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**COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON ADULTS' CONTINUING  
PROFESIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN EUROPE**

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***Abstract***

Continuing professional development is a peculiarly complex phenomenon, with multiple determinations and influences: individual, organizational, conjectural or systemic. This phenomenon does not lack contradictions, difficulties and tensions while equally it has a huge perfection and innovation potential, brought to a large extent by the most important resource of the whole educational system. The aim of the present research is to underline similarities and differences among adult education systems from 4 European countries (Romania, Germany, Greece, and Norway), as concerns the qualification level /competences of trainers, design and implementation of educational programmes, modalities of motivating the students and the abandon rate of courses. The data obtained through the analysis of legislative, administrative and curricular documents specific for the continuous education system from the 4 countries have been corroborated with the results measured by applying an online instrument of social survey. For each of the analyzed indicators, the study presents differences and similarities in the process of adult professional development. The results of the study point out the importance attached to quality and to the instruction level /trainers' competencies. Also, the results show the necessity of analyzing thoroughly the development needs and objectives of potential students as premises for the design of attractive, flexible and efficient educational offer.

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**Keywords:** Adult education, continuing professional development, trainers' competencies.



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## 1. Introduction

Adult education is undoubtedly, a vital component and essential element in the European Union education strategies and lifelong learning policies. Adult Education programmes are the main instruments through which not only continuing personal development is achieved, but consistent professional growth is obtained as well.

Today, more than ever, individuals must rely on consistent professional development in order to remain competitive, to gain new skills and enhance existing ones. The focus on continuous adult learning is therefore vital for everyone, in order to overcome the challenges of the labour markets. Today more than ever before, staff in all organisations are under strain in a world of continuous change, in order to meet demands for new skills and to improve or update their professional skills.

Apart from the personal benefits, lifelong learning supports, at the same time, both the economy and society by maintaining productivity, ensuring social cohesion and meeting labour market demands. It also supports people in improving their job prospects, taking their lives into their own hands and living full and satisfying lives (CEDEFOP, 2003).

Additionally, empowering staff training can increase work-value, the level of work-satisfaction and contribute to self-development and self-efficacy (Inglis, 1997, p. 5). Moreover, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) in a research paper regarding skills mismatching to labour market needs, illustrates the emphasis given in recent years on encouraging worker empowerment via the provision of adequate levels of autonomy, task discretion, control and responsibility (CEDEFOP, 2012, p. 57).

At this point it is imperative to underline that staff training courses are directly connected with continuous vocational training and especially with in-house training (Hyland, Sloan, & Barnett, 1998; Kappelman, & Thomas, 1996), meaning any training activity provided by and for department employees and staff. Training may be required to be provided to employees both as part of legislative requirements or continuing education needs. Under this perspective staff training aims to:

- provide employees with career growth opportunities consistent with corporate goals, objectives, and strategies;
- increase individual and organizational productivity and enrichment;
- enhance knowledge, develop skills and empower self-development;
- create, promote and foster an organisational environment that values development, diversity and growth opportunities for all employees.

## 2. Problem Statement

Social, economic and technological changes in the European countries determined by re-technologizing and reorganization of certain branches of economic activity brought substantial modifications as concerns employers' level of qualification and their competences. The main competences associated to these changes of occupational structure requested on the labor market refer to ICT competences, abilities in problem solving, resource management, communication, foreign languages. The professional development offer is focused on complete qualification programmes or on programmes for the development of key competences: communication in the official language, communication in foreign

languages, basic competences in mathematics, science, technology, informatics competences, the learning competence, social and civic competencies, entrepreneurship competencies, cultural awareness and expression competence.

