

The 'Life-long Learning' Rhetoric in Adult Education Policies in Europe - A Case Study

D. S. Gouvias, V. Intzidis, E. Karantzola & C. Vitsilakis-Soroniatis
University of the Aegean, Greece

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ABSTRACT

In the definition of learning strategic objectives in Europe –and not only– it is claimed that a successful implementation of 'lifelong learning' strategies will contribute to 'increasing employability, economic growth, social inclusion and adaptation of skills'.

Lifelong learning strategies are being progressively incorporated and institutionalised in the Greek educational system according to the 'National Action Plan for Employment and the National Action Plan for Social Integration', whereas new legislation is being introduced, concerning the creation of a 'National System of Connection of Vocational Education and Training with Employment' (2004) and the establishment of 'Lifelong Learning Institutes' at every university of the country (2005). In the last 4 years, new programmes of post-graduate studies aiming specifically at mature students have been proliferated.

This paper, presents a single case study, with special reference to post-graduate studies. More specifically, it analyses the case of a distance-learning MSc offered by the University of the Aegean (Rhodes, Greece).

The paper initially discusses the theoretical connection between *learning society*, *life-long learning* and *adult education*. Then it examines the relation between initiatives at Europe-wide level to promote life-long learning opportunities, on the one hand, and the steps taken so far by the Greek government to incorporate the Community policies within a single and coherent legal framework, on the other.

The main focus of the paper, however, is the individual (mature, mainly) students' responses to the policies, through a discourse analysis of various *discussion fora* that have been organised during the MSc course. The aim is to unveil the individual students' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours towards the given institutional framework of *adult education* and towards the recently developed *new forms of learning* (*e-learning*, *distance-learning* etc.). Additionally, the importance that students ascribe to *life-long learning* and the students' future aspirations are highlighted and commented upon.

Introduction

Notions of post-industrialism, post-modernism and globalisation – although all ideologically distinct and highly contested – point towards fundamental shifts in the way societies are being structured within a rapidly changing world. Indeed, the development of complex networks of telecommunications technologies, along with the rise of information as a dominant form of capital, are seen as ‘axial principles’ of this epoch (Bell 1973). Explaining the significance of such changes has been attempted in different ways. Whereas Castells (1996) argues for a change from a ‘space of places’ to a ‘space of flows’ other authors go further in insisting that developments in transportation and telecommunications technology render space entirely meaningless and even ‘absurd’ (for example, Gillespie and Williams 1988, Jones 1997). Against this background a growing emphasis on telecommunications technology within ‘Learning Society’ discourse should come as no surprise. Over the last two decades information and communications technology (ICT) has increasingly been seen as the logical means for establishing a ‘learning society’; offering a flexibility of time and space that negates many, if not all, traditional barriers to lifelong learning (Selwyn & Gorard 1999).

1996 was for the European Union the ‘Year for Lifelong Learning’. Ever since, public authorities, public and private education institutions, secondary and higher education, the social partners, enterprises, non-profit organisations or various associations and, of course, individuals have reflected about its meanings, the changes necessary to build its future. Since 1996, many programmes have promoted new partnerships, new curricula and new assessment; questions are raised about learning outside educational settings; more and more individuals reach higher levels of education than previous generations ever hoped for. But at the same time, our ‘learning societies’ have discovered widespread functional or technological literacy. As stated by Grepperud and Johansen (2000, p. 283) ‘*even if overall there has been some rise in competence, the competence gap has in fact been strengthened by the emphasis on competence in working life.*’

In March 2000, the Lisbon European Council set out the goal for the European Union (henceforth EU) of becoming ‘*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*’, a goal which was reaffirmed, the following year, at the Stockholm European Council. The strategy for this purpose entailed such elements as: the *adaptation* of education and training to offer tailored learning opportunities to individual citizens, the promotion of *employability*, the creation of an *information* society for all, and the fostering of *mobility* (CEC, 2001, p. 6). Eight months later, the European Commission issued a *Memorandum on lifelong learning* on the basis of the conclusions reached during the 1996 European Year of Lifelong Learning¹ and ‘subsequent experience gained at European and national levels’ (CEC, 2001, p. 7).

Despite the fact that in the European agenda, after the Council of EU in Lisbon, *employability* is only one of the four major and interrelated goals of the European lifelong learning policies (*active citizenship, personal fulfillment, social inclusion*, being the other three), in practice there is a clear ‘colonization’ of the social by the market/work-place (see Karantzola & Intzidis 2006). As it is suggested in most of the official documents of the competent Greek and European authorities, lifelong learning is ‘addressed’ to individual learners and is inextricably linked to ‘adaptability’ and ‘employability’. The main aim of the various EU Programmes, such as the ‘Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training’ (OPEIVT) of the third –and quite soon the fourth– ‘Community Support Frame’, is to create: ‘*an integrated system which builds complementary links between education, vocational training, access to the labour market, lifelong learning and the continuous vocational improvement and professional development of the labour force*’ (CEC, 2003b, p. 2).

The basic objectives of this overall strategy of lifelong learning are (p.3):

- *The provision of basic knowledge and skills for all, at the level of basic school education ... so that the school acts as a foundation for lifelong learning.*
- *The modernization of university education ... through developing closer links between education and production and fostering entrepreneurship.*
- *... The provision of a range of opportunities for young people, the encouragement of individualised learning ... and the promotion of high quality and flexibility in the training provided.*

Thus it becomes clear that the ‘life-long learning’ is closely related to notions of individual emancipation, as well as of a general social progress, through the direct linking of the various stages of educational and training systems (local, national or international, formal and non-formal) to the ‘requirements of the labour market’.

