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Active Labor Market policies and Lifelong Learning in Greece

Anna TSIBOUKLI¹, Angelos EFSTRATOGLOU²

Abstract: The main goal of the present paper is to discuss how and under what circumstances, active labor market policies and Adult Education could assist staff to cope with stress and enhance skills and abilities to achieve employment. The high numbers of unemployed in Greece together with the long-term ineffective austerity measures and policies imposed in the country and the reduction of the social welfare state, created many multiple and complex issues that deteriorated after the pandemic. The present paper suggests that specific active labor market policies must be employed together with Lifelong Learning policies and programmes to ensure future developments. Greece, more than any other modern European country, was faced for several years with extreme austerity measures that affected the social, economic, and personal level. The working population and especially young people had to cope with prolonged unemployment, limited options for reentering the job market and the associated stress that follows exposure to adverse experiences. The phenomena of brain drain and brain waste, are well documented in Greek research and literature. Covid-19 pandemic was another stroke in an already unbalance economy. Lifelong Learning programmes, that are meant to assist not only the working but also the general population to increase social and other skills, as a way of ensuring access to the labour market, are addressed to only a small portion of the population and usually to those who need them the least. The current paper presents the challenges that Active labor market and Lifelong policies in Greece must face in the process of coping with prolonged unemployment, brain drain and brain waste.

Keywords: Active labor market policies, Unemployment, Lifelong learning, Adult education

1. Introduction

The high numbers of unemployed in Greece together with the ineffective austerity measures and policies of the last decade and the reduction of the social welfare state, create many multiple and complex issues that are extremely hard to solve. Economic crisis is directly linked with unemployment rates not only amongst the traditionally vulnerable groups (i.e., low educational qualifications and low skills), but also amongst the highly qualified and skilled workers. The severity of the problems that the unemployed must face, might be obvious in terms of financial instability and poor housing, however, they also include issues relevant to physical and even more to mental health. These issues, already present, became more obvious due to the pandemic and the prolonged periods of lockdown. The present paper suggests that these parameters must be taken into consideration in the development of

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specific active labor market and Lifelong Learning policies, to start coping with the negative effects of prolonged unemployment and enhance possibilities for social inclusion.

2. Unemployment rates in Greece

A main characteristic of the Greek Economy, when compared to other European Countries, was -and remains- the high unemployment rate. Even at times of economic prosperity and employment growth, unemployment in Greece was always present in a greater percentage than in the rest of the EU countries. In 2008, unemployment rate was as high as 7,3%. This, however, was the lowest rate that the country had experienced for three decades. During the period of economic crisis unemployment rate raised rapidly, reaching its highest peak (27,5%) in the year 2013. Given the prolonged time of economic crisis in Greece, unemployment rate, although in decline, remains extremely high (15,8% in 2021)¹ (Figure 1).

