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**Assessing the impact of Erasmus+
in Adult Education: empirical evidence,
transformative processes, and comparative
perspectives within the RIA-AE Framework**

Guest editor Vanna Boffo

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Marianna Capo

Editoriale

English version follows

Una riflessione sull'impatto sociale e il programma Erasmus+. Introduzione per una ricerca europea

Vanna Boffo

Il contesto di riferimento

Chiedersi, oggi, nel contesto politico, culturale, sociale che stiamo vivendo quale sia il ruolo dell'Educazione degli Adulti in Europa è quantomai importante. Viviamo in un tempo di populismi attivi, di migrazioni massicce e, al contempo, percepite come invasive, viviamo in un tempo dove il termine *communitas* (Esposito, 2010) si è rarefatto di fronte alle chiusure sociali e politiche sempre più incisive.

In questo nostro tempo, distante dalla fine della seconda guerra mondiale, distante dall'ordine che la politica mondiale aveva dato al globo terrestre, abbiamo perso il senso dell'altro. Il numero delle guerre locali, eppure globali, sta lì, a farci vedere che abbiamo dimenticato una identità umana. Eppure non dobbiamo lasciar andare la speranza. Ecco, allora, che la politica europea *su e per* l'Educazione degli Adulti si rende fortemente centrale.

Ha un senso parlare di politica per la formazione degli adulti in Europa, oggi? Al netto delle riflessioni metodologiche, al netto della indagine che già da circa tre anni si sta portando avanti, ha un senso cercare di capire cosa voglia dire essere *europei*? Anche un viaggio, in termini tecnici si dice mobilità, può sostenere l'idea di Europa? Perché al fondo delle indagini che qui presentiamo, la domanda centrale è unica e consiste nel chiedersi se il progetto di mobilità intrapreso sia stato una esperienza di formazione adeguata al fine che si era prefisso. Questo il nostro assunto di partenza: nel contemporaneo scenario del Lifelong Learning, il Programma Erasmus+ trascende la sua funzione di strumento di mobilità per configurarsi come un dispositivo pedagogico complesso, essenziale per lo sviluppo del potenziale umano e culturale europeo (European Commission, 2019). Sappiamo, infatti, che il Programma *Erasmus+*, fin dall'esordio del primo nucleo di idea *Erasmus*, avrebbe dovuto agire quale leva strategica per l'innovazione dei sistemi educativi, per lo sviluppo di condizioni di apprendimento/educazione formali, informali e non formali (European Commission, 2000) e per la promozione di una cittadinanza attiva e consapevole (European Commission, 2015).

In questa cornice sociale, educativa e politica, il progetto europeo *Research-based Impact Analysis in Adult Education (RIA-AE)*, condotto da un network formato da varie agenzie Erasmus di altrettanti paesi europei, sta lavorando proprio per dare evidenza a quanto è stato e può essere implementato attraverso la mobilità europea degli adulti in formazione. Il progetto ha preso avvio nel 2023 e si concluderà nel 2027.

Nel settore dell'Educazione degli Adulti, strutturalmente connotato da una marcata eterogeneità degli attori, la valutazione dell'efficacia del Programma Erasmus+ pone sfide metodologiche ed epistemologiche significative. Sebbene la partecipazione in termini

quantitativi sia ampiamente documentata (European Commission, 2024), permane la necessità di approfondire l'impatto qualitativo e longitudinale su discenti, sul personale amministrativo e di accompagnamento, sulle organizzazioni, con particolare riferimento alle dimensioni intangibili del *civic engagement*, della resilienza socio-economica e dell'inclusione sociale (De Greef, Segers & Verté, 2010). In linea con i pilastri concettuali che definiscono l'educazione come "tesoro" (Delors, 1996) e come processo esistenziale dell'"imparare a essere" (Faure, 1972), è indispensabile adottare lenti interpretative multi-dimensionali. Tali prospettive devono essere capaci di cogliere la profondità dei processi di cambiamento a livello individuale ovvero secondo una prospettiva Micro, devono essere in grado di cogliere l'evoluzione delle culture organizzative verso modelli di *Learning Organization* (Senge, 1990) a livello istituzionale, ovvero in una prospettiva Meso, e devono essere saper comprendere la capacità del Programma di fungere da "supporto funzionale" o catalizzatore di innovazione per le policy pubbliche a livello sistemico ovvero in una prospettiva Macro (OECD, 2003).

Sulla scorta delle evidenze empiriche emerse dal network transnazionale RIA-AE (Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ of Adult Education Programme) (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024), questo numero monografico intende indagare l'Erasmus+ come spazio privilegiato di apprendimento autodiretto (Knowles, 1975), riflessivo (Schön, 1993) e trasformativo (Mezirow, 1991). L'obiettivo primario è analizzare come la mobilità individuale (KA1) e la cooperazione strategica (KA2) agiscano sinergicamente sui tre livelli del sistema formativo: il livello Micro della persona, il livello Meso delle organizzazioni e il livello Macro delle politiche.