The Greek Context

In this context, a new bill for *the National System of Connection of Vocational Education and Training with Employment* was introduced (2003a) by the Greek Minister of Education and the Minister of Labour, to 'meet the new needs that have emerged due to the rapid development of education and training systems as well as the transformations in contemporary working settings' (CEC, 2003b, p. 2). Within the provisions of the Bill, a 'National Council of Connection of Vocational Education and Training with Employment' was established, in which the Ministers and 'social partners' will participate. The Council is a body that can formulate and coordinate national policies, set quantitative and qualitative targets, regulations and principles monitor and evaluate procedures. According to the Guideline 15 ('Adaptability as an element in Lifelong Learning') of the 'National Action Plan for Employment' (MoE, 2003), among the initiatives taken by the 'social partners', is the '*Guidance and encouragement to [their] members ... to disseminate the concept and practice of lifelong learning*' (p. 5). In other words, and in stark contrast to past practices, when the Greek State was the main *designer* and *provider* of (officially accredited) training, now the representative of employers' associations are called on to contribute to setting up a framework of lifelong learning within the workplace context, on the promise that generous EU funding will come to supplement their efforts.

As for tertiary education, a new measure, adopted recently (L. 3369/2005), is the 'Lifelong Learning Institutes' that may be established at every university of the country. These are intended to broaden, enrich and modernize the knowledge of the adult members of the population. They will operate within the existing institutions of university education, while their purpose is to facilitate the process of lifelong learning. Learning will be based on specially designed Lifelong Learning Programmes, which are to be organised in a way to ensure the flexibility of the content, so that the skills acquired will meet the economy needs (MNERA, 2005b, p. 5).

Issues of concern

Quite often, as the key-point of the life-long learning discourse –in conjunction with respective changes in the dominant mode of production-- is perceived the increasing cultivation of the idea of 'personal responsibility' for any future 'investment' that a person may wish to make in order to improve her/his negotiating power in a highly competitive labour market. In the new models of lifelong learning, some critics argue that an overarching emphasis is given to a very simplistic version of the 'human-capital' theory (Selwyn and Gorard, 1999; Rees *et al.*, 2000). The 'human capital' is now the key-word, and it is the tool – the only tool, some might say– that a person can 'trade' in order to survive in a world of uncertainty and high risk (Beck, 1992). Individuals – and not 'citizens' – are being seduced to 'invest' in their future well-being, by accumulating 'credits', 'learning units', 'training certificates', 'diplomas' and many other 'trading tools', which, in turn, will have to present to their prospective employers. 'Flexibility', 'adaptability' and 'openness to the labour market' in teaching/learning are the main driving forces in the quest – for the EU– to becoming '*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*'.

The bulk of the official documents stress the 'employability', 'flexibility' and 'adaptability' of the (rather vaguely defined) 'national workforce' (MoE, 2003; MNERA, 1997, 2001, 2003b, 2005a). Very few references are made to what a former Commissioner for Education & Culture envisaged of the role of Education and Training (V. Reding, 'Preface' in CEDEFOP, 2001): that it is 'not merely necessary to sustain employability of wage-earners and their ability to adapt to labour market requirements', but a mechanism for the promotion of 'active citizenship and strengthening social cohesion'. Thus, it is argued that what is abandoned is the original humanist concept of 'lifelong education' promoted by UNESCO in the 1970s, as propounded by the 'Faure report' (Borg and Mayo, 2005; Schuetze, 2006). As Borg and Mayo (2005) put it, 'the neo-liberal set of guidelines, contained in the *Memorandum* [on lifelong learning] serves to heighten the member countries' and candidate countries' competitiveness in a scenario characterised by the intensification of globalisation' (p. 218).

What is usually brought forward is an invariably social, economic, as well as technological, *determinism*. It is widely proclaimed that promoting life-long learning opportunities, especially through the use of ICTs, is the only means of overcoming existing barriers to participation, particularly barriers of 'time, space and pace' (Edwards, Sieminski and Zeldin, 1993; Essom and Thomson 1999). Furthermore, the 'right to

knowledge', or the 'right to learning' (implying life-long learning opportunities), is presented as an unalienable right, which *should be exercised* by each individual within the limits of a life-span, but with no guarantees of actually this happening, given certain restrictions and obstacles that deal with personal, familial and wider socio-economic specificities. In this discourse, inequalities at local, regional, national and international levels, and related to *psychological, economic, cultural, linguistic and geographic* characteristics, are mostly downplayed (Castells, 1996; Selwyn, 2002).

As some critics stress, the whole discursive basis of lifelong learning rhetoric remains 'ostensibly white, middle-class, Euro-centric (in alphabet and language-use at least), male artefacts', ...[and] many of the technologies that will form the backbone of on-line adult learning (in particular the Internet) are not necessarily likely to be dominant or familiar technology with working class, older, female and some learners from local ethnic minorities' (Selwyn and Gorard, 1999, p. 3; see also Spender, 1997; Holderness 1998; Selwyn, 2002).

Another line of argument points at the limited character of knowledge and skills acquired through some lifelong learning programmes. It is argued that, putting into practice all the gains from participating in these programmes –which supposedly equip the learner with 'soft skills', applicable to a wide range of working settings—is not an easy task, since an employee is usually restricted within the confines of a specific job description, and his/her skills cannot easily transferred outside the firm's boundaries, nor are they formally recognised. On the contrary, as research evidence on informal learning in various developed countries showed, 'the levels of informal practical knowledge attained in the workplace and in everyday life by even the least formally educated people have been both very extensive and generally unrecognized or discounted in public debate and job hiring policies.' (Livingstone, 1999, p. 171).

Finally, an increasingly reach bibliography has emerged in the lifelong-learning agenda, which places much emphasis on the 'Assessment –and recognition— of Prior Learning' or PLA (CEC, 2003a,b). Although it seems that this is an issue of immense importance for mature adults, with extensive working experience in education or elsewhere, since, to them, PLA appears to be an interesting tool to help education and training move forward (see Collardyn, 2001, especially in Conclusions), rarely has it been taken into account when public policies on *adult education* were drawn. This is, of course, an issue still unresolved, not only in Greece, but at a global scale, and involves fundamental questions: a) 'does PLA have a formative role and give feedback to learning processes, or does it bring evidence (certification of the learning assessed), therefore taking on a more summative role?'; b) 'should the standards common to formal and non-formal learning be education and training standards (as 'key qualifications' would) or should these common standards be employment standards (as some 'job descriptions' are)?' c) 'what is the role of higher education institutes in the promotion of lifelong learning?'; and d) 'is such a choice (i.e. between education-based and employment-based standards) a neutral or technical question, or relates to the political aims assigned to lifelong learning' (see Collardyn, 2001, chap. 2).

