



# Vocational training in Europe

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**Key words:** Vocational training, Adult education, professional competences

## Abstract

This paper concerns the state of professionalization of adult education in Europe. The field of adult education is not clearly defined, but it is strictly linked and overlapped to other social sectors. A debate on the professionalization of this field is scarce in all European countries. The field of adult education is characterized by a wide percentage of people dealing with adult learning part time or even by chance, and by a wide variety of working contexts where these people act. For a comparison on the fringe of the field, a common ground can be more easily found in the sphere of vocational training carried out by players that work for adult learning: teaching, management, consultancy, planning, support and media are fields of activity which can be identified in any European country. We think these fields of activity can be taken as starting points to identify the concrete professional tasks, the related abilities and the competence requirements in the sector of adult education.

## 1 Adult education as field of training

Adult education or continuing education or further training (synonyms used hereafter) represents the training field more strictly linked to the other social sectors. In other words: unlike school and university, adult education does not completely have at its disposal an institutionalized and delimited structure, capable of following a logic and dynamics of its own within the sector.

In some cases (Portugal, Italy, Poland) adult education is strictly related to the social sectors in which it is applied and it is born. In other countries (Sweden, Denmark, France) it is possible to identify and describe structures that order adult education according to sectors. However, independently of that, it is always stressed that the structuring of training (and so of the profession) is understandable only if we take into account the historical development and its involvement in the current social situation.

For this reason in Sweden we can observe that the four fields – social movements, residential folk highschoools, study circles and schools for adults – originate from different historical development phases of the training system and they have their own traditions, needs and basic points. Denmark tells us that there is not *one* debate but more debates and each one has as a reference the sector in which training is carried out. The sectors of the Danish example are adult education in general (including folk highschoools and evening courses), vocational training and education, semi-professional tertiary education, university education knowledge transfer and the sector of consultancy, human research development and trade union education. In France two big sectors of *animation socio-culturelle* and *formation professionnelle continue* have developed. A third sector, *insertion professionnelle et sociale*, has arisen in the last years.

Although the sectoral subdivision of training in single fields is different in the various European countries, concerning its organization there are crystallized cores both in general and cultural training and in vocational and business training. Also the working basis presents remarkable historical and systematic differences. Many times, during the process of development, laws or specific initiatives have sprung up in some sectors and they have consequently produced structures and institutions related only to these laws and to the relative financing sources. It is also logical that Adult Education, in all countries, does not come under the authority of a single Ministry, but it is shared out – with very heavy differences - among different state bodies. So it is possible to find references not only in the training sector, but also in the work sector, in the social sector and in the culture and research sector.

## 2 Vocational training

The existence of an activity of adult education carried out at the most different social levels is linked to the lack of a debate on the topic of Profession and Professionalism. If we consider it from the perspective of the single European countries, there are several reasons for this lack:

- contexts related to specific sectors are prioritarily appointed to an overall view of activities in the specific field. Therefore an Animator in a museum is a different thing from a Trainer in an enterprise even though they probably do the same things. Legitimacy, goals, image and self-definition relevant to the corresponding context are different;
- in no country the access to the activity is regulated in a general way; if anything, it is sectoral when the question is the achievement of state certifications. In some countries ways to qualify do exist – in Germany there is till now the degree examination based on adult education as main subject, but it has not been possible to develop any form for a Profession, because neither needs nor obligations have been systematically organized. Refresher courses are sectoral (in associations, enterprises, specific places for training courses) and produce qualifications which already within the single countries are not compatible with other supplies of refresher courses. So there is not the basic principle on which the existence of a Profession is based, that is a systematic and checkable training in order to practise the profession;
- occupational relationships in the field are more or less temporary. Obtaining a full time job without time limits in the field of training constitutes an exception in most countries. These workplaces have been set up especially in those sectors in which continuity had to be created for the exercise of institutes and for their assessment and direction. Anyhow the real situation is badly documented: practically in no country there are protected data concerning the quantity of personnel engaged in this field or general data concerning the working field of adult education;
- many people engaged in this field do not recognize themselves in the professional profile of pedagogist for adults, but rather in a social or business context. Just in the moment in which training turns to organizational contexts with other trends (for instance in enterprise, in cultural contexts, in associations, etc.) or when training activity constitutes only a part of its overall work, its professional identity does not make reference to adult education.

