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## Towards the Professionalization of Adult Educators

**Abstract:** The European discourse regarding the adult educators has moved in the last decade from asking for „innovative teaching”, towards asking the Member States to implement systems of initial and continuous professional development (CPD) for adult learning professionals (ALP). Enlarging the focus from the prerequisite of ALP pedagogical competence to the wider training needs they have for ensuring the quality of education and training (E&T) is a positive approach to the more complex competency profile a professional in AE has to master. A big emphasis was put on identifying the competency profile of ALP. Also, a lot of smaller scale solutions have been developed, both by formal education and non-formal education (ex. by recognizing and integrating alternative pathways through the validation approach), being launched, in the same time, European tools for making transparent and comparable the qualification gathered in different contexts and countries. But, in spite of the intensive developments and efforts spent, mainly in the last five years, the progresses made in different aspects of the professionalization of ALPs, there is still missing their integration into coherent system of pre/in-service system of professional development. Why the “next step”/ level is difficult to reach?

**Key words:** adult educator, adult learning professionals, pedagogical/ didactic competences, professionalization, continuing professional development, validation.

### Status of adult learning professionals

The widely recognised imperative of lifelong and life-wide learning means that learning of adults, not only in formal but also in non-formal and informal settings, needs to be continuously promoted and enhanced. To achieve both a quantitative expansion and a qualitative improvement of adult learning activities well-qualified staff are needed to support adults professionally in their learning. The

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professional development of staff is a critical component of quality assurance in adult education. That is why, in the recent decade it became more important to reflect about the work which is done in adult education, who is doing it and how he/ she is qualified to do that.

It is somehow the reaction towards the shift to the learner, who is more and more seen as a self-directed and self-responsible actor. This paradigm, nevertheless, has determined changes into the roles adult educators/ adult learning professionals (ALPs) are performing, being seen more as facilitators, as mentors etc. (see Nuissl, 2009, 2010), but also as ones able to design tailored training offers, able to identify learning needs and valorise learning experiences, to counsel them throughout their learning journey, to master the (digital) media tools etc.. Thus, their competency profile is enlarging, is becoming an “omnipotent profile of adult educators” (Kondratjuk, 2009), as their roles are very often overlapping. Even they are employed in (mainly small) adult education institutions, with a small number of staff performing 2-3 tasks in the same time, or they are just free-lancers proposing and running a course, they suppose to do “a little bit” of everything: to be the methodological expert (the good trainer), the manager, organiser and program planner, the expert on the media, the mentor, moderator and tutor, the evaluator.

The recent European studies (see Research voor Beleid 2008, 2010) have mapped the competency profile of ALPs, and the activities the adult learning staff are performing, their professional situations, being proved, once more the “diverse, heterogeneous and changing terrain” (Jutte, Nicoll, Olesen, 2011: 9) of adult educators. Not only the different roles to be performed in different ways, but the disparate practices in different sectors of adult education, different educational and professional biographies and employment statuses, dynamic competency profiles, make very difficult to define the profession of adult educators. But a profession is related to the occupational field, to the jobs to be performed on the labour market.

Let’s have a look at *Adult education as an occupational field* first (see Nuissl, 2007): Adult Education/Continuing Education is the educational sector which is most closely connected with many other societal sectors. In contrast to the school or higher education sector, adult education has not a clearly delimited institutionalised structure with its own internal rationale and dynamics. Adult education in some form or other is present in many appearances.

Adult education has developed in different contexts and is structured different in sub-sectors, which are partly overlapping. This is true for most European countries. In some countries, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe, adult education is very closely connected to the societal areas in which it has originated

and continues to develop such as social movements or the business sector. In other countries, especially in the North and West of Europe, there exist also different fields of adult education that are defined by a certain type of institution, such as folk high schools, private commercial providers, institutions of social and cultural education or technical colleges. In all cases, the whole picture of adult education (and the related „profession“) can only be understood against the background of its historical development and its current links with other societal sectors.

