

Do ALP's Competences matter? The shift of adult education towards professionalisation

Ioanna Tsarpa

Democritus University of Thrace

Teo Koutroukis

Democritus University of Thrace

Abstract

Purpose: In this study, we examine the role of the Adult Learning Professionals (ALP) and the essential competences involved, doing an in-depth literature review. The study aims at detecting and categorizing required typical and essential ALP competences, defining the most important competence of each category and determining certain vital competences towards ALP professionalization.

Methods: We chose a qualitative research methodology and collected data using semi-structured interview. We interviewed a group of 15 men and women, aged between 18 and 60, who had attended courses, either on an undergraduate or postgraduate level, at the Hellenic Open University.

Results: The results showed that (a) ALPs most frequently referred typical competence is the knowledge of their topic and to possess the necessary knowledge, to satisfy their students' needs; (b) ALPs most important essential competence is their ability to empower students to develop and continue, building a strong relationship between them.

Implications: The results express adult students' expectations for ALPs role and can be used by adult educators to improve their training practices. It can also serve as basis for further research in ALPs competences in Greece, and their perspectives towards professionalisation.

Keywords: lifelong learning, adult learning, ALP's role and competences, adult learning professional (ALP).

JEL Classification: I2, J24

Corresponding Author name and email address: Teo Koutroukis, tkoutro@econ.duth.gr

1 INTRODUCTION - ADULT LEARNING PROFESSIONAL: ROLE AND REQUIRED COMPETENCES

There is a long-lasting debate on Adult Educators professionalisation in relevant academic circles. One of the most crucial topics concerns the fundamental competences they need in order to be considered professionals.

According to Onl, an Adult Learning Professional (ALP) is "a person who has gained mastery or proficiency in a particular domain of knowledge and skills and can effectively inculcate them to others" (Onl, 2007).

In other words, ALP is a teacher of general academic subjects, who is generally qualified for his position through completion of a degree and certification requirements in a post-secondary institution (Onl, 2007).

"ALP's professionalisation has been considered to be at the core of improving the quality of learning in adult programs, and several training systems focus on "promoting professionalisation and creating a comprehensive system of professional development to meet the needs of a diverse profession and a delivery system that includes both training related to management and instruction" (Sabatini et al, 2000). Despite policy talk, adult education is not yet a highly professionalised field (Sabatini et al, 2000). One of the reasons is that the path towards professionalisation is complicated. This is a global phenomenon, which can be linked to several reasons. Adult Education can take the form of either vocational training or of liberal or general education of adult learners. It can be part of the public, the private or the third sector of the economy, under different legal provisions or funding regimes. It can be connected with

formal or informal education, active labour market policies, and activities within social, cultural or scientific policy and practice. Eventually, Adult Education is a diverse, heterogeneous and changing terrain (Sava, 2011)

Moreover, the profession of Adult Educators profession is difficult to define. ALPs work on a part-time or full-time basis; in the social movement, business sector or non-governmental organizations (Vassiliadou, 2009). Their employment conditions and industrial relations and the status of their profession is not tightly regulated. They may face different entry requirements, certification eligibilities, training standards, or postgraduate specializations. No professional organization or trade union exists and there isn't a collectively authorized code of conduct (Vassiliadou, 2009). This occupational field provides different rate of income to its workers (several of which are volunteers) and is characterized by high degree of creativity, flexibility and diversity (Sava, 2011).

A study that surveyed ALPs, members of professional organisations in Canada and the United States, argued that "practitioners, especially those who belong to professional organizations (...) support the development of a code (of ethics) because it represents the values of the dominant and elite group to which they belong" (Gordoin & Sork, 2001). Nonetheless, it must be stressed that codes of ethics have been developed in Eurocentric cultures a Western, liberal political context, and they divert from more radical philosophies. Some argue that this could transform adult education in a less inclusive field (Gordoin & Sork, 2001).