Methodology

The need for qualitative approaches to the critical evaluation of 'adult education' & 'e-learning programmes'

From an inspection of the international literature, it emerged that few studies –and even fewer qualitative ones—have been done concerning the perspectives of individual learners in the new educational environments. Especially in Greece, there is a total absence of studies that deal with the learners' voices amidst all the earnest discussions of education and technology (for a relatively recent review see Kyrides *et al.*, 2003). Yet, as the ultimate 'end users' of technology in education, hearing students' voices was perceived by the authors as crucial in developing a realistic understanding of new technologies in educational and training settings.

We decided to follow an 'action research' approach in our case-study, and use as the main analytical tool for the emerging data the 'discourse analysis' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2001, chaps. 1 & 13). We adopted this approach in interpreting the mature students' comments and ideas because we consider ourselves as action-researchers, as 'players' in the learning process, who *affect* and *are affected* by the whole process; as active participants who do research, but at the same time *learn by doing it, test their hypotheses*

and even *develop new ones* in the process. In other words, we consider ourselves as ‘subjects’ of our research; research through which prior knowledge, perceptions and attitudes –as well as stereotypes and prejudices– are intertwined, not only in the *choice* of the research topic(s), but also during the *collection of data* and their subsequent *analysis*. Thus, we do not hesitate to admit that we are practitioners of ‘grounded theory’, in the sense that we acknowledge the importance of allowing theoretical ideas to emerge out of our data (Bryman, 1995).

The settings

From the academic year 2004-05, the Department of the ‘Sciences of Pre-School Education and Educational Design’ of the University of the Aegean (Rhodes Campus) offered the postgraduate programme (MSc) titled ‘*Gender, New Forms of Education, New Forms of Employment and New Technologies in the Information Age*’.¹

It is a pioneering programme in the Greek Higher Education environment, in terms of *content*, because it combines the study of gender in relation to three other thematic areas namely: a) the educational environment, b) the changing workplace environment, and c) the processes of globalisation and the development of IT in contemporary Greek society. The main learning environment is the e-learning platform WebCT Vista 3.0.²

Its *teaching methodology* is also pioneering because the e-learning methods are combined with ‘conventional’ class meetings (approximately three to four times per semester). Additionally, it promotes an *inter-disciplinary approach* to the study of ‘gender’ in the modern socio-economic and technological world. Each subject is taught by at least three professors from distinct academic backgrounds (sociology, psychology, economics, gender studies, literature, etc.), thus offering cross-scientific examination of ‘gender’ through the lenses of various scientific domains and areas of study.

The authors have been –interruptedly– involved in the *implementation* (i.e. preparation of learning material, time-pacing of the lectures), *feedback* and *assessment* of learning throughout the initial stages of the MSc course. Their involvement, though, varied in *quantity* (number of lectures and e-material provided) and *quality* (different roles assumed in the process, from *course- or module-designers* to *senior module-instructors* and/or ‘simple’ *module-lecturers*)³.

Sample

One of the most important elements of the examined MSc is the promotion of continuous feedback between teachers and students, a feedback that is crucial, not only for student support –an indispensable element of e-learning, which is markedly different from the traditional classroom delivery methods (Hubbard, 1998; Harasim, 2000; Govindasamy, 2001; Hamid, 2001)—, but also for a more elaborate analysis of the topics discussed (i.e. ‘life-long learning’ etc.), since the majority of students are mature workers (median age= 37 years), with extensive labour-market experience and an undisputedly high interest in the development of new forms of education and/or training. As previous research has shown, ‘students often associate an interactive learning environment with an effective learning environment’, and ‘many instructors find creating interactivity in an online course one of the greatest challenges in Internet-based education’ (McGorry, 2003, p. 163).

The students’ areas of specialisation were differentiated (from primary- and secondary-school teachers to marketing assistants and computer programmers), and so was their working experience.

The main communication means in the MSc is the use of e-mail and of (‘asynchronous’) ‘threaded discussion boards’ (or *discussion fora*). Especially the threaded discussion boards are more important because they ‘can be very effective for providing structured, whole-class interaction.... [which] permits

¹The typical duration for the specific (fee-paying) MSc programme is 3 academic semesters. Students of the programme may continue for a PhD programme, spanning between 3 calendar years (minimum) and 6 calendar years (maximum). Also students holding M.A. or MSc degrees from other relevant areas of study may enrol in the Ph.D. programme.

² For more details, visit the platforms web-site (portal) at vista.lib.aegean.gr/webct/entryPageIns.dowebct.

³ For more details on the structure of the MSc, visit the Programme’s web-site at www.rhodes.aegean.gr/genderstudies/postgrad/.

grouping of discussions according to topic, and the indentation feature shows who is responding to whom and in what sequence' (Lieblein, 2000, p. 166).⁴

The assessment of the 'threaded discussions' varies, but usually only the participation counts and provides the highest mark. The marks gained in the 'discussions' constitute (weighted) part of the final mark for the respective module.

The three Discussion *Fora* that have been here analysed were part of the assessment of the learning module 'New Forms of Education and Training', offered during the winter semester of the academic year 2006-07. The topics of the Discussions were the following:

1. 'Life-long learning policies in Greece'.
2. 'New "literacies" emerging in the workplace'.
3. 'Possible Dangers from the adoption of the new forms of education and training on *social justice, gender, racial and class inequalities*'.

Each Discussion was 'visible' only for a limited period of time (usually 2 to 3 weeks) for reasons of smoother time-pacing of the module's lectures.