Practically, it is not possible to single out in any European country above mentioned a debate on the profession, not even a debate on Professionalism. Nevertheless an intense and wide discussion exists on people's competences

and on the Quality of the system. Countries such as France and England have extremely different starting points as regards the debate on the competences of the sector focused on the theme of vocational training. Yet, definite competences relating to training as a whole are never required as conditions necessary to carry out an activity in the training field. Therefore an important requirement is lacking to define professional segments and activities of a profession.

### 3 Occupational relationships and competences

Practically in all the European countries presented it is evident that only a small group of players working exclusively in adult education does exist, as far as institution (training institutions) and kind of activity are concerned. The greater part of people making contributions to the carrying out of adult education either have temporary working conditions within the training field or are involved only in the least part in adult education.

It is difficult to assemble in a common frame the group of people working in training in their respective country. This task becomes easier if we deal with school and university teachers, who also apply adult education. Instead, it is certainly harder in case of people attending to personnel development in enterprises, to refresher courses for trade-unions or to training in associations and organizations.

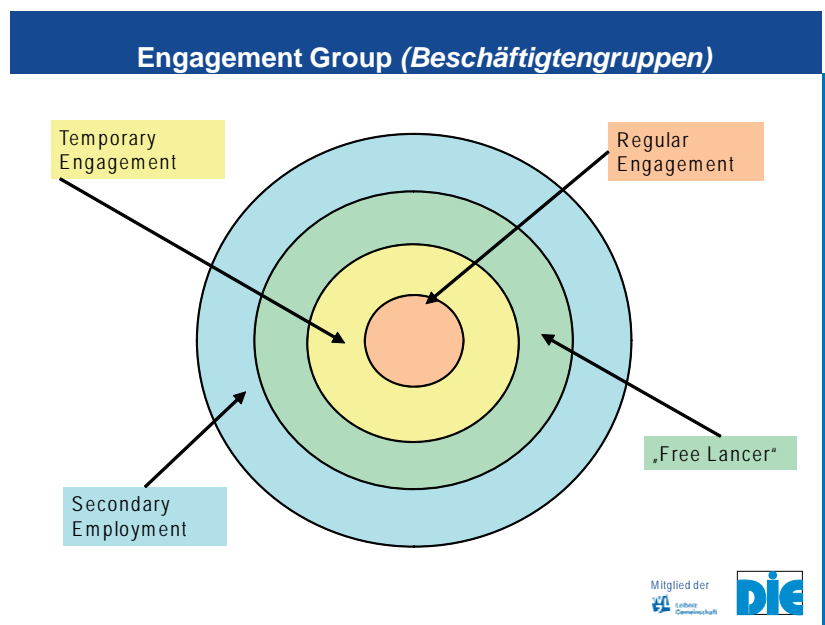
It is possible to define in an overall way the different groups of people of the sector, by representing them with concentric circles: in the middle there is the group of people working exclusively in the sector; around it, there are people earning their livelihood through temporary work in training or as entrepreneur with his own workforce; then, there are people devoting part of their work to adult education; and finally people who, besides other activities, also deal with training.

We obtain in all an extremely wide spectrum of different groups of people, consistently with the integration of adult education in all social fields.

Many times, during the discussion on professionalism, only the small group of people in the middle of the concentric circle is kept in mind. This group constitutes, in Germany as well as in the other European countries, only a tenth of the people who deal more or less with training. Moreover, most of them work in small bodies where they are asked to attend to the activities that at the moment are more impelling – such as marketing, work with the public, personnel management, training, planning, policy, etc. – thus laying an unfavourable premise to highlight formally the single competences.

