1) What is the problem representation in specific policy?; (2) What assumptions underline representation of the problem?; (3) How does the representation of the problem come about?; (4) What is left unproblematic in problem representation?; (5) What effects are produced by the representation of the problem?; and (6) How has the representation of the problem been produced and disseminated? (2).

In this paper, when presenting the data (results) on problems of ALE and solutions for ALE, we first analysed what is represented to be a problem within the given skills strategies of both countries and explored the first WPR question. In the documents analysed, problems and solutions are framed under the label of ‘challenges’ and ‘recommendations’. Secondly, when discussing, comparing and interpreting results, we further explored second, third and fourth WPR questions by investigating: (a) the *conceptual logics* (i.e. assumptions, values, presuppositions) underlying the myths identified (referring to the second WPR question), the *inspiration* (origins) of such myths (referring to the third WPR question) and the aspects that are being *silenced* (referring to the fourth WPR question). Finally, the fifth and sixth WPR questions are not the focus of our research, as the focus is on the ‘policy and textual issues’ of policy analysis, and not on its ‘implementation and outcomes issues’ (cf. Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 54–56).

Regarding the selection of sources, we chose OECD policies on the skill strategy reports of both countries. The Diagnostic report for Portugal includes 142 pages plus annexes (OECD 2015) and the Implementation Guidance report 160 pages plus annexes (OECD 2018a). The Diagnostic report for Slovenia includes 167 pages (OECD 2017) and the Implementation Guidance report 182 pages plus annexes (OECD 2018b). Together, these reports consist of approximately 650 pages (without annexes) and draw upon analyses from the OECD, Portugal and Slovenian authorities, and other published sources. In Portugal, Patricia Mangeol (from DES) was the project leader and main author of reports (OECD 2015, 2018a) together with an adjunct professor from the University of Porto and a data analyst from DES. Other OECD staff members of a cross-directorate OECD team – from DES (10), Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (2), Economics Department (3), Centre for Tax Policy and Administration (2), Directorate for Public Governance (1), Centre for Entrepreneurship (1), SKC (2) – provided their knowledge and expertise as well. A Portuguese National Project Team (9), including several staff members from the national agency for qualification and VET (ANQEP) and members of different national organisations provided guidance and input⁴, while the European Commission’s Directorate-General for ‘Education’ and for ‘Employment’ provided expertise and financial support (OECD 2018a, 5–6). In Slovenia, Ben Game (from SKC) was the project leader and main author of reports (OECD 2017, 2018b) together with two Slovenian research assistants and a data analyst from DES. Other OECD staff members – from DES (5), SKC (9), and the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (4) – provided their knowledge too. The Slovenian National Project Team (19), the Slovenian Steering Committee (12) and representatives of stakeholders provided guidance and input⁵, while the European Commission’s Directorate-General for ‘Education’ and for ‘Employment’ provided expertise and financial support (OECD 2018b, 5–6). This

circumstance shows the multi-level governance character of the referred studies and the interdependence among governmental and non-governmental actors in ALE policy decision-making (Milana and Rasmussen 2018). It also indicates the interdependency of actors and movement of ideas shaping policy problems and solutions.

Additionally, we considered the *Getting Skills Right* report (OECD 2019a), which includes data on cross-country comparison of ALE systems across OECD countries, as well as scientific journal articles and reports in Portugal and Slovenia to improve the reliability and objectivity of the comparisons made. Moreover, as natives of Portugal and Slovenia, we could interpret the sources available in the national languages, and we are knowledgeable about the political context and ALE in the two countries.

Results: skill strategies in Portugal and Slovenia

In what follows, we analyse what is represented to be a problem and recommend solutions within the given skills strategies of both countries and address the first WPR question, while the conceptual logics of problem identification and recommendations given is elaborated in the next section (see ‘Discussion’). Our results addressing the first WPR question indicate that both countries share common problem representation related to low-skilled and unemployed adults and youth not in employment, education or training (NEETs), low participation rates of adults in LLL, lack of entrepreneurship and innovation, reducing barriers to employment and inefficient governance of ALE systems (lack of stakeholder’s ownership, insufficient funding of ALE). However, they as well differ in some aspects, as in Portugal problems of equity and quality in education and responsiveness of VET to labour market demands are emphasised, while in Slovenia attracting talent from Slovenia and abroad and busting people’s skills in workplaces are stressed. Similarly, both countries share common solutions representations related to improved governance and financing of ALE, stakeholder’s co-operation and ownership, awareness raising about benefits of ALE, better monitoring of ALE and maintaining a learner-centred approach, while for Portugal, efforts to raise the accessibility and quality of ALE is as well emphasised.

