Lifelong Learning Policy Agenda in the European Union: A bi-level analysis

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Abstract

The Lisbon European Summit in 2000 has been a milestone in reframing education policies to foster a ‘knowledge economy’, whilst amid the challenges of the new decennium Lifelong Learning (LLL) has been propounded as a powerful lever for attaining ‘sustainable growth’. The present article aims to elucidate the development of an integrated European Union (EU) policy framework for LLL in light of the ‘Lisbon’ and ‘Europe 2020’ Strategies. Through a bi-level analysis of policy texts with high political significance representing a point of reference for a given discourse, it seeks to explore trends and identify interrelations between EU LLL policy and emerging challenges within the Union, as well as global socio-economic mandates that inform contemporary education policy. On the first level, Critical Discourse Analysis was employed, categorizing the data in five main discourse strands. On the second, the data underwent Implicative Statistical Analysis. The results have indicated a substantial shift in the relationship between education and politics, with education assigned a monolithic role in providing for a flexible ‘up-to-date’ workforce, so as to enable the EU to remain a strong global actor.

Keywords: European Union, lifelong learning, discourse analysis, implicative statistical analysis

The Context

At the turn of the century, with the European Union (EU) enlargement in process and amid increasing competitiveness in the global market, the Lisbon European Council prioritized the substantial increase, both in terms of investment and participation rates, in adult education within the context of Lifelong Learning (LLL). In order to attain the maximalist goal of building ‘the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’, an
integrated policy agenda known as the ‘Lisbon Strategy’ was endorsed, initiating a new era in community collaboration in educational matters and practically leading to a ‘European area of education’ (Ertl, 2006; Hingel, 2001).

In May 2009, in light of the Lisbon strategy poor results along with the ongoing economic crisis, the Council adopted a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (Official Journal of the European Union [OJEU], 2009). The new agenda, ‘Europe 2020’, mainly focusing on ‘smart and inclusive growth’ (Commission of European Communities [CEC], 2009, 2011), combines strategic long-term objectives with short-term priorities and is built on four pillars: (a) LLL and mobility; (b) quality and efficiency of education and training; (c) equity and social cohesion; (d) creativity and innovation (CEC, 2009, 2010a, 2011; European Council [EC], 2010; OJEU, 2009).

In effect, since 2000, LLL has been high in the political agenda, presumed as a modern ‘panacea’, with political discourse repeatedly accentuating multifarious potential benefits in economic, social, cultural and political spheres (CEC, 2003a, 2006a), while feeding a cautious optimism in that LLL may generate opportunities for tackling forthcoming challenges, such as increased global competitiveness and growing demand for knowledge and innovation. In this regard, the present study aims to elucidate the development of an integrated EU policy framework for LLL in light of the ‘Lisbon’ and ‘Europe 2020’ strategies, for enhancing employment, combating unemployment and increasing competitiveness of the EU. Through a systematic review and analysis of policy texts with high political significance, this study seeks to explore trends and identify interrelations between EU LLL policy and emerging challenges within the Union, as well as global socio-economic mandates that inform contemporary education policy.

Methodology

Initially, a systematic review of policy texts was conducted following a four-stage process, including research of preliminary sources, use of secondary sources, study of primary sources and synthesis of the literature (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Preliminary source research was conducted using the ‘Europa’ official documents database (http://europa.eu/publications/official-documents/index_en.htm), running a search within the Commission of European Communities (CEC) official documents (Reports, Staff-working Documents, Communications, Memoranda), with ‘Lifelong Learning’ as a title key word. Initial search yielded a set of 74 documents endorsed by the European Commission from 2000 to 2014. References within preliminary sources helped draw up a comprehensive list of primary material, comprising 50 policy texts, conditioned for relevance to the topic and issuing year so as to enable equal allocation in the period under scrutiny (Table 1).