There have been 95 texts-contributions (31 in the first one, and 32 in each one of the remaining two). Each student was allowed to have more than one contribution posted on the message-board, although rarely students took that option. In the (unlike) event that a student had posted more than one message, his/her contributions –through a careful examination of the respective texts– were treated as a unitary whole.

Basic units of analysis

The basic unit of our analysis is each text posted (as an attachment or a written message in the respective frame of the platform), although –as stated earlier– the vast majority of students participated with only one text and, as a result, when we mention 'contribution' this should be identified with each 'student-participant'.

Each student was required to post *at least one message* for each topic discussed, so we have at least 3 contributions per student. Each Discussion was labelled as DF_x, where x = 1-3, and each student/participant was assigned a number, from 1 to 32.⁵

Main categories of analysis

We decided to focus on certain key terms of the discursive framework that has been developed in the last decade at international level, as far as education and training are concerned. Thus, we analyse the students' comments, views, ideas, critical observations and proposals on the following notions: a) 'knowledge society'; b) 'life-long learning' or 'adult education'; c) 'distance learning'; and d) 'e-learning'.

The rationale behind this choice lies in the following assumptions: a) the promotion of the mentality of 'lifelong learning' (see also *adult learning, adult education, continuous learning, continuous education, in-service training* etc.) is inextricably linked to notions of contemporary societies as 'knowledge societies'; b) the majority of programmes addressed to adult learners –offered either inside their working environment, or during their 'free time'– deal with the effective use of ICTs, especially in Master's Degree courses (quite often they are implemented through 'distance-learning' methods, an increasingly number of which is based on new models of 'e-learning').

The table I below is a 3X4 representation of the main analytical focus of this paper.

TABLE I

⁴ As the main 'synchronous' way of communication, the MSc use chat-room sessions, while serious measures have been taken towards the creation of the infrastructure for live video-conference sessions (something that the *WEB-CT Vista* platform supports).

⁵ For example, the contribution of student number 3 who took part in the first Discussion Forum is labelled as DF1-3. That of student number 30 who took part in the third Discussion Forum is labelled as DF3-30.

DIMENSIONS OF THE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

DISCUSSION FORUM TITLES	CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS			
	<i>Knowledge Society</i>	<i>Life-long Learning</i>	<i>Distance learning</i>	<i>E-learning</i>
<i>Life-long Learning Policies in Greece</i>				
<i>New 'Literacies' in the Workplace</i>				
<i>Dangers of the New Education & Training Policies</i>				

Results

General Remarks

First of all, it should be said that the students who participated in these Discussions were very hesitant of producing their own analysis of the political context within which lifelong learning policies are being designed and implemented today, and 'got stuck' to what the respective lecturer was saying on a specific issue. In their messages, they often reproduced the original text of the corresponding lecture, and only marginally did they challenge commonly accepted (i.e. officially endorsed) arguments. Secondly, they invariably referred to the (*supra-national* or *inter-governmental*) European institutions as though the latter were functioning as a 'unitary', homogenous entity, whose decisions are not to be questioned or commented upon. They, for example, frequently were using phrases such as 'Europe decided that...' or 'Europe wishes to...', or 'the European Union accepts...' or '...endorses...', as if their own government and other political players had not been part of whole the decision-making process (for good and bad).

Europe demands a lot more that combating unemployment: the safeguarding of social cohesion... [DF1-07]

The European Union decided, during the Lisbon Council, to meet the increasing challenges of a globalised world... [DF1-11]

The European Commission has set certain key-messages that promote the Life-long Learning mentality ... [DF1-10]

The 'European' directives, decisions, targets etc., were almost unanimously seen as something *static* and *given*, and something to which everyone should be subdued. In that sense, it seemed that anything that the Greek government had done or was about to do was judged according to what 'Europe' wished, and usually the reference carried a negative connotation.

Is it feasible today to say that what the European Union wishes to achieve has not been materialized in the Greek context?... [DF1-02]

Greece is forced to keep pace with current international developments ...but, due to institutional, structural and financial weaknesses, its performance is very poor.... [DF1-11]

The students' comments sketch a stereotypical image of Greece as the 'bad child' of the European Union and as the lowest achiever among the rest of member-countries. This rather 'fatalist' stance rarely provides an alternative policy proposal and assigns to Greece the role of the 'late-comer', who always struggles to 'catch-up' with the 'developed others':

Greece simply cannot ignore the multiple-opportunities policies that already exist in other countries of the E.U. ... [DF1-24]

Greece lags far behind the European standards.... [DF1-27].

Knowledge Society

Students were quite inexplicit –as it is true in most official texts, at national and international level– in trying to bring forward a definition of what a 'knowledge society' and/or 'learning society' is, or should be. However, contrary to the official rhetoric, they were very hesitant in using the aforementioned terms, even when the topic at hand was highly related to them.

For example, only nine students –out of a total of 31– used the term 'knowledge society' in the Discussion that was devoted to the life-long learning policies adopted, so far, in Greece. The average frequency of use of this term in each text (i.e. individual contribution to the discussion) was 1.7 times, something that seems to suggest that students do not closely link life-long learning to the needs of an emerging 'knowledge society' (see table II below).

TABLE II

DISCUSSION FORUM ON LIFE-LONG LEARNING POLICIES IN GREECE.
Frequency of mentioning, at least once, the respective term in their text
(31 participants).

	<i>... Knowledge Society</i>	<i>... Life-long Learning</i>	<i>... Adult Education</i>
<i>Number of references to ...</i>	9	30	12
<i>Mean number of references per text for...</i>	1.7	4.2	1.2

The same is true for the other two Discussions. In the one commenting on the (possible) dangers of the new forms of education and training, just three out of 32 participants referred to the so-called 'knowledge society' (average frequency per text: 2). As for the discussion forum concerning the emerging 'literacies' in the new working environments, just one student used the term 'knowledge society', despite the fact that it was the most relevant term to the main topic of the discussion (see tables III and IV below).