A reflexive analysis of the adult education domain underlines the necessity to design instruction programs starting from their development needs: to improve personal and professional experience, to express their personality and give proof of their competences in the professional environment, to adapt to professional and organizational requirements and implicitly, to make an effort to comply with them (Neculau, 2004, p. 63). Presently, European educational policies are focused on the encouragement of educational demands and on the development of programmes adapted to the development needs, flexible, by using open technologies as well as by including support services of counselling, orientation and ameliorative study (Nuissl, 1999). The necessity to identify some transferrable credit and accreditation systems, which would capitalize and certify the experience acquired in non-formal and informal environments is a fundamental objective of adult professional development which also comes to ensure a unitary background of occupational mobility (Usher, & Bryant, 2001). To that effect, adult professional development programmes have to be designed based on the following indicators: employability (to help students to develop adequate competences), entrepreneurship (initiation of a personal business), adaptability (to acquire flexible working modalities and transversal competences) (Sava, 2005).

The quality of the adult professional development programmes will depend considerably on how motivated are students to participate and to finalize the proposed development programme. In order to diminish the effects of some obstacles and difficulties (fees, time span etc.), specialists recommend five essential pillars in motivating adult students: trainers' expertise which would qualify them in relation to students' expertise, trainers' empathic capacity and enthusiasm which create an interactive and challenging educational environment, the clarity of teaching and responsibility towards the differentiating particulars of students involved in the programme (Paloş, Sava, & Ungureanu, 2007).

International tendencies in adults professional development highlights the preoccupation for the flexibilization of initial development modalities, mainly through the contiguity of the two directions of development : educational institutions to the working place, a possible approach under the form of *work-based learning* (Knapper, & Cropley, 2000) which can be achieved through several development practices: apprenticeship programmes, practice periods, job shadowing activities, cooperative education (Smith, Payne, & Thornton, 1999).

Professional policies tend to the validation and accreditation of learning acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, situation which generates changes concerning a large number of educational beliefs and attitudes, especially as regards evaluation criteria related to the validation and certification of individual competences acquired in any social context (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2009). The capitalization of the potential of non-formal and informal education offers a large motivational field to the adult professional development process and have a rapid capacity of receiving all influences from the social and professional activity environment.

The main objectives of continuing professional development target on one hand the development of initial training and on the other hand, upon professional conversion and reconversion. Regardless of the objective, the emphasis is laid upon the employees' adaptability and flexibility in a labor market subject to continuous changes.

The analysis of the professional background of continuing professional development underlines the variety of institutions which take over responsibilities in the field, at a central, regional and local level, but also the decentralization tendency of decision roles as regards the design, the organization, development, monitoring and evaluation of the continuing development programmes, ensuring like that the premise for a better adaption of the development offer to the needs of different categories of students.

At European level the task of providing adult education staff training lies mainly on regional and national umbrella and professional organizations, universities and other providers in the adult education sector, offering staff training programmes for their member institutions. These programmes strive to provide high quality opportunities to maintain and extend skills, but unfortunately are often implemented on an individual base and focused on regional and national operational frameworks in term of pedagogical and learning policies, administrative and executive staff and educators. This fact makes the exchange of good practices between adult education providers difficult and thus the opportunity of learning from each other in order to further improve the quality of offered staff training programmes diminishes.

Standardization levels in adult education differ considerably. Romania features a mandatory system of academic training for trainers, making professionalization and standardization levels the highest of the consortium. Greece also requires adult education trainers to fulfil specific standards, which are monitored by a national body. By contrast, Norway and Germany experience comparatively low levels of standardization but the discussion around centralized standards has been prevalent in the past years.

During the last decade there have been repeated calls to increase quality of adult education from both European and national agencies (European Commission, 2006). In Germany, the debate over professionalization has been prominent for years, however, after the European Qualification Framework was introduced in 2007 it had a strong focus on the standardization of learning outcomes. By comparison, the qualifications of trainers have enjoyed much less attention and most European countries lack mechanisms that control training staff (Jütte, Nicoll, & Olesen, 2011). This is due in part to the extreme heterogeneity of employment patterns in adult education and while some factions welcome the extensive amount of leeway awarded by a lack of common standards, others argue standardization is necessary to guarantee quality training. The point of view largely depends on who is talking, with trainers themselves often less opposed to standards (and thus the potential for validation of their skills) than their employers (Bjerkaker, 2016). New learning environments and cultures (such as informal learning) additionally challenge any attempts at standardization.