Across countries, the articulation of the field of adult education differs considerably, although usually one will find in most countries a broad distinction between vocational training and education on the one hand and liberal or general adult education on the other.

Also, the bases on which adult education provision rests differ considerably. Often laws or initiatives have been implemented in one given sector of adult education only and have there created very specific structures and institutions which are governed by this particular law or funding regime. One will normally find, also, that the responsibility for adult education does not lie with one particular ministry but is spread over various ministries, such as education, labour market, social affairs, culture or science.

This may be one of the reasons, why many activities which could be considered as some kind of adult education are not always understood or termed as such. Often adult education activities have better chances of funding when they are not labelled as adult education but demonstrate a relation to labour market programmes, regional development schemes or social movements for example. This has an obvious impact not only on the terming of the activities but also on their image and self-image and on the definition of their aims.

If we look at the *employment conditions of adult education staff* we find that only a small minority works exclusively for adult education and in an institutional context. The majority of people who contribute with their work to adult education and learning has either fairly insecure employment conditions, working on a free lance basis for example; or they have a job which is only in part related to adult education activities, for example company employees with training duties or persons working in cultural institutions.

It is difficult to apply identical categories to the various groups of adult education staff in different countries. This is still relatively easy in the case of teachers in school or higher education institutions, who are also concerned with adult students; but it is much more difficult in the other fields and sectors. All in all, the spectrum of adult education staff is extremely broad – which is not surprising given the integration of adult education in all societal sectors.

Nevertheless, this heterogeneity and diversity is only one cause of the difficulty to map the professional status of ALPs. Already the expression “professional development” of adult educators, or the more recently used “adult learning *professionals*”, suggest that there is – or might be – a “profession” of adult education. Is that so? We talk of “profession”, when special knowledge and skills are needed to carry out a job in this field. But this is not all. Normally, special training or education, usually at a high level, is formally required to get access to the profession, to take up a job in the field. Such as is the case in the fields of medicine, law and religion, for example. And finally, the members of a profession are regarded as experts and enjoy a high level of respect from the general public. And accordingly they have themselves a high level of self-esteem.

What is the situation in adult education then? Are there needed special knowledge and skills? Is special training required to allow people to take up a job in adult education? What about the prestige and self-image of adult educators? And finally, what is an adult educator after all, whom do we consider as belonging to this group and why? If we talk of professional development of adult educators in Europe, it will be necessary to have these questions in mind.

Also, while analyzing a profession in a classical way, other criteria are to be taken into consideration, and these criteria, unfortunately are not fulfilled or well defined (see Sava 2006, coord. 2007, Nuissl and Latke, 2008) while discussing about the profession of adult educators, and their professional status:

- one cannot differentiate entry requirements to this profession, at different levels, so almost everyone can be an adult educator, a lot of them are “experts”;
- there is no clear monopoly on the occupation or type of work that would allow competence in carrying out specific functions to be clearly recognised;
- there is not a “common core” of competencies unanimously agreed, that everyone should master, irrespective the sector of adult education she/he is working in;
- there is also no specific professional association to initiate and maintain any collective code of conduct for quality, ethics and professional correctness. Such professional bodies do not exist at national levels, even less at European level. Also, specific trade union of adult educators hardly can be met in Denmark;
- although there is a scientific knowledge related to the discipline or field of adult education on which to base a university professional education, and over the years there have been developed such offers at BA/ MA/

doctoral level, even widely recognised international ones across the Europe, the field remains largely not-regulated, regarding the “functional markers of *competence, quality and qualification*, as those central to policy and wider debate on professionalisation” (Jutte et al, 2011: 11).

If the efforts to map the competencies of adult educators have been consistent, in the last three years coming out two related European wide studies (Research voor Beleid, 2008, 2010), there are still to be clarified the issues quality and qualification.