The selected documents underwent qualitative analysis, resting within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach (Fairclough, 1992, 1993, 2001). According to Taylor (2004), CDA provides a framework for a critical policy analysis, drawing on the investigation of the relationship of language to wider social processes and enabling researchers to go beyond speculation and demonstrate how policy texts work. In this respect, a ‘text in context’ analysis of the selected European Commission documents was conducted, in an attempt to explicate statements which place a discursive frame around particular
Table 1: List of policy texts included in the study

| Title                                                                 | Year  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| A memorandum on lifelong learning                                    | 2000  |
| Strategies for jobs in the information society                        | 2000  |
| Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality                 | 2001  |
| Education Policies and European Governance: Contribution to the Interservice Groups on European Governance | 2001  |
| The concrete future objectives of education systems                   | 2001  |
| European benchmarks in education and training: Follow-up to the Lisbon European Council | 2002  |
| The Lisbon strategy: Making change happen                             | 2002  |
| European report on quality indicators of lifelong learning            | 2002  |
| Implementing lifelong learning strategies in Europe: Progress report on the follow-up to the Council resolution of 2002 | 2002  |
| Implementation of the ‘Education and Training 2010’ programme         | 2003  |
| Education and Training 2010: The success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms | 2003  |
| Investing efficiently in education and training: An imperative for Europe | 2003  |
| Achieving the Lisbon goal: The contribution of VET                    | 2004  |
| Mobility within the community of students, persons undergoing training, volunteers and teachers and trainers | 2004  |
| The new generation of community education and training programmes after 2006 | 2004  |
| Exploring sources on funding for lifelong learning                    | 2004  |
| Creating the ‘youth in action’ programme for the period 2007–2013     | 2004  |
| Key competences for lifelong learning                                 | 2005  |
| Modernizing education and training: A vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe | 2005  |
| Developing local learning centres and learning partnerships           | 2005  |
| Towards a European qualifications framework for lifelong learning     | 2005  |
| Establishing for the period 2007–2013 the programme ‘Citizens for Europe’ to promote active European citizenship | 2005  |
| Adult learning: It is never too late to learn                         | 2006  |
| Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems      | 2006  |
| Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training      | 2006  |
| Establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning    | 2006  |
| Implementing the Community Lisbon Programme: Fostering entrepreneurial mindsets through education and learning | 2006  |
| A coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in E&T | 2007  |
| Action plan on Adult learning: It is always a good time to learn      | 2007  |
| Towards more knowledge-based policy and practice in education and training | 2007  |
| Towards common principles of flexicurity: More and better jobs through flexibility and security | 2007  |
| Promoting young people’s full participation in education, employment and society | 2007  |
| Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training      | 2008  |
| An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training | 2008  |
| Improving competences for the twenty-first century: An agenda for European cooperation on schools | 2008  |
| Key competences for a changing world                                  | 2009  |
| Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training      | 2009  |
| A new impetus for European cooperation in vocational education and training to support the Europe 2020 strategy | 2010  |
| An agenda for new skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment | 2010  |
| Youth on the move: promoting the learning mobility of young people    | 2010  |
| Progress towards the common European objectives in education and training | 2011  |
| Implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020) | 2011  |
| Mid-term review of the lifelong learning programme                    | 2011  |
| Rethinking education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes | 2012  |
| Vocational education and training for better skills, growth and jobs   | 2012  |

(Continued)
positions, as well as to interpret these statements as a rhetoric that privileges particular ways of seeing and codifies certain practices (Graham, 2005). Within this framework, initially nodal points were identified, while further on, an interpretation of the relationship between text and the wider socio-economic context was attempted, categorizing discourse in five main strands.

On the second level, the data underwent implicative statistical analysis, a mode of analysis drawing on the extraction and the structuration of quasi-implications, originally developed by Gras (Gras & Kuntz, 2008). According to Couturier (2008) implicative statistical analysis establishes the following properties among the variables: (1) the relationship between variables that are dys-symmetrical; (2) the association of measures that are not linear and are based on probabilities; (3) the user’s possibility to use graphical representations that follows the semantic of the relationship. For the present analysis, the Hierarchical Clustering of Variables and Gras’ Implicative Statistical Analysis method was conducted, using Classification Hiérarchique, Implicative et Cohésitive (CHIC) software (Bodin, Couturier, & Gras, 2000). CHIC software enabled the extraction of data association rules, based on the implication and similarity intensity, whereby allowing the building of two trees and one graph (Similarity, Hierarchical and Implicative diagrams).