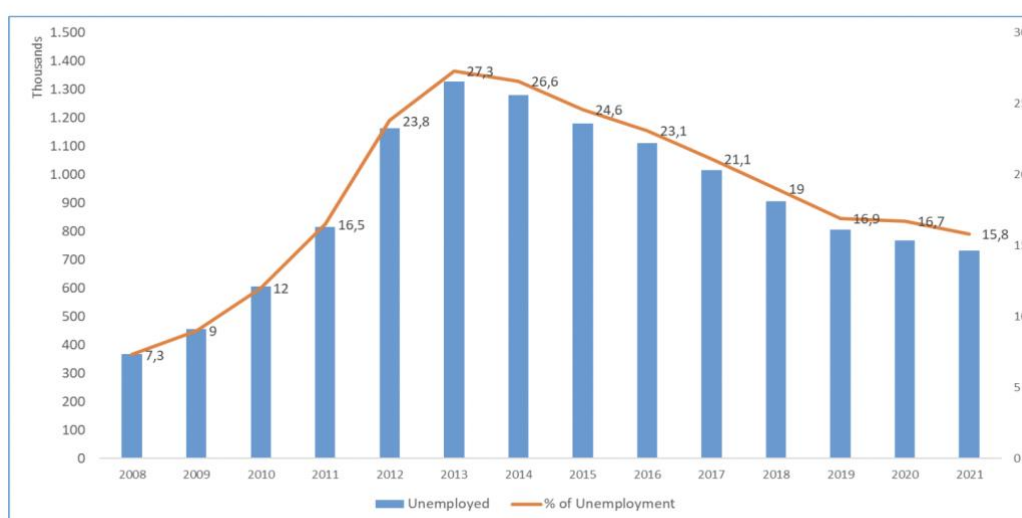


Figure 1. Number of Unemployed and Unemployment rate in Greece 2008-2021

Traditionally, in Greek society, unemployment hits women. Women’s unemployment rates are significantly higher (19,9%) than those of men (12,8%) in 2021, even though women’s labor force is in total, significantly lower. However, in year 2013, men’s unemployment (in numbers) was higher, since manufacturing, construction, and many small enterprises, employing mainly male workers, were forced to apply large dismissals. Recent data suggests that up to date middle aged men and women consist of most of the unemployed population in Greece (Table 1), whilst at the same time youth unemployment rates (those between 15-24 years old) are also close to 50,0%.

Registered unemployment² comes to 1.124.932 persons in January 2021, from which 63,2% are women and the rest 36,8% are men. Among them 17,9% are in the age of 15-29 years old,

¹ INE / GSEE, (2021) considers that the number of unemployed and unemployment rates in 2020 and 2021 are higher than the ones presented here, since several unemployed have not considered as unemployed and counted as those out of the labour force.

² There are two sources from which unemployment data are gathered. The first is Labour Force Survey, which is a European sample survey contacted four times per year from the Greek National Statistical Authority.

35,8% in the age of 30-44 and another 46,2% in ages above 45 years old. At the same time 51,9% of registered unemployed are long term unemployed (remain in unemployment more than a year), with women to be the majority (57,9%) among them. Only 19,3% of total unemployed receive for a very short period (which counts from 4 to 12 months, depending on years that a person was in employment) an unemployment benefit. Since 2012 unemployment benefit comes down to 360,0 euros per month, increased only by 10,0% for every member of the family.

Table 1. Number of Unemployed and registered Unemployed 2021

	Total	Men	Women
Number of Unemployed (LFS)	732.544	320.254	412.300
Unemployment Percent (LFS)	15,8%	12,4%	19,9%
Registered Unemployed (OACD)	1.124.932	413.658	711.274
High Qualified (University degree)	174.537	-	-
Medium Qualified (lyceum degree)	529.218	-	-
Low Qualified (compulsory education)	421.127	-	-
Long term registered Unemployed (OAED)	572.900	171.680	331.751
Unemployed who receive benefit (OAED)	212.800	91.383	121.417

Source, Labour Force Survey (LFS), OAED

Unemployment rates remain high amongst those with university degrees (around 15,5%) even though these figures are much lower when compared to unemployment rates of those with a high school education certificate (around 47,0% in 2021) or those of even lower education levels (37,6%).

Unemployment is not the only negative effect of economic and social crisis in Greece. Other effects are equally severe. In the period 2008-2020 GDP dropped by 19,0%. The percentage of the population living around or even below the poverty line increased also to 25%. The negative effects on the population health and education levels are obvious. In fact, one out of three children in Greece, lives under the poverty line (Unicef, 2014) and some 3,795,100 people live on less than 60% of the national median income (IOBE,2015). It is worth noting

Unemployment data are gathered and published at national and regional level. The second source is OAED (Greek Public Employment Organization) which gathers unemployment data because of its own activity at local, regional and national level (registered unemployment data).

that not only the number of those living under poverty line has increased, but also the poverty line itself decreased to a great extent due to the GDP decrease.

Several studies (Markovits, et.al, 2013) suggest that economic crisis forced many well-educated young people to seek employment in North Europe and left those who remained with a constant fear of job loss, followed by income reduction. On the other hand, large numbers of well-educated young people are forced to work in jobs that require lower qualifications and skills from what they have to offer. Current studies suggest that Greece exhibits the highest percentages on horizontal and vertical skills mismatch, when compared to other European countries (Cedefop, 2014). This is one of the causes that keep productivity at low levels.

In this turbulent environment, certain especially groups suffer more than others, in a country where unemployment rates were rather high when compared to the European level, even before the socioeconomic crisis and the pandemic.

