

Research Article

Exploring Trends and Challenges in Professional Development of Adult Educators across European Member States: Insights and Recommendations for Improvements

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of professional development trends in European Member States, encompassing training and qualification requirements, as well as the supply and demand for adult teaching staff, including specialized training in andragogical studies. The study investigates actions and policies related to professional development in selected European Member States through thematic analysis of a supportive document for National Coordinators of Adult Learning, who participated in an online Peer Learning Activity (PLA) in May 2021. Additionally, relevant information from Eurydice, European policy documents, scholarly articles, and research papers is incorporated. This overview sets the stage for a discussion on prevailing trends in the professional development of adult educators across European Member States and explores how these trends impact professional development. Overall, the discussion underscores the need for a more systematic and sustained approach to professional development and professionalization in the field of adult education. This includes addressing the diverse needs of adult educators and advocating for greater recognition and regulation of the profession across European countries.

Keywords: adult educators, professional development, professionalization, document analysis, European Member States

1. Introduction

The landscape of adult education in Europe is shaped by dynamic societal, financial, and technological changes, with the European Commission emphasizing its pivotal role (European Commission, 2006; Council of the European Union, 2021). These changes, including the financial crisis, such as the one of 2008 and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, stress the need for upskilling and the swift adaptation to digital education for adults (European Commission, 2020). However, despite efforts, the adult learning sector faces challenges in reaching adult learners, particularly those belonging to marginalized groups (European Commission, op. cit.).

To meet the long-term goals of adult education, well-trained adult educators are needed, as emphasized in several EU policy documents (European Commission, 2006; Council of the European Union, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2015; European Union, 2019; Council of the European Union, 2020). Early policy documents highlighted the pivotal role of adult learning professionals in enhancing the quality of the sector and urged Member States to develop strategies for initial and ongoing professional development, focusing on defined competences

and mechanisms for validating knowledge acquired in non-formal contexts (European Commission, 2006; 2007). Subsequently, initiatives such as the European Agenda for Adult Learning in 2011 reinforced attention on the education of adult teaching staff education within the framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ‘ET 2020’ (Council of the European Union, 2009). Member States were encouraged to define competence profiles, establish effective professional development systems, and promote staff mobility (Council of the European Union, 2011, p. 5), with mobility aiding professional growth by offering a broader understanding of educational practices and policies (Levy, 2016). Recent reports also highlight the significance of professional development for adult educators as an emerging priority in the post-2020 period (European Commission, 2019; Council of the European Union, 2020), echoing calls for enhancing the professionalism and capacity of adult educators in the new European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030 (Council of the European Union, 2021).

Despite the prevailing circumstances, training for adult educators has not received priority, as evidenced by various European and international studies (European Commission, 2006; 2018; 2019; Research voor Beleid and PLATO, 2008; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015). Furthermore, many adult educators lack specialized preparation, often due to their part-time or freelance employment status, which impacts their professionalization and quality of education they provide (Council of the European Union, 2020). A Eurydice report on adult education in Europe highlights that most adult educators are self-taught professionals, underscoring ongoing challenges in providing quality professional development opportunities across the EU (European Education and Culture Executive Agency et al., 2015). These challenges include, among others, resource constraints, inadequate support systems for professional development, the alignment of professionalization with the professional development and training of adult educators, and the need for better recognition of non-formal and informal learning of adult educators. Concerning the last issue, it is worth mentioning that many educators acquire their specialized skills for working with adults through practical experience, non-formal and informal training, and voluntary work, rather than formal education. Consequently, validating their prior learning offers an alternative route to formal education, enhancing the comparability and transparency of adult educator qualifications and facilitating career access and advancement (Lupou & Sava, 2009). Additionally, the UNESCO progress report highlights the scarcity of resources as the primary challenge adult educators are confronted with (UNESCO, 2018). While resources alone may not guarantee success, they are undeniably essential—this sentiment was echoed by the majority of countries surveyed, which cited a lack of financial, technical, human, and other resources as a major obstacle. Furthermore, the UNESCO GRALE 5 report underscores the significance of resources in enhancing professional capacities, citing textbooks, teaching manuals, digital infrastructure, and equipment as crucial elements (UIL, 2022). Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing the quality, equity, and inclusiveness of adult education across European Member States (European Commission, 2019; Council of the European Union, 2011). Notably, although professional development of those working in adult education is identified as a characteristic of the professionalization of the sector, it is still difficult to identify how this term is applied and by whom and how adult educators can take control over their own profession (Doyle et al., 2016).

