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From Compliance to Capability: The Formalization – Professionalization Gap in Hungarian Adult Education

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The conceptual duality of adult education and training in Hungary reflects the ongoing professional debate concerning the social purpose of the field. The broader andragogical interpretation situates adult learning within an interconnected system of education, teaching, training, cultural development, and self-development, whereas the narrower regulatory and employment-policy approach focuses primarily on programs leading to measurable competencies, formal qualifications, or direct labor-market outcomes (Benedek, 2012; Durkó, 1999; Györgyi et al., 2004). These two approaches are not mutually exclusive; however, their relative emphasis determines whether adult education and training is centered on the formal completion of a program or on the development of participants' autonomy, agency, and social participation (Juhász, 2016; Maróti, 2015). Accordingly, the Hungarian andragogical tradition has regarded the remediation of educational deficits, self-directed cultural development, and the promotion of social integration as fundamental functions of adult learning alongside vocational preparation (Durkó, 1999; Farkas, 2013). It follows that the effectiveness of adult education and training cannot be assessed solely on the basis of the number of completed instructional hours, successful examinations, or certificates issued. A formal credential confirms that specified requirements have been met, but it does not demonstrate whether participants are able to apply the knowledge acquired within their own living and working conditions, further develop it, or transfer it to new contexts (Bajusz, 2006; Benedek, 2009; Csoma, 2009). The utilization of knowledge is jointly shaped by prior learning experiences, life circumstances, family and employment-related responsibilities, the time and resources available, local services, and actual labor-market opportunities (Fehérvári, 2020; Maróti, 2015; Scandurra et al., 2024). Employability therefore cannot be reduced to the possession of a qualification; it also encompasses the genuine capacity to mobilize knowledge, pursue further learning, and act effectively within the labor market (Farkas, 2017; Scandurra et al., 2024).

Similarly, the quality of training cannot be equated solely with lawful operation, program authorization, complete documentation, or procedural compliance in examinations. These elements are indispensable for protecting participants and ensuring transparency, but they provide no direct information as to whether training builds on prior knowledge, adapts to the diverse life circumstances of adult learners, provides formative feedback, or supports the application of acquired competencies (Farkas & Henczi, 2014; Mufic & Fejes, 2022). Regulatory compliance and andragogical quality are therefore interrelated but not interchangeable categories. The problem arises when verifiable organizational compliance becomes a substitute for the quality of teaching and learning, while the conditions required for differentiated learning organisation, mentoring, and knowledge transfer remain contingent.

The international literature directly associates the quality of adult education and training with the professionalization of adult educators. Although European policy documents recognize adult educators as key determinants of quality, their initial preparation and continuing professional development remain fragmented, unevenly accessible, and only partially institutionalized in many countries (Ioannou, 2023). Professionalization therefore cannot be reduced to occasional professional development undertaken by individual educators. What is required is a system in which policy expectations, the operation of training organizations, the definition of professional roles, mentoring, and workplace learning mutually reinforce one another (Chen et al., 2021). Beyond subject-specific knowledge, the necessary competencies include the identification of learning needs, the management of heterogeneous groups, differentiation, supportive communication, formative assessment, self-reflection, and the facilitation of transfer (Benedek, 2007; Csoma, 2009; Dobos, 2009). Recent empirical findings suggest that educators'

self-efficacy, professional enthusiasm, constructivist beliefs, and self-reflection are associated with particular dimensions of learner support and instructional quality (Fischer et al., 2026).

Professional support is particularly important for adults with low levels of educational attainment, unemployed adults, those with previous experiences of educational failure, and those affected by territorial disadvantage. Their participation is influenced not only by the formal availability of training but also by a lack of trust, family responsibilities, health conditions, transport constraints, and the local service environment (Fehérvári, 2020; Fejes, 2012). An emphasis on individual motivation must therefore not lead to the psychologization of structural disadvantage. Personalized support should be complemented by accessible services, career guidance, local partnerships, and opportunities for progression (Broek et al., 2024; Fehérvári & Györgyi, 2006). The role of the adult educator is not to address every social or employment-related problem independently, but to recognize barriers to learning and the limits of their own professional competence, and, where necessary, to involve other professionals and services.

Following the turn of the millennium, the formal frameworks governing institutional operation, program development, registration, evaluation, and monitoring were substantially strengthened within Hungarian adult education and training (Farkas, 2006; Farkas & Henczi, 2014; Györgyi et al., 2004; Kovács, 2026). At the same time, however, no comprehensive system of requirements emerged that would uniformly define the frameworks for the initial preparation, continuing professional development, mentoring, and professional support of adult educators. This is why Farkas (2013a) described the field as an “invisible profession”: qualification pathways, professional identities, and opportunities for further development remained heterogeneous. Methodological knowledge was nevertheless available. Learning arrangements building on prior experience, facilitation, differentiation, and interactive methods were also present in Hungarian professional discourse (Bajusz, 2006; Csoma, 2009; Feketéné Szakos, 2003, 2014). Their institutional transmission, however, remained uneven, with the result that training quality depended to a considerable extent on educators’ individual experience and the professional culture of the training organisation (Farkas, 2013a; Kovács, 2026). Developments over the past quarter-century have mobilized substantial resources for the training of disadvantaged groups, the development of key competencies, the establishment of mentoring networks, and the creation of local employment partnerships. Centralized programs enabled broad outreach and capacity building, while third-sector initiatives frequently combined personal recruitment, individual development plans, mentoring, psychosocial support, and employer engagement (Arapovics, 2007; Fehérvári & Györgyi, 2006; Györgyi, 2006; Juhász, 2009). At the same time, projects financed through the Structural Funds also generated administrative, financial, and sustainability-related dependencies (Arató et al., 2008a, 2008b). The author’s previous research also identified developments that were discontinued after the mandatory sustainability period, with the result that the methodological and organizational knowledge accumulated within them was not durably embedded in institutional practice (Kovács, 2026). The central contradiction, therefore, lies not in the absence of innovation, but in the failure of project-based solutions to develop into an accessible and sustainable infrastructure for professionalization.

