

Georgios K. Zarifis¹, Achilleas Papadimitriou²
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

What Does it Take to Develop Professional Adult Educators in Europe? Some Proposed Framework Guidelines

Abstract: Recent European-wide studies have shown that the adult learning sector is very diverse. This diversity can be seen in the various target groups of adult learning, subjects covered by adult learning courses, but also in the professional pathways to becoming an adult educator, the employment situation of adult learning professionals and furthermore, in the competences required for working in this sector. This diversity, however, makes it difficult to develop the sector in Europe as a whole and in particular as a dedicated profession. To partially overcome the ‘hampering diversity’ it is important to identify common elements in the work adult educators do and the key competences that come with carrying out their activities. Based on the results presented in relevant European studies, projects and reports, this paper suggests that in developing professional adult educators, competences should be understood as a complex combination of knowledge, skills and abilities/attitudes needed to carry out a specific activity, leading to results. Any set of competences therefore can be applicable for adult educators working in the sector, by abstracting from the specific context in which these professionals work. This means that not only the teaching activities, but also other activities (for example management activities and programme development activities) must be supported by a particular set of competences.

Keywords: adult educators, professionalisation, competences, Europe.

Professional development of adult educators in Europe

Adult education staff – adult educators in particular – play a key role in facilitating learners in developing knowledge, competences and skills. However, not much is known about this particular group of people. At the European level there

¹ Georgios K. Zarifis, PhD is Assistant professor of Continuing Education at the Faculty of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece (gzarifis@edlit.auth.gr).

² Achilleas Papadimitriou is a social researcher and a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

is a lack of information about various aspects of their professional status. The issue of professionalisation of the field of adult education in Europe has been a source of intense debate and controversy since 2000 and certainly after the European Commission's policy document *Action Plan on Adult Learning: it is always a good time to learn*' (European Commission, 2007^a) that sets out how Member States and other stakeholders can be supported to improve, implement and develop efficient adult learning systems, and to monitor their results. Although this debate has been erratic across the European nations and perhaps more intense in some areas (Nuissl & Lattke, 2008), it comprises a notable contradiction. This contradiction lies in the fact that adult educators in Europe are labeled as professionals. The reality however is different and if we are to consider any direction towards the professionalisation of adult educators, we need to reflect on the realities of these people; and there is nothing that better describes these realities than their employment conditions.

Professional development of adult educators in Europe poses a number of challenges, many of which are not as justifiable as others. This is partly because the policies that have been developed in the adult education (AE) field so far have addressed only a limited number of the issues in a rhetorical manner without going deep into the heart of the matter (see for example European Commission, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006^{ab} and 2007^{ab}; European Council, 2002 & 2009); and partly because the field of AE itself is so fragmented and incoherent that is almost impossible to address a shared concern for those providing services in it. Across Europe the articulation of the field differs considerably, although a broad distinction between vocational education and training (VET) on the one hand and liberal or general adult education on the other is more applicable, without considering of course the variety of beneficiaries and multitude of relevant programmes, in terms of formal and non-formal provision. Although the spectrum of adult education staff is extremely broad both in terms of provision and of employment conditions – which is not surprising given the assimilation of adult education in all sectors of society, both public and private – there is one issue that seems to stand out in this debate; this is the intense discussion on the competences and skills needed by those working in certain posts in the field. According to Nuissl (2009, p. 129), this debate is less intense in European countries where the institutional structure of adult education is less developed, but even there it has already started (see Zarifis, 2009 & 2012).