The policy papers stress more and more the idea of quality, and quality assurance of education and training offers, relating it automatically to the quality the staff delivering it. There are attempts to design benchmarks and indicators in this respect, and almost any national accreditation body running the (re)accreditation process of the education providers has a distinctive part related to the quality of the teaching-learning behaviour. But in a lot of situations the criteria are quite vague and subjective. The preliminary results of a comparative research I am coordinating on the criteria stipulated by different quality assurance agencies (in higher education, and adult and continuing education) to evaluate the professional behaviour of the ALPs while doing the (re)accreditation of the educational and training offer, are showed so far big differences between countries, related to the cultural background and philosophy about the teaching and learning relation and process as well.

As concerning the issue of qualification, even most of the educationalists stress the direct relation between quality and qualification of the staff working in (adult) education, the description of qualification each ALP should prove, at different levels of working, is largely now regulated. It is surprising that neither in countries like Serbia, Slovenia, Germany etc., which have departments of initial education in adult education/ andragogy since a lot of years, there is no differentiation of the entry into the labour market, to favour such specialists. Only the countries (e.g. Swiss) having designed systems of initial and continuing professional development for adult educators have stipulated differentiated qualification needed at different entry level.

In general, the majority of countries have paid little attention to defining the content and processes for initial training or for continuing professional development for formal personnel working in adult education, and even less so for personnel in non-formal adult education. Generally, the occupation of teacher or trainer of adults is not a regulated profession in most Member States (Eurydice, 2007). There are many educational and professional routes to becoming a

teacher, programme developer or manager in the adult education sector, mirrored by the wide range of approaches to professional development.

Such situation is two folded: on one hand the practitioners have agreed with this ambiguous situation, letting space for creativity, diversity, for benefiting without constraints from people's expertise, in a flexible way. The practitioners themselves are against any regulation, arguing only for the rules of the competitive market. On the other hand, such "freedom" and diversity makes difficult any increasing of the professional status of ALPs, as far as anyone can do this. Furthermore, any protection of the practitioners against bad quality, and thus, bad image, any constrain for continuing professional development, has bad effects on the image of their professional status.

Our arguing is for a needed system of initial and continuing professional development (CPD), to regulate the issue of qualification needed at different levels, in order to protect the professionals working in adult education, to force to political measures allowing them opportunities for CPD, asking them to attend them, but finding in the same time sources to support them (as the teachers in pre-university system have), to increase the professional status, image and attractiveness of a more regulated profession. This, however, does not hinder the space for creativity, diversity, and flexibility, as these regulations should be differentiated according with the employment status of the practitioners. I give you an example of the effects of not existing criteria for a desirable qualification: in Romania, there was the good stipulation in the law of professional adult education that from 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010 each provider asking for national accreditation of its offer, should prove that the staff delivering it is specialized in dealing with adults in a didactic way. If this stipulation was meant to increase the quality of the delivery, it was no mentioning what such specialization might be, in the labour market having the same value a training of trainers certificate delivered in one weekend, like a master certificate. This has lead to the decrease of esteem for the trainer's profession, as anybody could easily get such a specialization certificate, with doubting effects on the improved quality of the training offer.

Such regulations are therefore needed, if we struggle to define this profession against the classic criteria of analyzing it, and to increase the professional status.

### **Messages in the European policy papers**

The European discourse regarding the adult educators has moved in the last decade from asking for "innovative teaching" (see the third key message of the

*Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, 2000), towards asking the Member States to implement systems of initial and continuous professional development for adult learning professionals. Enlarging the focus from the prerequisite of ALP pedagogical competence to the wider training needs they have for ensuring the quality of education and training (E&T) is a positive approach to the more complex competency profile a professional in AE has to master.

In the *Memorandum* (2000) the objective was to “develop effective teaching and learning methods and contexts for the continuum of lifelong and life-wide learning”, and, in this respect, “significant investment by Member States to adapt, upgrade and sustain the skills of those working in formal and non-formal learning environments, whether as paid professionals, as volunteers or as those for whom teaching activities are a secondary or ancillary function” (p.14) was foreseen as being needed. Also, at that time was already mentioned: “Teaching as a professional role faces decisive change in the coming decades: *teachers and trainers become guides, mentors and mediators*. Their role – and it is a crucially important one – is to help and support learners who, as far as possible, take charge of their own learning. The capacity and the confidence to develop and practise open and participatory teaching and learning methods should therefore become an essential professional skill for educators and trainers, in both formal and non-formal settings”. After more than one decade, the Member States subscribing to the *Memorandum* can report organizing courses to enable the adults educators to perform the new roles? If adult educators were named already then professionals, with a crucial role in supporting the learning of adults, what it is done further since then at national levels to improve their professional status?