This study conceptualizes the problem as a compliance–professionalization asymmetry: the regulation of training organizations, programs, administrative processes, and documented outcomes became more strongly institutionalized than the definition, development, and workplace support of the competencies of the professionals responsible for implementing the learning process. The central research question is therefore how, and through which institutional mechanisms, the regulatory formalization of Hungarian adult education and training became decoupled from the professionalization of adult educators after the turn of the millennium. Drawing on international literature, expert interviews conducted as part of the author’s previous research, and a comparison of centralized and third-sector programs, the study examines the relationship between educator competencies, the organizational conditions of program delivery, and the institutional transmission of professional knowledge. Its starting

proposition is that learner-centered approaches based on mentoring and local partnerships did emerge, but were not consistently incorporated into a system capable of ensuring educators' initial preparation, continuing professional development, and the institutional preservation of accumulated knowledge.

Methodology and Research Framework

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative, multi-source comparative research design. Its aim is to explore how the conditions supporting the professionalization of adult educators and the learning of adults in vulnerable situations are represented in the international literature, Hungarian expert interpretations, and domestic program practice. The research does not seek to establish causal evidence of program effects, construct a ranking of effectiveness, or undertake a cost-effectiveness comparison. Instead, it examines the professional mechanisms and conditions of institutionalization identifiable across different sources (Cserné Adermann, 2018; Falus, 2014; Sántha, 2009, 2015).

The methodological approach consists of a qualitative synthesis supported by source and perspective triangulation. International research provides a comparative framework; expert interviews contribute interpretations of the development and operational contradictions of the Hungarian system; and program documents make the practical components of implementation amenable to analysis. The comparison identifies convergences, partial overlaps, divergences, and evidence gaps across the sources. At the macro level, the study examines the regulatory and funding environment; at the meso level, the operation of training and partner organizations; and at the micro level, educator-, mentor-, and participant-support processes. The units of analysis are not the programs or interviewees in themselves, but the professional mechanisms that influence the quality of learning and the application of knowledge.

Source Corpus

The international component consists of a purposive, concept-driven review of the literature. The search focused on the professionalization of adult educators, educator competencies, professional development, training quality, learning transfer, support for low-qualified adults, and employability. Priority was given to peer-reviewed reviews, systematic and scoping reviews, and empirical studies conducted in adult education, training, and continuing education settings. The source corpus places particular emphasis on findings published after 2020, while also drawing on earlier foundational works to support the historical and theoretical interpretation of the problem under investigation (Chen et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023; Scandurra et al., 2024; Fischer et al., 2026). The review does not constitute a comprehensive systematic literature review: it did not employ a registered protocol, exhaustive database coverage, or meta-analysis. Its function is to establish the comparative framework required for interpreting the Hungarian empirical material. International findings are therefore used not as directly transferable normative standards, but as points of reference. Particular attention is paid to the process-oriented nature of professional preparation, organizational support, opportunities for practical application, feedback, and follow-up (Ioannou, 2023; Nímannte et al., 2025).

The second group of sources consists of a purposive secondary analysis of semi-structured expert interviews conducted as part of the author's previous research (Kovács, 2026). The interviews addressed the institutional development of Hungarian adult education and training, the relationship between policy objectives and implementation, discrepancies between regulation and practice, the preparedness of adult educators, and the sustainability of professional innovations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The study did not aim to identify a representative distribution of opinions, but rather to elicit information-rich interpretations originating from different positions within the system.

Four of the original five interviews were included in the analytical corpus of the present study; one interview was excluded in its entirety because permission for publication had not been granted. The sample comprises András Benedek, Éva Farkas, Tibor Bors Borbély-Pecze, and József Palotás. András Benedek represents the perspective of institutional development, national-level governance, and the

continuity of professional knowledge. Éva Farkas emphasizes the relationships among regulation, training quality, learning outcomes, and the professionalization of adult educators. Tibor Bors Borbély-Pecze addresses the relationship between career guidance, employment services, and transitions from learning to work. József Palotás contributes perspectives on the regional training system, institutional governance, the implementation of legislation, and responsiveness to labor-market needs. The interviews do not represent the views of the profession as a whole; rather, they provide expert perspectives that assist in interpreting the processes reflected in documentary and program sources.