Results

Qualitative Analysis

According to Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional model for CDA, every instance of language use is a communicative event consisting of three dimensions: (a) texts; (b) discursive practices; (c) social practices. CDA studies can be distinguished between approaches that draw mainly on the linguistic features of texts and those that generally focus on the historical and social context of texts, informed by Foucault’s work and the underlying assumptions of discourse and language (Taylor, 2004). In light of the ‘Foucauldian approach’, hegemonic discourses formulate regimes of truth regulating power relations in a society, simultaneously constraining and promoting chances for transformation and change (Foucault, 1972, 1980). In effect, CDA is not a blueprint, but rather a flexible framework largely dependent on the epistemological framework being drawn upon (Fairclough, 2001; Graham, 2005).

On these premises, our analysis of the selected EU primary texts focused on the particular discourses articulated and institutionalized, and on whether the specific promotional genres aim at restructuring public perceptions and the broader social practices
(Fairclough, 2001). As Edwards and Nicoll (2010) posit, a rhetorical analysis of policy texts relies on exigence, audience and persuasive genres, with official discourses highly construed as ‘mystifications of the material world by those who exercise power’ (p. 104).

Hence, there was followed a linear process, moving from textual analysis to contextual analysis and to interpretation, in order to grasp insight into political processes, institutions and systems, and their interrelatedness to socio-cultural practices. Our analysis identified five prominent discourse strands (logos—Edwards & Nicoll, 2010) that present a particular reading of the texts under scrutiny, largely elucidated by neoliberal regimes of truth. Precisely, the five categorical strands formulated, each one comprising a set of further descriptive codes presented in Table 2, were identified to be informed by the exigencies of the socio-economic changes emanating from techno-scientific advancement and globalization, addressed to a diverse audience of individuals—employees, educational institutions, stakeholders, vulnerable grouts etc.—who however all need to cope with the major upheavals confronted, while the prevailing persuasive genre rests mainly on the ‘necessity’ propagated to respond to the aforementioned change.

**LLL Policy**

The LLL policy endorsed since 2000 has signified a substantial shift in the relationship between education and politics, with education becoming the lever for supporting, enhancing and promoting structural changes at political level to stimulate economic growth. In this regard, LLL policies, packed in a discourse that systematically stresses the critical role of investment in human resources, are largely assumed to be ‘central to the implementation of the Union’s new economic, social and environmental strategy defined in Lisbon in March 2000’ (CEC, 2003b). As outlined in the Memorandum on LLL (CEC, 2000) ‘people are Europe’s main asset and should be the focal point of the Union’s policies’.

In this context, LLL, has been accredited a role that ranges, depending largely on the contextual framework it is informed by, from subsidiarity (P2), forming a ‘part of the EU’s Lisbon strategy’ (CEC, 2007a), to constituting the pivotal political tool (P1) in enhancing EU competiveness and raising employment rates.

**Table 2: Discourse analysis results**

| Categorical labels | Descriptive codes |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| LLL policy         | P1 pivotal role   |
|                    | P2 subsidiary role|
| Scope of LLL       | L1 economic growth|
|                    | L2 social justice |
| Context challenges | C1 skilled workforce|
|                    | C2 unemployment   |
|                    | C3 ageing population|
|                    | L3 personal fulfilment |
|                    | C4 innovation     |
|                    | C5 Europeanization|
| LLL funding        | F1 by the state   |
|                    | F2 by stakeholders |
|                    | F3 by individuals  |
| LLL tools          | T1 flexibility    |
|                    | T2 employability  |
|                    | T3 quality assurance|
|                    | T4 policy convergence|
**Scope of LLL**

According to the Commission, LLL pertains to all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective (CEC, 2001).