TABLE III

DISCUSSION FORUM ON NEW 'LITERACIES'.
Frequency of mentioning, at least once, the respective term in their text
(32 participants).

	<i>... Knowledge Society</i>	<i>... Life-long Learning</i>	<i>... Adult Education</i>
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<i>Number of references to ...</i>	1	8	5
<i>Mean number of references per text for...</i>	1	1	1

TABLE IV

**DISCUSSION FORUM ON POSSIBLE DANGERS OF NEW POLICIES.
Frequency of mentioning, at least once, the respective term in their text
(32 participants).**

	<i>... Knowledge Society</i>	<i>... Life-long Learning</i>	<i>... Adult Education</i>
<i>Number of references to ...</i>	3	21	10
<i>Mean number of references per text for...</i>	2	2.1	1

Quite revealing of their perceptions of the constituting elements of a 'knowledge society' is their comments on the way knowledge is constructed in contemporary societies and how it is linked to the 'demands' of the labour market and to the needs of each individual, in the new working environments. Although they did not use the term 'knowledge society', some of them linked new developments in lifelong learning to the 'globalisation' process in contemporary capitalist societies. Against this background, most of the students put an emphasis on the growing importance of telecommunications technology within the 'Learning Society' discourse.

Within these environments, it is argued, more efforts towards upgrading the skills of the incumbents on the labour market are required. 'Knowledge' is inextricably linked to 'economic' necessities.

Important social and economic benefits can be derived from measures promoting mobility and employment sustainability through investment in vocational education and training and additional 'soft skills' support. Broadly speaking, this type of policy intervention contributes to the process of economic adjustment. [DF1-09]

Quite often, 'adaptation(s)' to new developments in the labour-market are portrayed as a type of 'moral obligation'. As one student put it:

Workers should be autonomous, flexible, ... and always on alert.... Apart from merely technical skills, they are required to develop a wide variety of skills organisational skills, decision-making skills, time-management skills ... to show collective spirit etc... [DF2-19]

In other words, according to almost all participants in the discussions, workers should be able to adopt new 'literacies'⁶, not only of a 'functional' type, but also of a 'critical' one.

⁶ The OECD defined literacy as 'the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work, and in the community –to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential' (OECD, 2000, p. x). However, for a comprehensive presentation of the 'new literacies', see, among others, Lankshear *et al.* 1997 and Cope & Kalantzis 2000.

Functional literacy refers to certain key skills for individuals to meet the demands of contemporary labour-markets where education equips each person with the necessary tools towards the desired social goals ... and towards the development of 'critical' literacy. [DF2-02]

Of course no extensive analysis has been provided on what 'critical literacy' is, or what kind of 'critical literacy' is being promoted at European-wide or nation-wide levels. Given the character of this kind of discussion (i.e. limited in time and size requirements, topic discussed etc.), one would not normally expect an extensive analysis on the specific issue. When, however, such an analysis was provided, mainly within the context of the third discussion –which, by definition, required the presentation of more 'critical' views than the first two– the views presented were actually citations from the international bibliography given in the respective e-lecture. For example, a student wrote:

Today there are major impediments in the participation of various groups of citizens [in the learning process]... related to gender, ethnic and class inequalities... Participation in on-line learning requires economic and cultural capital, linguistic skills and technological infrastructures that are scarce in certain people... (Castells, 1996; Rees et al, 1997; Selwyn, 2002) [DF3-02]

Life-long Learning or Adult Education

A similar picture emerged when references were made to 'life-long learning' and/or 'adult education' in the forum texts. The most 'critical' contributions were provided by the students in the third threaded discussion, though the views developed there were quite often a duplication of the learning content in the respective lecture(s).

Often it is argued that life-long learning [in the form of in-service training] means nothing else but restricting the learning process within the requirements and short-term needs of a specific business firm, needs that unavoidably are of a rather narrow nature and use, may not be accredited easily, and cannot be easily transferred outside the particular firm. [DF3-23]

Very interestingly, though, some of them, based on their personal working experience, stressed issues of adult learning that had not extensively been dealt with in the respective lectures, since they highlight the peculiarities of the Greek labour market. They rightly observe that in Greece in-service training is a rare phenomenon in the private sector, and is only done by very large companies –usually branches or affiliates of multinational corporations.

In-service training is the 'privilege' of employees in big companies, while those who are unemployed or work for smaller ones have very limited chances –if any– to participate in skill upgrading during their working life course. [DF3-18]

To some of them, the role of Higher Education has been redefined so as Universities and Higher Technological Institutes are considered today –in sharp contrast to the past– as promoters of short-term training.

Universities [are required to] train, not scientists and specialist in a specific knowledge domain, but 'knowledge-workers'... [DF3-11]

Some even conclude –in conjunction with relevant arguments put forward in the supplementary bibliography of the module– that the new lifelong learning policies denote a radical change of the role of the State in contemporary (western) societies.

The promotion of measures that help the 'employability' and 'flexibility' of the workforce underlines a more general attempt to transfer responsibility for the cost of education and training from the State to individuals or companies. [DF3-32]

There is also a unanimously expressed concern over the capacity of the Greek State (i.e. administrative structures, financing, organizational ethos, political interests etc.) to provide a coherent framework of ‘adult education’ and ‘lifelong learning’ opportunities. Some of the students pointed at the new legislative and financial framework, through which lifelong learning strategies could (supposedly) be more effectively implemented, commenting that there are wide discrepancies on the general rhetoric adopted by the Greek government and the actual legal provisions, at least in terminology:

In the article 1 of the new Law [L. 3369/2005] ‘lifelong learning’ was substituted by ‘lifelong education’, something that is completely different... Lifelong-learning opportunities are based on prior formal educational qualifications, and not on prior working experience or general learning and social needs (articles 2 and 7)... [that way] reproducing traditional stereotypes of education and learning. [DF1-01]