Portugal

Problems of ALE

The OECD’s (2015, 18; 2018a, 3) analysis revealed that Portugal showed in 2018 a low-skilled workforce, which is referred to as a critical characteristic to support the country ‘to recover fully from the last recession and meet the challenge of an increasing and digital economy’. Additionally, the report mentions a gap to be found among the younger Portuguese generations that are highly educated and the older ones that have only a few years of compulsory education, as well as the need to reduce barriers to employment, especially youth NEETs. Therefore, one of the main challenges stressed in the ALE system is equity (OECD 2015, 36) and the need to raise accessibility for those who are low-skilled and have no or few qualifications. The second challenge is the quality of the ALE offers available, related to the responsiveness of VET to labour market demands and entrepreneurship of education system. These two conditions are highlighted, keeping in mind the economic development and improvement of the

living conditions of the Portuguese population. In fact, the report highlights that '[i]mproving skills is important to boost growth and well-being' (OECD 2018a, 3).

The Portuguese (negative) situation is considered to be based on three main problems related to adult learners and the governance of the ALE system. The first problem refers to the job polarisation resulting from the reconversion of the Portuguese economy in recent times. Jobs in construction, agriculture and mining (requiring mainly low-skilled workers) declined while jobs (demanding highly skilled people) in arts, recreation and health services increased (11). In spite of efforts developed in the ALE system, the low-skilled rate is still high – 53% of people aged 25–64 did not attain upper-secondary education level in 2016, almost twice the OECD average. Additionally, the low-skilled are the ones in long-term unemployment – more than 50% of unemployed people in 2016 (12). As an outcome, ALE participation is still low: 'the large number of low-skilled adults in Portugal is a major barrier to growth and social cohesion' (6) and 'the least skilled are also the least likely to participate in adult learning' (13). The low-skilled are therefore considered a major problem for this country when reforms in employment policies, favouring flexibility, have been implemented and new investments have been made in specific economic domains requiring highly skilled workers (OECD 2015, 97).

The second and third problems are related to the governance of ALE. The report reinforces the need to allow accessibility to existing provisions and promote the quality of ALE activities and programmes that might be attended. Therefore, it is said to be important to identify and remove barriers that limit the participation of the low-skilled learners to provide offers in some geographical areas and economic domains that may present a lack of provision. Furthermore, delivering flexible ALE pathways that might suit the learners' needs is emphasised as well. The improvement of ALE guidance is also highlighted, namely, when the ALE system is seen as complex, which for adult learners might be 'difficult to navigate, especially for those with low skills' (OECD 2015, 54; 2018a, 16). As the system involved many responsible departments and stakeholders, it noted a lack of structures allowing negotiation and collaboration among these actors to identify skills needed in the labour market, improve the outreach of activities and programmes and develop flexible ALE paths. '[R]esponsibility for adult learning is typically shared by several ministries or public agencies and different levels of government. Adult-learning programmes are often provided by private and not-for-profit organisations, making monitoring more complex' (OECD 2015, 132; 2018a, 16). Another concern relating to governance refers to the reliance on EU funding: the European Social Fund (ESF), the variations of funding referring to the deadlines of EU funding applications and programmes, and the lack of funding invested in quality and outcomes assessment of existing offers. Following this argument, the report states that 'adult-learning policies tend to be piecemeal, and funding is limited' (16).

Solutions for ALE

The problems identified present a complex portrait of the ALE system, requiring improvements 'in the area of awareness, access and quality, governance and financing' (OECD 2018a, 17). Therefore, several governance strategies are highlighted to solve Portuguese problems.

The first one refers to the improvement of monitoring and evaluation of existing provision (17). This should include the development of 'a coherent adult-learning strategy

that encompasses existing and new measures, and is aligned with other key economic policies' (19), such as specific industry sector policies, digitalisation and innovation.