The number of homeless has also increased rapidly (FEANTSA, 2008) from 7.720 to 20.000 people with half of this population residing in the capital of the country (Stamatis, 2012). Migration also doubled. In modern Greece, one in five lives today in a family where no one is working. These phenomena are unique in a country that was always at the periphery of Europe.

The large figures of unemployment rates open a discussion in relation to active labor market and Lifelong Learning policies that the relevant agencies need to adopt. Employment policies and reforms should have been applied years ago at various levels. However, the extreme and rapidly imposed austerity measures together with employers' demands for staff shortage in both, the public and private sector, increased unemployment rates even further and created an unstable social and economic environment.

3. Active Labor Market Policies

Active labor market policies (ALMP) and Lifelong Learning in Greece are not yet fully adopted. Active Labour Market Policies include learning procedures, training, consulting, and matching policies as well as the development of new jobs under public subsidies. However, development of new jobs largely depends on increasing industries and economic activities that are not yet fully achieved. Job development can make use, to a certain extent, of the human resources currently available and focus mainly on the pool of the unemployed work force. This is not an easy task. Nevertheless, various measures could be employed such as higher subsidies in certain job categories according to occupation or certain qualification level.

Post-crisis Greece has been turned into a job arena where achieving proper employment seems at times an almost impossible task. Crisis pushed the country to establish the functioning of a rather chaotic labor market with an increased 'black economy' where few proper jobs are readily available, skills offered by future employees are usually higher than what the jobs demands, leading to the phenomenon of brain waste within the country. Brain waste is already a reality and youth unemployment remain for the last seven years at very high rates (Efstratoglou, 2018). Moreover, in the last two years, Greece is under a process of restructuring the ALMPs framework and that might be one of the causes of even lower participation in training programmes, when hardly any incentives are so far present.

There is a continuing need to retrain unemployed workers and those with long unemployment periods. However, even though the need for re-training unemployed workers is too high, those who end up participating in lifelong training programmes remain relatively low in numbers. There are different reasons for this. Traditionally, participation in Lifelong Learning programmes was very low in the country. When the average participation in Lifelong Learning programmes in Europe, for those between 25-64 years old, is 11.5%, in Greece is between 3-3,9 (UNESCO, 2017; Eurostat, 2021) (Figure 2). UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning (2017) suggests that with such low participation rates the achievement of the 15% participation is unlikely.

	Total population (25–64 years)		55–64 years		Unemployed (25–64 years)		Low-qualified (25–64 years)	
	2012	2015	2012	2015	2012	2015	2012	2015
EU	9.2	10.7	4.5	6.0	9.4	9.5	3.9	4.3
Belgium	6.9	6.9	3.6	4.0	10.2	9.0	2.9	3.0
Bulgaria	1.7	2.0	:"	:"	1.5 ^u	:"	0.5 ^u	:"
Czech Republic	11.1	8.5	4.8	3.7	6.5	3.8	2.4	1.9
Denmark	31.6	31.3	23.9	23.6	32.7	28.9	22.4	21.7
Germany	7.9	8.1	2.9	3.1	5.6	6.2	3.2	3.4
Estonia	12.8	12.4	5.6	4.5	11.7	9.9	3.9	4.5
Ireland	7.4	6.5	3.2	2.7	7.4	7.4	3.2	2.4
Greece	3.3	3.3	0.7	0.5	3.3	2.7	0.4	0.4
Spain	11.2	9.9	5.2	4.0	13.2	11.2	4.7	3.6