2. Background

2.1 *Current status of professional development of adult educators*

Adult educators play a crucial role in delivering quality teaching to adult learners, yet many lack formal training and specialized expertise (Andersson et al., 2013). They often work part-time, facing low salaries, limited career prospects, and low professional status (Collins, 1991; Steiner, 2013). Adult educators’ initial education and ongoing professional development receive insufficient attention compared to other educational fields (Andersson et al., 2013). Limited regulation and fragmented provision hinder their professional growth (Lupou, 2010; Egetenmeyer et al., 2018). Despite efforts to address this limited provision, such as the engagement in modularized academic courses (Egetenmeyer et al., 2018) opportunities for comprehensive professional development remain scarce.

New roles for adult learning practitioners are linked to evolving competence requirements (Lattke & Zhu, 2010; Tzovla & Kedraka, 2020). While adult education definitions are broad, they encompass activities like teaching, management, counseling, and media, all necessitating specific competencies (Nuissl, 2010). Adult educators, operating across diverse settings, are tasked with fostering transformation in the economy and society, facilitating growth, and

nurturing the acquisition of new skills among their learners. At the same time, they have to navigate the complexities of an increasingly diverse learner population and increased demands for effective teaching. Meeting these demands requires tailored professional development designed to equip educators with the necessary skills and competences (Nuissl, 2010). Professional development serves as a crucial pathway for ongoing support and skill acquisition (Lattke & Zhu, 2010; Tzovla & Kedraka, 2020).

Adult educators are expected to have diverse competences, as outlined in the European study 'Key competences of Adult Learning Professionals' (Research voor Beleid, 2010), which explores the competences needed for professional development, informed by stakeholder perspectives and existing literature. However, critiques challenge this conceptualization, citing its instrumental focus and lack of attention to social and personal attributes in professional development (Mikulec, 2019). Despite these criticisms, the study highlights the diverse activities and profiles within adult education, suggesting tailored approaches to professional development. This includes recognizing different fields like teaching, management, and counselling which will allow the identification of sets of skills and competences related to each of these fields (Nuissl, 2010; Sava, 2011). The competences identified in the aforementioned study may inform training materials, workshops, and ongoing education programmes, contributing to the sector's professionalization. They also serve as assessment benchmarks and guide continuous professional growth for adult educators.

Formal training and qualification of adult educators have gained increased policy attention from the European Commission, urging European countries to enhance the quality of adult educator work through performance indicators, benchmarks, and standards. This results in various discussions mobilizing different audiences to hold the profession of adult education accountable (Jütte et al., 2011). The quality of adult education work relies on the competences of practitioners, who are expected to have professional competence and engage in continuing professional development through reflection and participation in communities of practice (Jütte et al., 2011; Egetenmeyer & Käßlinger, 2011; Travers & Harris, 2014). With adult teaching staff in Europe coming from diverse backgrounds (GHK & Research voor Beleid, 2011), training programmes should address their multiple roles through flexible curricula and training formats. Given that adult learning professionals often enter the field later in life after gaining work experience elsewhere, training provision must be flexible and respectful of their past experiences, taking into account the specific needs of part-time practitioners with short-term contracts (GHK & Research voor Beleid, 2011).

The diversity within the adult education field poses a challenge in defining the required competences for professionals (Zarifis & Papadimitriou, 2020). Encouraging European Member States to adopt quality performance indicators and standards is an important endeavour (Jütte et al., 2011). The wide spectrum of adult education staff, along with varied provision and employment conditions, complicates their professional development. Fragmentation within the field makes it difficult to address common concerns regarding the type and content of professional development programmes. Understanding how professional development is approached across European Member States and whether national policies exist, is crucial for ensuring relevance across diverse adult education sectors and roles.

Despite the recognized importance of professional development for adult educators and its impact on the quality of adult learning, concerns persist. The European Commission's report *Achievements under the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning between 2011 and 2018* (European Commission, 2019), highlights ongoing difficulties in identifying clear advancements in professionalizing adult educators. Additionally, the diverse backgrounds career paths of adult educators (Paulos, 2015) complicate the definition of required competences, highlighting the necessity for increased focus on professional development within the European Member States as a key quality indicator.

Based on the aforementioned context, the present article aims to explore prevailing trends in professional development among adult educators in the European Member States, with a focus on identifying effective strategies to improve the situation regarding their professional development. With this aim in focus, the article seeks to address the following research questions: (a) What prevailing trends characterize the professional development and professionalization of adult educators across European Member States? (b) In what ways do these trends impact the professional development of adult educators? (c) How might the current situation be improved to ensure enhanced professional development for people working in the adult education field?

3. Methodology

This article was based on descriptions of staff training in 27 European Member States prepared by independent experts as background to the Education and Training Monitor of 2019. The descriptions were updated by the National Coordinators of the European Agenda for Adult Learning, and compiled into a document with the title “Information on training and professional development of adult learning staff” (Hansen, 2021). It was also used as a supportive document for the online Peer Learning Activity on ‘Staff Capacity and Development in Adult Learning’ that took place in May 2021, in the framework of the European Agenda for Adult Learning. The document had a thematic focus on teachers and trainers in adult learning and gathered information that highlighted the diverse picture of training of adult educators all around Europe. The information was verified and updated by the majority of the countries. In this context, some parts of the information of the context of the document are updated and some parts remained the original as prepared by the independent experts.