The second one relates to the spread of information to raise awareness referring to the benefits of learning among public authorities, employers and learners, maintaining the focus on a learner-centred approach, as is the case in RPL (17). The importance is stressed on improving 'the collection, use and dissemination of information on skill performance and the returns to skills investments' (19) to avoid mismatches between labour market needs and the ALE provision (20). Complementarily, learners need to be convinced of the benefits or 'real-life impacts of learning, such as personal experiences' (20). Employers favouring ALE should be socially recognised due to the development of 'best practices in adult learning through national competitions/award for employers' (20).

The third is the importance of financial incentives for learners and employers, and for national and local governance bodies (17). Financial objectives should be provided to learners, employers and providers involved, specifically, for (small and medium enterprises) employers and employees (within disadvantaged social groups) (27–28). Regarding governance bodies, the emphasis is on public bodies fostering negotiation and collaboration among the different stakeholders (public, profit-making and non-profit ones) (25). The reinforcement of or the creation of new local networks able 'to address current and future needs for skills that align with the local economic development context' (26), is also mentioned.

Finally, notably, according to the OECD (2019a) dashboard on Priorities of Adult Learning (PAL), Portugal is facing the need to update the ALE system, even if the existing one is considered 'well-prepared'. This is needed to tackle urgent skill challenges, such as when it concerns training provision developed by firms that doubled in recent years. However, it is also mentioned that Portugal has weak financing arrangements to fund existing offers.

Slovenia

Problems of ALE

The country is facing a higher percentage of low-skilled adults than the OECD average. One-third of 16- to 65-year-olds 'have low levels of literacy and/or numeracy' (OECD 2017, 8), which means that there is room for the country 'to improve adults' skills, employability and active citizenship' (OECD 2018b, 6). Approximately, one-third of working-age adults are 'either unemployed or not participating in the labour market', especially older, low educated and long-term-unemployed adults, and a growing number of youth NEETs (OECD 2017, 9). However, attracting talented people from Slovenia and abroad could help the country to meet its needs of skill and 'infuse new knowledge, technology and innovations into the economy' (26). The number of years of adult education has effects on 'employment and earnings' to the highest level of all countries participating in PIAAC. While adults' literacy and numeracy skills in Slovenia have positive effects on adults' wages more than any other factor (6). However, countries skill use performance is not good, as relatively few firms have adopted 'High-Performance Work Practices' that are 'the main driver of skills use in workplaces' (27).

Participation in ALE according to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) is slightly above the EU average (12% in 2017), but this is actually ‘one of the lowest levels since 2002’ (7). The country also faces ‘large and persistent participation gaps’ in ALE as those most in need are the least likely to get ALE (8). Most low-skilled adults are not willing to participate in ALE (OECD 2017, 9). Furthermore, Slovenia faces ‘one of the largest participation gaps between low- and highly-educated adults in the EU (14% versus 71%)’ and was unable to reduce this gap in the last decade (OECD 2018b, 8).

Slovenia lacks efficient cooperation ‘across ministries, between levels of government and with stakeholders’. This is a necessary condition for coherent ALE policies, and due to its ‘centralised policy approach’, it limits the role that municipalities could play in the policy process (OECD 2017, 12). It spends less on education per student than the OECD average, while financial support for ALE is insufficient and is ‘constraining LLL’ opportunities (13) and ‘highly reliant on the ESF, which comes with its own risks’ (OECD 2018b, 21).

Finally, although Slovenia has a comparatively well-prepared ALE system, according to the OECD (2019) dashboard on PAL, it still faces ‘urgent skill challenges’ (11). This is due to the risk of automation, the need for structural change, an ageing population, globalisation processes, low alignment of the ALE system with labour market needs, lack of entrepreneurship and innovation, and serious underfunding of the system. Slovenia has the third weakest overall performance regarding financing, while there is also room for improvement in the reducing barriers to employment, coverage of job-related ALE and on the impact of ALE.

Solutions for ALE

Three challenges emerged as the most in need to be addressed in the Slovenian ALE system: LLL as a national priority, a culture of co-operation in the ALE system and making the end-user central to policy and programme design (OECD 2018b, 12–13).