The shortage of a debate on the profession and the presence of a debate on competences answer to a situation present in the other professional fields. Nevertheless, adult education is not undergoing a deprofessionalization pro-

cess, which instead can be observed, with the due critical analysis, in the other fields. In the training field there has never been the constitution of a veritable profession. As a matter of fact, most European countries neglect a process of vocational training with regard to training activity and directly acquire definitions of competences oriented towards small jobs. The definition of competences does not make reference anymore to a general profession, but to specific clusters of activity fields in different contexts.



#### 4 Fields of activity

Sectors relating to adult education are widespread, they can be practically found in all social fields. In the countries of Northern and Western Europe it is possible to delimit the institutional fields of adult education, like Folk Universities and private bodies or associations supplying adult education courses in Germany, folk highschoools and adult education centres on the one hand, commercial and technical colleges on the other in Denmark, social and cultural training centres on the one hand and vocational training centres on the other in France. Such a sectoral subdivision according to institutions practically does not exist in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe. There adult education is linked to social movements, enterprises, associations, organizations and primary education centres. But these joint working sectors relating to adult education exist also in Northern and Western Europe.

The overall view of adult education going beyond all social sectors is almost impossible within a country, and it completely falls through in a comparative analysis of the different countries (and of their different social structures). The discussion of the groups of researchers has pointed out that the beginning of an overall analysis of the adult education activity will be possible only after the identification of fields of activity concerning adult education. But this identification of fields of activity transversally defined requires that we have at least heuristic ideas about what is or not is part of adult education. The international discussion highlights the same lines of demarcation that can be found in national discussion; adult education and adult learning process part from socialization, therapy, social work, etc. Expressed in a positive way: the definition of fields of activity related to adult education focuses on adults' learning; all is done to make possible and to support adults' learning is part of adult education.

On the basis of this work hypothesis it is possible to identify, in the present descriptions of the European countries, fields of activities that can be found in all countries, even if priorities are different.

#### 4.1 Teaching

Here two trends can be found: teaching is delegated by the group of people of the core to experts who are consulted because of their competence on the matter, of the regional nearness, of their organizational abilities or for other reasons. Therefore content is not defined by people dealing with further training, but by the group who carries out this work as main activity within competent experts. Greater and greater oppositions are arising to the concept of teaching. Many times teaching is no more understood in this way, but as moderation, animation, simplification on the one hand and coaching training on the other. The activity seems to crumble in a "soft" activity oriented to learning and in a "hard" activity oriented to contents. So teachers are needed such as to meet students and organizations' expectations.

#### 4.2 Management

Management as field of activity related to adult education got importance not only in Germany but also in the other European countries a short time ago. The issues concerning personnel management, marketing, organizational development for the managers of training centres, as well as the issues concerning staff development, carrier planning and the use of resources of personal competences in enterprises constitute activities that at present are partially or fully attributed to adult education. The reason for this state of

affairs is due to the fact that here something happens to the bodies devoted to adult education in their organizational feature or that processes are started which could not be carried out without refresher or specialization courses for the persons concerned. But also new management activities such as Fundraising, Project management or constitution and assistance of regional cooperation nets are increasing and are linked to adult education activities. Management also includes activities of Human Resources Development or the activities that support training of associative structures strictly linked to learning processes.

### **4.3 Consultancy**

A growing field is consultancy activity. It is a phenomenon that can be noticed in all countries. In particular training consultancy forms part of it, that is support to learners through proper supply and through analyses of needs relating to the process of learning. Consultancy also comprises the activity of creation and care of the relevant information systems and databases and the control of the information necessary to take decisions about training. The concept of learning consultancy usually includes also remedial activity for students during the learning process, consultancy in case of learning problems or for the assessment of the learning level. In some contexts of discussion, this form of consultancy is included in the concept of Teaching, but when we examine the necessary competences it stands as autonomous field. The same goes for consultancy concerning carrier planning, which is occasionally included in the concept of Management, but which is lately defined – in relation to Communication, Roles Definition, etc. – as consultancy activity. An important part of consultancy has developed: balance of individual competences, recognition of prior and experimental learning.