The earlier definition actually concerns three closely interrelated spheres: (a) human capital (economic growth—L1); (b) social capital (social justice—L2); (c) identity capital (personal fulfilment—L3). As eloquently put forward ‘more than ever before, access to up-to-date information and knowledge, together with the motivation and skills to use these resources intelligently on behalf of oneself and the community as a whole, are becoming the key to strengthening Europe’s competitiveness and improving the employability and adaptability of the workforce’ (CEC, 2000). Furthermore, it is stressed that ‘although the main challenges implied by the Lisbon strategic goal are obviously related to the labour market, the contribution of education and training to the knowledge economy can hardly be dissociated from its contribution to society in general and to the individual citizen’ (CEC, 2003b).

However, even though the political discourse has been repeatedly drawing on various LLL benefits in personal, social, cultural and political spheres (CEC, 2003a, 2006a), there exists a conspicuous lacuna in EU rhetoric, with an apparent laxity in perceiving non-economic returns. LLL contribution to social justice and personal fulfilment tends to be growingly perceived as of secondary importance, with the emphasis shed on the primary objective of ‘helping make adults more efficient workers’ (CEC, 2006a).

In effect, ‘investing in people’ is mainly regarded as ‘a growth factor, particularly in the current context of rapid technological change’, while secondarily presumed to serve as a ‘key instrument for enhancing social inclusion’ (CEC, 2003b). In the same vein, personal fulfilment tends to be inherently related to economic growth, with LLL assumed to be ‘first and foremost a need for all individuals in a knowledge society’ (CEC, 2002a), serving the purpose of empowering citizens ‘to move freely between learning settings, jobs, regions and countries, making the most of their knowledge and competences, and to meet the goals and ambitions of the EU’ (CEC 2001).

**Context Challenges**

The dominant objective propounded in EU LLL policies since the turn of the millennium has been restoring its competitiveness in the globalized economy. Thus, there is a strong mandate to build a skilled workforce (C1), both by ‘providing the right mix of skills’ (CEC, 2010b), as well as by ensuring that individuals ‘can adjust their skills to the labour market needs of an environmentally sustainable economy founded on competence-based training concepts’ (CEC, 2010c). Closely intertwined with workforce skills improvement, there has also been an increasing demand for innovation (C4). As interestingly posited ‘the case for better skills development in Europe is even more urgent in the light of the global race for talent and rapid development of education and training systems in emerging economies such as China, Brazil or India’ (CEC, 2010c).

Further challenges within the Union are associated with a rapidly ageing population (C3), a large number of low-skilled individuals and high rates of youth unemployment.
In effect, the existence of high rates of low-qualified, mismatches between skills and the labour market, and the ageing labour force constitute the major structural challenges of the current decade (CEC, 2008, 2012).

The foregoing challenges gave impetus to propounding a European identity that may promote solidarity among EU peoples and facilitate human resources’ mobility flows. According to the Commission (CEC, 2005a), ‘the EU is currently facing a paradox: despite the successes and achievements of the Union since its creation, European citizens seem to have developed a certain distance towards the European institutions and to have difficulties in identifying themselves within the process of European integration’ (CEC, 2005b). To this end, a premium has been put on promoting the ‘Europeanization’ (C5) process through ‘building a European or international dimension into national education and training systems’ (CEC, 2005b), along with reinforcing ‘the role of LLL in creating a sense of European citizenship based on understanding and respect for human rights and democracy’ (CEC, 2006b).

LLL FUNDING

The issue of LLL funding has been of growing concern for the EU, constantly re-emerging in the political discourse, especially towards the end of the previous decade with the onset of the economic recession. Hence, with state funding (F1) in decline, stakeholders’ role (F2) has been promoted, outlining that ‘creating partnerships for funding … , such as sectoral training funds based on social partner agreements … , can mobilise private resources and share the costs of learning’ (CEC, 2006b). What is more, there have been several addresses to the necessity of individuals (F3) to finance their participation in LLL. This shift in funding schemata has been characteristically reflected in the Commission’s appeal to member-states for ‘encouraging individuals to invest in their own learning, both for reasons of personal fulfilment and employability’ (CEC, 2007b), indicating an alarming trend in diminishing public expenditure on education, while entrenching LLL in commodification and utilitarianism patterns.