However, at European level some more significant steps have been done, more than in a lot of Member States. The two further main policy papers for European Adult Education, the Communiqué on Adult Learning (2006, *It is never too late to learn*)<sup>2</sup>, and the *Action Plan on Adult Learning – It is always a good time to learn* (2007) have both stressed the need for national systems for initial and continuing professional development of adult educators, relevant researchers and studies (see the two above mentioned ones from 2008, 2010), the need for developing “standards for adult learning professionals, including guidance services, based on existing good practice”.

In the three years of implementation, a lot of peer learning activities have taken place, workshops, debates, for the large dissemination of the results of the

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<sup>2</sup> “In order to foster a culture of quality in adult learning, Member States should invest in improving teaching methods and materials adapted to adult learners and put in place initial and continuing professional development measures to qualify and up-skill people working in adult learning. They should introduce quality assurance mechanisms, and improve delivery” – COMM 2006.

studies (see the Report on the implementation of the Action Plan, [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc1288\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc1288_en.htm), 2011: 28-31). Furthermore, the experience in implementing the *Action Plan on Adult Learning* has grounded the further continuation of the efforts and achievements, and in “ET 2020” is highlighted the need „to ensure high quality teaching, to provide adequate initial teacher education, continuous professional development for teachers and trainers, and to make teaching an attractive career choice”.

Beside the policy papers, a lot of European tools for making transparent and comparable the qualification gathered in different contexts and countries (see the EQF, the EuroPass, ECTS, etc.), and instruments for supporting the exchange of good practices, for improving the European cooperation with respect of ensuring the CPD of ALPs have been put in place.

Training courses and qualifications for education and training practitioners working in non-formal sectors (such as youth and community work), in adult education or in continuing training are underdeveloped everywhere in Europe. But through the Grundtvig Programme the CPD of ALPs was strongly supported, either by in-service training courses, or job shadowing, mobility, etc. However, the results of a recently carried out study (soon to be published) on the impact of the Grundtvig Programme on the CPD of ALPs have shown that most of the adult educators benefiting by grants for CPD have at least a master degree, living in urban area. This proves once more the “Mathew effect”: the ones having the highest qualification are also the ones benefiting more for such facilities, and not the ones more in need, with lower levels of qualification. Even more, most of the in-service training courses taken were on languages, not on subject related to the pedagogy of teaching adults, or low skilled adults etc., showing the need to reflect more for the new component of the Lifelong Learning Programme aimed to support the CPD of the adult learning staff on linking the policy priorities with the eligible grants. Furthermore, in the global competition, European Union aims to export know-how and education, one of the main ways being throughout cooperation between adult learning professionals. Such priorities are to be reflected into the design of further programs from 2013 on.

## Debates and challenges

The professional development of adult educators poses several big challenges. The first one comes from the diversity of the adult learning staff, being extremely difficult to identify the training needs for CPD of a target group which is extremely heterogeneous. This, in turn, requires a good knowledge of the activities that



adult education staff is required to perform and on the working settings, as their work differ largely according with the system they are working in. Such knowledge is an essential prerequisite for the development of appropriate training offers that cater for the different training needs of the different sectors of adult education. If professionalism in adult education is discussed at all, then the debate usually refers to one particular sector within adult education rather than to the whole picture. There are various reasons for this. First of all, the sectoral context prevails over an overall perspective on adult education activities. An “animator” in a museum is seen as someone very different from a „trainer“ in a company, even though they do things that are quite similar.