The article utilizes a descriptive research approach employing qualitative methods to examine how the European Member States included in the document conceptualize the professional development of adult learning staff. This exploration involves analyzing their policies and the implementation of relevant initiatives. To achieve this objective, a thematic analysis of the aforementioned document was conducted, carefully considering the qualitative aspects of the analyzed material, adhering to the process outlined by Boyatzis (1998). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method which identifies, analyses, and describes themes found within a set of data, highlighting similarities and differences, (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The structure of the document led to a deductive approach to thematic analysis, where coding relied on pre-established codes, which were applied to segments of text from each country. During this approach categorisation of themes was already established and occurrence of text that fitted these categories was the focus of the analysis (Cardno, 2019). The themes explored were those identified in the aforementioned report: i. Overview of the education/training for adult educators, including training and qualification requirements, ii. Supply of and demand for adult teaching/training staff, iii. Andragogy/specific training to teach adults, through which concepts could be further investigated. For better identification of the information in each Member State, a provisional template with the above themes was used as suggested by King (2004), which employed the full data set, suggesting that using a template forces the researcher to clearly define how each theme is used. While the manifest themes were already pre-determined, the objective of the process was to grasp the underlying significance embedded within these themes. This necessitated interpretation aided by supplementary documents. Therefore, additional information was also retrieved from Eurydice on the Continuing Professional Development for Teachers and Trainers Working in Adult Education and Training in EU countries (information updated in 2023) as well as from relevant European policy documents and academic articles.

Throughout this phase, policies, significant initiatives, practices, relevant regulations, and policy measures for each country under every theme were pinpointed. By identifying both similarities and differences among European countries, a deeper comprehension of the professional development landscape within the adult education sector was fostered (Egetenmeyer, 2016; Lattke & Jutte, 2014).

Before analysing the data more thoroughly, the aforementioned document (“Information on training and professional development of adult learning staff”, Hansen, 2021) was read multiple times to get an overall impression of the central concepts referring to the professional development in each country. Then, a more traditional analysis was followed, that is, analysing the information for each country separately under each theme, to identify what was relevant to each of the three themes stated above. After that, the information for all countries for every separate theme was read horizontally to compare and contrast and find similarities or categories to assign the information gathered. Information from certain countries could be coded into more than one theme.

Of course, the process employed in this study was not without its limitations. Simply reporting on what was present in certain countries did not necessarily imply its absence in others. Therefore, this study primarily aims to highlight general trends rather than provide a comprehensive mapping of each country’s situation. A future article could focus on a select number of countries to delve deeper into a comparative perspective. The utilization of supplementary documents helped mitigate some of these limitations.

4. Results and findings

In this section, information pertaining to professional development is discussed based on specific themes, including an overview of education and training provisions, the supply and demand of adult teaching staff, and specialized training in andragogy and other training for teaching adults. The information has been extracted from the document “Information on training and professional development of adult learning staff” (Hansen, 2021) using the process outlined in the Methodology chapter above. The results are presented below. Additional documents identified, included and analysed in the review, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Documents identified, included and analysed in the review

S/N	Country	Source	Major Issues/findings
1	Latvia	Eurydice (2023a)	Various institutions provide regular programmes for adult education facilitators and educators, aiming to develop the competences of adult education providers.
2	Portugal	EAEA (2022)	As indicated by the Associação Portuguesa para a Cultura e Educação Permanente (APCEP), non-formal education is not recognised as a specific field in adult education policy.
3	Greece	Karalis et al. (2014)	The training of any person who wishes to become a certified adult educator is an open-market non-regulated procedure and their training is left on the individual educator who can participate in an examination process by the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications & Vocational Guidance.
4	Slovenia	Mikulec and Perčič (2019)	There are courses provided by NGOs that cover general basic training, specialized role-specific training, and advanced programmes aimed at enhancing knowledge and professional identity.
5	Norway	Eurydice (2023b)	University programmes focusing on Adult Learning and Literacy or on Adult Learning and Digital Competence.
6	Czech Republic	Kříž and Svobodová (2022)	Some NGOs are active in the theory of andragogy and deal with the development and research of adult education.
7	Czech Republic	Kaňáková (2016)	Because of the lack of well-defined career pathways in the Czech Republic, adult educators encounter limited opportunities for career growth and development. Other obstacles include the aging demographic of adult educators and an increasing gender disparity weighted towards women.
8	Austria	European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (2017)	Combined with the lack of a specialized workforce within the nation, the uncertainty surrounding employment for adult learning instructors is also a matter of concern, among other issues identified regarding the country.
9	Austria	Eurydice (2023c)	Clarifications are given for the qualification “Certified Adult Educator” which is acquired after participation in various courses provided by academic organisations.
10	Cyprus	Ioannidou and Gravani (2014)	Adult educators in Cyprus lack background in andragogy.
11	Croatia	Čepić and Mašić (2016)	Many adult educators lack basic andragogical knowledge and skills, among others, due to limited educational opportunities.