Based on the current debate the purpose of this paper is to propose some guidelines for building a framework for identifying the various sets of competences that adult educators in Europe need, in order to develop their professional capacity and status in the field. These guidelines are based on previous work that

is visible in a number of research studies and relevant EU-funded projects, and brings together the essence of these approaches through a four-lens perspective for classifying the relevant competences for adult educators. The main argument in the chapter is that being (and becoming) a professional adult educator does not simply entail mastery of a certain array of skills and competences (including psycho-pedagogical ones); it is essentially a social process by which any occupation transforms itself into a profession of the highest integrity and competence on the basis of acquiring certain traits and qualities through constant reflection, up-skilling through systematic and regulated education and training, validation of those competences acquired in the workplace, exchange of experience and networking with beneficiaries and other professionals. Before we proceed with the specifications of the proposed framework guidelines, we consider it essential to attend to some of the issues that relate to the current debate. For adult educators the question of “professional development”, “professionalisation” and/or “professionalism” became more legitimate after the release of European Commission’s Communication on *‘Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality’* in 2001 (see European Commission, 2001, pp. 12 & 23–25).

Nuissl (2009, pp. 127–128), in his attempt to analyse the trends and challenges in the professional development of adult educators in Europe, suggests that if “professionalism” in adult education is discussed at all, then the debate usually refers to one particular sector within adult education (i.e. vocational education and training) rather than to the whole picture, and poses a valid question by suggesting that the expression “professional development” of adult educators already suggests that there is – or might be – a “profession” of adult education; but is this the case with adult educators?

The “professionalism” of adult educators (teachers, instructors, vocational trainers) largely relies on their certified competences (academic and/or those applied in practice) that are not essentially related to psycho-pedagogical aptitude or educational expertise, while the lack of professional associations, or a community of practice for that matter, that would operate as a (self-) regulating supervisory body, does little to promote the professional status of those working in the field. In this respect it would be legitimate to suggest that adult educators could be classified as semi-professionals as they lack one or more of the traits of other valid professions. In particular, the relation between occupational groups and the possibility to exclusively apply their own developed knowledge and skill within their occupational practice constitutes a trait that a semi-profession cannot live up to, and this is much the case with adult educators. Although this condition need not necessarily be thought of as causing functional inadequacy for those working in the field since it does not create any demarcation leading to occupa-

tional closure – especially considering that adult educators in Europe come from all realms of professional life and experience – it does raise the need for a flexible framework of competences that will effectively allow those working in the field to consider their beneficiaries, their roles, tasks and duties and essentially create the basis for developing communities of practice based on their work domains (i.e. vocational training, second-chance education, education for social cohesion, culture and arts education, etc.). Before explaining more about the necessity for such a framework it is equally important to understand how the adult education sector is structured in Europe and how it affects the status and socio-economic position of adult educators as well.

Constructing a “competence profiling” agenda

Policy rhetoric does not pursue the professionalisation aspects of adult educators in a realistic manner. It discusses the “label”, but it does not orientate towards the “processes” that can create the conditions for adult educators to become professionals. This is because policy language places too much stress on the results of the adult learning process as the major quality element of the adult education practice, making the adult educator liable for the adult learners’ attainment of learning outcomes. This approach has somewhat occupied the discussion on adult educator professionalisation by focusing on the development of professional competences that will ensure quality in the field. What policies do not discuss however is which these competences are and how can they be identified in the multitude of adult education settings that exist in Europe.

According to Nuissl (2009) and Zarifis (2012) the *employment conditions* of adult education staff in general are more or less insecure everywhere in Europe. A permanent full-time job in adult education is the exception rather than the rule in all European 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 working conditions. Many adult education staff members do not even consider themselves as adult educators, but rather as belonging to a certain social or business context (see Nuissl, 2009, p. 129). This is especially true in cases when the adult education activity is related to organisational contexts such as companies, cultural institutions and associations, or when the adult education activity represents only a part of the work involved in the job. So, virtually in no country can we find a debate on adult education as a profession. What can be seen though in many cases is an intense debate on the competences and skills needed by people working in certain jobs in the field

of adult education. Considering the above it is our conviction that we need to readdress the agenda of this debate from this point onwards (hence examining ways on how to identify and frame the required competences for adult educators in Europe) in order to gradually unfold the social and economic repercussions of their employment status in the field of adult education, instead of unduly deliberating on their alleged professionalism.