### **4.4 Planning of the programme**

In many cases the planning activity is understood strictly speaking as preparation of a supply by an adult education body. All this has strongly differentiated and calls for a wide range of competences. So by planning of the programme we mean the development of a qualified supply for enterprises, the agreement on a programme of development (with parts concerning adult education) in a region. In particular, the planning of programmes in cooperative contexts with enterprises, public offices, associations and adult education bodies is taking place more and more frequently and needs its own accesses.

#### 4.5 Support

Ever more often we are confronting also those important activities for the adults' learning process - no matter in which field – that are included in the concept of Support. Furnishing and care of places where training is carried out, enrolment and registration procedures, assistance (also of children, etc.), travels, financing, in short the whole technical-organizational machinery that supports learning processes in formalized contexts, constitute a wide working field for adult education and it is increasingly acknowledged as such.

#### 4.6 Media

Here a field of activity which is still extraordinarily in motion has developed. It is essentially production, use and assistance of software for adult education, collaboration with experts, development of teaching and learning programmes through interactive media and internet.

The fields of activity mentioned are useful in the segment following the work of researchers to discover the concrete activities of adult education in the most different social fields. They are not complete and they are not studied in depth but they have an important heuristic function for analysis.

### 5 Profiles of competence

Among the activities and fields of activity defined there are different competences to be defined which can result in a transversal definition of competence profiles.

The described profiles of competence extremely vary from country to country. They are in part more differentiated, in part more general, in part they refer more strongly to core skills, in part mostly to instrumental abilities. In France there is a differentiated system for the description of competences, the so-called *Répertoire opérationnel des métiers et des emplois (ROME)*, which shows the adequate competences of employees in social and cultural training, in vocational training and in social and professional inclusion as well.

In England there is a list of employment national training organizations, in which the skills of the three main groups, there identified, of the people working in the adult education field (Management, Teaching, Support) are defined. In these lists the item Management comprises finance, business development, people management, IT-competence; the item Teachers comprises research skills, reflective pedagogy, languages, business development; the item Support Staff comprises customer service, careers guidance, counselling and business development. Competences such as business development, IT and core skills



are defined for the three groups. Core or key skills are communication, numeracy, information technology, working with others, problem solving and improving own learning performance.

Also Germany, Sweden and Denmark have differentiated catalogues of competences, it being understood that there is still the question whether they are transmitted or checked during the relevant processes of qualification. In Portugal and Poland more general competences have been defined, like for example interpretation capacity, language competence, critical reflection ability, conceptual skills, which fall into line with a process of development that involves the whole society and a general strategic perspective.

Practically in no country there is a binding combination of competence profiles, of opportunities of attending training and refresher courses and courses for the check of competences, if we consider them as a whole. These binding determinations exist only sectorally and only in very limited fields of vocational qualifications. The whole adult education field is therefore an open working context, flexible and accessible to people with different competences.

## 6 Perspectives

With respect to a general discussion on professionalism in the adult education field in Europe, it is possible to sum up the different perspectives in the following way:

- in the public sector we wonder how we can canalize the professionalism of adult education in the concept of a learning process throughout life. The other fields of training (such as school and university) are much more professionalized compared to the adult education field; here a twisted situation can develop, fixing at the beginning the unavoidable contradictions and breaks of a learning process throughout life;
- it is plain that the state of current knowledge on which activities are really carried out by the people working in this field and on the kind of competences they need to carry out their work is very weak. In particular, there are not enough precise ideas on the conditions necessary for certain activities to be defined and practised as profession or job; an analysis of job-skills practically does not exist;
- profiles of competences are not fixed in the single countries, neither at general level. Besides, it is not sure whether such profiles must then be fixed from the concerned people's perspective or from that of training policy. The profiles of competence at our disposal are not systematically linked to the types of training and to professional outlets, and they are placed at different levels (personal, concerning the work, basic, instrumental, etc.). This state of affairs can be found both among countries and within each country;

- the problem of the consideration of “collective” competences in fields of activity (just in adult education) remains unsolved, because the concept of competence is always referred to the individual. It is not even clear how the necessary competences in the current qualification system must be transmitted, in particular how motivation and willingness of the people working in the training field and placed in the external circles can be stimulated for this transfer of competences.

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