Il presente numero della nostra rivista *Epale Journal* affronta, dunque, un tema complesso, ma importante, molto diffuso, ma poco studiato. La valutazione e, soprattutto, la valutazione di impatto, sono questioni sempre più centrali per la ricerca scientifica, finanziata o no. La valutazione di impatto aiuta a comprendere se la variegata offerta formativa, di cui come ricercatori, *practitioners*, *adult* e *older adult* siamo beneficiari, abbia realmente ricadute sul nostro senso di cittadinanza e di costruzione del sé, come anche di partecipazione o crescita personale.

Assessing the impact of Erasmus+ in Adult Education: empirical evidence, transformative processes, and comparative perspectives within the RIA-AE Framework, raccoglie un'ampia serie di contributi teorici, indagini empiriche e testimonianze esperienziali sull'impatto del programma Erasmus+ nel settore dell'educazione degli adulti. Il lavoro si colloca all'interno delle attività di ricerca della rete transnazionale **RIA-AE** (*Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes*), finalizzata a monitorare e valutare gli effetti dei progetti europei, finanziati dalla Commissione, sulle organizzazioni, sui discenti e sui sistemi educativi e formativi a livello europeo. La rete transnazionale è composta da un numero significativo di Paesi membri, più di venti sono quelli che partecipano alla ricerca di matrice istituzionale. Per ogni Paese sono presenti sia ricercatori delle Agenzie Nazionali, sia ricercatori universitari.

Il nostro intento principale è stato quello di portare alla attenzione della comunità scientifica la riflessione sulla misurazione delle attività e dei prodotti di progetto, spostando l'attenzione da una analisi di mero tipo quantitativo a una analisi di tipo qualitativo. Comprendere quale sia la

ricaduta dei Progetti Erasmus+ sulla popolazione adulta europea è molto importante, non solo in termini di rendiconto, ma al fine di capire a fondo come le relazioni, i rapporti, la mobilità abbiano influito sulla trasformazione dei soggetti che vi hanno partecipato. Quale sostenibilità a lungo termine, quale accessibilità strutturale e come i processi trasformativi innescati dalle esperienze di mobilità individuale (Azione Chiave 1 – KA1) e dai progetti di cooperazione e partenariato (Azione Chiave 2 – KA2) hanno contribuito a far crescere il senso di cittadinanza e appartenenza europea?

Gli articoli ci restituiscono una visione globale sulle opportunità offerte da Erasmus+ e, soprattutto, ci aiutano a comprendere come queste opportunità si traducano in effettivo sviluppo personale, professionale e organizzativo, promuovendo l'inclusione sociale, l'*agency* individuale e la partecipazione democratica.

L'articolazione dei contributi

Il N. 19/2026 si articola in tre sezioni principali che riflettono diversi livelli di analisi e di applicazione del quadro metodologico RIA-AE.

In una prima sezione troviamo ricerche nell'ambito della rete RIA-AE (*Researches within the RIA-AE Network*). Questa sezione raccoglie studi transnazionali e analisi nazionali condotti da coloro che partecipano alla rete RIA-AE. Possiamo ricapitolare i contributi sotto le seguenti voci:

- **Mainstreaming degli output di cooperazione (KA2):** Bert-Jan Buiskool e Victor Verlaan analizzano il trasferimento e l'integrazione dei risultati dei progetti KA2 attraverso la teoria della diffusione delle innovazioni di Everett Rogers (2003), evidenziando come l'impatto a lungo termine dipenda dalla capacità organizzativa, dal valore aggiunto dimostrato e dalle reti istituzionali.
- **Accessibilità della mobilità transnazionale e politiche educative:** Francesca Torlone e Marco Ceccarelli esaminano Erasmus+ come misura di policy, introducendo la distinzione tra pubblico effettivo, potenziale e non-pubblico e discutendo il rischio di stabilizzare un "equilibrio di esclusione dall'apprendimento" (*learning exclusion equilibrium*) (Torlone, 2023) in assenza di servizi strutturati di mediazione, orientamento e tutoraggio.
- **Riflessività e traiettorie biografiche dei partecipanti:** Julita Pieńkosz esplora le narrazioni dei discenti adulti in Polonia alla luce della teoria della riflessività di Margaret Archer, mostrando come la partecipazione e gli esiti della mobilità siano plasmati dalle premure fondamentali (*ultimate concerns*) e dai contesti di vita dei partecipanti.
- **Approccio comunitario co-creativo:** Willeke van der Werf analizza il valore dell'approccio comunitario e co-creativo nell'educazione degli adulti all'interno della *New Public Governance* (Osborne, 2010), illustrando pratiche che collegano l'apprendimento delle competenze di base alla vita quotidiana e alla partecipazione civica.
- **Prospettive e casi di studio nazionali:** La sezione comprende inoltre lo studio sulle organizzazioni locali nell'educazione degli adulti in Portogallo (Paula Guimarães, Carolina Pereira, Ana Nascimento David); le riflessioni sull'impatto del programma in Slovenia (Borut Mikulec); la presentazione di RIA-AE come architettura valutativa nel contesto italiano e il ruolo dell'Agenzia Nazionale (Daniela Ermini); e l'indagine sulla formazione del sé nei discenti adulti italiani coinvolti in mobilità KA1 (Vanna Boffo, Christel Schachter).