LLL TOOLS

As mentioned earlier, the central plank defining LLL policy since 2000 has been enhancing EU competitiveness in the global arena, strongly conditioned by committing member-states to a convergence education and training policy (T4), so as to ensure effectiveness and efficiency in educational reforms. As outlined, ‘reforms, while decided and conducted at national level, need to take serious account of their increasingly important European dimension, which has become a critical factor for their efficiency’ (CEC, 2010c).

Hence, mainstreaming the use of European tools, catering for the comparability and transparency of qualifications, and the validation of prior learning (CEC, 2006b, 2007b), has been a breakthrough in EU education policy, with the ultimate aim to enhance employability (T2) namely ‘the capacity to secure and keep employment’, presumed to be ‘a decisive condition for reaching full employment and for improving European competitiveness and prosperity in the new economy’ (CEC, 2000).
The European tools developed (such as the European Qualifications Framework, the Europass, the European Quality Assurance reference framework for Vocational Education and Training, etc.), practically form a lingua franca that facilitates communication not only between the labour market and education but also among national education systems, enabling greater flexibility (T1) for both employers and individuals, while providing for quality assurance (T3), in that they may allow comparability of knowledge, skills, competences and qualifications, and ensure transparency, contributing to reinforcement of human resources’ mobility flows (CEC, 2011).

Quantitative Analysis

On the second level of analysis the data underwent implicative statistical analysis. The similarity dendrogram (Figure 1) depicts the similarity clustering of the five categories identified through qualitative analysis. The similarity relationships depicted are significant at 99% significance level.

Taking into account the earlier similarity dendrogram, three distinct clusters can be identified. The first cluster (Cluster A) depicts the similarity relationships among variables which relate to LLL’s pivotal role (P1), economic growth (L1), funding by individuals (F3), innovation (C4) and employability (T2), indicating that these items were coherently addressed in the policy texts analysed. Additionally, within Cluster A, two further sub-clusters were traced, with the first sub-cluster (A1) (Classification level:9:([P1 L1]F3) similarity: 0.587326) reflecting a textual coherency in addressing the pivotal role (P1) of LLL in economic growth (L1) and impetus for individuals to invest on their learning (F3). Likewise, the second sub-cluster (A2) (Classification level:6:(C4 T2) similarity: 0.698548) denotes a linkage between the rising demand for innovation (C4) and enhancing employability (T2).

The second similarity cluster (Cluster B) indicates that variables related to LLL’s subsidiary role (P2), personal fulfilment (L3), flexibility (T1), skilled workforce (C1), unemployment (C2), ageing population (C3), policy convergence (T4), and Europeanization (C5), were coherently addressed in the policy texts analysed. Within Cluster B two
further sub-clusters were identified, with B1 (Classification level:10:[P2 (L3 T1)] similarity: 0.440162) reflecting a strong interconnection between LLL’s subsidiary role (P2) and personal fulfilment (L3). In the second sub-cluster (B2) the most significant similarities have been identified between the challenge of an ageing population (C3) and policy convergence (T4) (Classification level:1:(C3 T4) similarity: 0.910974), as well as between the need for a skilled workforce (C1) and unemployment (C2) (Classification level:5:(C1 C2) similarity: 0.747955).

The third similarity cluster (Cluster C) reflects the linkage among variables which relate to social justice (L2), funding by the state (F1), funding by stakeholders (F2) and quality assurance (T3). Two further sub-clusters (sub-clusters C1, C2) were also identified, with a strong similarity presented between social justice (L2) and funding by the state (F1) (Classification level:2:(L2 F1) similarity: 0.904533), and a significant similarity presented between funding by stakeholders (F2) and quality assurance (T3) (Classification level:7: (F2 T3) similarity: 0.67751)

The hierarchical dendrogram (Figure 2) portrays the hierarchical relationship among variables in order of importance, while it depicts the direction of the hierarchical relationships identified. The concomitant implications are significant at 99% significance level.