4.1 Overview of the education/training for adult educators, including training and qualification requirements

The professional development landscape for adult educators in European Member States, based on the thematic analysis, appears complex and varied. The majority of these countries lack a comprehensive and regulated system for training adult educators, with no standardized requirements or specific qualifications necessary to practice in this field, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Spain, and the Czech Republic. Additionally, there is a lack of systematic professional development opportunities, and national regulations outlining training qualification requirements are often absent. Moreover, the diversity within the field leads to variations in qualifications and employment status among adult educators.

In formal adult education systems, there are more formalized qualification requirements for adult educators

compared to those working in the non-formal adult education sector, which is less systematized. Adult education teachers working in formal schooling, including vocational education and training (VET) or gymnasiums/lyceums, for adult learners possess the same qualifications as teachers in the formal school system or have a degree in their area of expertise (for instance, in Spain). In general, the organization and motivations for engaging in ongoing professional development among adult educators are comparable to those commonly put in place for teachers delivering education at other education levels.

Moreover, adult educators do not have to comply with any special requirements in terms of their qualifications in teaching adults. In Latvia, for example, there are no regulations at the national level outlining training qualification requirements for adult educators and adult trainers and no special requirements for teachers working in evening schools, beyond the general requirements for teachers, although various institutions provide regular programmes for adult education facilitators and educators aiming to develop the competences of adult education providers (Eurydice, 2023a). In Norway, the education of adult learning teachers within the formal system is of high quality as it falls under the responsibility of public governance and regulated legislation. In some countries, there are specific prerequisites for adult educators, for instance in Malta, the Higher Diploma in the Teaching of Adults is a prerequisite for people engaged by the Ministry in teaching adults as part of its broad adult education programme.

In the non-formal and informal sectors, the requirements are less systematized. Adult educators in the non-formal system are not considered as teachers and thus there are no specific requirements regarding their qualifications, a situation found in Poland. In Portugal, as indicated by the Associação Portuguesa para a Cultura e Educação Permanente APCEP, non-formal education is not recognised as a specific field in adult education policy (EAEA, 2022). In Finland, there are no set requirements, but education planners and teaching staff are also required to have a BA degree and 60 credits in pedagogy. Those working per-hour contracts are still unqualified. In Greece, the training of any person who wishes to become a certified adult educator is an open-market non-regulated procedure and their training is left to the individual educator who can participate in an examination process by the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications & Vocational Guidance-Ethnikos Organismos Pistopoiisis Proson ton & Epaggelmatikou Prosanatolismou (EOPPEP) (Kokkos et al., 2014).

Moreover, there are numerous training programmes for specific types of involvement in adult education and training. In Slovenia, the main programme focused on forming highly skilled adult educators is provided by the University of Ljubljana (Department for Pedagogy and Andragogy). Teachers in formal adult education can finish university programmes in social and humanistic sciences (a special one-year programme called Pedagogic Andragogic Training) and pass the exams (the programme is also required for candidates that want to teach in schools for young children). Moreover, there are numerous training programmes for specific types of involvement in adult education and training, such as organisers, counsellors, advisors, mentors, valuers, supporting staff and other staff offered by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education. Apart from the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana with the study programme Andragogy, in Slovenia, the Faculty of Education of the University of Primorska offers a study programme on Adult Education and Career Development. Finally, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) offers diverse training for adult educators and professionals engaging in adult education. Their courses cover general basic training, specialized role-specific training, and advanced programmes aimed at enhancing knowledge and professional identity (Mikulec & Perčič, 2019).

In the majority of European countries, various programmes exist to enhance the skills and competences of adult educators across different sectors. These programmes include both full-time and part-time BA and MA university programmes, with modules focusing on Adult Education and Adult Pedagogy. For example, in Portugal, universities offer BA degrees addressing adult education issues, alongside MA and PhD programmes specialized in the field. Such university programmes are available in several countries including Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia, and Cyprus. Additionally, other countries, such as Denmark, have well-organized and high-quality adult education systems, with a significant level of institutionalization (structures, curricula, funding schemes). Furthermore, some countries offer formal training through multiple providers, which can be integrated into degrees or taken as voluntary Continuous Professional Development (CPD). For instance, in Norway, one university provides a 30 ECTS program focusing on Adult Learning and Literacy, while another university offers a 30 ECTS course centred on Adult Learning and Digital Competence (Eurydice, 2023b).