The third source group consists of documents relating to centrally coordinated developments and civil-society and nonprofit programs. Programs were included if they addressed the learning and labor-market integration of vulnerable or low-qualified adults, if educator, mentor, or other support roles could be identified, and if sufficient documentation was available to reconstruct the program's professional design. The corpus of centralized initiatives includes national competence-development, employment, and mentoring programs, including the "Actively for Knowledge" program. The third sector is represented by the cases of EU-Háló, ZSUTI, NOSZA, and LIFT. These programs combine network development, community embeddedness, individual development, psychosocial support, mentoring, and work experience in different ways (Arapovics, 2007; Györgyi, 2006; Farkas & Kovács, 2014; Kovács, 2026).

The target groups, duration, funding arrangements, indicator systems, and follow-up procedures of the programs differ considerably; consequently, their effectiveness indicators cannot be compared directly. Quantitative data are included in the analysis only when the original source, the number of participants, the meaning of the indicator, and the timing of follow-up can be identified. The analytical value of the programs therefore lies primarily in their documented professional mechanisms rather than in outcome figures that are not comparable across cases.

Analytical Framework

The three source groups are compared along eight dimensions:

- the assessment of participants' needs and competencies;
- consideration of prior knowledge and experience;
- learner-centered differentiation;
- educator and mentor competencies and their development;
- psychosocial and practical support;
- work experience and learning transfer;
- local, institutional, and employer partnerships; and
- evaluation, follow-up, sustainability, and institutionalization (Ioannou, 2023; Nĩmante et al., 2025).

The coding procedure combines deductive and inductive approaches. In the deductive phase, relevant findings from the literature, interview excerpts, and program documents were identified on the basis of the eight predefined dimensions. The inductive phase incorporated themes emerging from the Hungarian material, including the loss of professional knowledge during institutional restructuring, the insecure status of project staff, the lack of coordination between programs, and tensions between administrative and professional responsibilities. The source groups were first analyzed separately and subsequently integrated into a shared comparative matrix. Convergence is considered to occur when a professional mechanism is identified as relevant in international research, also appears in the expert interviews, and can be documented in at least one Hungarian program. Partial convergence refers to cases in which an element is identifiable in several source groups, but its meaning or institutional level differs. Divergence occurs when the sources interpret the same phenomenon differently. An evidence

gap is identified where the available documentation or follow-up does not permit verification of a claim. Convergence indicates professional relevance, but does not in itself demonstrate a causal effect.

Source Criticism, Ethics, and Limitations

The evidentiary strength of the sources used in the study varies. Peer-reviewed research and independent evaluations provide stronger evidence than official program documents or reports produced by implementing organizations. The latter are primarily suitable for reconstructing program design. Information derived from the author's previous research and practical experience provides contextual insight, but cannot be treated as independent evidence of program effects. Accordingly, the formulation of claims distinguishes among research findings, data reported by programs, and reconstructed program experience.

Researcher positionality is relevant because the author has participated in the design and implementation of civil-society, adult education, community development, and employment programs. This experience supports the interpretation of operational relationships, but also entails a risk of bias. To mitigate this risk, the analysis distinguishes documented facts, expert statements, international findings, and the author's own conclusions. Personal involvement is not used as evidence of effectiveness.

The interviews are used exclusively with permission for publication. Direct quotations must be verified against the original transcripts, while no quotation, individual statement, or aggregated conclusion from the interview lacking permission may be included.

The study is limited by the purposive and non-systematic nature of the international literature review, the small and non-representative sample of four experts, and the heterogeneity of the program corpus. It therefore makes no claims regarding frequency, does not conduct a meta-analysis, and does not directly compare program effects or cost-effectiveness. Its conclusions concern recurring professional mechanisms and the conditions under which they become institutionalized. The analysis focuses on developments during the two decades following the turn of the millennium and therefore does not provide a comprehensive assessment of the most recent regulatory changes.

Results and Interpretation

System-Level Conditions for the Professionalization of Adult Educators

The strongest point of convergence across the three source groups is that the quality of adult education and training cannot be separated from the preparedness of the professionals who implement the learning process. Professionalization, however, does not imply that all educator, mentor, counsellor, and program-organizer roles should be subject to a single uniform qualification requirement. Rather, it presupposes a shared core of andragogical competencies supplemented by preparation tailored to different roles and target groups. This common competence base includes the assessment of learning needs and prior knowledge, differentiated learning arrangements that build on adults' experience, formative assessment, supportive communication, and the facilitation of the application of acquired knowledge. In the case of participants in vulnerable situations, these competencies are complemented by the recognition of barriers to learning, support for motivation, cooperation across services, and the management of professional boundaries (Csoma, 2009; Dobos, 2009; Benedek, 2012; Ioannou, 2023). International findings indicate that the policy-level recognition of adult educators as key determinants of quality has not everywhere been accompanied by a comparable degree of institutionalization of their preparation and continuing professional development. Professional development opportunities are often fragmented, unevenly accessible, and dependent on individual initiative or the resources of the employing organisation. Competence frameworks are therefore of limited effectiveness unless they are accompanied by supported practice, workplace feedback, collegial learning, and opportunities for professional progression. In this sense, professionalization entails the alignment of policy expectations, organizational operation, and individual professional development (Chen et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023).