A culture of LLL must pervade ‘families, communities, workplaces and education institutions’ and requires all sections of society to ‘have access to the benefits’ of ALE (13). To achieve this goal, Slovenia needs to accept the following measures. To strengthen government engagement with stakeholders in ALE policymaking and to include stakeholders in ‘programme design and delivery’ (19). To improve co-operation between different actors on ‘raising awareness’ about ALE that would motivate adults to participate in ALE and employers to sponsor ALE (20). To improve co-operation between government, employers and individuals to fund ALE more ‘effectively and efficiently’, with government financial support to low-skilled adults and social partners’ support to ALE through collective agreements (21).

As ALE systems are ‘complex and cross-sectoral’, Slovenia needs to improve cooperation within and between ministries, government and stakeholders, central and municipal governments and local and regional actors. Hence, government and stakeholders need to agree on the ‘priorities, goals, roles and responsibilities’ (13) of the ALE system. In more detail, Slovenia needs to develop a comprehensive ALE master plan ‘that covers all forms and providers’ of ALE and sets clear stakeholder responsibilities (14). It also needs to strengthen ‘cross-sectoral oversight and accountability’ in ALE and set a body with ‘decision-making capacity’ over ALE policy (15), as well as to enrich decision-making with ‘high quality information’ on ‘skill needs and mismatches’, ‘adult

education and training activities and opportunities’ and outcomes of ‘adult-learning programmes and providers’ (16). Finally, it needs to strengthen ‘inter-ministerial co-ordination’ for ALE (17), alongside ‘co-operation with municipalities and between local actors’ for developing and implementing ALE policy (18).

As adults and enterprises exhibit a ‘diverse range of motivations for and barriers to participating in learning’, maintaining a learner-centred and end-user approach in ‘policymaking and the design of adult-learning programmes’ is essential for ensuring good ALE services (especially involving ‘target groups of adults and employers’). Furthermore, a comprehensive system for RPL should be set up as well. Hence, the government should monitor and collect better data on ‘flexible education and training programmes’ and RPL, as well as raise awareness about benefits of ALE (OECD 2018b, 19).

Discussion, comparison and interpretation

In the following section, we discuss, compare and interpret country case data and their problem representations by applying the second, third and fourth questions of Bacchi’s (2009) WPR approach to policy analysis.

The ‘Results’ section of the paper identifies common problems representations that both countries are facing with, as well as foreseen solutions to tackle these problems, while also identifies some differences of problems diagnosed and solutions given to the two countries. Furthermore, in selection of country cases we argued that both countries have different histories, welfare regimes and ALE systems as, among others, in Portugal, the forms of provision are based on formal education and RPL, while in Slovenia, beside these two, non-formal education is included as well. However, although both countries contexts differ, they both share, if we sum up results from the analysis of the first WPR question, the following four main problem representations and solutions given that reinforce several policy myths (de Neufville and Barton 1987) on the role of ALE policy: (a) ALE as a solution to tackle socioeconomic problems; (b) unemployment as a problem of low-skilled adults; (c) the learner-centred approach as a way to raise participation in ALE; and (d) improved governance that can bring about advanced national ALE systems. We now turn to discussion of these four myths by unpacking their conceptual logics, inspiration (origins) and aspects being silenced.

ALE as a solution to tackle socioeconomic problems

In the first problem representation, ALE systems in both countries are there to ‘help people develop and maintain relevant skills over their working careers’. This is due to the changing conditions of the work and ageing population, alongside new technologies and globalisation processes affecting the type and quality of jobs and ‘skill-sets they require’ (OECD 2019a, 11). The *conceptual logic* behind this is that ALE offers better job opportunities, generates better income for adults and thus contributes to the economic development and competitiveness of firms and economies. *Inspired* by HCT, the basic assumption of OECD skill policy is that adults who invest in skills and LLL will be rewarded in the labour market. LLL and the right skill-sets will enhance their capacity for productivity, and they will consequently earn higher wages (Desjardins 2018).