Various academic degrees and specialized courses are offered by NGOs, private providers, educational institutions,

and public bodies across several countries. For example, in the Czech Republic, the Czech Andragogy Society is active in the theory of andragogy and deals with the development and research of adult education (Kříž & Svobodová, 2022). Moreover, the Federation for Support of Knowledge in Bulgaria provides in-service training programmes to this group. In Latvia, work-based learning for trainers and tutors was introduced in 2018 as part of the National Reforms in Vocational Education and Training and Adult Learning. For those employed in the adult education sector in Latvia, delivery is provided by the Latvian National Library, Universities, Colleges, and other independent providers. Slovakia provides training programmes through NGOs and private providers, some accredited by the Ministry of Education. In Austria, the Austrian Academy of Continuing Education is a key stakeholder in the professionalization of adult educators which is a validation system for the qualification and recognition of adult educators.

Finally, it has been identified that adult educators are active in many fields. For instance, in Austria, teaching, education management, counselling, information and library management were highlighted. In Malta and the Netherlands, a key area of practice is teaching migrants or Migrant Education, while in Belgium it is basic education teachers. In Cyprus, there are teachers in Evening Gymnasiums-Lyceums and Evening Technical Schools of Secondary Education and part-time practitioners working in the non-formal sector. To address the need of the different fields and specific target groups, in some countries there are more specific requirements for adult educators teaching specialized courses, e.g. language courses to migrants, or basic skill courses to low skilled adults. Teachers of Norwegian to adult immigrants, for instance, must have at least 30 ECTS in the Norwegian as a second language at Higher Education level (Integration Act 2021). In the Netherlands, in relation to basic skills training, there are modules and certificates developed for adult educators, both teachers and volunteers, in Dutch as a first and Dutch as a second language (e.g. in the framework of the programme Language for Life).

4.2 Supply of and demand for adult teaching/training staff

Insufficient data availability hampers the assessment of demand for and supply of teaching staff in the adult education sector across Europe. However, notable trends can be identified in certain countries. For example, Austria witnesses a growing demand for qualified adult teachers, particularly in rural areas. In Spain, there is an inadequate supply of teachers in vocational education and training (VET) and general adult education. Combined with the absence of a specialized workforce in the country, the instability of employment among adult learning teachers is also a concern (European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, 2017). Additionally, France identifies a need for basic adult education teachers and teachers in new technologies and innovative teaching methods like MOOECs. Finally, Malta experiences a high demand for language course instructors, especially English language.

Generally, the supply of and demand for adult teaching staff in the EU countries are closely tied to the profession's low employment status. Professional development and qualifications for adult educators are often left to individual initiative, particularly in Bulgaria and Greece, leading to unstable working conditions. Only a small number of adult educators work on a full-time basis and as a consequence the part-time employment limits the attractiveness of the profession. Many adult educators face precarious employment, often on a contract basis and hourly pay, such as in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland and Poland. Low wages and social prestige discourage individuals from pursuing careers in adult education, prompting some to seek opportunities in other fields, such as business, as observed in Lithuania. Due to the absence of an established career system in the Czech Republic, for instance, adult educators face restricted prospects for career advancement and progression. Additional challenges include the aging workforce among adult educators and a growing gender imbalance in favor of women (Kaňáková, 2016). Limited professional development opportunities further compound the low employment status of adult educators, leaving many without specialized competencies, particularly in adult education and andragogy, as it will be seen in the next part of the article.

4.3 Andragogy/specific training to teach adults

Generally, formal requirements for adult pedagogical competences (andragogy) are lacking, with limited availability of programmes focused on adult pedagogy. In practice, teacher and trainer training in andragogy is inadequate, although some national initiatives recognize the need for different teaching methods for adults. In Cyprus, for example, adult educators have no background in "andragogy" (Ioannidou & Gravani, 2014). Moreover, there is a lack of agreed approaches or principles on delivery approaches, teaching methods and principles. A binding qualification

profile for the pedagogy field of andragogy is not specified, with no mandatory qualifications for adult educators. For example, in Hungary, the use of andragogic principles is unstructured with limited awareness, and it continues to face a significant backlog in addressing the professionalization of adult learning professionals (Beszédes & Farkas, 2023). According to them (Beszédes & Farkas, op. cit.) the debate regarding the roles and responsibilities of adult educators regarding Andragogues has been covered multiple times throughout the history of this professional field. Additionally, the extent to which adult learning principles are integrated into training for teachers and volunteers in European Member States remains unclear. In Croatia, many adult educators lack basic pedagogical knowledge and skills, among others, due to limited educational opportunities (Čepić & Mašić, 2016).