The expert interviews identified the same deficit within the Hungarian system from different perspectives. In Éva Farkas's interpretation, the development of legislative and accreditation frameworks strengthened the auditability of operations but did not establish a unified system for the continuing professional preparation of training providers, educators, organizers, and assessors. The decline of university-level andragogy programs simultaneously reduced the opportunities for the institutional transmission of knowledge concerning the distinctive characteristics of adult learning. This is consistent with the description of adult education and training as an "invisible profession": the social significance of the field was not accompanied by a unified professional status or a predictable professional development pathway (Farkas, 2013; Kovács, 2026). András Benedek highlighted the tension between the accumulated body of andragogical and vocational pedagogical knowledge and its practical application. In his interpretation, methodological knowledge was available, yet the organizational and instructional logic of school-based education for children continued to prevail in several training environments. Consequently, consideration of adults' prior experience, autonomy, and life-situation constraints did not become a universally accepted professional norm. From this perspective, the problem is not simply a lack of knowledge, but the weakness of the institutional transmission and consistent application of existing knowledge (Benedek, 2007, 2012; Kovács, 2026). Tibor Bors Borbély-Pecze interpreted training as part of life-course development and the support of labor-market transitions. From this perspective, training effectiveness may also require career guidance, information provision, competence assessment, and support for further progression. The role of the adult educator is not to assume responsibility for these services, but to recognize barriers extending beyond the learning process and to cooperate with the appropriate professionals. At the same time, the interview indicated that the preparation and professional qualification of training personnel did not become a consistent component of employment and social-inclusion programs either (Borbély-Pecze, 2010; Kovács, 2026). Drawing on the experience of the regional training centers, József Palotás directed attention to the organizational conditions of professionalization. These centers developed capacities for analyzing labor-market needs, designing programs, and facilitating inter-institutional cooperation; repeated reorganizations, however, disrupted several channels through which this knowledge had been transmitted. The preparation of professionals therefore became increasingly tied to temporary projects. This demonstrates that the presence of competent professionals does not in itself ensure lasting quality if the institutions and professional communities that carry and transmit knowledge are not sustained (Kovács, 2026).

The common finding emerging from the interviews is therefore not the complete absence of andragogical knowledge or innovation. Considerable professional knowledge accumulated within the Hungarian system at universities, research institutes, regional training centers, civil-society organizations, and development projects. Its institutional carriers and channels of transmission, however, were repeatedly disrupted, while educator competencies were not consistently connected to initial preparation, supported practice, continuing professional development, and professional progression. On the basis of the sources, four fundamental conditions can be identified: a shared core of andragogical competencies; role-specific preparation; an organizational environment supporting practical application; and the documentation and transmission of institutional knowledge. The lack of professionalization should therefore be interpreted not as the personal inadequacy of individual educators, but as the insufficient coordination of these conditions (Chen et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023; Nĩmante et al., 2025).

Elements of Professionalization in Hungarian Program Practice

The analysis of the program corpus demonstrates that professional components associated with the professionalization of adult educators—including needs assessment, mentoring, individual development plans, psychosocial support, work experience, and local partnerships—appeared in several Hungarian development initiatives. However, these elements did not function as components of a unified system of educator requirements, but as intervention components adapted to the objectives, target groups, and funding periods of the respective programs. Program documents are therefore primarily suitable for examining the professional functions assigned to educators, mentors, and other

support professionals; because of their differing indicators and follow-up periods, they cannot be used for direct comparisons of effectiveness.

Among the centralized initiatives, the “Actively for Knowledge”¹ program sought to integrate training, basic competence development, the completion of missing educational qualifications, and the acquisition of work experience within a single intervention process. According to the available program data, 19,434 participants had been enrolled by March 2020, of whom 8,997 entered training, 7,456 completed it, and 1,108 gained access to a work-experience opportunity (Prime Minister’s Office, 2023; Kovács, 2026). These data do not permit the establishment of the program’s causal effects, but they clearly illustrate the unequal accessibility of participation in training, training completion, and the practical component enabling the workplace application of knowledge. Work experience reached only a proportion of those participating in training; consequently, the program provided broader coverage in documenting learning outcomes than in directly supporting transfer. From the perspective of adult-educator professionalization, the lesson of the program is that educators’ work cannot end with the delivery of curriculum content and the formal completion of training. Participants may require further support to test the competencies they have acquired, practice the role of an employee, and address problems arising in new situations. This is consistent with international research on professional development and learning transfer, which emphasizes the combined presence of opportunities for application, feedback, workplace support, and follow-up (Nimante et al., 2025). The documentation does not, however, make it possible to determine whether the educators and mentors working in the program received preparation within a unified system designed to remain in place over the longer term.