The first hierarchical clustering (cohesion: 0.946) indicates that LLL’s pivotal role (P1) conditions economic growth (L1). The second clustering (cohesion: 0.724), denotes that personal fulfilment (L3) conditions flexibility (T1), while the third cluster (cohesion: 0.664) is related to the hierarchical linkage between unemployment (C2) and skilled workforce (C1), indicating that the presence of variable C2 conditions the presence of C1. The fourth hierarchical cluster, presenting the strongest cohesion (cohesion: 0.988), is related to the ageing population (C3) conditioning policy convergence (T4). The fifth hierarchical clustering (cohesion: 0.436) demonstrates that (innovation) C4 conditions employability (T2), while the sixth cluster depicts that there is a strong hierarchical relationship between (cohesion: 0.92) funding by the state (F1) and social justice (L2) which in turn conditions quality assurance (T3) (cohesion: 0.362). Finally, the seventh clustering indicates a hierarchical relationship (cohesion: 0.624) between funding by individuals (F3) and funding by stakeholders (F2).

Figure 2: Hierarchical dendrogram
Finally, the implicative diagram (Figure 3) portrays the relationships between variables, presenting three interrelation chains: \( P1 \rightarrow L1 \), \( C3 \rightarrow T4 \), \( F1 \rightarrow L2 \).

In the implicative chain \( P1 \rightarrow L1 \), the presence of variable \( P1 \) (pivotal role) implies the presence of variable \( L1 \) (economic growth). In the implicative chain \( C3 \rightarrow T4 \), the presence of variable \( C3 \) (ageing population) implies the presence of variable \( T4 \) (policy convergence). Finally, in the implicative chain \( F1 \rightarrow L2 \), the presence of variable \( F1 \) (funding by the state) implies the presence of variable \( L2 \) (social justice). It should be noted that the results from the implicative diagram come in line with the results of the hierarchical diagram.

**Discussion**

The results of the present study may entail significant implications, in that they indicate a coherency of the political discourse in addressing various issues associated with LLL policy in the EU.

Precisely, the first cluster (Cluster A), depicting the similarity relationships among variables related to LLL’s pivotal role (\( P1 \)), economic growth (\( L1 \)), funding by individuals (\( F3 \)), innovation (\( C4 \)) and employability (\( T2 \)), provides compelling evidence as to the central role of LLL in fostering a growth policy in the EU. In detail, all similarity, hierarchical and implicative diagrams, have indicated that there is a strong interrelationship between variables \( P1 \) and \( L1 \), denoting that economic growth is highly conditioned by the endorsement of an integrated policy agenda on investment in human resources, in which LLL has a pivotal role to play. In effect, the human capital rationale, presuming LLL to be a *sine qua non* for sustainable growth and social stability, has been systematically
informing EU policies since 2000, signifying a substantial shift in the relationship between education and politics, with education becoming the lever for supporting and enhancing the policies endorsed to stimulate economic growth (Jones, 2005).

However, this growth policy tends to be increasingly associated with funding patterns that rely on individuals (F3), in the face of retaining their ‘employability’. The impetus for encouraging individuals to invest in their own learning may signal the ushering in of new schemata, with LLL entrapped in a ‘commodity’ role (Green, 2002), serving the purpose of preparing a ‘homo ergaster’ flexible and employable, forced to learning for life, not however in line with personal interests and often at his own expense (Panitsides, 2013).

What is more, the rising demand for innovation (C4) has been indicated to condition employability of the workforce (T2). Apparently, in light of the global race for talent and innovation, employment tends to be highly dependent on those skills and competences that may attribute competitive advantage to organizations and economies. In this regard, Coffield (1999) has proclaimed the rhetoric developed around LLL rather diversionary, as it advocates ‘flexibility’ and ‘employability’, whereby legitimating escalating demands of employers, intensification of workloads, retreat from the policy of full employment and reduce of public expenditure on welfare measures. LLL actually tends to become part of a strategy through which ‘active citizens’ are mobilized in support of their own destinies, wherein the state acts as a monitor and regulator rather than provider of services (Edwards, 2002). In this context, being a participant in LLL appears to be mostly promoted as a moral obligation rather than as an opportunity (Biesta, 2006; Walker, 2009), with ‘learning a living’ becoming the norm (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2005).