For some European scholars and researchers in the field like Milana & Skrypnyk (2009), Zarifis (2009 & 2012), Lattke (2005), Lassnigg (2011), Egetenmeyer & Kapplinger (2011) and Maier-Gutheil & Hof (2011) the contradiction in the professionalisation agenda is visible in the majority of the relevant literature, that is primarily concerned with descriptive and analytical accounts of the field in which people earn their living as adult educators, and ongoing processes of professional validation and quality assurance in some European countries. The relevant literature also stresses that, similarly to other occupational fields, professionalism, or to be more precise professional behaviour in adult education is being affected by rapid socio-political changes; dissimilarly, however, unfolding the concept of professionalism in adult education is more complex (see Jütte et al., 2011). We can therefore argue that conceptualising adult education as a distinct professional field is of little use when discussing professionalism, as there are several occupations that exist in the field. Some of these occupations are semi-professions, with few having reached a full-fledged professional status and others progressing in this direction (see Nuissl, 2009). In readdressing the agenda of professionalisation of adult educators in Europe it may be fruitful therefore to focus on the *needs* of adult educators performing specific roles, e.g. teaching adults, rather than on the type of occupation they hold (see Bernhardsson & Lattke, 2011). This will justify to a large extent the necessity to examine ways on how to identify and frame the required skills and competences for adult educators. Recent studies (see DIE, 2009; Research voor Beleid, 2008; Buiskool et al. 2009 & 2010; Egetenmeyer & Nuissl, 2010) show that the adult education sector is very diverse. This *diversity* can be seen in the various target groups of adult learning, subjects covered by adult learning courses, but also in the professional pathways to becoming an adult educator, the employment situation of adult learning professionals and furthermore, in the competences required for working in this sector. This diversity also makes it difficult to develop the sector as a whole and in particular as a dedicated profession.

To partially overcome the 'hampering diversity' as Buiskool et al. (2010) suggest it is important to identify common elements in the work adult educators do and the key competences that come with carrying out their activities. There is today a sufficient variety of relevant studies ('*Key Competences for Adult Learning*

Professionals: Contribution to the development of a reference framework of key competences for adult learning professionals, 2010; *Adult Learning Professions In Europe – ALPINE*, 2008), and results from EU funded projects (*AGADE – A Good Adult Educator in Europe*, 2004–2006; *Flexible Pathways for Adult Educators between the 6th and 7th Level of the EQF – Flexi-Path*, 2008–2010; *QAct – Qualifying the Actors in Adult and Continuing Education*, 2006–2007; *VINEPAC – Validation of informal and non-formal psycho-pedagogical competencies of adult educators*, 2006–2008) that can help us identify the competences needed by adult educators which can be found in job descriptions of individual organisations, the learning outcomes of specific educational programmes, and where available in qualification structures at national level. So, besides the already mentioned conditions of employment status of adult educators, their specific needs, and the sectoral diversity in the field, there is another element that we need to consider; this is the element of *comparability*. Identification of a comparable set of competences however in the European context proves extremely complicated considering the previous conditions.

Yet, comparability of competences in the European context is essential for understanding the consequence of all three conditions in this debate (hence adult educators' needs, sectoral diversity in the field and the employment situation); in order to do so we need a substrate of elements for delineating and classifying these comparable competences. Moreover in identifying a set of comparable competences, it would be advisable to start with the wealth of information already available and derive the 'common elements' from that which has already been developed. This substrate has partly been developed and is presented in the study report "*Key competences for adult learning professionals: Contribution to the development of a reference framework of key competences for adult learning professionals*" (Busikool et al. 2010, p. 9). According to Buiskool et al. (2010, 10) competences should be understood as a complex combination of knowledge, skills and abilities or attitudes needed to carry out a specific activity, leading to results. It is from this position that we consider the profiling of comparable competences as an essential step towards reframing the debate on the professionalisation of adult educators in Europe. This process of profiling essentially eschews complex technicalities and sociological jargon and focuses only on three rudiments: competence identification, competence modeling, and competence assessment. These basic elements are described by Buiskool et al. (2010) in detail and will be partly used here as the basis for developing our proposed framework guidelines for the identification and modeling of adult educators' competences in Europe. For the purpose of this chapter we prioritise the first two rudiments because the last one – competence assessment – refers to checking whether the set of competences is

complete, consistent and workable for supervisors in the sector, professionals and other stakeholders.