Figure 2. Adults' participation in Learning

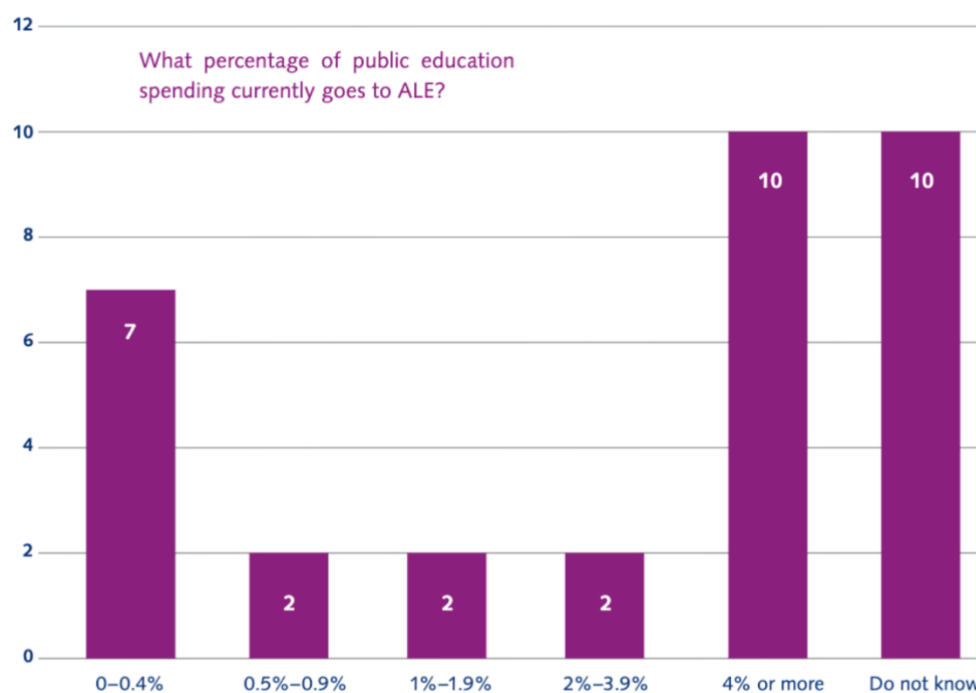
UNESCO's predictions for Greece, are unfortunately true as four years later, the percentage of participants in non-formal programmes in Greece, aged between 25-64, dropped in 1.4%. Needless to say, that this is a very disappointing development, especially taking into consideration the post-crisis and post-pandemic effects.

Table 2. Percentage of participants aged 25-64 in non-formal education in Greece

COUNTRY	Percentage %
Sweden	27,9%
Finland	21,1%
Denmark	20,2%
Greece	1,4%
Croatia	1,3%
Romania	0,6%
Bulgaria	0,5%

Inclusion policies are very significant, in an environment of high instability where more obstacles are created. Active Labor Market Policies must be employed together with, well designed Lifelong Learning programmes, group and individual consultation and the development of grounded expectations and incentives for the unemployed. Incentives, i.e., the value of a particular object or outcome, a training achievement that is related to employment outcomes and specific expectation in relation to the given contextual factors, are necessary for achieving positive outcomes, in a country where the labor market recovery might take several more years before it occurs.

It is now widely recognized that Lifelong Learning programmes do not reach those who need them more (UNESCO, 2022). There is also a big gap between the different countries in relation to the amount and the sources of funding. Some give up to 4% of their annual budget for education to Lifelong Learning and especially to Adult Education and others less than 0.4% (UNESCO, 2022;2017). (Figure 3).



Source: GRALE III monitoring survey, Question 4.1.

Figure 3. Percentage of public education spending to ALE

Participation in Adult Education is higher amongst those who have higher qualification levels, according to the International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] levels 5, and 6). Therefore, the less educated you are the more likely it is to remain out of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning programmes. Accordingly, the unemployed seem to remain out of Lifelong Learning programmes, apart from Sweden, where also those with low qualification levels (ISCED 0–2) are more likely to participate (UNESCO, 2017). This is not the case for several European countries -and certainly not the case for Greece, where participation in Lifelong Learning programmes depends on the level of the qualification already acquired. Consequently, the highest percentage of participants in non-formal education are mainly those with an already higher qualification. This might be the case in other European countries as well but nonetheless, the gaps are obvious as they are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Percentage of people aged 25-64 in non-formal training in relation to their educational level in 2019

Educational Level	GREECE	EU 28
Middle School	0,3%	3,5%
High School	1,0%	6.5%
Tertiary education	2,8%	15,2%

Furthermore, the pandemic of COVID-19, brought forward another challenge, that of digital inclusion, where Greece also lucks behind (Figure 4) (Tsiboukli, 2020; Eustratoglou & Paidousi, 2020), even though there been several efforts to bridge the gap (Kokkosis, 2020).