However, at least four issues are *silenced* in this problem representation. First, both countries face problems of overqualification (of young adults), credential inflation and the rise of a precarious employment situation in labour markets (Carneiro and Araújo 2020; Širok et al. 2018). The process of economic globalisation, under cost competition, has fostered the rise of the labour market for high-skilled in low-waged jobs. This influences the social mobility and unemployment of young adults around the globe and causes a ‘global auction’ in which high-skilled work goes where the lowest prices are (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011; Mikulec 2018; Shan and Fejes 2015). Second, ALE policy serves as the ‘educationalisation’ of social problems (Ydesen 2019, 300). ALE is conceived as a tool for the inclusion of adults in a precisely defined order, i.e. the social order of competitiveness, productivity and effectiveness, and for the establishment of predetermined subjectivities of adults, i.e. good workers, economically active citizens and lifelong learners. Third, ALE systems in both countries are targeting ‘working-age adults’, this being low-skilled, young (NEETs) or unemployed, meaning that some groups of adults are being excluded from the ALE system, i.e. adults beyond ‘working age’. Additionally, the OECD excludes adult liberal education (Desjardins 2017, 19–20) from the ALE systems of both countries. Fourth, the core assumption of HCT, which is used in PIAAC, claims that ‘the cognitive level of a given population/workforce is the key factor determining economic growth’ (Rappleye and Komatsu 2021, 241). However, this argument lags behind evidence that there ‘is no strong relationship between mean PIAAC scores and GDP per capita growth’ (242).

Unemployment as a problem for low-skilled adults

In the second problem representation, adults in both countries that are ‘less able to access education and training opportunities are less likely to engage in continuous learning in adulthood, and are more likely to become unemployed and have low earnings’ (OECD 2017, 32). The *conceptual logic* behind this is that adults can and should raise their employability skills through upskilling, reskilling and labour market relevant skills. The assumption is that skills will increase the value of human capital and productivity in society (Cort, Mariager-Anderson, and Thomsen 2018). *Inspired by neoliberalism*⁶ the basic assumption of the OECD skill policy is that employability is the responsibility of adults and not of the state.

However, at least three issues are being *silenced* in this problem representation. First, when the concept of employability is redefined as a problem of ALE (unemployment is a problem of unqualified people), the illusion is maintained that more education will contribute to an individual’s increased employability. Thus, accountability for problems, such as structural unemployment, is shifted from the state and placed on the individual’s shoulders (Mikulec 2018). Second, the demand side (firms) of skills also requires ‘low-skilled workers for low-skilled jobs’, which are characterised by ‘low pay, low job security and poor working conditions’ (Cort, Mariager-Anderson, and Thomsen 2018, 206) on the one side while, on the other, low-skilled workers are not simply ‘reluctant to learn’, but ‘are sometimes pushed into low-skilled jobs by the education system or by the labour market’ (212). Third, the concept of knowledge has been substituted by the concept of skills – associated with ‘human capital and human resources that need to be cultivated to fuel the labour market and to enhance national competitiveness on

the global stage' (Shan and Fejes 2015, 229). This argument places summative testing in the foreground and understands 'knowledge' as information that is impersonal, instrumental and decontextualised (Peters 2006). Hence, within the universe of possible knowledge, value is only ascribed to specific knowledge and a specific form of its organisation. The acquisition of knowledge that is essential for the broader intellectual, aesthetic, moral and social development of the adult is neglected.

Learner-centred approach as a solution to greater participation in ALE

In the third problem representation, public authorities and providers should systematically 'implement a user-centred approach by involving target groups of adults and employers in the design of adult learning services' (OECD 2018b, 141). They should do that to 'promote modular and labour market-relevant training and training that responds to users' specific needs' (OECD 2018a, 114) in both countries. The *conceptual logic* behind it is that a learner-centred approach supposes a successful address to issues related to motivation for and barriers to participating in learning. However, learner-centred education is a slippery term, as it is related to different contexts and *inspired by* at least three different narratives (Britton, Schweisfurth, and Slade 2019): the constructivist, the emancipatory and the IGOs narrative. The last one sets a policy imperative for learners to acquire the twenty-first century necessary skills related to 'new learning technologies and new modes of economic production' (33). Therefore, what is being *silenced* here is that 'emphasis on the differentiated needs of individual learners is noteworthy, as is its juxtaposition with the needs of the labour market' (35). However, this juxtaposition may hide the needs and aspirations of the individual him/herself. Moreover, a paradox can be observed when it is stated that there is a need to increase twenty-first-century skills, especially among low-skilled adults, as those skills are the ones that 'adults often need to have in order to be able to fully participate in adult education' (Van Nieuwenhove and De Wever 2020, 3). Furthermore, participation in ALE has more to do with the country's commitment to develop ALE provision structures that allow for openness and flexibility and broad conceptualisation of ALE going beyond adult vocational education and training (VET) (Desjardins 2017). As Boeren (2017, 161) argued, participation in ALE is a layered problem related to 'responsibilities of individual adults, education and training providers and countries' social education policies'. However, the learner centredness is emphasised, reinforcing the myth of self-actualisation (Jansen and Wilde-meersch 1998).