Of course, some initiatives employ pedagogical approaches. Universities providing Master's programmes in adult education use both pedagogical training techniques, the theory and practice of adult learning. In Cyprus, for instance, when professional development is provided, special attention is given to adult learning theories, such as andragogy, transformative and experiential learning. Also, Master's programmes provided by higher education institutions adopt the main pedagogical principles in their programmes of study. However, it has been noted that it is up to a university to decide the content of the adult educator programme. Therefore, it is difficult to say if andragogy is part of the programme or not. This cannot be answered, yet from studying some of the disciplines of the programmes offered by the respective universities, in most of the times these are theoretical and not based so much on didactics and practice.

Training opportunities vary, including workshops, conferences, and occasional events organized by employers, education providers, or educators themselves for continuing professional development. In Belgium, organizations are encouraged to offer tailored, in-house training for teaching staff, while in Flemish formal education, educators receive in-service training through the Public Employment Service (Vlaamse Dienst voor Beroepsopleiding en Arbeidsbemiddeling, VDAB). Luxembourg provides a curriculum for adult education teachers covering pedagogical theory and practice which is organized by the Institute for continuing training of school teachers and educational staff. The curriculum covers areas that fall within the adult education pedagogy, both in theory and practice (e.g. introduction to adult learning and didactics of adult education). In Malta, professional development focuses on learner-centred approaches and influential theorists, such as Paulo Freire. Latvian adult pedagogy adapted the humanistic notion of adult learning with the individual in the centre, based on the principles of adult education theorists as well as recommendations of international organizations such as Knowles (1984) and UNESCO (1976). In the Netherlands, within the broader teacher training programmes, some focus is placed on adult education principles whereas in Romania andragogy courses are offered in university education. Moreover, adult education and andragogy in Austria are part of the theoretical competence of the qualification "Certified Adult Educator". The qualification is acquired after participation in various courses provided by academic organisations (Eurydice, 2023c).

5. Discussion

The discussion will revolve around the three research questions posed at the beginning of the article, building upon the results and findings presented in Chapter 4. Regarding the first two research questions about prevailing trends in the professional development and professionalization of adult educators across European Member States, and how these trends affect their professional growth, several key issues have emerged. At first, it was identified that in the majority of the countries, very few are full-time practitioners due to the highly changing demand for teaching (intake on a needs basis) as the demand depends on the course take-up. Overall, the sector is characterized by a low degree of professionalization of the adult educators and their professional profile does not have standardised requirements. This may be due to the high heterogeneity and uncertainty of their employment status (part-time practitioners, temporary contracts, volunteers, self-employed, paid on an hourly basis with a lot of variation in their rates).

This situation affects their training, which in the majority of the counties is very limited, highly unregulated and of questionable quality and duration. Due to the lack of permanent demand and the employment in short term contracts, normally do not, adult education organisations, both in the public and the private sector, invest in the in-service and the continuing professional development of staff. At the same time, the insecure and uncertain employment conditions in the sector and the low wages force many employees in further education to move to other occupational fields. Adult educators are in a unique position, as they have acquired a speciality in the course of their studies, but often lack formal

preparation and initial training for teaching adults before entering the profession (Gravani & Zarifis, 2020). Hence, they mostly acquire their competences for dealing with adult learners on the job, through their working experience. In the absence of a specific professional development pathway in the majority of European countries, adult educators take on this responsibility and manage their own professional and personal development, usually in non-formal and informal learning settings.

The diversity of the field is reflected in the type of professional development provision, which varies in types, covering initial and continuous professional development, as well as informal courses and university programmes. Various professional organizations contribute to the development of professionalization of adult educators, such as universities that offer specific programmes of studies in the field of adult education, associations of adult education providers, professional organizations and governmental bodies that are responsible for policy making in the field of adult education.

As identified in this research, the profession of adult educator is not a regulated profession, a situation that is commonly found in most European countries (Paulos, 2015) and scant attention has been paid to defining the content and processes for initial training or for continuous professional development for adult educators, either in the formal or non-formal sectors. 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. Moreover, because of the diversity of the field professional development needs to target not only full time employed adult educators but all those people who are activated in the field of adult education, even those hidden groups or those who may not regard themselves as educators of adults to ensure high-quality level of adult learning (Sava, 2011).

In general, no legal requirements for adult educators working in the general adult education field could be recognized and no regulation frames the need for regular and continuous training of adult educators. As a result, adult educators have very few opportunities to access relevant, systematic and high quality and practice-oriented training and no incentives exist for them to participate in such courses. Due to this, adult educators take the responsibility of their professional development by themselves through participation in conferences, training programmes or joining a community of practice. This knowledge, however, is not enough to teach adults effectively and fulfil professional development requirements (Milana & Larson, 2010).