In una seconda sezione troviamo le Ricerche che possiamo collocare nel quadro del RIA-AE (*Researches within the RIA-AE Framework*). Qui sono raccolte indagini empiriche e comparative orientate dal quadro concettuale RIA-AE:

- **Apprendimento trasformativo:** Antonio Sacristano analizza la mobilità Erasmus+ come catalizzatore di apprendimento trasformativo oltre l'esperienza del viaggio.
- **Valutazione linguistica per migranti:** Piera De Gironimo presenta uno studio comparativo tra Italia e Spagna sulla valutazione e certificazione L2 per adulti migranti.
- **Benessere dei discenti:** Ángel Navarro Rodríguez propone una prospettiva comparativa sul benessere dei discenti adulti tra le Isole Canarie e la Finlandia.
- **Integrazione tra educazione formale e non formale:** M. Amparo Aymerich Bort illustra un caso pratico sul programma di *Job Shadowing* presso la Volkshochschule di Francoforte.

Infine, nella terza sezione troviamo i Contributi esperienziali nel quadro del RIA-AE (*Experiential Contributions within the RIA-AE Framework*). Vengono valorizzati i modelli pratici, i casi di studio e le esperienze applicate che possono essere ricompresi all'interno di un possibile quadro di riferimento RIA-AE:

- **Sostenibilità e competenze:** Angelo Fanelli presenta un modello di competenze abduktivo per le mobilità Erasmus+ sulla sostenibilità.
- **Impatto comparativo sulle organizzazioni:** Maria Teresa Caccavale analizza l'impatto di Erasmus+ su organizzazioni e partecipanti in chiave comparativa tra Paesi.
- **Alfabetizzazione funzionale e inclusione:** Juan Cristóbal Ruiz González approfondisce il progetto EVLE incentrato su alfabetizzazione funzionale, inclusione e cittadinanza europea.
- **Sviluppo professionale dei docenti:** Ivan B. Šarčević analizza la mobilità KA1 come strumento di formazione per i docenti delle Scuole di Seconda Opportunità.
- **Job shadowing e modelli innovativi nelle scuole per adulti:** Cristina Meneguzzo illustra il progetto "TOP" sul *job shadowing* a scuola; María Álvarez Álvarez presenta l'esperienza dell'EOI di Collado Villalba e San Lorenzo de El Escorial; Rocío Romero Aguilera ed Enrique Tierno Galván descrivono un progetto di insegnamento individualizzato basato sul modello finlandese per studenti adulti con difficoltà di apprendimento.
- **Prossimità e narrazione nel territorio:** Marianna Capo esamina il progetto NEAR come metodo per valutare l'impatto di Erasmus+ nell'area napoletana attraverso la prossimità e la narrazione.

Rilevanza e conclusioni

Ancora mancano conclusioni complessive che potremo avere solo nel 2027, tuttavia sulla base di quanto abbiamo assunto fino ad ora dai dati, possiamo trarre alcune riflessioni, a livello di *Accessibilità* ci troviamo davanti ad alcuni fattori come la *democratizzazione dell'accesso* permettendo che sempre più micro-organizzazioni possano fruire del Programma Erasmus+, soprattutto organizzazioni con contenuto numero di dipendenti che, quindi, lavorano territorialmente e localmente. Alla accessibilità lavorano sempre più organizzazioni, dette del terzo settore (ONG, Fondazioni e Associazioni). Un orientamento verso il sostegno alla *educazione alla longevità*. L'età dei beneficiari dei programmi, infatti, sempre più alta, impone di curare i Programmi verso una attenzione all'*Active Ageing* (World Health Organization, 2002). Questo è sempre più un tema di inclusione sociale, culturale e politica.

Accessibilità, democratizzazione e prospettive di longevità ci dicono della preparazione professionale necessaria per pensare alla organizzazione. In tal senso, le competenze degli operatori sono fattore fondamentale per implementare i Programmi stessi con una offerta di apprendimento permanente di qualità. Comprendere che la professionalizzazione è importante, significa potersi rivolgere a gruppi sempre più variegati e diversi di adulti, si pensi solo agli adulti in difficoltà per le più svariate ragioni che possono fruire di esperienze di vita uniche. In tal senso, sarebbe importante comprendere come supportare queste fasce più deboli e, dunque, le organizzazioni che se ne possano far carico.