This study focuses on ALPs competences needed in their path towards professionalisation. The purpose of this paper is to outline their profile as successful professionals and educators. Secondary objectives of the research presented in this study are:

1. To identify the most crucial required typical and essential ALP's competences, according to adult students.
2. To open the discussion for the professionalization of adult educators and to identify the required skills and obligations arising from their role.
3. To sensitize professionals to the requirements that their trainees maintain in an academic, behavioral and social-emotional context.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We have surveyed relevant literature to delineate and define ALPs competences. This is a complicated task, since ALPs are often assigned many different roles, like encouraging and advising students and adult learners, to be effective and cooperate at each stage of learning procedure. It is suggested that an ALP should follow less traditional ways of teaching and thinking, in general.

Furthermore, the relation between ALPs and adult students has to be close and to be guided by specific principles, such as effective communication and respect (Kokkos, 2005; Leftheriotou, 2010).

According to Jacques (2004), should obligatory activities and exercises should be avoided for adult students, as these do not yield the desired results. Also, Jacques (2004) advocates the use of that certain group techniques against negative feelings.

An ALP should be informed on the main characteristics of each student as well as the dynamics of the students' group as a whole (Jacques, 2004). An important requirement for this is that an ALP must have the abilities, skills and interest to be connected with students' special needs and interests in order to help them to that direction. For an ALP, the core of the learning procedure are the students themselves (Vaikousi & et al., 2008). According to Kokkos (2005), an ALP must adopt several roles, such as the empowerment of participating in the whole procedure and the active participation in trying to find possible solutions and relevant effective practices, for the benefit of the students.

There are many aspects of the roles of the ALPs that have to be considered. The educator must know the characteristics of the students' personality and start from them, to design and organize the stages and levels of the learning process. Jarvis (2004) argues that the educator's role and educational methods should not endanger students' dignity and well-being. Anything less is against the role of the educator, could be characterized as immoral and does not respond to the ideals of education.

The ALP should have the proper abilities and attitudes, to respond to the needs of postmodern education. It is important for him to improve constantly his knowledge and capacities and to empower them all the time. Except for this, the educator has to develop favourable conditions for the students' learning, so that they learn how to learn effectively (Kapsalis & Papastamatis, 2002).

The educator is a significant factor of the educational procedure. According to Vergidis and Karalis (2008), an educational organization, chooses educators, taking into account certain significant characteristics and criteria, i.e., their experience and the evaluation of their work in similar organizations.

According to Cambell (1977), the ideal ALP should have the following competences: a) to understand the way of learning of the adult students and their pursuits to learn b) to accept the students' opinion (based on the fundamental principles of democracy and freedom) c) to effectively coordinate student groups, implement complex activities and concerns administrative issues. Imel (1995) found that adult students have specific expectations from their educators. These expectations are considered to be: a) interest in students' learning b) knowledge c) use of many techniques d) incentives for students e) interest for students' needs e) creative atmosphere f) enthusiasm g) proper organization of the educational material.

As we can see, the educators' characteristics can be approached by different points of view.

According to Kokkos (2005), an ALP can be really effective in the learning procedure, if he/she possesses the knowledge, capacities, skills and attitudes, which are referred below: a) organizing the teaching material and setting specific goals, depending on each unit, b) achieving significant communication, by developing a favourable atmosphere, through dialogue, esteem of others' opinions and experiences, bonding and freedom of expression c) showing acceptance of adult students and their characteristics, perceptions and desires, and taking into account their skills and knowledge d) being ready for self-assessment, through continuous improvement and development, focusing

especially on the elements that should be changed, e) implementing of a variety of teaching techniques, effective for adult students (depending on learning through experience, participation and critical stance), f) connecting learning topics to the labour market to foster learners' employability, benefit the community and help them to be included, g) empowering adult students towards participating in many different stages of the learning procedure, h) knowing about their own advantages and disadvantages.

Leftheriotou (2005) suggests the following ALP's competences, described in the categories:

Knowledge:

- principles of effective communication
- the topic he/she teaches
- principles of adult education
- methodology of adult education
- their group of learners
- educational assessment

Skills:

- using educational techniques (i.e., brainstorming, role playing, working in groups, etc.)
- figuring the dynamics of the team
- designing the educational material
- evaluation of the learning procedure
- effective communication

Attitudes:

- respect to the students' personality
- enhancement of participation
- continuous education by every person
- mood for improvement
- self-consciousness

Obviously, one should also refer to ALPs socio-emotional capabilities. The emphasis placed on them depends on the selected theoretical approach.