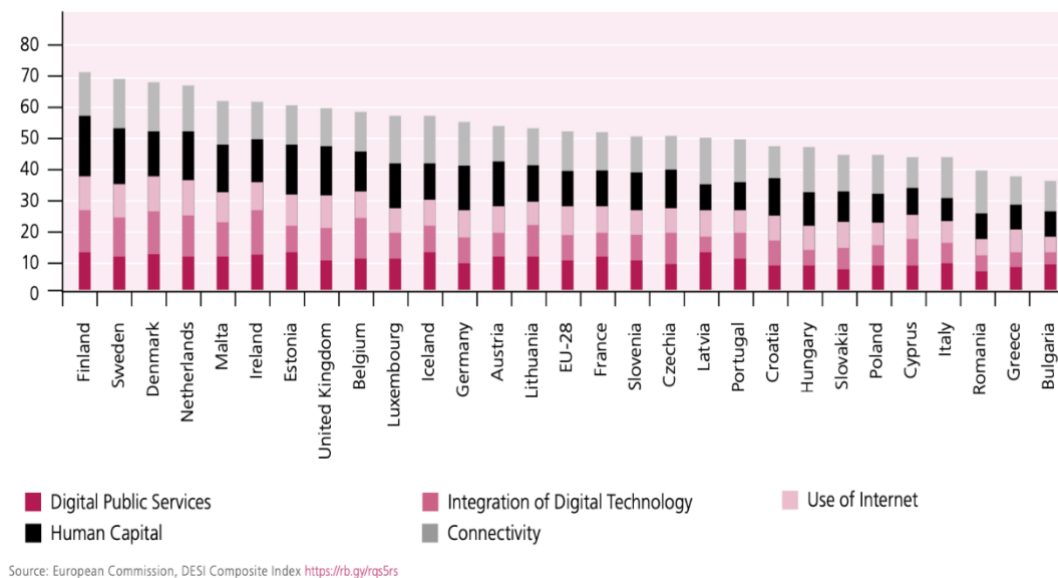


Figure 4. *DESI and its Individual Dimensions*

Active labor market policies need to employ lifelong training and consultation to assist in changing organizational functioning and prospects. However, these cannot be achieved in a vacuum. The workforce is left with low expectations and an even lower morale. Already acquired high skills and knowledge, are undermined in a post-crisis and post-pandemic era but unstable situation. In the effort to develop active labor market policies, it is significant to note that fighting unemployment, it requires on one hand, rethinking and reconsidering past choices and beliefs that might be no longer helpful (Efstratoglou, 2012) and on the other, understand the deep roots of structural inequalities.

In many cases active labor market policies are related with several life changes amongst the unemployed, i.e., orientation changes, type of occupation, place of living and ways of living. Considering that around 65% to 70,0% of the unemployed in Greece are between 45 to 65 years old, the intensity and variety of problems and structural inequalities are easily understood. Lifelong Learning programmes are significant for enhancing active labor market policies and for a change of culture within the labor market. Job descriptions, accountability and responsibility, organizational matrixes and evaluation for job development and work improvement, might assist in attitude change and respond to brain drain and especially brain waste. However, one of the most significant effects of unemployment at the personal level is stress.

4. Lifelong Learning and hidden assumptions

Unemployment is considered as one of the major sources of stress in life. Increased stress and anxiety are just one of the effects of prolonged unemployment. Prolonged

unemployment is linked with stress (Giorgi, et.al., 2015). Several studies (Mucci, et.al., 2016) suggest that economic crisis is an important stressor with negative mental and physical health consequences in the general population as much as in the workforce. In fact, most studies suggest an increased prevalence of mental and physical health problems that coincided with the outbreak of the financial crisis. However, eight years since that outbreak, health consequences on the Greek population have been largely ignored together with the fact that *'major cuts to health care cost lives'* (McKee & Stuckler, 2016:41). On that basis, Lifelong Learning programmes can focus, not just on the development of hard skills but, on personal development and the alleviation of stress.