Soprattutto sui singoli, è stato già possibile rilevare i benefici della mobilità. Siamo davanti a un vero e proprio valore pedagogico della mobilità di gruppo (Kolb, 1984), come strumento protettivo e strategico per i discenti vulnerabili, sviluppando *soft skills*, incrementando l'autostima, infondendo nei partecipanti la consapevolezza di essere parte di uno spazio europeo (Delanty, 1995).

Attraverso la varietà delle metodologie e dei contesti analizzati, la pubblicazione evidenzia come l'impatto di Erasmus+ nell'educazione degli adulti non costituisca un esito automatico della partecipazione, bensì un complesso processo di diffusione e trasformazione (Rogers, 2003). Questo processo richiede un sostegno organizzativo costante, reti istituzionali di intermediazione e servizi orientati all'accessibilità reale.

Dobbiamo continuare a ritenere che sia centrale per la democrazia costruire spazi europei di condivisione, questi programmi vanno proprio in questa direzione. Devono diventare più ampi e più sostenuti, sono un mezzo valido per diffondere l'idea di Europa, ma soprattutto per avere la diffusione di una idea di uguaglianza, solidarietà e vita in pace. Tutti aspetti che gli eventi bellici degli ultimi anni stanno erodendo in maniera sempre più rapida.

La valutazione di impatto, scientifica, su processi educativi è complessa, è lunga, anche lenta, ma rende ragione che solo camminando sulla strada di valori condivisi di cittadinanza e partecipazione sarà possibile continuare ad avere risorse umane per orientare la politica. E non solamente per farsi orientare dalla politica.

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The NEAR project as a model and a method: assessing the impact of Erasmus+ through proximity and narration on adult education in the Naples area

Marianna Capo¹

Keywords

Adult education, Biographical learning, Erasmus+ impact, Narrative proximity, Educational agreements.

Abstract

The NEAR project suggests a change in the approach to assessing the impact of the Erasmus+ programme in Naples which shifts the focus from quantitative indicators to a methodology based on storytelling and proximity. In a context characterised by emerging social vulnerabilities, the model re-imagines transnational mobility as a process of 'biographical learning', capable of highlighting latent skills and reshaping participants' identities. The model's effectiveness is rooted in three interconnected dimensions: Individual transformation (Micro): narrating the travel experience enables vulnerable individuals (inmates, the elderly and students in marginalised communities) to develop self-efficacy and regain their social dignity. Organisational innovation (Meso): the institutions concerned evolve into 'learning organisations' capable of re-purposing assets confiscated from crime and adopting flexible, results-oriented management models. Systemic impact (Macro): through Territorial Education Pacts, the project promotes stable alliances between schools and the third sector and transforms adult education into a driver of urban regeneration and active citizenship. Overall, NEAR shows that pedagogical proximity and active listening are vital scientific tools for ensuring that internationalisation will become a democratic and structural asset capable of surviving individual funding cycles.

1. Introduction

In Lifelong Learning today, the Erasmus+ programme has taken a major step forward toward a sustainable present and future. Far from still being a mere transnational mobility tool, it has now become a complex socio-pedagogical apparatus, a heterogeneous interconnected network of discourses, institutions, administrative structures and a specific educational proposition for producing new patterns tailored to human needs and specific contexts (Milana, Webb, Holford, Waller, & Jarvis, 2018). Erasmus+ acts as a strategic lever for:

- people to update their technical skills;
- educational systems to deeply renew their structures and methods;
- institutions to promote an active and informed citizenship.

In this approach, mobility becomes a space where learners acquire know-how and restructure their own identities in a now multi-shaped European context.

Adult Education (AE) is facing unprecedented challenges today. Considering the future of European Education Space (European Commission, 2025), impact assessment can no longer rely on quantitative indicators only. A strategic framework is necessary to capture qualitative and longitudinal changes, especially in contexts where training remains fragmented. Conventional AE practices strive to respond to the "new social vulnerabilities" (educational poverty, digital isolation and geographic discrimination) characterising the post-Covid-19 period. The Italian NEAR (Narration, Erasmus, Auto-Reflection and Results) Project, which started upon the initiative

of Naples-Area Adult-Education Ambassadors Marianna Capo, Raffaella D'Angelo, Giuseppina Di Ture, Veronica Polese and Lucia Veneruso, aims at bridging the gap between institutional norms and human life experiences. By taking an interpretive view that integrates aesthetic and narrative approaches with the construction of professional identities (Formenti & Luraschi, 2020), the project aims at creating the necessary conditions for adult learners to narrate their own changes, thus turning educational travelling into critical auto-reflection and biographical reward.