Improved governance as a path towards advanced national ALE systems

The fourth problem representation is based on the *conceptual logic* that ALE systems are seen as 'complex and cross-sectoral', covering programmes with different objectives and different target groups in both counties. Therefore, *inspired by* the idea that dialogue among the main policy actors is central, it is stressed that there is the need for cooperation across several ministries, social partners and stakeholders. This should also include actors that 'often do not perceive themselves as being part of a joint adult learning system'. The establishment of good coordination mechanisms between them is also highlighted as essential to characterise advanced ALE systems (OECD 2019a,

102). The idea is that governance of the ALE system can be improved by developing 'effective monitoring and evaluation systems', establishing 'better coordination arrangements' and strengthening 'capacity-building' and 'inter-ministerial cooperation' (103).

As shown by Desjardins (2020), ALE systems are linked to different types of opportunities and stakeholders and are products of 'structural and public policy frameworks' (109). In countries with advanced ALE systems, (1) governance structures tend to 'foster coordination among stakeholders', meaning that the exchange of information, expectations and needs are enabled. Additionally, (2) existing financing structures are aimed to 'align incentives and foster co-investment' between learners, employers and states. Moreover, (3) ALE provision structures are directed at enabling 'open, flexible and targeted opportunities that are designed to mitigate barriers to participation' (110). These ALE systems often aim at promoting opportunities to attain (highest) qualifications at older ages (also through RPL), training schemes under the active labour market policy and integration among major types of ALE (adult: basic and general education, higher education, VET and liberal education). Despite these circumstances, the reports under analysis *silence* the fact that ALE systems are deeply embedded in their societies. The OECD recommends for both countries to address the issues of governance, i.e. stronger cooperation of stakeholders, coordination of ALE policies and the establishment of decision-making body over ALE policy. However, these synergies face several constraints in Portugal and Slovenia that are centralised countries and in general develop a top-down policy decision-making approach. Complementarily, these recommendations do not acknowledge the lack of provision structures, especially adult higher education in Slovenia and adult non-formal and higher education in Portugal (Antunes and Guimarães 2014; Guimarães and Mikulec 2021; Mikulec 2021). Other blind spots in the OECD solutionism that could jeopardise the development of advanced ALE systems in both countries involve: (a) prioritising specific types of ALE (adult higher and vocational education) while leaving aside other types, such as non-formal adult education provision; and (b) favouring specific financial schemes (government financial support to low-skilled adults).

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the role of the OECD and its Skills Strategy team in shaping development and/or improvement of ALE systems in two European countries under the OECD 'Skills Strategy Projects' initiative.

First, by discussing the role of IGOs in ALE policymaking, we emphasised their crucial role in the formation of global ALE policies and clarified the instruments the OECD uses to influence national development and/or improvement of ALE systems. We have underlined that ALE policies (OECD skills strategies) are (re)assembled in particular ways, in particular for places and for particular purposes, as well as, most importantly, elaborated on the OECD skills strategies discourses as important ideological tools as problems' and myths' definers in ALE policies.

Second, we elaborated on the OECD as a pluridimensional organisation with a complex organisational structure, as well as shedding light on the birth of the OECD's education policy and the current OECD bodies involved in shaping education policy (i.e. skills strategies and ALE). Then we identified the main OECD ALE concepts,

explained how ‘Skills Strategy Projects’ works and indicated the main actors involved in the OECD skill strategy reports of both countries.