According to Jarvis' approach, emphasis is given on those characteristics, which are important for the educator to understand and help their adult students (Kokkos, 2005).

According to Roger's theory, the educator has the role of the facilitator of learning, and it is required to have the following characteristics (1983):

- the educator has to award the students, to accept them exactly the way they are, respecting their personalities
- the educator should be authentic.
- understanding of the students' feelings by the ALP is a vital factor.

Many research projects have been conducted about the required competences and characteristics of an ALP (Vergidis, 2002. Galata et al., 1999. Dimoulas et al., 1995). The results of those projects argue that most ALPs do not have the required competences, so as to complete a task or work. Furthermore, the results show that they need additional training.

A vast majority of ALPs do not have the required typical competences, although they have worked for a long time in adult education (Aggeli, 2004. Kokkos, 2004).

Also, ALPs should bear some essential competences (Kokkos, 2004), to cope with different situations effectively. These essential competences are included in the following categories: a) to communicate essentially b) to have self-awareness c) to have organizational capacities d) to use the appropriate educational techniques e) to be in a self-

assessment procedure; f) to connect education with the job market g) to organize educational material and the pertinent modules h) to have a positive attitude towards the students (Ziomas, Karalis, Kokkos & Chrisakis, 2002; Vergidis, 2003; Vergidis & Karalis, 1994).

. As to the typical competences of ALPs, relevant research (Vergidis, 2003; Vergidis and Karalis, 1994) argues that they include: a) participation in trainings and seminars; b) relative studies; c) work experience in adult education. In detail, it is necessary for ALPs to have an academic profile that is relevant to what is needed in adult education. For instance, one should have the ability and capacity to solve possible issues and problems, concerning group dynamics and communication in order to participate in adult education programs.

It is interesting to search for the most important typical and essential ALPs' competences, through the students' standpoint.

The results through that research project are necessary for the ALPs, in order to make their educational work better, according to new data and the relative circumstances. Additionally, these results could be useful for the organizations that undertake design and implementation of adult education programs.

3 METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The aim of the research project presented below, was to investigate the required typical and essential ALP competences, define the most important competence of each category and determine certain vital competences towards ALPs' professionalization. The research questions, are:

- RQ1: Which are the required typical ALP's competences, according to adult students?
- RQ2: Which are the required essential ALP's competences, according to adult students?

Data was collected by semi-structured interviews, constructed after considering research and literature on the role of Alps. However, during the semi-structured interviews different topics came up, but almost always related to the research and the relevant literature.

The interview protocol was tested in pilot interviews with two students, before it took its final form.

Sampling on purpose is the way we used to choose the sample for the research (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). According to this method, the main criteria for the participants are clarified and the sample consists of those participants who meet those criteria (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The research population includes men and women who have attended an educational program that is delivered following the principles of adult education, and aged between 18 and 60. The participants were students of the School of Humanities of the Hellenic Open University, specifically from the postgraduate department of Adult Education, who had attended courses either on an undergraduate or postgraduate level one at. Participants' knowledge background and capacities varied.

The selection of the sample was convenient to the researcher was based on criteria such as easy access, personal judgment

and experience from relevant topics but also from the research topic itself.

The research process was held in April and May 2018 and the topic of the research was communicated to the undergraduate and postgraduate students through the electronic communication of the Hellenic Open University and by the teaching staff in the meetings of their groups. The researcher selected, following criteria of gender, age group, geographical distribution and work experience, 15 people (10 women and 5 men), also considering differences in their academic level, and personal profile, aiming at getting a wide spectrum of opinions.

The ages of the women in the sample were distributed as follows: 2 women aged 25-30, 2 women aged 31-35, 4 women aged 36-40 and 2 women aged 41-50. The men in the sample belonged to the following age groups: 2 men from 40-45 years old, 2 aged 46-50 age group, and 1 man was 54 years old. In addition, the geographical distribution of the sample varied, as 5 of the participants lived and worked in Thessaloniki, 5 in Athens and the remaining 5 in the other parts of Greece, namely Patras, Heraklion, Kavala, Volos and Ioannina. All 15 participants had at least two years of professional experience in adult education, fulfilling the other important criterion for selection.