Beyond the several acronymic namesakes around, the NEAR model is not a simple monitoring protocol, but an integrated methodological architecture aiming at restoring human experience to its scientific dignity and prestige. For learners often caught between rigid European frameworks and fluent informal learning processes, NEAR proposes a form of participatory "auditing" which turns "cold data" into a lived narrative. Auto-reflection and self-assessment are now fundamental learning principles: no longer a passive user, the learner is the critical protagonist of his/her own growth. In the wake of Merrill and West's social research methods (2009), the model acquires narrative as the prime tool for making tacit skills emerge. Turning the travelling experience into a critical narrative means letting all participants re-appropriate the sense and significance of their own learning process. Telling about one's own journey is a generative process: while narrating their own "biography in progress" (Wieczorek, 2016), people identify the most critical moments, thus consolidating that perceived self-efficacy which is essential for them to obtain their social reward (Azzolini, Marazzita, & Izzo, 2024).

The NEAR model rests upon 4 interconnected theoretical pillars which define the architecture of narrative proximity as a participatory auditing device. These pillars –Biographical Learning (micro-level), Informal and Incidental Learning (learning by friction), Learning Organisation (meso-level) and AE Policy (macro-level) – form a pedagogical ecosystem which has been capable of embedding internationalisation into the social fabric of the Naples area.

Regarded as "transformational science" (Balzano, 2025), proximity in NEAR has gone beyond the merely physical vicinity to become an epistemological attitude. "Inhabiting" territories means recognising the educational value of informal interaction-based learning contexts. The trainer becomes a "contextual facilitator" capable of supervising the quality of the educational bond. He/she will no doubt make sure the learning experience is not perceived as external imposition, but as a deeply-felt response to contextual needs. Thus, proximity is the precondition for trust, which is an essential element for including those adults training circuits have almost always excluded.

The Naples-Area Ambassadors act as real anthropological catalysts between Brussels directives and micro-local realities. They perform a twofold task: a) they operate semantic translations of the Erasmus+ competition notices to make them accessible and interesting to the public and b) they make some active scouting to bring European project management straight into out-of-reach places and contexts.

Through their publicity and mediation, Erasmus+ has made its way into jails, slums and old-people's homes, and has asserted itself as a valuable prospect for reward tailored on the weaknesses specific to the people and contexts in question. These goodwill ambassadors are the human face of the institution, inasmuch as they guarantee that continuous support which turns an isolated project into an organic development route toward social and educational reward.

The practical application of the model finds its utmost significance in the Community-Based Educational Agreements (ActionAid Italia, 2024). Far from being mere bureaucratic agreements, they are participatory governance tools that consolidate stable alliances between schools, non-profit organisations, trade associations and local authorities. By acting as virtual social infrastructures, the agreements guarantee that the new skills and views acquired abroad will accrue to the single mobility project participant and constructively contribute to the

improvement of the whole local area as well (Boffo, Iavarone, Nosari & Nuzzaci, 2023). ActionAid Italia will also provide the Erasmus+ project concerned with the official recognition it deserves. This will no doubt help create a protection and development network that would outlast any possible financing expiration date and promote shared responsibility and a firm commitment to lifelong education.

The research was carried out through a participatory interpretive approach based on a pedagogical proximity and action research perspective. Ours was a field reconnaissance involving projects that started in March and ended in December 2024 (KA122, KA210) within a three-year macro-schedule (2021-2027). The projects were related to Key Actions KA122 (short-term mobility) and KA210 (small-scale partnerships). The results evinced the ambassadors' specific strategic choice: the projects were selected because they met the Naples area's specific needs in critical contexts.

These two types were decided upon for pursuing the following three fundamental objectives:

- a. *dismantling access barriers*: short-term and small-scale formulas ideal for less experienced organisations and suitable for helping participants to win their cultural resistance and gain the necessary confidence during the process;
- b. *focusing on human assets* (Naples - KA122): a challenge on rapid professionalisation and the acquisition of skills that could soon and easily be passed on in dynamic urban contexts;
- c. *community development and resilience* (Salerno - KA210): suitable for a generative usage in the Avellino and Benevento areas as well as for the creation of solid anti-isolation networks.

Table 1 - Summary of Territorial Strategy.

Key Action	Strategic Objective of the Ambassadors	Expected Result
KA122	Making the internationalisation process more democratic	Turning ethnocentric resistance into conscious citizenship
KA210	Deeply rooting innovation into small organisations	Creating an indissoluble bond between project and context

Source: author's own elaboration.

These projects enable facilitators to internationalise people and contexts on a bottom-up basis: it is not all about travelling, but turning the local organisation into a European network hub with a visible and tangible impact crucial to the modernisation of the regional system.

Table 2 - Table of focus groups per geographical area.

