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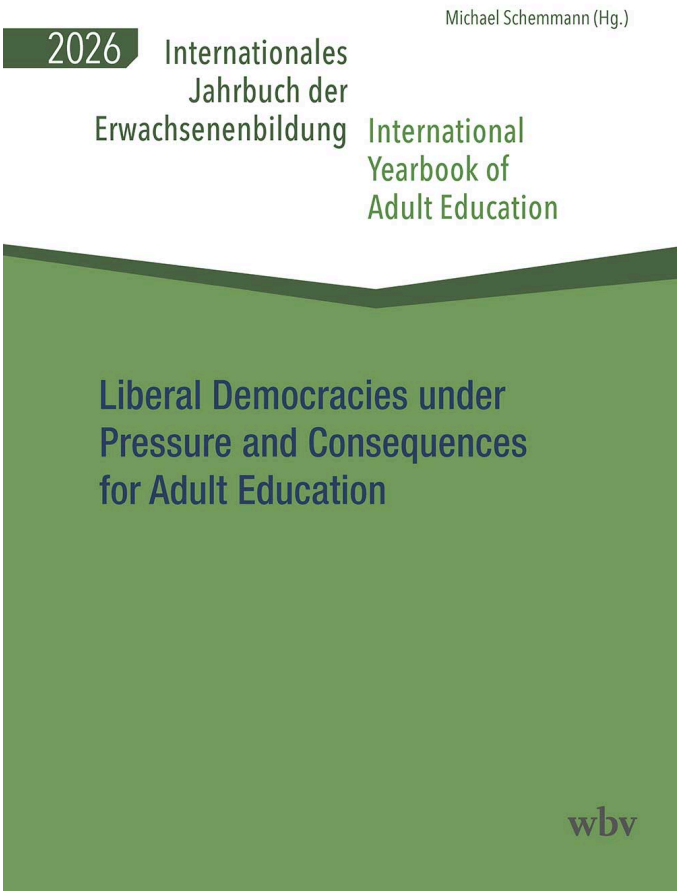
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This paper examines the development of adult and lifelong learning in Hungary between 1998 and 2025. It focuses on the increasing emphasis on labour market-oriented vocational education and training, which has reduced the role of basic skills education, second-chance education, and non-vocational adult learning. Although participation in adult learning has increased, OECD PIAAC results indicate declining or stagnating levels of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills. The paper also identifies shortcomings in accessibility, guidance, funding, and the professional development of adult educators. At the same time, EPALE Hungary and international research collaborations are highlighted as positive examples of professional exchange and innovation. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for a more balanced adult learning policy that promotes both employability and lifelong learning for active citizenship, resilience and community engagement.

Schlagworte: ALE; access; inclusion; community; VET
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Adult learning and education in Hungary. Trends and Issues

Balázs Németh

Abstract: This paper examines the development of adult and lifelong learning in Hungary between 1998 and 2025. It focuses on the increasing emphasis on labour market-oriented vocational education and training, which has reduced the role of basic skills education, second-chance education, and non-vocational adult learning. Although participation in adult learning has increased, OECD PIAAC results indicate declining or stagnating levels of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills. The paper also identifies shortcomings in accessibility, guidance, funding, and the professional development of adult educators. At the same time, EPALE Hungary and international research collaborations are highlighted as positive examples of professional exchange and innovation. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for a more balanced adult learning policy that promotes both employability and lifelong learning for active citizenship, resilience and community engagement.

Keywords: ALE, access, inclusion, community, VET

1 Introduction

Adult learning and education (ALE) has become the special hostage of an 'era of the post-financial crisis' as most European governments gave up balanced lifelong learning policies of integrating low-skilled adults into basic skills education and to further learning opportunities by reducing learning to VET-related programmes (Németh, 2016) and, simultaneously, downgrading second chance education as the traditional mission of adult educators. While governments gave up using the slogan of lifelong learning and shifted towards reskilling and upskilling programmes alongside the claims and interests of industrial and economic stakeholders, both participation and performance levels in adult learning fell in most EU member states, regardless of researchers in adult learning and education having called for the necessary combination of programmes in formal and non-formal structures in order to develop basic and transversal skills of adults to successfully respond to community demands and labour market challenges (Farkas, 2019). This paper examines the changing and limited role of adult learning and education in Hungary, a tool which have been made to obey to VET-based employment interests and focuses. Opposite to EU and international calls, policies in Hungary have reduced ALE either to non-formal trainings for adults through regional VET Centres (Bükki, 2019) or to limitedly accessible short-cycle programmes

to develop soft and vocational skills of adults aiming at strengthening their positions in the labour market. Not only programmes of provision, but also the number of participants in ALE programmes have risen for the last five years while former government reduced active participation in EU and UNESCO led intergovernmental dialogues in adult learning other than VET-focuses towards CEDEFOP and the OECD. Although Hungary entered the PIAAC survey in 2015 and 2018, the latest 2023 results were rather disappointing to reflect falling or stagnating skills levels (OECD, 2023).