The interview was conducted via Skype. The researcher had previously contacted the participants on the phone to schedule the interview and arrange relevant details.

The interviewer could change the turn of the questions, add or remove questions in case it was needed (Robson, 2010).

The interview consisted of two parts: the introductory interview questions and the main part of the interview. Introductory questions collected information about the participant, on demographical issues, academic profile and personal data.

The main part, aimed at collecting information about the ALPs participation in adult training procedures in general, and the frequency they participated in them. In addition, there were open-ended questions concerning ALP's role. It also aimed at discussing the meaning and importance of the ALPs role and exemplifying the main competences that an ALP should possess towards professionalisation.

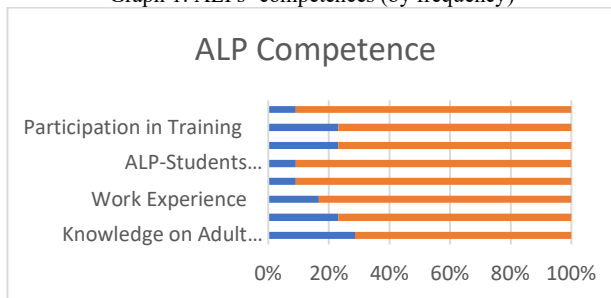
The research results were processed and analyzed by content analysis. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. To process the data, the researcher transcribed the interviews and combined them with her personal notes from the interview.

This process was initially followed per person and interview. Afterwards, all the data were collected, processed, and compared. In this way we managed to draw our final conclusions.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to students' interviews, the most important findings are shown on Graph 1.

Graph 1: ALPs' competences (by frequency)



Since the participants were studying in an Adult Education department, we took for granted that the discussion on the role of adult educators and the principles of adult education was familiar to them. So, we expected participants to express their views on their future professional role, while they expressed their opinion on the importance of their educators' role and competences.

Most participants believed that ALPs should possess a significant knowledge of adult education. Moreover, the majority believed that the ALPs should have the ability to help students overcome the obstacles they face, to concern for them and also, to inspire, encourage and empower their participation in the educational process.

On the other hand, the preparation of the teaching procedure and the ALPs' academic background were not considered as the most important competences, but it was a desirable qualification of the trainers, as it was mentioned in many interviews. In essence, this finding complies with the So, literature, which argues that adult learners want to be treated as such, and to participate actively in the educational process rather than to be taught in an authoritative manner.

The students who participated in the research did not rank the quality of communication between them and their educators and the creation of a corresponding climate, among the most crucial skills of the ALPs. We believe that a reason for this, may be that the creation of a climate of trust and dialogue between educators and learners is one of the basic principles of adult education, and knowledge of those principles was considered by the majority of the students to be the most basic ALPs competence.

Finally, students argued that previous relevant work experience was very important for their educators. This result may express their prejudices from their involvement with education during their lifetime and their experience of other educators.

Some interesting quotes from the interviews are shown in the Box 1.

Box 1: Participant quotes (from the interviews)

- *"We wait from him to help us get over our obstacles".*
- *"We want our educator to give us urge so as to overcome our difficulties".*
- *"It is important for the educator to have experience in teaching in adult education".*
- *"The educator should have a bachelor and master degree in what he teaches and maybe in adult education".*
- *"The attendance of specific seminars for adult education is really an important competence for the educator".*

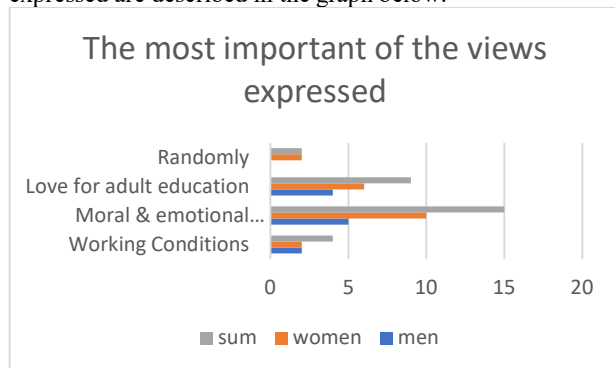
- *“The educator has to communicate with us effectively and talk with us”.*