Feature	Salerno Focus (28/03/2025)	Naples Focus (31/03/2025)
Territory	Salerno - Avellino - Benevento	Naples - Caserta
Participation	12 participants from 9 organisations in 9 projects	15 participants from 10 organisations in 10 projects
Specificity	Project-context bond	Focus on training organisations and skills learned
Theme Focus	Generative process in the hinterland	Professionalisation and innovation

Source: author's own elaboration.

Data gathering was conducted on two main focus groups, divided by geographic macro-areas and strategic specificities:

- Focus Group 1 (Salerno, 28 March 2025) was at the A. Santucci Library of the University of Salerno. 12 representatives of 9 organisations participated in 9 territorial projects in the Salerno, Avellino and Benevento areas which mostly relied on the deep bond between project and hinterland regeneration.
- Focus Group 2 (Naples, 31 March 2025): was in the Multimedia Room of the Humanities Department of the Federico II University. 15 representatives of 10 leading organisations in the Naples and Caserta areas participated in 10 projects which concentrated on the innovation of training structures and the acquisition of competitive professional skills.

Overall, the research target included heterogeneous groups of high-school worker-students, ex-convicts from social rehabilitation centres, company trainees and university students.

Pursuant to EU Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR), all participants formally authorised the mention and use of their names, personal data and names of institutions involved, as they regarded network transparency and traceability as added values which proved the real impact of regional projects.

Epistemologically, the empirical cases in the manuscript are analytical case summaries. They derive from the systematic cross-examination of final reports KA122 and KA210 and the live biographical narratives from the focus groups. They were collectively validated by the facilitators themselves, who acted as key informants of rehabilitation routes and organic territorial changes.

2. Micro-level: self-revelation and biographical learning

The deepest impact emerges in the individual transformation stories collected within the focus groups in Naples and Salerno, where the journey was described as an epiphanic identity-rupture experience.

The Reward Case – One of the most representative examples is that of a working student at the *Marconi School* in Giugliano (near Naples), whose history was marked by migration traumas and deep social isolation. An Italian-born young man kidnapped by his father and forced to stay in Algeria until the age of 18 saw his return to Italy as a complex identity re-appropriation process. When he took part in an Erasmus+ project in Malaga, Spain, he experienced a real “biography in progress” (as discussed in Section 1). His meeting with diversity acted as a catalyst between:

- the trauma from his parents’ separation and his lack of confidence in the world around him;
- his eventually coming to fully comprehend the universal value of languages and communication.

That boy that lived a marginalised life now works as an international steward for *Ryanair*, as a result of having turned his forced journey into a conscious travelling profession.

Identity and Self-efficacy – The narrative orientation routes analysed in the focus groups confirm that telling about the journey consolidates the learner’s self-efficacy (see p. 2 above). For many of the adults involved, Erasmus+ meant their first time ever out of Italy or on a plane. Although these people initially perceived Erasmus as a privilege of university students, they later experienced their journeys as moments of much greater enrichment than they had expected. Being selected for a European programme gave participants an unexpected shot of self-confidence - they eventually started to feel equal to those students that were always referred to as the most successful.

Discrimination and Inclusion – For the convict women from the *Lazzarelle social cooperative*, “to be able to tell” their own know-how means to renegotiate the stigma and humanise the inclusion route (Benelli & Gijón Casares,

2020). Often victims of economic violence or involved in unpaid illegal domestic work, many of them have ended up in jail totally unaware of their own skills. Through exchanging such good practices as Quadrathlon DuFemm (a programme including sport, mental well-being and empowerment), NEAR has enabled these women to identify hidden skills. Narrative-based orientation has helped them “identify what they can do but cannot properly say they do” – once just prisoners, they are now skilful individuals that can take and keep regular jobs they will have legitimately qualified for.

Active Ageing - The impact of the project has clearly been visible even in the cases of over-65s, who have been able to “dismantle their age stereotypes and start getting creative”. Through 13 training sessions on creativity and transnational exhibitions (in Spain, Ireland and Italy), senior participants have shown one can be a major social actor even late in one’s life. Albeit without any formal language learning, Naples-focus-group over-65s found ingenious communication modes (even gestures), made close friends and destroyed the idea of the elderly as passive subjects excluded from modern life.

3. Meso-level: organisations as presidia of innovation and proximity

While the micro-level is centred on transformation in the individual, the meso-level features the structural analysis of Erasmus+’s catalyst effect on the transformation of the institutions. Once mere bureaucratic-mobility containers, the organisations involved in the NEAR project have now become dynamic learning organisations (Bierema, Fedeli & Merriam, 2025). The Naples-area institutions concerned have created a special space where European innovation is embodied in local daily life. As Boffo et al. theorised (2023), far from still being a mere “passive resistance to shocks”, organisational resilience is also a proactive local-asset-valorising skill and attitude never seen before. Through its transnational osmotic confrontation approach, Erasmus+ simplifies tasks and speeds up routines and procedures - it forces the personnel to measure themselves with European standards and import flexible management models into contexts often hindered by uselessly complex, lengthy and rigid procedures.