It becomes clear [from a close reading of the new Law] that, even if there is higher demand for a certain area of study, there is no safeguard that all the interested persons will take part in the programme, since it is stated that when the demand exceeds the supply of places offered, a selection process takes place, something that automatically leaves out a considerable number of potential adult learners, no matter how much motivated those might be. [DF1-03]

Another issue raised by the students was the problem of financing the new ‘Lifelong Learning Institutes’ that have been created recently (see above), as well of the whole educational and training system:

If there is not generous State funding, these Institutes will not operate effectively... Most of these programmes are going to be partly financed by European funds. What will happen when, in the near future, the flow of funds will diminish or altogether ends? [DF1-04]

Some others raised the issue of the quality of studies *when* and *if* private investment pours into these public institutions (i.e. ‘Lifelong Learning Institutes’ and other secondary or post-secondary learning institutions). This issue is important, not as an ideologically driven scorn against the involvement of private sector in education, but rather as a deep concern of the way that, so far, various private establishments have operated in the field of educational services.

Another major problem is the potential financing of those Centres [sic]... Who can safeguard the quality of the diplomas they provide? [DF1-09]

Finally, others raised the issue of individual emancipation, by pointing that most of the proposed measures for the planning and promotion of lifelong learning do not seem to take into account the learners’ own desires and needs, on the contrary, they are designed mostly by people who have never been ‘adult learners’ themselves:

We should not leave outside those who are supposed to benefit from lifelong learning programmes... We cannot simply talk about lifelong learning when most of the ‘promoters’ of those programmes have never in their lifetime gone through any kind of lifelong learning process. [DF1-04]

Distance Learning and E-Learning

References to the potentials that recent developments in ‘distance learning’ and ‘e-learning’ have opened up for future ‘adult learners’ were very rare. When, however, they referred to these concepts, their comments were often critical of the real potentials of distance-learning programmes –even of those who use the ICTs—to challenge existing social inequalities and to overcome a number of geographical, economic, linguistic and cultural barriers. To this critical stance, we think that contributed the learning material available to students during the particular semester.

The high cost of connection and of hardware & software necessary for this connection, not to mention the possession of basic skills in ICTs (level of education completed, working knowledge of English etc.) make access [to distance-learning programmes with the use of ICTs] almost prohibitive for people from the lower socio-economic strata, or from nations with low level of economic and technological development. [DF3-18]

Research evidence, even in countries with a longer history of ICT use and no direct or indirect financial help from the European Structural Funds (eg. The UK), often suggests that work ICT-based training has not increased,... while some socio-economic inequalities in adult participation in education and training have worsened. [DF3-05]

For some of the students, the criticism developed in the international bibliography (see Selwyn, 1999; Rees *et al.*, 2000; Selwyn, 2002) about the motivational factors of participation in distance learning, is also a very important in the on-going debate about the new institutional framework that is being progressively introduced in Greece. In other words, it is argued that, as barriers of any kind are, by definition, more effective against the less motivated, it is not clear how merely making changes on the 'supply' side will tackle this significant barrier.

If the problem is based upon people not wanting to participate then it is difficult to envisage how these 'supply-led' schemes are going to be successful in terms of widening participation. [DF3-08]

Discussion

In this paper, we tried to highlight some important issues that are disregarded or downplayed in the official agenda surrounding adult education today: the individual (mature, mainly) students' responses to the policies propagated by the Greek government, in the light of wider educational initiatives taken at European-Union level.

We should take into account that the learning context of the course itself (i.e combination of three elements: *post-graduate study*, *adult student population* and *e-learning methods*) is radically different from what these students –and most of the teachers, we could add– come from and are used to. Thus, we need to admit that it is too early to jump into conclusions for a still 'uncharted' area of formal learning. The main aim was simply to unveil the individual students' perceptions and attitudes towards the given institutional framework of *adult education* and towards the recently developed *new forms of learning* (*e-learning*, *distance-learning* etc.), a topic that has hardly been touched upon by contemporary research in Greece.

The methodology used (i.e. discourse analysis of various 'Discussion Fora' that have been organised during the MSc course) is based on the assumption that there is number of qualitative dimensions of the above attitudes that cannot be recorded and analysed by relying solely on traditionally-used 'quantitative' techniques (e.g. structured questionnaires of paper or electronic type).

Most of the interpretations might be perceived as highly subjective in nature, therefore of low reliability – or 'confirmability', as it is usually referred to in handbooks of qualitative research (see Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2001, chap 5)– and validity, for any conclusive argument to be put forward. Although this is something that has to be acknowledged –and judged--, given the nature of learning process that takes place in the modern educational environments, we acted, not only as 'producers of knowledge' or and 'impartial outsiders', but rather as 'mediators' and 'learners', where the 'learning experience' counts more than a simple 'knowledge-transmission' (see discussion about methodological issues above).

Having the above in mind, an interesting observation should be made here. Although the students of this MSc are mature workers in the labour market, with generally big experience in the new educational and working environments, they have been very hesitant in bringing forward a strong personal element in their messages. Very often the authors had the sense that students were reproducing material from the (on-line lectures) because they (presumably) thought that they would be judged according to how well they knew (or *show* that they knew) what the international bibliography offers on the topics discussed. They often gave us the impression that they were not expressing their views for fear of saying something wrong or for not being

articulate, a fact that contradicts the findings of the literature on e-learning programmes, which suggest that *asynchronous* methods of on-line communication, especially the ‘threaded discussion boards’ are considered as an effective tool for ‘shy’ or ‘introvert’ students because they provide enough time for ‘verbalization and articulation of ideas’ and they ‘focus on message rather than on the messenger’ (Harasim, 2000, p. 50; see also Lieblein, 2000, p. 166). We cannot of course comment on that, since a thorough explanation would require to review a vast array of factors, from differences in personal values, aspirations, attributes and skills to various objective barriers (eg. unforeseen events) and, further on, to issues of dominant institutional (academic) mentality, cultural norms etc. One possible explanation of that behaviour –which again is not unrelated to the aforementioned factors– might be the perceived ‘importance’ that the specific students attached to those on-line Discussions, as something to ‘assess’, despite the fact that the instructions that had been given to students were clearly stating that ‘what matters is participation to the dialogue and the expression of opinion’ and not an bibliographical review (extensive or not).