It was impressive that the more aged participants in the sample, namely the 2 women aged 41-50 and 2 of the 5 men emphasized the support that the ALPs should give to their trainees, and the creation of a safe and open-dialogue climate. This finding can be explained by the previous negative experiences that these people may have had in the past, in their education, and therefore emphasize the supportive role of their educators.

In addition, the younger participants in the sample, 4 women aged 25-35, emphasized the academic background of the ALPs and their previous experience in adult education. This can be explained as the collection of degrees and certificates is a trend among younger generations, while at the same time it is more difficult to gain work experience.

Finally, in contrast to the participants from other cities, the 10 students living in Thessaloniki and Athens strongly argued that it is very important for educators to favor the active participation of their trainees and to encourage them to overcome their obstacles.

Another point that we would like to highlight is the reasons that pushed educators to - “work in adult education. We tried to find out whether it was the professional salary and the benefits of the profession that led most educators to engage in adult education, or whether they ultimately possessed common characteristics and skills that urged them to engage in adult education. The most important of the views expressed are described in the graph below.



More specifically, the majority of the sample did not choose the profession of adult educator because of high job benefits and salary earnings. Also, most of them admitted that they chose to engage in adult education purposefully (4 participants declared that they work in adult education randomly). The most important reasons provided by the participants for their professional choice were (a) the love for the scientific field of adult education that was cultivated during their studies, by being related with corresponding standards, but also, (b) their involvement in the industry.

However, all participants stated that adult educators who practice their profession in accordance with the role identified in the previous results and who possess these competences, always feel emotional fullness and moral justification in the practice of the profession, as they help their trainees to improve themselves, to stand on their feet and face their obstacles and assumptions.

Only 2 men aged 40-50 and 2 women aged 41-50 stated that the professional conditions of adult educators were very good and that their employment rights and opportunities in the labor market were expanded. These participants also had the largest previous work experience in adult education.

Finally, the two youngest women aged 25-30 stated that they were involved in adult education by chance, but during their studies and as they gained work experience, they felt great affection for the profession and that they thought it was the answer to what they were looking for in the professional arena.

These results, in general, lead us to the conclusion that adult educators do not remain in the field for work benefits of the industry compared to other professions. In addition, they open the dialogue for the professionalization of ALPs. Finally, they highlight that the basic competences that define the ALPs role are to a large extent the aspirations of professionals entering the field but also their key characteristics.

The typical competences of the ALPs reported by our research are: a) in-depth knowledge about their topic, b) training in order to update their knowledge on adult education; b) work experience and academic background.

Most frequently participants argued that it is important for an ALPs to know very well their topic and to have all the necessary knowledge, to satisfy their students' needs.

The essential competences identified in the findings were: a) giving opportunities to students, in order to empower themselves to continue their studies; b) understanding students' impediments and difficulties; c) preparing their teaching and d) communicating with students, and resolving any inconvenient situation that occurs.

The most important essential competence mentioned was the ALPs ability to empower students to develop and continue, showing in this way the meaning of a harmonic and creative relationship between them and their students.

The research findings are of practical importance for adult educators, as they can be used to improve training procedure. In detail, the adult students' expectations for their ALP should be understood and acknowledged.

Additionally, our results are significant, because they add to the current literature, offering empirical data on the beliefs of adult students in Greece.

Furthermore, our project has been helpful to comprehend the main ALPs competences in Greece and the lack in other assets/characteristics which could complete the ALPs profile as professionals.

It would be of value to plan a further investigation of ALPs competences in Greece. Such an effort could focus on the “dark side” of that occupation, i.e., status of employment, percentage of personal income from adult training activities, participation in professional organizations or trade unions, employment conditions and industrial relations, entry requirements, certifications, postgraduate specializations etc. Such research would be helpful in defining even better an emerging profession.

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