Regarding the symbolic value of rewards, a few instances of territorial excellence are worth mentioning. NEAR’s impact is unquestionable in contexts like *Didaxè* and the *Città Nuova Foundation* (in the Caserta and Naples areas respectively), where Erasmus+ has become a means for “territorial claim and reward”. Here, the claim and reward symbolism is clearly visible on two major “channels”:

- the transformation of the assets confiscated and the semantic reconsideration of their functions;
- social tailoring – from exclusion to internationalisation.

Such places as the Cellole villas or confiscated properties in the Caserta area will have their destiny radically rewritten. Once symbols of seclusion, omerta and top-down territorial control, these spaces, thanks to European grants and networks, will turn into vital hubs of an international network. The confiscated asset is no longer a criminal-power warning signal; it is a freedom lab where European institutional reliability emancipates the local community from asphyxic criminal control. The presence of foreign partners in these places acts as a powerful evil-demythifying agent: Europe enters the asset, opens its windows and normalises lawfulness through some sort of transnational cooperation.

Within a confiscated villa, social tailoring is the climax of the above transformation process. No longer a mere normative imposition, lawful action here actually integrates with pedagogical innovation (Rocco, 2023). Once synonymous with exploitation and subsistence, craft work now becomes a European citizenship lab. The tailor’s seams symbolise the mending of a torn social fabric: the women involved produce not only goods, but also new identities – they become world citizens. This shows that “proximity” is an asset rather than a liability. Proximity

is the engine of a global transformation, one which has brought Europe right where the Italian Government seemed to have blatantly failed.

An essential element that the meso-level analysis has evinced is the paramount importance of incidental and informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). NEAR organisations do not improve and progress only through structured courses, but “learn to be” through their daily friction with complexity.

Tacit Knowledge and Operational Resilience: rather than being learned only mechanically in textbooks, skills are also acquired “by chance”, while handling logistic crises or by spontaneous problem-solving activities that might be needed while dealing with foreign partners. This tacit knowledge translates into greater organisational flexibility: the personnel concerned learn to face uncertainty and will most probably transform unforeseen circumstances into learning opportunities. Arranging international meetings successfully in secluded contexts entails emotional and managerial forms of intelligence that will become stable assets for the organisation involved.

Cross-Fertilisation and Green Identity: no longer a mere bureaucratic duty, the integration of “green resources” with sustainable practices is now a strategic choice. Beside its environmental dimension, organisations also discover ecology’s social value. Reducing the social and environmental cost of obsolete structures also means modernising education by introducing digital tools and devices that would be implemented in environmentally and socially-healthy contexts. Horizontal collaboration approaches act as filters within the walls of the institutions concerned. This “cross-fertilisation” process renews the local bureaucracy not only by de-materialising paper documents, but also by making its practices less lengthy and more result-oriented. NEAR organisations end up acting as real “Law Frontiers”: liminal spaces where Eurocracy humanises itself, loses its technical coldness and adapts to the primal needs of complex contexts by acting as a cultural mediator between the old and the new. No longer an isolated one-way administrative entity, the single organisation is now a two-way bridge: a) it brings the Naples hinterland to the hub of EU policies and b) it translates European values such as inclusion and dignity into concrete actions that change the looks of streets and the lives of people.

4. Macro-level: AE policy, systems and future

The step toward the Macro-Level marks the moment when the individual sparks of change - the transformation of participants and the evolution of associations - become an organic system. Not only a traveller’s cheque dispenser, Erasmus+ is also a formidable public policy accelerator. NEAR’s added value really lies in its ability to leave a structural legacy to the context concerned and transform AE into a real tool for social and urban-planning design (see Section 5) – e.g., the *Ribellarci* (Let’s Rebel) project in the Benevento area. Through its action research centred on rivers as the throbbing veins of local communities, the project started as a mere adult learning route and later provided the scientific grounds and civic thrust needed for a municipality near Naples to secure €1.5 million in Eurogrants. Studying the territory means being able to re-qualify it: a forsaken naturalist route coming back to life is the tangible result of an education policy that can turn into “stone and concrete” by bridging the gap between theoretical learning and local development (Rocco, 2023). This macro-Neapolitan vitality finds its rightful correspondence even in international data and figures. The most recent country reports by the European Association for the Education of Adults (2025) reveal surprising data: while Northern European models, like the Finnish one, continue to dominate the formal participation statistics, the Naples area is winning the radical inclusion challenge. NEAR’s strong point is its specific ability to arrive at the hardest hit, those vulnerable adults who are hardly ever reached by any initiative whatsoever. Now this historical gap is being bridged thanks to some sort of proximity pedagogy that can speak various languages and address concrete needs. The real future challenge is to make all these innovations become the “new normality”. AE in the Naples region will be travelling toward ambitious horizons:

1. Restorative Justice, whereby, through “circles of justice”, education can re-sew the seams crime has broken;
2. Regeneration Tourism, which transforms the journey into a reward opportunity for both hosts and guests - using the confiscated assets not only as labs, but also as social housing spaces and job centres, consolidates a view whereby lawfulness produces material wealth and active citizenship (Boffo et al., 2023);
3. Territorial Educational Agreements - the ultimate macro-objective; we no longer want ephemeral measures, but solid alliances that ensure every broken shell (be it an individual weakness or a territorial wound) will be recovered and turned into a pillar for a European Union that is finally equal, resilient, and profoundly humane.