Furthermore, it seems that their contributions ‘shifted’ attention from ‘policy review’ to ‘critical evaluation’, depending on the topic discussed. In other words, in the first two Discussions –regarding the lifelong policies in Greece and the new ‘literacies’ in the workplace– the expression of personal opinion was rather fable and indecisive, while in the third Discussion –about possible dangers arising from the implementation of new forms of education and training– the views expressed were much more clear and critical. Thus, it seems that students considered ‘being critical’ as ‘being correct’, in the sense that they *had* to present their opinion –no matter how *positive* or *negative* that was– when *they were requested to do so*. Thus, the ‘active learner’ participation which is essential in adult education settings, especially through methods of distance and/or electronic learning, is in our case missing, as indeed has been the case with various on-line learning environments during their initial operational stages (Harasim, 2000). Cognitive growth and development of problem-solving skills depend on epistemic conflict, that is, the collision of adverse opinion (Johnson & Johnson, 1996; as cited in Harasim, 2000, p. 53), something which is not evidenced in our case-study and should be evaluated and accounted for in any future reform of the examined post-graduate programme. It is clear that, apart from any individual *disposition, skill-level, aspiration* and *attitude* towards lifelong learning, and especially e-learning for adults, the designers of adult-education academic programmes should take into account the aforementioned problem and create more challenging and collaborative *online discourse environments*. As international bibliography suggests, feedback and explicit user expectations may considerably alleviate student concerns as they ‘gain skills and confidence in navigating the online classroom’ (Harasim, 2000, p. 58; see also Hillesheim, 1998; Hubbard, 1998; Govindasamy, 2001; Hamid, 2001; McGorry, 2003)

Another issue of concern is that students –during the examined discussions– rarely made references to other key aspects of the new educational and working environments, such as the rhetoric behind the ‘knowledge society’, the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of adult education, the increasing importance of distance learning in the new (formal and non-formal) educational settings, and the role of e-learning methods in the promotion of lifelong learning. Moreover, they did not stress the importance of general trends in the world economy, of emerging models of business restructuring, of new working practices and the subsequent legislation on working arrangements (e.g. on time management); nor did they comment on wider socio-political developments at the dawn of the 21st century (eg., globalisation of economic-management practices, trends of political unification in Europe and elsewhere, inequalities between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ worlds, or within the ‘advanced’ societies of the West, unemployment crisis, gender ‘gap’, linguistic and other cultural disparities, obstacles to sustainable development, redefinitions of the role ‘education’ and ‘training’ etc.), which affect the way that lifelong learning policies have been formulated and propagated (CEC, 2001 & 2003a,b; Collardyn, 2001).

Nevertheless, certain issues concerning the lifelong learning framework that is being progressively introduced in Greece and the development of new forms of education and training emerged out of the students’ contributions to the discussions. Some of these issues reveal, not only possible lines of criticism against the current institutional arrangements and policy initiatives, but also the importance that students ascribe to life-long learning, even their aspirations and fears concerning their future occupational and social status, their earnings, job security, professional development and family life.

Although they admitted that ‘knowledge’ is –and should be-- linked to the ‘needs’ of the labour market and there are certain necessities for ‘adjustment’ of the labour force, they simultaneously pointed at a number of *gender, ethnic* and *class inequalities* that inhibit participation, and stressed the importance of

economic and cultural capital, linguistic skills and technological infrastructures, which are ‘scarce in certain people’.

They also expressed their reservations about the true potentials of the new lifelong-learning context in Greece, where in-service training is a rare phenomenon and, when it is implemented, it serves the ‘short-term’ interests of particular firms.⁷

As we have seen, there have also been some critical comments on the changing role of the State in contemporary (western) societies, and of course in Greece, where the State has been always playing a key role in educational provision, something, however, that is starting to change in the new framework of lifelong learning. As noted earlier, there are widespread fears that there will be a ‘transfer’ of responsibility for the cost of education and training from the State to individuals, something that will inevitably create new forms of inequalities.

It is even stated that Universities are increasingly required to train, not scientists, but ‘knowledge-workers’, who will be ‘flexible’ and ‘employable’. This is something that became evident in the face-to-face meetings between students and academics of the programme that took place during the winter semester 2006-07, since many of them expressed their personal feelings as being treated as ‘customers’ by the University, not only because they pay tuition fees, but also because the *content* and the *teaching arrangements* of the MSc provides them with ‘bits of information’, ‘chunks of knowledge’ and ‘easy-to-use skills’ that –so it is said– do not coincide to what they had in mind about the real nature of a demanding academic environment. On the other hand, there are those who expressed their dissatisfaction with the traditional academic environments and who were pleased to be treated as ‘mature learners’, with flexible learning and assessment arrangements and rich e-material that suits their needs and provides the appropriate ‘pacing’ for working adults with many family and social obligations. Thus, there are no clear-cut and homogenous stances towards the new forms of learning, something that implies different ‘target groups’ (i.e. with different educational and occupational trajectories, family backgrounds, value systems, income levels, mobility chances, social roles etc.) which adult-education programmes, like the examined one, are addressed to. This is not something necessarily bad, especially at this early –‘transitory’ we might say– stage of development.

Another issue of concern –and criticism of the new institutional framework of lifelong learning in Greece– is the Assessment –and recognition– of Prior Learning (PLA). Through our continuous feedback, it emerged that students consider PLA as an alternative access path for further education and training, not only for themselves (all of them are Higher Education graduates), but for a variety of groups who otherwise would encounter difficulties in entering post-compulsory education and training, at secondary or tertiary level. The reflections given by participants in the examined *Fora* were mostly critical of the fact that, although their previous experience had been initially taken into account (i.e. when selection for the programme took place), there is no reliable framework for PLA to be applied *during* the MSc course, something that –they recognised– is a general problem in Greece.