In almost no country the access to a job in adult education is regulated for the whole field of adult education. Such rules do exist only for individual sectors, especially in vocational training or second chance education, where adult learners study to obtain a state diploma or certificate. Proper educations for adult educators do exist in some countries – for example in Germany university degree courses leading to a diploma in adult education. However, since these courses are not compulsory, they failed to exert a shaping influence on adult education as a profession. Continuing training for the professional development of adult education staff is usually offered within the individual sectors of adult education (by associations, companies etc.). The qualifications that are generated through these trainings are very diverse and hardly comparable. Thus, a key prerequisite for the existence of a „profession“ – a systematic and regulated education for the exertion of the work – is lacking.

Secondly, the employment conditions of adult education staff are more or less insecure everywhere. A permanent full-time job in adult education is the exception rather than the rule in all countries. However, we lack reliable data in this regard. Not even the numbers of staff working in adult education are available in most countries, even less so are data on further details of their work conditions. Many adult education staff members do not even see themselves as adult educators but rather as belonging to a certain social or business context. This is especially true in cases when the adult education activity is related to other organisational contexts (such as companies, cultural institutions, associations etc.) or when the adult education activity represents only a part of work in the job.

So virtually in almost no country we can find a debate on adult education as a profession (with positive exceptions like Swiss and Estonia). What can be seen though in many cases, is an intense debate on the competencies and skills needed by people working in certain jobs in the field of adult education. This debate is less intense in countries where the institutional structure of adult education is less developed, but even there it has started. Countries such as England

or France on the other hand have developed quite differentiated approaches to the debate on competencies in adult education – normally with a focus on vocational education and training (see more examples in the Report on implementing the Action Plan on Adult Learning, 2011: 30). The existing competence profiles vary enormously from country to country, being sometimes more differentiated, sometimes of a more generic character. Some refer more to „core skills“, others more to instrumental skills. In no case however have the identified competencies been made a compulsory prerequisite for taking up a job in adult education in general.

Where there is a concern with professionalism or professional development it is often targeted at the small minority of adult educators which is full time employed and works exclusively in adult education. But it is safe to estimate that this minority represents at best 10 % of all those people who are active in one way or another in adult education. This relation varies from country to country and sector to sector – f.e. it is less in confessional contexts, more in the community sector, less in Eastern and Southern Europe, more in the North (Nuißl, 2007). For the professional development in adult education it will however be especially interesting not to concentrate on full time professionals only – which do not exist in great numbers in any country – but to take into account also other groups who work only partly for adult education, or who are not even considered as adult educators, at all or do not consider themselves as such, but whose activity is nevertheless relevant for adult education. The updating of their skills and competencies will be of crucial importance for assuring a high quality level of adult learning. The problem is that we know relatively little about these more “hidden” groups of adult educators (even the Alpine study has tried to show this out), about the concrete activities of relevance to adult education that they perform in their jobs and about the skills that they possess or that they would yet need to improve. Here is a challenge for research and analysis work to provide a basis for the further professional development of the field.

Thus, a real challenge is to stimulate flexible work in social secure environment, raising the attractiveness of the profession. A regulatory system can enhance the attractiveness of the profession mainly to the qualified ones. But these “hidden groups” of adult educators are also to be protected, as they have a big expertise in their field of specialization, and this capital is to be valorized.

Furthermore, as a distinctive challenge we would like to stress the integration at the policy level with focus on the balance between various educational sectors within the spectrum of lifelong learning. Why? Because these hidden groups of practitioners are mainly working in general adult education, in community work, are the animators reaching the adults most in need for support on

their learning. Unfortunately, the recent developments and policy debates, the driven forces of market demands show the concerning trend of decreased focus and efforts for this type of adult education for personal development, for community integration and inclusion, against the increased focus on professional/vocational related adult education. Loosing the balance between various sectors of adult education, within the spectrum of lifelong learning will generate a dangerous situation, contradicting with the wide debate and demand for soft skills, for transversal ones, for the ones embedded into the everyday life.