Stress is created as a reaction mechanism by a lack of balance between external increased demands and internal abilities to respond to them. Stress increases by several factors such as situational disturbances and day to day or ambient life stresses. Stress does not affect only the unemployed. It also affects people in employment due to two other significant factors. The first one is job uncertainty created in the work environment due to the high risk for unemployment. The second is intensity at work, because of the extreme demands made by employers and at the same time the limited access employees have in the necessary resources for good outcomes (INE, 2017).

Negative experiences and failure to maintain or achieve employment are linked with lower expectations, lower self-esteem, and lower self-efficacy estimation. Self-efficacy expectations are relevant to the personal aptitude to achieve goals. Self-efficacy is influenced by environmental conditions that also shape attitudes and interests that are products of learning experiences and personal values. These in return shape a lifelong developmental process between the individual and the social/labor factors. Furthermore, they influence self-esteem, self-perception of reality and respect for oneself that derives from social and work life. Low self-esteem exhibits an artificially positive attitude to the world, in a desperate attempt to prove to others that the person is adequate. A positive self-esteem is a central factor in the process of social and emotional adjustment and relates to more effective functioning. A healthy view of the self encompasses the understanding of shortcomings but without being harshly critical of them.

Relevant studies suggest that unemployment is linked with high stress levels and low self-esteem and self-efficacy evaluations. Negative mental health effects are already present on the Greek labor force with women being more severely affected than men (Drydakis, 2015). Recent studies suggest that even the employed population (Rachiotis et al, 2014) exhibited high burnout levels followed by emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, due to staff and resource shortages (Markovits, et. al., 2013).

Active labor market policies that employ Lifelong Learning as a way of fighting unemployment, are important for hard skills development and matching workers with the labor market. Furthermore, are even more significant for understanding hidden assumptions and enhancing a deeper understanding of stress related and other relevant factors that exercise further pressure and hinder, together with the socio-cultural and socioeconomic events, employment.

In this process, it is significant to train the trainers as significant psychological notions are inevitably linked with the hidden assumptions of trainers about employment, lifelong learning, adult learning, and learners (Norwich, 2000). Hidden assumptions about the abilities of learners to achieve employment disregard the demands of a highly competitive work

environment at times of crisis. In this process, transformative learning and group dynamics could be employed for critical thinking, for understanding hidden and false assumptions and developing an inner view of the structural inequalities that create obstacles to reaching employment. Group dynamics and transformative learning together with relevant learning activities, are important for exploring hidden assumptions about unemployment and false beliefs and develop the necessary skills and positive attitudes needed to overcome these beliefs.

The employment of experiential learning methods is significant. The need to discuss false assumptions, to cope with frustration caused by both, the crisis and the pandemic, the need to develop coping mechanisms for facing uncertainty in the long run, is for the benefit of the unemployed and society at large. Lifelong Learning may assist to prevent mental and physical health issues in a context where health and social care are in the decline. In addition, it may further enhance the development of social skills for achieving employment and avoid depersonalization (Senge, 2006).

5. Conclusions

The present paper attempts a critical reflection on the hidden assumptions and the psychological effects of unemployment. High unemployment rates together with limited work prospects affect personal and vocational development. Benefits and incentives to increase participation in Lifelong Learning programmes are rarely there. Economic crisis, followed by the pandemic, was experienced as a threat for the economic, social, and work sectors. Post-crisis Greece is left with high unemployment rates, situational disturbances, and day to day life stresses. Fears prolonged unemployment might affect even the next generation, despite its efforts to achieve high skills, are also present. Furthermore, the challenges for Adult Education and Lifelong Learning are still many, as the neoliberal policies in a narrow way for hard skills development rather than in a broad way for enhancing democracy, equal access and participation to decision making (Fejes, et.al., 2022).

Lifelong Learning might assist in developing hard skills that the labor market requires but furthermore, they could enhance personal coping mechanisms for situational disturbances and day to day life stresses. Lifelong Learning programmes within the work environment might also assist in relieving job stressor and creating a positive work climate that affects outcomes. The International Labor organization (2022) calls for a human centered recovery, that is essential for the quality and sustainability of work and employees and for equal participation of men, women, who were affected more by the pandemic, young people, and people with disabilities.

In this context, Lifelong Learning is of high significance for guiding and supporting the population to cope with prolonged stress and the associated physical and mental health problems.

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