Teaching adults is not seen as a regulated profession compared to teaching other groups (e.g. students in primary and secondary education) and thus the training of adult educators is not seen as part of their everyday practice, making it a contentious and contested terrain (Buiskool et al., 2009). This limits the professionalization of the sector as the occupational profile of educators in adult education does not possess standardised requirements. It also contributes to the low awareness of the importance of well-educated staff. The importance of updating knowledge cannot be understated, particularly in the light of the pressing challenges confronting the adult learning sector today. These challenges refer to the need to address the rapid societal changes, like demographic shifts, healthcare transformations and globalization, that affect the adult learning sector and, by extension, the adult educators. This places significant responsibility upon adult educators, who require relevant knowledge to achieve specific and general objectives of the sector. To play this role effectively substantial professional development will be required to reach adult learners, especially vulnerable groups. Relevant to this is research suggesting that developing a skilled adult education workforce through initial teacher training and continuous professional development is key to increasing adult participation in learning (European Commission, 2015).

Participation in professional development and the acquisition of specialized knowledge and skills can help establish adult education as a profession (Imel et al., 2000); however, this is jeopardized by the limited participation of adult educators in these activities. The situation in the European Member States shows that there is a lack of adult education pedagogy in most training programmes as well as the presence of a large number of unqualified per-hour teachers in the non-formal sector. Because of this, adult educators use knowledge constructed by themselves to operate as professionals and to develop their teaching. It also denotes that teachers of adults should have better skills in teaching adults to address the specific needs of their learners in the particular sectors they work, e.g. with migrants, low-skilled adults and adults coming from vulnerable social groups. Therefore, greater professionalization would be necessary, including the improvement of their working conditions, such as an increase in wages and the prestige of the profession.

If the professional development of adult educators becomes more systematic and sustained for practitioners in the sector, there will be a need for provision in more institutions and via flexible methods, taking that adult educators have,

as their learners, numerous obligations and responsibilities. A better recognition of the social role of the adult educator is also needed, along with much investment in the role of the adult educator, as to bring about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, or skills (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 9), as facilitators with responsibility for creating a comfortable physical and psychological climate of mutual trust, respect, supportiveness, and openness (Knowles, 1984). The growing demands of the role have brought about segmentation, and has created new occupations which in turn has necessitated new approaches to professional preparation and development.

The fact that a wide number of adult educators have educational roles without receiving appropriate education raises concerns about the effectiveness of the teaching process. Adult educators' training should be more specialized, targeted, and systematic to ensure quality in teaching. For non-formal education, where there is a lack of a regulated system of validation of educators' qualifications this needs to be addressed with certain mechanisms of validation of non-formal and informal learning in this sector. Better working conditions, the reduction of uncertain employment relationships and a more secure professional future can enhance their professional development. However, the adult learning policy agenda needs to be renewed in European Member States.

As the field of adult education is not at the forefront for policymakers, it is important to develop a more promising image of it in terms of the professional career of adult educators. Continuity in policies may give a more prominent profile to the profession and practice of adult educators. Also, it is important to review the regulation on the profile of adult educators by introducing the need for adult educators to have initial education and continuing education, through better and more consistent policies. However, because professional development of adult educators is rarely specific to adult education, this group of practitioners may not identify themselves as professionals in the field. Adult education is therefore-as elsewhere becoming a second-choice profession (Andersson et al., 2013). Consequently, adult educators have relatively low degrees of professionalization in contrast to other educational sectors.

Professional development can provide job security and raise the professional status of adult educators by making them 'highly qualified' (Beavers, 2009, p. 25). This might be regarded as an instrumental approach because this kind of professional development mostly focuses on updating or acquiring teaching skills and knowledge that are important for the practitioners in the workplace, and ignores the context in which educators learn and practise. However, professional development can be a transformative process of critical reflection upon practices that change one's frame of reference, discarding habits of mind, seeing alternatives, and acting differently. This form of professional development encompasses educators as holistic individuals, considering their values, beliefs, and assumptions regarding teaching, as well as their perspectives on the world (Cranton & King, 2003).

Addressing the third research question concerning how the current situation could be improved to ensure enhanced professional development for individuals working in the adult education field poses a complex matter to resolve. Considering the situation described above, some ways could improve the professional development of the people working in the field. At first, it is essential to have the appropriate training in order to play their educational role. It is also important to identify who the adult educators are and to carefully consider their role in the broader context of adult education. They serve not only as facilitators of learning but also as catalysts, empowering adults to live creatively in the contemporary world, and fostering personal development and the participation of adults in learning. These are fundamental principles of adult education theories on which their professional development may be based, enabling learners to have an active role in the learning process. This will also enable adult educators to connect their everyday practice with the wider purposes of the field and help them identify the necessary competences that adult educators should possess in order to improve their instructional practice and teaching techniques and address the needs of their learners, including learner-centred teaching. Finally, allocation of sufficient resources to adult education in accordance with national needs to develop the capabilities of educational personnel, can enhance professional development.