”Train the Provider” as a multi-lateral project funded by the European Commission, bringing together partners from Norway, Greece, Romania and Germany is addressing structural and operational differences regarding staff training within the adult education sector. Partners, through an issue-based approach, identify specific problems and topics from each organization’s individual context and compare strategies, work collectively on solutions for common problems and extrapolate good practice examples. The objective is to gain new perspectives and find practical solutions for problems commonly faced by providers of adult education training through the exchange of cross-national borders.

In this context partners adopted a paper listing major challenges for staff training in adult education (<https://www.aewb-nds.de/themen/eu-programme/train-the-provider/>), from which through a commonly accepted elaboration, three challenges, among others, were considered of common and major importance

and thus emerged as in need to be addressed with further deliberation. More specifically these challenges are:

- Desirability of national standards and the certification process of educators,
- Importance of adult education design and implementation that can satisfy the identified needs of trainees,
- Motivation for participating in staff training classes and factors influencing cancellation rates.

### 3. Research Questions

The research hypotheses of this study are:

1. There are significant differences among trainers, academic and administrative staff who come from different countries as regards the standardization levels for trainers' qualifications in staff training.
2. There are significant differences among trainers, academic and administrative staff who come from different countries, as regards the programme design and implementation.
3. Identification the cancellation rates for staff training classes and underlying the reasons for this drop.

### 4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims to presents a comparative study of the adult education system in 4 different countries (Romania, Germany, Greece and Norway), starting from the analysis of the national educational, legislative and curricular policy documents. The systemic analysis of the framework on adult training, and the implementation methods specific to each country focus on highlighting their experience in adult education.

### 5. Research Methods

The method used in this investigative approach was the questionnaire-based investigation. The questionnaires were applied using google forms. The online questionnaires for trainers, academic and administrative staff, were structured based on the following dimensions:

- the rate of standardization levels for trainers' qualifications in staff training,
- the aspects regarding the programme design and implementation,
- the cancellation rates for staff training classes,
- the factual data – professional background, country.

**Table 01.** Variables of study participants

Variables	M (SD) or %
Total number of participants	78
Trainer	28%
Academic staff	16%
Administrative staff	56%

## 6. Findings

The first hypothesis “There are significant differences among trainers, academic and administrative staff who come from different countries as regards the standardization levels for trainers’ qualifications in staff training” was tested through chi square test. In Table 2 the results of the Person  $\chi^2$  test show that trainers, academic and administrative staff have different opinion upon the standardization levels for trainers’ qualifications in staff training depend on different countries [ $\chi^2$  (6) = 18.832,  $p < 0.05$ ]. Despite the Romanian adult education structure being based on a mandatory system of continued, academic training for trainers, a majority of Romanian participants in the survey rated standardisation levels medium (69.6%) with only 30% viewing them as high. The trend towards a medium rating is mirrored in the responses from Greece (64.5%) and Germany (58.8%), while Norwegian respondents tended towards judging levels as high (57.1%). Tendencies can be described as medium-low in Germany, high-medium in Norway, medium-high in Greece and medium-high in Romania. This identifies Germany as the only country in the partnership to have received a notable amount of low-responses to the standardisation question. The rating, however, reflects reality with experience in training being the main qualification over certificates and formal training. This, however, is mirrored by the Norwegian system which, despite the rating by providers, does not have any common standards for adult education trainers and also focusses on professional experience and (tertiary) training in the subject field (Bjerkaker, 2016). In both countries’ trainers are encouraged to continuously develop their skills but trainings are not compulsory. This is complemented by high fluctuation rates in training staff, who often see the work as transitional or as one of a number of jobs.

By contrast, both Romania and Greece have centralised agencies creating and monitoring standards as well as supplying certificates for staff qualifications in adult education. In Greece, the early 2000s saw an increase in regulations for AE trainers with a preference for formal, academic training in teaching (Tsamadias, Koutrouba, & Theodosopoulou, 2010). Romania is the only partner with strict academic requirements for trainers to update their knowledge regularly through compulsory courses.