Third, by applying a WPR approach to policy analysis, we scrutinised how the OECD frames the problems and solutions regarding skills strategies in both countries. On the one hand, we elaborated that the OECD skill strategy reports can play an important role in the governance of ALE policy, by supporting changes in existing policies and contributing to the development of advanced ALE systems in Portugal and Slovenia. On the other, we showed that this support is based on several myths that stress some ALE features as relevant to socioeconomic policies aimed at tackling unemployment, fostering participation in ALE and raising useful and work-related knowledge. Moreover, the individual responsibility of learners for the poor educational, social and economic conditions they might be experiencing is part of these myths as well. Overall, these myths silence the importance of contextual and historical developments of ALE in both countries – such as top-down policy decision-making approach in both centralised countries, tradition of (liberal) non-formal ALE and historical division between ALE and higher education in Slovenia, and the importance non-formal education, local and critical education providers have in Portugal for increasing adult learners participation and engagement in education and social change – and reinforce the role of the OECD in the transnational policy transfer of neoliberal guidelines embedded in ALE policy.

Finally, we would like to conclude with alternative ways of looking at ALE policymaking. We believe that the step away from reproducing mythologies in ALE policy is to shape its policy beyond the ‘educationalisation’ of social problems that is being driven by neoliberal guidelines. Rather than utilising ALE for particular ends or using it as an instrument for achieving economic or political aims, we should see ALE as an entity in its own right. The entity that has value in itself as it enables intellectual, aesthetic, moral and social development of adults and/or fosters the experience of self-transformation among adults. Therefore, being understood in this way, ALE policy should enable conditions for setting up a comprehensive ALE system – including governance, financing and provision structures – that provides all major types of ALE opportunities to adults. Last but not least, ALE policy should set conditions to engage in ALE on micro (individual adults), meso (providers) and macro (state) levels, fostering participation and avoiding the instrumentalisation of such actors to main neoliberal guidelines of the IGO under analysis.

Notes

1. For an overview of the main OECD policy documents from the 1970s onward, and critical analysis of its concepts – recurrent education (1973), LLL (1996), skill development (2012) – emphasising the beneficial relationships between LLL and economic and social prosperity, see, for example, Desjardins (2018), Jakobi (2009), Milana (2012a) and Rubenson (2015).
2. International comparative perspectives most often use the method of document analysis to compare international and/or national ALE policies (Breyer 2020, 35). Institutional approaches (i.e. world polity, actor-centred institutionalism, governance perspective) focus on multi-level perspectives of policy analysis (including the focus on actors and their interest for pursuing policy agendas), are based on mixed-method designs and borrow methods from other disciplines (e.g. lexicometric analysis that enables the analysis of large text corpora from linguistics) (42–43).

3. According to Bacchi (2009, ix), policy is a course of action that is usually linked to a ‘problem’ that needs to be changed in governmental policies, but we would argue in the policies of IGOs as well (see Milana 2012b, 785).
4. Governmental representatives from the ministries and stakeholders took part in 4 workshops and separate bilateral meetings in 2014 (OECD 2015, 6, 21), and 2 workshops and 5 meetings between February and November 2017 (OECD 2018a, 179–185). It is evident that variety of representatives of business, the educational sector, government and non-governmental organisation took part in the process and reported their views to the OECD team. However, apart from representatives from ANQEP (the national agency for qualification and VET), education stakeholder’s representatives were missing as well as those from educational organisations of trade unions and non-formal education/non-governmental organisations. This circumstance revealed less importance was given to the actors from educational sector than expected.
5. Governmental representatives from the ministries and stakeholders took part in 3 workshops in 2016 and separate bilateral meetings (OECD 2017, 5–8), and 2 workshops and 15 discussions events from December 2017 until July 2018 (OECD 2018b, 202–207). It is evident that variety of representatives of business, the educational sector, government and nongovernmental organisation took part in the process and reported their views to the OECD team. However, representatives of some key AL bodies, such as Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Adult Education (SSIO), Economic and Social Council (ESC) and Council of Experts for Vocational Education and Training (SSPSI), did not participate in the process, meaning that views of the key AL bodies were not taken into account.
6. Neoliberalism rejects the idea that the state should play a significant role in steering development and emphasises the role of the market in steering economic, political and social development. Additionally, HCT is reinforced within neoliberal guidelines (Desjardins 2018).

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