Among the third-sector cases, EU-Háló² may be understood primarily not as a program providing direct training to participants, but as a national and regional capacity-building initiative for civil-society employment organizations. Implemented between 2001 and 2003, the program involved more than one hundred organizations and combined organizational audits, methodological development, training, exchanges of experience, and the establishment of regional human-service networks. Documented outcomes included improvements in project-management capacity, partnership activity, documentation, and administrative operation. The program thus represented the organizational dimension of professionalization: it developed not only the knowledge of individual staff members, but also the functioning and collaborative capacity of organizations. A limitation of EU-Háló, however, was that the network and methodological functions it created operated within a project framework. The sources do not provide evidence that organizational auditing, regular professional support, and network-based knowledge sharing were transformed into permanently available nationwide services after the project ended. The initiative may therefore be assessed not simply as a “good practice”, but as a professionalization mechanism that was established but did not develop into a lasting infrastructure. This is directly related to the findings of Ioannou (2023) and Chen et al. (2021): professionalization is not equivalent to the provision of occasional training but requires the durable interconnection of policy, organizational, and individual-development levels.

The ZSUTI³ employment program applied a training and employment approach within Roma communities in Békés County. The program combined local outreach, the establishment of trust through community relationships, preparatory activities, mentoring, and supported employment (Farkas & Kovács, 2014; Kovács, 2026). Its analytical significance does not lie in an independently verified

¹Actively for Knowledge: a nationwide social inclusion program that combined basic competence development, the attainment of formal educational qualifications, foundational vocational preparation, and, to a limited extent, work experience for low-qualified and disadvantaged participants.

²EU-Háló: a nationwide network- and organisational-development program coordinated between 2001 and 2003 by the Hungarian Federation of Public-Benefit Organisations Supporting Unemployed People. It supported the auditing, training, methodological development, and cooperation of regional civil-society employment organisations.

³ZSUTI: an employment program targeting Roma communities in Békés County that combined community outreach, preparatory support, mentoring, and supported employment.

employment effect, but in the fact that it situated participation in training within a cultural and community context. Outreach and retention required professionals who, in addition to delivering curriculum content, understood the target group's local network of relationships, recognized barriers to participation, and were able to cooperate with community and employment stakeholders. The program thus brings cultural sensitivity, the development of trust-based relationships, and the management of local partnerships into the competence profile of adult educators. On the basis of the available program documentation, however, it cannot be claimed that these competencies were supported by nationally standardized preparation.

The labor-market reintegration project implemented by the NOSZA Foundation within the framework of HEFOP 2.3.1⁴ aimed to train and support the employment reintegration of 36 unemployed people disadvantaged in the labor market, including Roma participants. The program combined competence development and vocational training, individual progression pathways, structured mentoring, psychosocial support, and cooperation among social workers, psychologists, and trained support professionals. The project was implemented with funding of HUF 112 million. The source material reports an employment rate of 65 per cent, but this figure must be treated as program-reported data rather than as the result of an independent impact evaluation. The professional significance of the NOSZA project lies in its organisation of training not as a self-contained event, but as part of a process leading towards entry into employment. Individual assessment and development planning were followed by training, mentoring, psychosocial assistance, and so-called "first steps into employment". Participants were able to test their acquired knowledge partly in more protected and partly in open labor-market environments, while mentoring support continued. This arrangement made visible the organizational conditions of learning transfer: participants received not only training, but also opportunities for application, feedback, and support in addressing problems. Within the model, the roles of the educator, mentor, psychologist, and social professional were not merged, but were connected through a coordinated service process. The sources do not, however, demonstrate that the competence profiles and preparation systems associated with these roles became institutionalized beyond the project.

The LIFT program⁵ – whose full Hungarian name translates as Opportunity–Integration–Employment–Learning – was implemented in 2006 in Szekszárd and its surrounding area under the coordination of the Blue Bird Foundation. Its target group consisted of people experiencing long-term unemployment, individuals without marketable vocational qualifications, and persons with disabilities. The program's transitional-employment model combined vocational training, mentoring, social support, and direct work experience. A training kitchen and family-friendly restaurant were established at the Bartina Street site, functioning as both training and protected-employment settings; the program also covered participants' commuting costs. In the LIFT program, the management of practical barriers to participation was not treated as an additional social component, but as a condition of the training and employment process. The coverage of transport costs, mentoring support, and supported employment demonstrates that dropout and labor-market transfer cannot be interpreted solely in terms of participants' motivation or vocational preparedness. The continued operation of the training kitchen established within the program indicates the preservation of local capacity, but does not demonstrate the nationwide institutionalization of the full transitional-employment model or of the preparation of the professionals working within it. The continuation of a service and the system-level transfer of a methodological model must therefore be distinguished from one another.

⁴NOSZA Labour-Market Reintegration Project: a comprehensive program implemented by the Foundation for the Non-Profit Sector under HEFOP 2.3.1, designed to support the training, mentoring, psychosocial assistance, and entry into employment of 36 disadvantaged unemployed participants.

⁵LIFT: Opportunity–Integration–Employment–Learning; a transitional employment program implemented by the Blue Bird Foundation in Szekszárd in 2006, combining vocational training, mentoring, social support, and supported work experience.

The comparison of the programs reveals five professional mechanisms documented across multiple cases: the assessment of individual needs; personalized, trust-based outreach; continuous mentoring; work experience enabling the practical application of acquired knowledge; and cooperation among local service providers and employers. In the NOSZA and LIFT cases, these were complemented by psychosocial support and the management of practical barriers to participation. EU-Háló emphasized organizational auditing and network-based knowledge sharing, while ZSUTI placed particular emphasis on community embeddedness and cultural sensitivity.