**Table 02.** The chi-square analysis regarding the rate standardization levels for trainers’ qualifications in staff training according to different countries

Variables	The rate standardization levels for trainers’ qualifications in staff training				$\chi^2$	df	P
	N	High	Medium	Low			
<b>Country</b>					18.853	6	<0.05
Germany	17	3	10	4			
Norway	7	4	2	1			
Greece	31	9	20	2			
Romania	23	16	7	0			
<b>Total</b>	78	32	39	7			

In Germany, 47% of respondents answered with a clear yes, indicating a desire for further movement towards a common standardisation system. Additionally, another 17.6% answered with a qualified yes, indicating that the quality of a certificate and the potential benefits it would award in the job market are central to acceptance of increased standardisation. This reflects the point of view of trainers who, in Germany, often find themselves in precarious employment situations, earning their main income as

freelancers or on temporary contracts (76% of all new contracts in the sector are only temporary; Elias et. al., 2015, p. 6). Many of these adult education trainers in publicly funded organisations earn close to subsistence level incomes and can thus scarcely afford to invest much time and money in continuous further training. On the other hand, their chance of employment depends heavily on their methods being up-to-date, which traps them in a precarious dilemma in a market that is under increasing pressure to supply high quality training at low rates (Elias et. al., 2015, p. 7). Views on the chances and risks of standardisation differ – from the possibility of improving quality to the fears over job perspectives for trainers. The latter fraction would see it as the state’s responsibility to safeguard the rights of weaker players, such as freelancers, in the process (Elias et. al., 2015, p. 6).

Additionally, respondents indicate a preference to evaluate the need for standardisation from topic to topic instead of imposing generic, common norms for all fields. If attaining a certificate for training became a condition, participants strongly insist that this certificate should have international recognition.

In Norway, 57% of respondents voiced a desire for more stringent standardisation with the other 43% being flat-out against it, naming individual competence and experience as more important than standardised training qualifications. As mentioned above, trainers in Norway do not necessarily see a long-time perspective in the profession and may well be averse to extensive training in skills which does not promise any long-term gains in the face of potential career change. A 2013 report found that, generally in Europe, “status and career prospects in the sector are unattractive and may not retain quality staff” (cited in O’Connor, 2014), this will also mean low motivation to invest in further training. O’Connor also points to the possibility placing more focus on the validation of prior learning as equal to specialised training.

Among Greek participants 67.7% would welcome higher standardisation levels, citing an increase in the quality of programmes as well as the chance for validation of skills as their main motivations. This suggests that trainers identify with their profession more strongly and want to improve or maintain their chances in the job market through continuous training and development. However, in a caveat a number of participants mention that specific training needs must always be considered, so a degree of flexibility remains desirable. This desire was also mirrored by comments from Germany where the idea of standardisation seems to invoke an image of excessive and unwelcome control.

In Romania, which already has the highest standardisation rate within the partnership, a resounding 91.3% of participants feel that higher levels of standardisation would be useful.

The second hypothesis “There are significant differences among trainers, academic and administrative staff who come from different countries, as regards the programme design and implementation” was tested through *chi square test*. In Table 3 the results of the Person  $\chi^2$  test show that there are not significant differences between trainers, academic and administrative staff who come from different countries, as regards the programme design and implementation [ $\chi^2 (15) = 17.924, p \geq 0.05$ ]. Responses to the question of priorities in programme design and implementation indicate a considerable lean toward a focus on teaching methods and strategies. The results show that 34.6% of respondents felt that the effectiveness of the training programme depended on how the programme was implemented pedagogically. Outside this area, trainer or tutor quality in terms of their level of knowledge and capacity to effectively include it in the programme was a high priority for respondents. Overall, almost 26.9% of respondents earmarked trainer expertise as most important. The third most common priority for respondents

was desire for acquisition of practical knowledge. Overall, 17.9% of respondents highlighted this as a priority.