Proposed framework guidelines for identifying key professional competences for adult educators in Europe

In the next paragraphs we elaborate on some proposed framework guidelines for identifying key professional competences for adult educators in order to develop their professional capacity and status in the field. The proposed framework guidelines attempt to bring together the core of various approaches that are evident in the results of a number of EU-funded projects and study reports such as “*Adult Learning Professions In Europe – ALPINE*” (2008) and “*Key competences for adult learning professionals: Contribution to the development of a reference framework of key competences for adult learning professionals*” (2010), through a capacity-building perspective.

The premise on which the proposed framework guidelines rest, is the assumption that comparability of professional competences is possible at a European level only if we consider the multiplicity of three intertwining factors; these are the *work domain* (where adult educators work), the *clients and/or beneficiaries* (the learners to whom the service is addressed), and the *tasks and duties* to which adult educators need to respond in order to provide the best possible service (this essentially addresses the quality element of adult educators’ work). Research in the area so far shows that there is essentially a set of four broad employment areas or work domains in which competence develops (or needs to be developed) for adult educators in Europe. These include the vocational education and training work domain (initial or basic, continuing, in-service, on-the-job, etc.), the second-chance education work domain (basic adult education, literacy, etc.), the social cohesion work domain (education for immigrants, unemployed, those in need or the socially deprived, etc.), and the liberal education work domain (open access education for all, culture and arts, education for personal development, education for empowerment, etc.). In each work domain however, different challenges may arise for adult educators, based on the needs of their clients or beneficiaries (adult learners). Along this line one can easily suggest that the tasks and duties to which adult educators need to respond when they work, for example, with older adults in the continuing vocational training work domain, are essentially different from those when working with older adults with physical disabilities in the social cohesion work domain, or when working with older adults in the liberal education work domain, or with older immigrants in the social cohesion

work domain. This in essence demands an approach that does not contain professional competences for adult educators in a labels list, however exhaustive (i.e. being reflective, knowledgeable, assess needs, have teaching skills, gaining trust/commitment, manage crises, etc.), but provides an understanding of the contextual changes that influence the competences relevant for them. Let us not forget that professional competences depend on the context in which adult educators are working. Considering the element of comparability of these competences in the European context however, we are faced with another challenge in framing them. Instead of randomly identifying comparable competences based only on the employment or work domain context, we also need to consider those broad areas for *capacity building* in which skill and competence need to be developed. Capacity building is used in this context to refer to the concept of development that focuses on areas for enhancing adult educators' abilities that will allow them to achieve measurable and sustainable results. To this end we recognise four such areas that also serve as lenses in identifying comparable competences (Zarifis & Papadimitriou, 2014, pp. 156–157).

The first lens is that of *human capital*. Our interest is on how skills and competences need to develop in adult educators. For the last half century, the concept of human capital has become thoroughly integrated into theoretical and empirical studies in economics and other social sciences – so much so that policy makers routinely pick up on it and infuse discussions on a wide variety of policy areas with this terminology. At the same time, much of the discussion both in research and in its public incarnations has been reduced to very simplistic shells of the underlying ideas. In most cases, investment in human capital is measured simply by spending on education or other training activities. This reduction to the matter of spending is perhaps even more prevalent in theoretical work. These narrowed perspectives have resulted largely from efforts to develop testable hypotheses, and they represent clever and powerful adaptations to available data. But there is now substantial reason to believe that many of the models and perspectives used have been seriously distorted in the process.