Thus, to attract and to keep into adult education such practitioners, different solutions are to be put in place. One way to attract them is mapping different educational pathways and professional backgrounds, setting quality standards, benchmarking them (entry requirement, time investment, and learning outcomes). Such attempt has been fulfilled in the European study carried out by Research voor Beleid in 2010. As mentioned before, adult education related activities are widely spread and can be found in practically all societal fields. An overview on adult education which covers all is hardly possible even within one single country. Any attempt at a comparison between countries with their differing societal structures must then necessarily fail.

For a common approach to the professional development of adult educators in Europe it seems therefore necessary rather to identify different fields or clusters of activity in adult education which will then allow to identify sets of skills and competencies that are related to each of these fields, as in this study was done. The broadly defined fields of activity (teaching, management, counselling and guidance, media, programme planning, support) play an important role for the professional development of adult education. Some of them have always been seen as directly being related to adult education, for others the awareness of their relevance for adult education has only developed more recently.

Beside differentiating the various fields of activity with their related competencies, the different professional experiences and pathways are to be valorised and integrated. The validation approach is more and more stressed as a viable professional path. However, our study (Lupou et al, 2010) has shown that this path is still seen as an inferior to the training one, and due its credibility and quality assurance mechanisms, which are still to be improved. The quality assurance issue is a more general one, addressed as well to all the in-service training provisions for CPD of adult learning staff.

Another way to attract and maintain into adult education now only these hidden groups, but also the senior staff, the ones with high expertise, is to ensure different career steps and related benefits, to ensure real opportunities for professional development. The EQF tool allows differentiation and recognition

of different levels of qualification, and smaller scale attempts have been already implemented for designing the competency profile at the level 6 and 7, with the appropriate tools of identifying them (see the FlexiPath toolkit, Gooding, 2010; Strauch et al, 2010).

Such career steps means a coherent system of continuing professional development. To design such system is needed a high position on the policy agenda at national levels, to set methodological and institutional solutions, to design standards for staff (as the study on key competences for adult learning professionals from 2010 has proposed: a set of competences for staff, both professionals and managerial, which could serve as a useful reference), to frame the regulations of access, of upgrading competencies, or the ones related to the opportunities and support for further education. With other words, it means to define the status of the adult learning professional as an independent profession, as a needed measure to ensure an increased quality of the provision for learning opportunities for adults. It is to be seen if such desiderata will be implemented, but also to be seen how the intensive positive developments in the last five years (mainly at European level) will be followed and further valorized at national levels.

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## Put ka profesionalizaciji nastavnika u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih

**Apstrakt:** Evropski razgovori na temu edukatora u obrazovanju odraslih u toku prošle decenije prešli su put od „inovativnog učenja”, do zahteva državama članicama da implementiraju sisteme inicijalnog i kontinuiranog stručnog usavršavanja (KSU) za profesionalce u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih (POO). Pomeranje fokusa sa preduslova, kada su u pitanju pedagoške kompetencije POO, na šire potrebe za obukama ovih profesionalaca radi osiguranja kvaliteta obrazovanja i obuke (O&O) predstavlja pozitivan pristup složenijim kompetencijama koje profesionalac u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih mora da poseduje. Veliki značaj dobiće identifikacija profila kompetencija profesionalaca u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih. Takođe, formalno obrazovanje je ponudilo dosta sitnijih rešenja, kao i neformalno obrazovanje (npr. prepoznavanje i integracija alternativnih pravaca kroz validaciju pristupa), a u isto vreme prikupljene su evropske alatke koje omogućavaju transparentnost i uporedivost kvalifikacija u različitim kontekstima i državama. Međutim, uprkos intenzivnom razvoju i uloženim naporima, i to uglavnom u poslednjih pet godina, i napretku koji je ostvaren u različitim aspektima profesionalizacije POO, još uvek nedostaje njihova integracija u koherentni sistem kada je u pitanju profesionalni razvoj za vreme studija i u toku zaposlenja. Zašto je tako teško preći na „sledeći korak”/nivo?

**Ključne reči:** nastavnici u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih, profesionalci u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih, pedagoške/didaktičke kompetencije, profesionalizacija, kontinuirano stručno usavršavanje, validacija.

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