The financing of new or existing lifelong learning institutions was also a major issue raised by the students, especially as it concerns the recently proposed ‘Lifelong Learning Institutes’, which will be part of the Higher Education Sector. Students expressed their concern over the poor financial support that the Greek State provides to public education. The government expenditure (recurrent and capital) in education, as a whole, decreased in the period 1996-2005 by more than 10% in real terms (taking into account the official inflation rates during the respective period). Expenditure per student in Higher Education decreased by more than 25% in the same period –taking into account the aforementioned increases in new departments and student intake⁸. Thus, it is understandable that many students expressed their concern over the economic viability of the newly established system, and forecasted that an increasingly higher proportion of the cost of lifelong learning will fall on the shoulders of individuals, creating that way –given the existing socio-economic inequalities– a ‘multi-tier’ system of learning opportunities. Taking into account that these students have already invested a considerable amount of money and time for the examined MSc⁹,

⁷ One of them even suggested that most of the training programmes in various firms around the country had been organized for the sole purpose of ‘getting the [European] money’ (DF1-02)

⁸ Personal calculations based on historical data provided by the NSSG, on public expenditure in Education and on the inflation-rate evolution during 1996 and 2005. Data were also drawn from various ‘Hellenic Federation of University Teachers’ Associations’ documents.

⁹ The tuition fees for the MSc are 4,500 €.

we would like to acknowledge the imminent dangers highlighted here by the students, no matter how simplistic might sound.

We also tend to be sensitive to their concerns about the lack of involvement of mature learners in the proposed measures for the planning and promotion of lifelong learning, and we think that policy makers should be very attentive to their criticism –evident above– that most of the programmes are designed mostly by people who have never been ‘adult learners’ themselves.¹⁰ This is a line of argument that needs to be taken into account in the future, not only when new lifelong learning programmes are *designed* and *tested*, but also when they are *implemented* and *evaluated*.

Finally, we should stress the critical stance of the students towards the ‘technological determinism’ that accompanies all measures relating to the use of ICTs for the promotion of lifelong learning and the widening of participation in adult education. Although they were not very elaborate in their views, students pinpointed certain key issues in the uncritical acceptance of ICTs as a tool of ‘emancipation’. International bibliography often suggests that work-based and ICT-based training has not increased, and may even have declined over the last decade (Gorard and Selwyn, 1999a-b; Selwyn and Gorard, 1999; Williams, Selwyn and Gorard, 2000; Gorard, Selwyn and Rees, 2000). As participating students argued, approaches that present an invariably optimistic picture of distance learning or e-learning, neglect a key barrier that prevents people from engaging in learning, the dispositional (or motivational) barriers. If the problem is based upon people not wanting to participate then it is difficult to envisage how these supply-led schemes are going to be successful in terms of widening participation. If particular individuals are not well disposed towards the notion of ‘learning’ then removing other more tangible barriers such as cost and so on will have very limited effect (Gorard & Selwyn 1999a-b). As Dyer (1997) demonstrates, the ‘disconnected’ are characterised by their geographical location and low socio-economic status; with inner-city as well as rural areas least likely to have access to even basic telecommunications networks. Thus, in order to gain access to on-line learning, issues of space and locality suddenly take on a great importance. This is something that we –as teachers in the particular MSc– have encountered quite often, when, for example, we have witnessed many drop-outs in the course of the studies, as well as complaints about a number of issues: from purely technical ones (eg. low-speed connection to the internet), to problems of distance and of financial cost (eg. cost of travelling to Rhodes for the face-to-face meetings, temporary absence from work, family issues, health problems) and to more ‘academic’ ones (different learning habits and perceptions of what constitutes ‘valid’ assessment, misunderstanding of rules etc.). Nevertheless, it must be said here that considerable progress has been made since the conception and the preliminary operational stages of the programme. Feedback from the students, extensive reading of the –increasingly rich– bibliography and consultation with the technical and administrative personnel of the programme –supplemented with high personal commitment and time-investment– have all helped us to become more ‘flexible’ and sensitive to problems in the everyday running of the MSc. After all, we believe that this is the very essence of ‘lifelong learning’.

This paper is a case-study, and has not tried to provide a general assessment of the recently introduced framework of lifelong learning in Greece, nor to simply measure (adult) student satisfaction with learning in a digital instructional environment, through a ‘representative’ sample of the student population in distance-learning programmes in Greece, at under-graduate or post-graduate level. Although the initial discussion on the relation between initiatives at Europe-wide and at Greek national level to promote life-long learning opportunities, is considered very important in order to give the ‘whole picture’ on the examined theme, the main focus of the paper is the individual (mature, mainly) students. We have looked at how they judge, on the one hand, their own learning experience and, on the other hand, the wider institutional framework of adult education that is being progressively developed in Greece. By placing weight to the students’ views, and using an interpretive approach to micro-social research, we aimed at, not only raising high-stake issues in contemporary policy-making in adult education, but also highlighting the importance of focusing on the learners’ voices.

The importance that students ascribe to *life-long learning* and their comments, suggestions and ideas is to us of higher significance, than simply assessing learner ‘satisfaction’ in a digital environment, through a very structured and quantitative psychometric tool. We believe that, with the clear emergence of a digital learning environment in higher education and the call for research regarding factors that will impact technology in teaching and learning, as well as the realization that the environment may be appropriate for

¹⁰ As academics who take part in the design and implementation of distance-learning programmes, addressed to mature adults, we must admit that this ‘accusation’ applies to us too, with varying degrees though.

some students but not for others, this paper opened new opportunities for further micro-research, which should be of a comparative nature (at national and international level),. Our findings should be used with caution, and only as a starting point for further studies, which would be able –through more elaborate theoretical and technical analysis– to corroborate them or not.

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