Furthermore, our results have recorded a strong interconnection between an individual’s development and fulfilment stemming from his/her participation in LLL (L3), and flexible learning structures and contexts (T1) (Cluster B). In effect, flexible structures which integrate the different streams and levels of education and learning, may substantially enhance accessibility and encourage participation in LLL, allowing thus individuals to build upon prior learning, and link competences and qualifications gained both from leisure and working life contexts, inside or outside formal education and training (CEC, 2002b, 2012).

Flexibility may also account for combating the main challenge of the current decade associated with inflating unemployment rates (C2), which was indicated by the hierarchical dendrogram to be highly dependent upon catering for a skilled workforce (C1). Actually, according to Cedefop’s (2010) projections, skills needs for the next decade show that technological change will increase the demand for high and medium qualified at the expense of low-qualified individuals. Even in occupations that used to require mostly low-level skills the landscape is changing, a fact which signifies that for low-skilled and unskilled workers it will be rather difficult to find employment in the future.

A further challenge imposed within the EU concerns a swiftly ageing population. In 2013, 18.2% of EU population were over 65 years old (Eurostat, 2013), whilst future projections indicate that the number of people over 60 will nearly double by 2025 (Muenz, 2007). Our findings have advocated that in tackling the exigencies of the ageing phenomenon, member-states need to commit to a convergence policy, with LLL undertaking a
weighty role. In effect, the strongest hierarchical linkage in the study has been recorded between the ageing population (C3) and policy convergence (T4), highlighting that the interdependencies among member states have been growingly reinforced, pointing thus to closer cooperation and coherent policies as the only means in confronting arising socio-economic problems.

Finally, what is noteworthy in the third similarity cluster (Cluster C) is the intense relationship between social justice (L2) and funding by the state (F1), implying that in order to enable LLL to play a decisive role in reinforcing a social justice agenda in the EU, it is necessary to ensure that there is adequate public financing of LLL initiatives. Hence, it can be argued that the widely articulated priorities of ‘widening of access to knowledge and skills’ and ‘inclusion’ should be not limited to the rhetoric level, as there is growing evidence that disparities in participation in LLL have been continually growing in benefit of the ‘included’ and not the ‘unincluded’ ones (Macrae, Maguire, & Ball, 1997; Walker, 2009).

Concluding Remarks

Our two level analyses have indicated that in an increasingly ‘Europeanized’ space of education, discursive patterns have been evolving mainly around three axes: (i) increased accountability within a quality assurance framework; (ii) a strong mandate for LLL to respond to labour market needs; (iii) new financing schemes either through rolling the cost away from the state to social partners or to individuals themselves.

Our findings come in line with relevant literature, arguing that humanistic aspirations have been increasingly washed away in EU documents, moving from a somewhat idealistic social justice to a more utilitarian, human capital-based, model (Borg & Mayo, 2005; Schuetze, 2006; Walker, 2009). Hence, LLL encounters the peril to evolve into a means that diminishes the public sphere, undermines educational activity, introduces new mechanisms of self-surveillance and reinforces the view that failure to succeed is a personal responsibility (Crowther, 2004). However, this may bring about the exact opposite results than those expected, as it is argued that driving the flexibility schema too far may impose a fragmentation in identities and energies that make work meaningful and provide a sustainable basis for productivity (Negt, 2012, quoted in Rasmussen, 2014).

It might therefore be high time to move beyond the present limitations in LLL practices and develop more ambitious and unambiguous policies for proliferating economic prosperity and social justice. This entails disentangling from the ‘naïve’ rhetoric developed over the last decades that LLL, entrenched in narrow economic considerations, is a wonder drug which, on its own, will solve a wide range of economic, social and political ills (Coffield, 1999, 2000). Consequently, if LLL is to perceived as a lever for growth and social justice, as the ‘holy grail’ in helping EU citizens restore their functionality in swiftly changing environments, at personal, professional and social levels, and not as the ‘Trojan horse’ of modern enslavement in a vicious cycle of professional and/or ontological insecurity, it has to be ‘unhooked’ from unilaterally serving ‘employability’ schemata, ensuring that it will assume its active and redistributive role, while countenanced by adequate public financing.
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