For the sake of accuracy, the NEAR governance has proposed the following analytical schematisation to sever empirical findings from interpretive hypotheses and political implications:

Table 3 - NEAR Summary of Empirical Findings, Interpretive Hypotheses and Political Implications.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS	INTERPRETIVE HYPOTHESES	POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS
<i>Job Opportunities: stable training routes for vulnerable individuals (e.g., the Marconi worker-student who became a Ryanair flight-assistant).</i>	<i>Mobility as an identity-rupture experience: the cultural shock between the participant’s past and present engendered a present reconsideration of past traumas and annihilated the social-stigmatisation fears so typical of the marginalised.</i>	<i>Democratising internationalisation: European AE policies must be structured as bottom-up participation processes – that is the only way to bridge the historic participation gap between Southern Italy and Northern Europe.</i>
<i>Reward and functional re-writing of confiscated assets: transformation of assets historically confiscated from organised crime into lifelong education hubs, social transnational interaction and active lawfulness labs (e.g., the Didaxè Centre in the Cellole villas).</i>	<i>Proximity as an anthropological catalyst: the pedagogical proximity of facilitators and EDA ambassadors as semantic mediators and translators between the formal Brussels directives and the real historical and educational micro-needs within the local community concerned.</i>	<i>Institutionalisation of educational agreements: ineffective temporary or fragmented financing measures must inexorably be ruled out in favour of the structural adoption of stable Community-based Educational Agreements as ordinary local governance provisions.</i>
<i>Generating tangible civic impacts on the territory concerned: field-based action research triggered direct cooperation with local decision-making authorities: it was particularly the case with the Let’s Rebel Project that was centred on the Calore river catchment, whose results provided the town near Benevento with a civic and scientific basis for intercepting and obtaining a €1.5 million environmental re-qualification Eurogrant.</i>	<i>“Learning by Friction”: the development of educational and third-sector institutions is not a mechanical process, but one which consolidates through the assimilation of informal learning and the management of quick frictions and bureaucratic crises that can turn unforeseen circumstances into stable emotional intelligence.</i>	<i>Generative Welfare and Restorative Justice: AE and mobility programmes within regional welfare, regenerative tourism and restorative justice policies must be organically integrated, so as to make lifelong training a fundamental pillar of the health and reliability of European Democracy.</i>

Source: author’s own elaboration.

5. Conclusions: toward a stable AE community

The experience gained through the NEAR project unmistakably shows that impact assessment can no longer be reduced to a mere technical, bureaucratic or statistical exercise. Instead, it constitutes a deliberate pedagogical act requiring active listening and narrative as legitimate scientific research tools. An assessment of this sort cannot fail to valorise biographic transformation processes or to recognise that behind every datum or figure is the pulse of individual change (Bierema et al., 2025). NEAR project outcomes suggest that each individual, often fragmented, experience finally merges into a stable regional AE community. Far from being sheer project accumulation, NEAR's real challenge is to engender a territorial ecosystem that would act as connective tissue between and among the various Provincial AE Centres (CPIA here in Italy), non-profit organisations and local authorities. Then again (see p. 2 above), the main aim is to turn the informal networks that started during the initial project emergency into real permanent social infrastructures which can outlive European financing cycles (Milana & Holford, 2014; Gouthro, 2014). At this stage, capitalisation is the keyword. We should prevent the extraordinary portfolio of skills acquired and the juvenile mobility-triggered de-provincialisation process from disappearing once the enthusiasm for the project wanes. As Boffo et al. (2023) stressed, the resilience of a system is gauged by its ability to retain the value it has yielded. As regards the Naples area in the 2026-2029 period, the challenge will be to institutionalise European Educational Agreements not as virtuous exceptions, but as ordinary governance tools. This will enable the area to move from a mere assistance model to a generative welfare scheme where an individual transformation narrative becomes the empirical basis for future political choices. NEAR leaves us with a precious lesson to learn: Adult education is the very engine of European democracy (Rocco, 2023). Only through a collective structured commitment can AE integrally fulfil its highest mission: humanise inclusion routes, dismantle the walls of prejudice and make each and every citizen – regardless of their life story, provenance or mistakes made – an active and conscious protagonist of a common European destiny.

Notes

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