The second lens is that of *social capital*. Our interest is in network construction and in knowledge acquisition within adult education networks, how knowledge transfer between *network* members occurs, and what role *social capital* plays in the transfer. The modern emergence of the concept of social capital renewed academic interest in an old debate in social science: the relationship between trust, social networks and the development of communities of practice. Through the social capital concept researchers have tried to propose a synthesis between the value contained in the communitarian approaches and individualism. Social capital can only be generated collectively thanks to the presence of

communities and social networks, but individuals and groups can use it at the same time. Individuals can exploit the social capital of their networks to achieve private objectives and groups can use it to enforce a certain set of norms or behaviours. In this sense, social capital is generated collectively, but it can also be used individually, bridging the dichotomised approach of ‘communitarianism’ versus ‘individualism’.

The third lens is *reflectivity*. Our interest is in looking at how to foster (critical) reflection among adult educators as it helps develop critical thinking skills, inform pedagogical reasoning and enhance professionalism among adult educators. Reflection — the expertise-enhancing, metacognitive, tacit process whereby personal experience informs practice — is integral to core professional practice competencies for adult educators. Development of reflective capacity has been highlighted as necessary for effective use of feedback in adult education and is an essential aspect of self-regulated and lifelong learning. Reflection can guide adult educators as they encounter the complexity that is inherent to their practice, potentially influencing the choice of how to act in “difficult or morally ambiguous circumstances”. In this vein, the development of reflective practice has been associated with enhancing an individual’s character or “virtue”, fostering a “habit of mind”, “dispositional tendency”, or “morality” with which to approach pedagogical reasoning and ethical or values-related dilemmas that may arise. It also helps in developing “phronesis” — adaptive expertise or practical wisdom to guide professionally competent practice.

The fourth lens is *interculturality*. Our interest is both in interculturality and transnationality in a vision of cultural diversity, which promotes awareness, respect and understanding for ways of doing, thinking and being that are different one from another and based on a universal ground defined by human rights. Intercultural capacity is the ability to leverage the near limitless nuances of human culture into valuable insight and strategic advantage. This is of great value for adult educators in Europe because the development of intercultural sensitivity involves the movement from a monocultural/ethnocentric (“simple”) to an intercultural/ethnorelative (“complex”) view of difference. This knowledge, skill and awareness can translate into behaviour changes and a range of choices in many ways.

What we are suggesting here is that identification of key comparable professional competences for adult educators needs to be approached not through a labelling process, but through a capacity-building approach that encompasses all the above elements (Zarifis & Papadimitriou, 2014). To this end identification of key activities or tasks (on the basis of capacity building), and identification of competences needed to carry out these key activities or tasks, is essential and needs to contain the following information items:

1. *Title*: this is the header of the competence; it contains summarising information of the competence.
2. *Description of the competence*: this item gives a full description of the competence based on the knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes to be considered relevant for this competence.
3. *Empirical underpinning*: in this item the competence described can be traced back to empirical reality.

We need, however, a more elaborate appreciation of each competence in order to create a framework. According to Buiskool et al. (2010) what is essentially needed is to find a balance between those competences needed to carry out a specific activity and those that apply to the whole sector. For example a key activity or task for adult educators in all work domains is to identify the learning needs of adult learners. This activity is commonly mentioned in job descriptions in Europe, but when seen through the capacity building perspective it also relates to some elements that should be taken into account in drawing up the competence needed to carry out this activity. This key activity can therefore be shaped so as to identify the various needs (identifying the background, history, personal goals) and possibilities, potentials and capacities of the adult learners, but with regard to the individual learner and the societal needs in a broader sense. It can also be shaped so as to identify and assess the entry level, prior learning and experience of the adult learner. Furthermore it can be shaped so as to respect the different backgrounds of the learner and be able to work with differences, as well as to network with various employers, social agents, interest groups and stakeholders in a socially and often politically complex environment. Essentially this means that the competence of identifying the learning needs of adult learners presupposes a competence in dealing with group dynamics and heterogeneity in the background, learning the needs, motivation and prior experience of adult learners, as well as competence in assessing the prior experience of adult learners, and competence in communicating and collaborating with adult learners, colleagues and stakeholders. Following this line of thought as it is presented in Buiskool et al. (2008 & 2010), in order to elaborate on each competence, the framework needs to encompass three levels of description: the *meta level* that refers to those competences that are supportive for all activities or tasks; the *generic level*, that refers to those competences that are supportive for a big share of activities or tasks; and the *specific level* that refers to those competences that are supportive for a small selection of specific activities or tasks.