In substantive terms, these mechanisms correspond to the conditions for professionalization and transfer identified in the international literature. Nímante et al. (2025) emphasize the significance of practical application, feedback, collegial cooperation, and organizational support; Ioannou (2023) highlights the institutional fragmentation of continuing professional development; and Chen et al. (2021) stress the need to align policy expectations, organizational operation, and educators' professional learning. These conditions appeared in several forms within Hungarian programs, but they did not become a generally accessible, funded, and durable professional infrastructure. The distinction between centralized and civil-society programs therefore cannot be described simply as an opposition between standardization and personalized operation. Centralized programs provided broader coverage, more uniform administration, and greater potential for nationwide expansion; some civil-society programs, by contrast, implemented more intensive individual support, stronger local embeddedness, and closer coordination among multiple services. The limitations of centralized programs lay in the unevenness of differentiation and follow-up, while those of civil-society programs included limited coverage, dependence on project funding, and reliance on key individuals. The finding emerging from the program corpus is therefore not the superiority of either organizational form, but the absence of an effective connection among national capacity, local adaptation, and sustained professional support.

Project-Based Innovation and the Institutionalization Gap

A central finding of the comparison across the three source groups is that the enduring problem within Hungarian adult education and training was not primarily a lack of innovation, but the limited institutionalization of innovation. Following the turn of the millennium, several programs applied individual needs assessment, mentoring, competence development, work experience, and local partnerships. These solutions, however, were typically tied to a particular funding cycle, implementing organisation, or professional community. Once the project ended, the financial, organizational, and knowledge-sharing infrastructure capable of sustaining their application often ceased to exist (Kovács, 2026). Institutionalization is not equivalent to the temporary continuation of a program or a service created within it. A professional solution may become a durable component of the system only if its content is documented, the competencies required for its application are defined, its financing is predictable, its outcomes are evaluated, and it can be adapted by other organizations. Formal sustainability requirements ensure only some of these conditions. A tool, service, or workplace may continue to exist without the methodological knowledge developed within the program becoming accessible more broadly.

Project dependence also affected the position of educators and mentors. Development initiatives often provided internal preparation, methodological guidance, or professional support, but these were generally aligned with the tasks and duration of the project. When funding ended, employment relationships, professional communities, supervision, and opportunities for knowledge sharing could also disappear. Professional knowledge consequently became partly dependent on individuals: the departure of experienced educators, mentors, or project managers could also result in the loss of the practices they had applied. Program documentation generally recorded the processes required for administrative compliance in detail but made the professional decisions shaping participant outreach, retention, and support less accessible. Reports usually permit more precise reconstruction of participant numbers and completed outputs than of the competencies, local adaptation, and inter-institutional cooperation

required by a program. Monitoring therefore strengthened accountability but contributed only to a limited extent to the transfer of methodological knowledge.

The lack of institutionalization was further intensified by weak coordination among programs. Initiatives supporting similar target groups operated within different funding and governance systems, often in parallel with one another. Because program monitoring was conducted separately, the system-level identification of territorial gaps, duplication, and transferable professional solutions remained limited. One consequence was a cycle of repeated reinvention: new funding periods repeatedly recreated needs-assessment, mentoring, and cooperation procedures that had already appeared in earlier projects but had not been incorporated into a shared methodological knowledge base.

The gap between project-based innovation and institutionalization can be identified at three levels. A professional transfer gap occurs when an effective method does not become a documented and teachable competence. An organizational transfer gap arises when the professional community, partnership, or support structure established within a program does not survive. A policy transfer gap occurs when local experience and evaluation do not lead to funded and accountable system-level solutions. These three levels reinforce one another: without a documented method, organizational transfer is difficult to ensure, while without stable organizational carriers, policy-level scaling is likely to remain formal. Institutionalization, however, must not mean the mechanical nationwide adoption of a single program model. The value of local initiatives often lay precisely in their adaptation to participants' life circumstances, the municipal environment, and the local labor market. A system-level solution therefore requires shared professional minimum standards, clearly defined competencies, predictable funding, methodological support, and consistent evaluation, while leaving room for local adaptation.

The findings suggest that the regulatory formalization of Hungarian adult education and training became decoupled from the professionalization of adult educators because the institutions ensuring the auditability of programs and organizations were developed more durably than the systems supporting educators' preparation, workplace learning, and the transmission of professional knowledge. Regulation was capable of specifying the documents, procedures, and outputs through which completion of training could be demonstrated, but it did not create a similarly coherent infrastructure to ensure how the professionals delivering training should acquire, apply, and further develop the competencies required to support adult learning. This constitutes the empirical basis of the compliance–professionalization asymmetry defined in the introduction.

Recommendations

The findings of the study suggest that the central task in the further development of Hungarian adult education and training is not the launch of additional isolated methodological projects, but the durable institutionalization of the andragogical knowledge already available. Following the turn of the millennium, regulation made the monitoring of training providers, programs, documentation, and outcomes increasingly detailed, but it did not establish a system of comparable weight for the preparation, professional support, and renewal of the knowledge of adult educators. The recommendations therefore aim to reduce the compliance–professionalization asymmetry and address the levels of policy, organizational practice, educator development, program evaluation, and knowledge transfer.