Other areas relevant to programme design and implementation (including: establishment of clear course objectives; organization of the programme in terms of location, quality of service and administration; as well as programme certification), were prioritized significantly less. Overall 9% selected clear objectives as a priority, 7.7% selected course organization and less than 4% prioritized certification.

Germany tended to overwhelmingly favour the ‘Trainer knowledge and effectiveness’ as a priority in a given programme. Just over 50 % of German respondents opted for trainer knowledge. Thereafter, just under 20% of German respondents opted for ‘Practical knowledge provided’ in a programme as, marginally, more important than ‘Teaching methods and strategies’ and the other various categories in the survey. Norway, like Germany, also favoured ‘Trainer knowledge and effectiveness’ as a priority but only to the same extent as they prioritised ‘Teaching method and strategies’ as important. Around 40% of Norwegian respondents favoured ‘Teacher knowledge and effectiveness’ as a priority and around 40% favoured ‘Teaching methods and strategies’.

Greek respondents, on the other hand, selected ‘Teaching methods and strategies’ as the most important element in training programmes. Just under 50% of Greek respondents saw this as the most important priority. Thereafter, ‘Teacher knowledge and effectiveness’ (at just over 20%) was the second highest ranked priority followed by ‘Practical knowledge provided’ (at just under 20%). Romanian respondents, like Greece, also tended to favour ‘Teaching methods and strategies’ over the other options. Around one third (just under 33%) of Romanian respondents favoured ‘Teaching methods and strategies’.

Thereafter, around one quarter (just under 25%) prioritised ‘Practical knowledge provided’ as most important in a given programme. Following this, Romanian respondents prioritised Teacher knowledge and effectiveness (around 13%) and ‘Programme organization’ (also around 13%) as most important in terms of programme design and implementation.

Overall, the results from question 4 in the survey show that the German respondents tended mainly to prioritize ‘Teacher knowledge and effectiveness’ as most important in a given programme’s design and implementation. While the Norwegian responses show an equal split of priorities between ‘Teaching methods and strategies’ and ‘Trainer knowledge and effectiveness’. On the other hand, the Greek and Romanian respondents tended mainly to prioritize ‘Teaching Methods and strategies’ over the other categories, though, a solid proportion of the Romanian respondents prioritized ‘Practical knowledge provided’.

**Table 03.** The chi-square analysis regarding the *highest importance elements in terms of programme design and implementation according to different countries*

Variable s	N	The highest importance elements in terms of programme design and implementation						$\chi^2$	df	P
		Practical knowledge provided	Clear course objective	Trainer’s knowledge and effectiveness	Overall programme organization	Teaching methods and strategies	Certification			
<b>Country</b>								17.924	15	$\geq 0.05$
Germany	17	3	2	9	1	2	0			

Norway	7	0	1	3	0	3	0			
Greece	3	5	3	6	2	14	1			
Romania	2	6	1	3	3	8	2			
Total	7	14	7	21	6	27	3			
	8									

The majority of respondents (73%) state that the cancellation rates for staff training classes in their countries are up to 20%. Yet variations between countries still exist. In Greece, Romania and Germany, the proportions of respondents agreeing with this view is higher – most of all in Greece, where 38.5% state a 20% cancellation rate. While, in Norway 10% think it is hardly up to 10% the classroom cancellation rates. In contrast, a 26% of respondents mention that the cancellation rates range between 21% – 50%. This is especially so in Greece where 40% support that argument. A very interesting point is that only one respondent (Greece) state that the cancellation rates are over 50%.

**Table 04.** The level of cancellation rates for staff training classes \* Country Crosstabulation

		Country				Total	
		Germany	Norway	Greece	Romania		
The level cancellation rates for staff training classes	0-10%	6	6	12	9	33	42.31%
	11-20%	6	0	10	8	24	30.77%
	21-30%	5	0	5	1	11	14.11%
	31-40%	0	1	0	4	5	64.11%
	41-50%	0	0	3	1	4	5.13%
	51-60%	0	0	1	0	1	1.3%
Total		17	7	31	23	78	

The data in table 5 show that: 61.54% of survey respondents reported that they do not know the reasons why the cancellation rates are over 20% in their organisations. This response was most marked in Greece (44%) and least in Norway (12.5%). Identifying these unknown factors is important for both policy creation and practice. 11% of respondents' state as a main reason for high classroom training cancellation rate in their organisations, the provided staff training courses are nor adapted to market needs, rising to 67% in Romania and 33% in Greece.