The proposed framework guidelines that are presented in this paper aim to assist in identifying the key comparable professional competences needed to support the activities carried out by adult educators on an institutional level through

a capacity-building perspective. The framework guidelines are largely based on previous work by Buiskool et al. (2008 & 2010) as well as various approaches to the professionalisation of adult educators in Europe (Milana & Skrypnyk, 2009; Zarifis, 2009 & 2012; Egetenmeyer & Nuissl, 2010; Bernhardsson & Lattke, 2011) and a number of projects that focus on the validation of competences for adult educators (VINEPAC, Flexi-Path). The proposed framework guidelines suggest that any key competence that has a comparable value also adds to capacity-building for adult educators. This means that we do not identify required competences only based on their employment premises, but we also identify competences based on understanding the obstacles that inhibit a large number of adult educators from realising their professional goals, while aiming towards enhancing the abilities that will allow them to achieve measurable and sustainable results in their domains of work. In this respect identifying comparable professional competences cannot only relate to identifying activities in specific work domains, but also relating these activities to “capacity-building areas”. For such a framework to be sustainable however, it requires a community of practice that will evolve naturally and out of its members’ common interest in gaining and creating new knowledge related to the field of adult education and learning. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members will learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop their shared competences personally and professionally.

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Georgios K. Zarifis³, Achilleas Papadimitriou⁴
Univerzitet Aristotel u Solunu, Grčka

Šta je potrebno za razvoj stručnjaka u obrazovanju odraslih u Evropi? Predložene smernice

Apstrakt: Nedavna opsežna evropska istraživanja pokazuju da je sektor obrazovanja odraslih veoma raznolik. Ta raznolikost se vidi u različitim ciljnim grupama u obrazovanju odraslih, predmetima koje sadrže kursevi obrazovanja odraslih, ali i u mnoštvu puteva koji vode ka profesiji nastavnika za odrasle, situaciji u zapošljavanju profesionalnih nastavnika za odrasle, kao i u kompetencijama koje su neophodne za rad u ovom sektoru. Ipak, u Evropi ova raznolikost otežava razvoj sektora kao celine, a naročito kao profesije za sebe. Da bi se ta „sputavajuća raznolikost“ delimično nadvladala, važno je identifikovati zajedničke elemente u radu nastavnika za odrasle i ključne kompetencije neophodne za obavljanje njihovih aktivnosti. Na osnovu rezultata relevantnih evropskih istraživanja, projekata i izveštaja, ovaj rad sugerise na to da u razvoju profesionalnih nastavnika za odrasle kompetencije treba shvatiti kao složenu kombinaciju znanja, veština i umeća/stavova potrebnih da se specifična aktivnost izvrši i dovede do rezultata. Stoga bilo koji skup kompetencija može biti pogodan kod nastavnika za odrasle koji rade u sektoru, i to izvlačenjem iz specifičnog konteksta u kome ti profesionalci rade. To znači da aktivnosti u poučavanju, ali i ostale aktivnosti (na primer, aktivnosti u upravljanju i razvoju programa) moraju biti podržane određenim skupom kompetencija.

Ključne reči: nastavnici za odrasle, profesionalizacija, sposobnosti, Evropa.

³ Dr Georgios K. Zarifis je docent na Filozofskom fakultetu, Univerzitet Aristotel u Solunu, Grčka.

⁴ Achilleas Papadimitriou je istraživač i student doktorskih studija na Filozofskom fakultetu, Univerzitet Aristotel u Solunu, Grčka.