A Shared Core of Andragogical Competencies and Role-Specific Requirements

The development of a national competence framework for adult educators is warranted. Such a framework should not seek to force the distinct roles of educators, trainers, mentors, counsellors, and workplace instructors into a single professional profile, but should define the common minimum standards of professional work with adults. These should include the assessment of learning needs and prior knowledge, the organisation of learning based on adults' experience, differentiated support for heterogeneous groups, formative assessment, inclusive communication, self-reflection, and support for learning transfer. When working with participants in vulnerable situations, additional requirements

should include the recognition of structural barriers to learning, cooperation across services, and adherence to professional competence boundaries.

The competence framework should not consist solely of a declarative list. It should be linked to observable professional activities, assessment criteria, and role-specific requirements. A vocational theory instructor, a workplace-based practical trainer, a mentor, and a career guidance counsellor, for example, require different forms of preparation, while all need an understanding of the distinctive characteristics of adult learners. International research indicates that a unified framework can function effectively only if policy expectations, the human-resource practices of training organizations, and educators' professional development are interconnected (Chen et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023; Fischer et al., 2026).

Establishing a System of Continuing Professional Development

Professionalization cannot be achieved through a single-pre-entry training program. Adult educators require a progressive professional development pathway that includes initial preparation, supported practical experience, regular continuing education, mentoring, professional feedback, and the recognition of experiential learning. This system should be accessible to professionals working in higher education, vocational education and training, corporate training, civil-society organizations, and project-based training environments.

Participation in continuing education does not in itself demonstrate a change in professional practice. The application of newly acquired knowledge requires time, opportunities for experimentation, collegial cooperation, managerial support, and follow-up. According to the review by Nĩmante et al. (2025), these organizational conditions consistently support the transfer of professional development, while evidence concerning longer-term application remains limited. The financing and evaluation of continuing education should therefore consider not only the number of training sessions and participants, but also the practical application and organizational integration of new methods.

The professional position of mentors requires particular attention. In several of the programs examined, mentoring emerged as a key element of participant outreach, retention in training, and transition into employment, yet mentoring responsibilities were often not clearly distinguished from educational, social, psychological, and employment services. It is therefore necessary to define mentoring roles, competencies, workload limits, referral obligations, and cooperation protocols. A professional mentor is not responsible for resolving every problem experienced by a participant, but accompanies the learning and progression process, recognizes the boundaries of their own competence, and has access to other service providers.

Integrating Professional Minimum Standards into Program Funding

The institutionalization of learner-centered approaches requires more than their inclusion in individual funding schemes as recommendations or optional components. Programs targeting adults in vulnerable situations should include the following as funded professional minimum standards:

- individual assessment of needs and competencies;
- recognition of prior learning;
- an individual learning or development plan;
- mentoring of appropriate intensity;
- career guidance and progression support;
- opportunities for the practical application of learning;
- cooperation with local service providers and employers; and
- follow-up after the completion of training.

Dedicated financial and time allocations should be assigned to these requirements. Otherwise, professional support becomes an expectation that implementing organizations must meet at the expense of direct educational or administrative tasks. The centralized and third-sector programs examined demonstrate that mentoring, psychosocial support, work experience, and local partnerships can be implemented in Hungary, but their accessibility, intensity, and sustainability have varied across projects.

The Actively for Knowledge program, for example, achieved substantial training coverage, while access to work experience was available to far fewer participants than access to training. The NOSZA and LIFT programs provided more intensive support integrating multiple services, but their scale and funding did not permit nationwide expansion. The policy task is therefore to connect the capacity of centralized programs with the integrated professional components of local programs, rather than to rank the two organizational forms. At the same time, local adaptation must be preserved. Institutionalization should not mean the mechanical nationwide replication of a single program model, since participants' life circumstances, transport options, service environments, and local labor markets differ across regions. At the national level, professional functions, competence requirements, principles of evaluation, and funding guarantees should be defined, while the specific mode of implementation should be adapted to territorial needs.

Reforming Program Evaluation

The numbers of participants reached, entering training, completing the program, and obtaining certificates should remain part of the evaluation of training programs. These indicators, however, cannot be used as the sole measures of learning or labor-market effectiveness. Program completion, the application of knowledge, and sustained employment outcomes represent different analytical levels. Favorable participant experiences or measurable skills development should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of longer-term labor-market impact (Scandurra et al., 2024).

The evaluation system should distinguish among:

- implementation indicators, such as participant outreach and program completion;
- learning outcomes and changes in competencies;
- learning transfer, meaning the application of acquired knowledge;
- participation in further learning and the use of services;
- entry into employment and the sustainability of employment; and
- the organizational sustainability of professional solutions.

For employment indicators, the meaning of "placement" should be defined consistently, including whether it refers to supported or open labor-market employment, the required duration of employment, and the timing of follow-up. Aggregating indicators based on different definitions is not methodologically justified. Evaluation of program effects should also consider local labor-market conditions, the composition of the target group, and the intensity of services provided.