Time-related obstacles constitute an issue for 11.64% of respondents, as they declare that they are not able to take time off from work. This variable calls for further investigation as there can be different interpretations to the respondents' answers. Specifically, people may not be able to participate in courses because of: a. job commitments and work overload, b. lack of free time or c. they are unwilling to give up free time or leisure activities.

Only a 7.71% of respondents believes that difficulties in reaching various target groups is responsible for high cancellation rates. This tendency was most obvious in Romania (50%).

Some of the included variables display extremely low rates such as expensive fees (3.88%), insufficient advertisement (2.57%) and remote locations where the seminars are taking place (1.3%). In other words, factors like money that is considered to be seen as a participation obstacle for many people, does not apply in this case. The above findings would suggest a need for further investigation that will include questions seeking to elicit additional reasons for high cancellation rates in life long education.

**Table 05.** Reasons for high cancellation rates \* Country Crosstabulation

		Country				Total	
		Germany	Norway	Greece	Romania		
Reasons for high cancellation rates	Courses not adapted to market needs	0	0	3	6	9	11.60%
	Courses too expensive	0	0	0	3	3	3.88%
	Participants cannot take time off work	3	1	3	2	9	11.64%
	Difficulties in reaching target groups	2	0	1	3	6	7.71%
	Insufficient advertisement	0	0	2	0	2	2.57%
	I don't know	12	6	21	9	48	61.54%
	The seminar takes place far away from the target's group residence	0	0	1	0	1	1.3%
<b>Total</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>78</b>	

Findings regarding the cancellation rates of participants in a training course, lead us to the conclusion that in most cases, in the researched countries, are not very high. Having said that, there is a percentage of approximately a fourth of the analysed sample where the cancellation rates are quite high. At the same time in most of the cases, the interviewees answered that they have no knowledge of the reasons that guide potential participants to cancel their training.

It is therefore clear that in order to proceed with the interpretation of the cancellation rate and the countermeasures that are necessary, one must conduct a thorough analysis of needs. Such an analysis is necessary for identifying the needs of the target group (Ospina, Langford, Henry, & Nelson, 2018). There is a number of available tools that can be used for collecting in development in order to reach a catalogue of staff needs (Watkins, Meiers, & Visser, 2012) and through this stage design effective training programmes (Brown, 2002). Such programmes with clear learning outcomes and benefits will be of interest to the organisations whose staff could be the potential trainees.

## 7. Conclusion

The paper focused on analysing the continuous professional development of adults in different European countries in order to emphasize the commune and different approaches of adult education programmes regarding the qualification level/competences of trainers, design and implementation of educational programmes, modalities of motivating the students and the abandon rate of courses. These dimensions were previously identified as the most important ones in all the target countries. The research undergone in different countries with trainees that belong to cultures, countries, and social-economic backgrounds that are not the same while experiencing everyday professional and personal life under a multitude of circumstances which are dissimilar lead to defining the idea that trainees think differently and that is why they are not motivated in the same way regarding their training attendance to be it in a classroom or otherwise. It becomes therefore apparent that a deeper analysis of the training cancellation factors needs to be done, in order to establish and clarify factors such as learning incentives, intentions, obstacles and motivation of individuals towards training.

It looks as though the only way for training providers who are operating in the adult education field and strive to offer training activities that are focused on the potential trainees is to conduct a throughout training needs analysis and ensure that their training programmes are attractive to the potential trainees. By offering programmes with learning outcomes that are needed to the client organisations' staff and designing the above programmes in ways that will best suit the participants, training providers will be able to minimize the cancelation rates they are facing. The present paper established both similarities and differences in the Partners' countries and opened the way to further research that is needed in order to design relevant adult continuous professional development programmes in Europe.

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