In this article, it has been acknowledged that adult educators should have qualifications in order to increase efficiency and quality in adult education. However, no specialised provision exists for this group of practitioners. In the absence of a specific professional development pathway, the majority of them depend on their own and take on the responsibility of their professional development by themselves, usually in non-formal and informal learning settings. The diversity of the adult education-related activities, the adult educator profiles and the different sectors in which adult educators are employed, implies that it may be inappropriate to implement a single approach to the professional development of adult educators. An answer to this is to identify the different clusters or fields of activity in adult education, such as teaching, management and counselling, which will then allow for the identification of sets

of skills and competences that are related to each of these fields (Nuissl, 2010; Sava, 2011). This can run alongside the identification of needs that are generic to all, regardless of field. Lassnigg (2011, p. 38) suggests that this heterogeneity requires a 'looser' conceptualisation of professional development for adult educators in order to 'denote the building of an organised community of practitioners, who are somehow both visible in and able to shape their field'. The above view aligns with the analysis presented in Chapter 4, which identified that European Member States are not engaged in the professional development of adult educators from the same starting point. Therefore, seeking for uniformity in addressing professional development may not be applicable, and recognizing the differences among countries, because of this diversity, might help in achieving the sector's goals in this particular aspect of the field.

An aspect identified to a very limited extent during the document analysis was the need for professional development to foster not only the teaching practices of adult educators but also other aspects, such as the reflective practice of adult educators to help them understand how they may promote other aims, such as helping adults to participate better in society and live fuller lives. Some principles used in adult education were identified in sub-chapter '4.3 Andragogy/specific training to teach adults', however, the main emphasis was on pedagogical training and teaching methodologies. Adult educators should be in a position to reflect on their roles and the purpose of teaching adults (Mezirow, 1990; Brookfield, 2017). Enabling adult educators to reflect on their beliefs and teaching will help them develop a new awareness of what creates an effective teaching and learning environment and stimulates interest in teaching adults.

Finally, it is important to note, as highlighted in the present article, that the profession of adult educator remains largely unregulated across most European Member States. There has been limited focus on defining the content and procedures for both initial training and ongoing professional development for adult educators, whether in formal or non-formal sectors. The diverse career paths of adult educators working in different sectors mirror the wide range of approaches to professional development. Therefore, professional development may contribute to standardizing the qualifications of adult educators, and protect and supporting those professionals while letting them remain creative and flexible in their work.

The analysis identified government policies, regulations and other acts that shape the opportunities and challenges faced by adult educators in their professional development. These are influenced by economic factors affecting adult education, such as market demands for specific skills, and economic trends affecting the job market for adult educators. Additionally, exploring the broader social dynamics shaping adult education and professional development is crucial. This involves, for instance, the demographic shifts that affect the learner populations. Aligning these elements with the professional development of adult educators may address more effectively their needs within the broader socio-political and financial environment in which they operate.

6. Conclusion

This article has reviewed the prevailing trends regarding professional development in European Member States, focusing on processes aimed at enhancing teaching practices and providing ongoing support to adult educators. The findings reveal a lack of comprehensive training systems and standardized requirements for adult educators across most European Member States. Despite existing European policies, national practices reveal slow progress in this area. Moreover, professional development initiatives mainly focus on formal certificate programmes offered by higher education institutions, leaving many adult educators in the non-formal sector without the necessary skills to address the diverse needs of their learners.

The absence of a standardized educational pathway for adult educators results in widely divergent entry requirements across European Member States, making it challenging to establish consistent professional standards. Despite efforts by Member States, progress in this area is limited. Additionally, professional development in this field lacks unified identities and visions, which undermines its visibility and importance. Although professional development of adult educators is recognized as essential, efforts remain fragmented and lack systematic approaches, hindering progress in the sector. This is possibly because adult education is not yet a priority in the educational agendas of the European countries and remains highly underfunded (UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, 2019). Inevitably, this impacts those working in the field.

While the discussion acknowledges the argument for more rigorous professional development to enhance job status, it focuses primarily on presenting the current state of professional development among adult educators in European Member States, rather than advocating for a specific regulatory approach. It also recognizes the aspect of identifying the different clusters within the adult education sector. The diversity of adult education-related activities, the different adult educator profiles, and the employment sectors in which adult educators are activated, imply that a single approach to professional development may be inappropriate. Therefore, the article discusses the need to identify various clusters or fields of activity. This approach will facilitate the identification of specific sets of skills and competencies relevant to each field, which can then be targeted by professional development programmes.

Finally, the research identified a lack of focus on professional development programmes to foster attributes such as inclusion, active citizenship and personal well-being of the adult learners, in addition to enhancing teaching skills. This neglects crucial elements of adult education aimed at promoting the principles of freedom, equality, and democracy. To clarify this matter and better understand European policies, we need to engage in further discussions and take explicit steps towards establishing effective systems for the professional development of adult educators. This article provides an overview of the situation in European Member States, but additional research is required to help them inform policy measures in this area in a more systematic way.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no competing financial interest.

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