Monitoring participant development should not be restricted to employment status. Program outcomes may include entry into further learning, improved capacity for independent administrative action, greater clarity regarding career objectives, increased learning self-efficacy, or the strengthening of competencies required to retain employment. Measuring these outcomes does not replace employment indicators; rather, it enables a more precise interpretation of the changes achieved by a program and of the outcomes that were not attained. Multidimensional evaluation also reduces the risk of interpreting participants' structural barriers as a lack of motivation.

Establishing a National Methodological Knowledge System

A nationally accessible methodological system should be established to preserve and transfer the knowledge accumulated in programs. This system should function not simply as a document repository,

but as a quality-assured knowledge base. It should include information on program target groups, intervention logics, competence requirements, methods applied, outcome indicators, limitations, and conditions of adaptation. The reliability of sources and the evidentiary strength of claims should be clearly indicated, distinguishing among independent evaluations, reports by implementing organizations, and reconstructed program experience.

On the basis of the programs examined, the systematic documentation of mentoring, transitional-employment, local-partnership, and organizational-development models is particularly warranted. EU-Háló, for example, combined organizational auditing, training, and network-based knowledge sharing. NOSZA and LIFT integrated training, personalized support, and work experience into a unified process, while ZSUTI made visible the importance of community embeddedness and trust building. General claims of effectiveness cannot be derived from these models, but their professional components can be documented, taught, and adapted to new environments in ways that permit further evaluation.

The knowledge system should be complemented by professional communities. Educator and mentor learning cannot be supported exclusively through manuals or online learning materials. Regional or thematic workshops, case discussions, mentoring, supervision, and inter-institutional exchanges of experience are also required. These mechanisms could reduce the dependence of professional knowledge on key individuals and temporary projects and help ensure that new development initiatives do not recreate the same procedures from the beginning in every funding cycle.

Clearly Defining Institutional Responsibility

Professionalization cannot be sustained solely on the basis of educators' individual responsibility. It is necessary to determine which institution is responsible for maintaining the competence framework, assuring the quality of continuing education, operating the methodological knowledge base, facilitating knowledge transfer across programs, and regularly evaluating results. These functions may be shared among higher education institutions, national professional organizations, training providers, employer representatives, and third-sector professional workshops, but their coordination cannot remain the responsibility of temporary projects. Higher education has a particularly important role in systematizing professional knowledge, researching competencies, developing preparation programs, and advancing evaluation methods. The weakening of the institutional base of andragogical knowledge cannot be compensated for solely by short-term project-based training. The professionalization of adult educators requires a stable academic and educational foundation that maintains links with practical training settings and is capable of transforming program experience into knowledge that can be researched, taught, and further developed.

Conclusion

The study sought to answer how, and through which institutional mechanisms, the regulatory formalization of Hungarian adult education and training became decoupled from the professionalization of adult educators after the turn of the millennium. On the basis of the comparison of international literature, four expert interviews, and the selected programs, this decoupling was not the consequence of a single legislative decision or institutional restructuring. Rather, it represents a structural asymmetry that developed over an extended period, in which the monitoring of training organizations, programs, administrative processes, and documented outcomes became more durably institutionalized than the definition, development, and workplace support of the competencies of the professionals delivering training.

The study did not demonstrate an absence of andragogical knowledge or professional innovation. Learning arrangements building on prior knowledge, individual needs assessment, mentoring, psychosocial support, work experience, and local partnerships all appeared in Hungarian scholarship, higher education, regional training institutions, centralized development programs, and third-sector initiatives. The central problem was that these elements did not consistently become accessible, funded, and accountable professional minimum standards. They were largely tied to projects, organizations,

and key individuals; consequently, the end of a funding cycle or a transformation of the institutional environment could also result in the loss of knowledge.

The compliance–professionalization asymmetry does not imply that regulation is unnecessary. Legality, transparency, the protection of participants, and the accountability of public expenditure are indispensable conditions of training quality. The problem arises when administrative compliance becomes a substitute for the quality of teaching and learning. A properly documented program does not necessarily build on adults' prior knowledge, adapt to their life circumstances, or ensure the practical application of acquired knowledge. Quality can therefore become systemic only when institutional oversight is accompanied by professional educator preparation, organizational support, methodological knowledge transfer, and valid follow-up.

The limitations of the research do not permit conclusions regarding the extent to which individual professional mechanisms improved program completion or employment outcomes. The four interviews are not representative, the program documentation is heterogeneous, and the international literature review was purposive rather than fully systematic. Convergence across the sources therefore indicates professional relevance, not causal evidence. It can nevertheless be stated with reasonable confidence that needs assessment, differentiated learning arrangements, mentoring, practical application, local partnerships, and follow-up appeared across several source groups as conditions of high-quality implementation.

The next phase in the development of Hungarian adult education and training should therefore focus not on repeatedly creating innovations, but on their institutional transmission. Progress should not be measured by whether learner-centered methods reappear in further projects, but by whether they become enduring components of educator preparation, the operation of training organizations, program financing, and evaluation. The transition from compliance to professional agency can be achieved when the system not only regulates how the delivery of training can be formally demonstrated, but also ensures that the professionals delivering it are capable of supporting adults' learning, the application of their knowledge, and their social participation in a professionally appropriate manner.

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