2 Adult and Lifelong Learning in Hungary from 1998 to 2025

Adult learning and education was integrated to open educational policies right after the change of regime in 1989 when Hungarian citizens chose democracy instead of Communist rule (Németh, 2000). This clearly meant and provided a choice for integrative and multi-sectoral lifelong learning policies and related structures to get adult education recognised and developed in a three-fold way through formal, non-formal and informal settings (Németh, 2000; Sz. Tóth, 2007).

Adult education started to deeply change in accordance with the communist regime to fade away and result in the continuation of second chance schools for adult learners at primary and secondary as a late achievement of post-war adult education, however, significant steps were made to open to market and democratisation of society (Bajusz, 2013, 2015). Those two factors started to promote and develop non-formal and informal adult learning with growing significance and, in a decade of time, it grew beyond expectations while governmental policies right after the millennium kept less and less focus on basic skills development in traditional schools for adults (e. g. primary school and secondary schools for adults to provide second chance). However, although European integration was a strong challenge to make vast quality improvement of public education, higher education and VET, adult education shifted to labour market related programmes and, consequently, lost influence as a bridging policy component between school education and vocational trainings both in formal and in non-formal structures (Németh, 2014; Fodor, 2015).

In case this is considered as a certain kind of erosion or deformation of adult education, accession to the EU provided to start in 1998 and beyond provided a positive atmosphere for grounding policies with effective structures and methods to respond to EU-principles in education and training by turning attention to lifelong leaning referring to the EC White Paper (European Commission, 1995) and CONFINTEA V's Hamburg Declaration (UNESCO, 1997). Consequently, this process slowed down the process of change and provided a certain positive illusion with the lifelong learning policy discourse that the economic might be balanced with more social. The above indicated impacts signalled some inspiring issues for adult education to be dealt with as matters for research and development, like participation, methodologies, policy and governance, quality and professionalisation, assessment and evaluation, validation of prior

learning, ageing, community and culture, citizenship and identity, comparative work, history, etc. to result in a strategy for LLL based on sectoral dialogue and discourse amongst policy makers, stakeholders and researchers under National Institute for Adult and Vocational Education (HUN LLS, 2006).

In Hungary, the main bodies in research were university units and departments in Budapest, Szeged, Debrecen and Pécs, together with the Hungarian Folk-high school Society, the Association for Dissemination of Sciences/TIT and the Network of Museums and Galleries in Adult Education, which later formed the Museum-Andragogy Platform of the Pulszky-Society after 2000. Another influencing factor to promote and organise quality research work was the European programme from 1995 dedicated to adult education, later to adult learning.

The illusion of a balanced picture lasted for a decade until 2007, when the financial crisis blew up everything and employment focuses hijacked and deformed adult learning and education to fully serve economic and industrial interests. It became rather hopeless to insist on a balanced view referring to the formation of national policies since adult education and training were pushed directly to ministries of labour, of employment and labour, of national economy and recently of innovation and technology.

However, we must conclude that the Hungarian policy shift after 2008 was something similar to the process how the European Commission, right after the 2008 financial crisis, moved the adult learning portfolio from DG EAC to DG Employment. This new way of understanding the role of adult learning came into action at the very end of the budget period for 2007–13 and resulted in the merge of programmes to Erasmus+ and in the reduction of lifelong learning policies and strategies to obey to the priority of member states targeting skills and competence development in accordance with OECD priorities and recommendations based on PIAAC results (OECD, 2005; Csanádi et al., 2014).

As a consequence, research work became slightly turned to VET, upskilling and reskilling with employment concerns, and only a few higher education units/departments were shaping research with a rather holistic and innovative approaches in professional development of staff to respond to calls of EAEA (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2006, 2016, 2019) the UNESCO CONFINTEA VI and BFA in 2009 and those of the Renewed Agenda on Adult Learning for Europe (UNESCO, 2009; Council of the EU, 2011).

3 Hungarian adult and lifelong learning and OECD's adult learning priorities

In the last two decades, Hungarian Adult Education has been relatively successful in moving participation in adult learning from the average of 3 % to beyond 7 % by 2015 according to Eurostat and OECD surveys (OECD, 2025). Whilst the latest figures of CEDEFOP reflects that the rate of participation of adults in learning has risen up to 62,2 % within the age cohort of 24–64 (Bükki, 2019; European Commission, 2025), lat-

est OECD PIAAC results from 2024 resonate a fall of literacy and problem-solving skills, whereas numeracy skills stagnate. This clearly resonates that Hungarian adults performing below the EU average in all areas regardless of growing participation in learning (OECD, 2025). This clearly resonates the contradiction in between quantity and quality dimensions.

Quite recently, the 16–24 age group, who are still enrolled in initial education or have just completed it, scored significantly below the average, signalling potential issues with the quality of education. Almost one in four adults are low achievers both in numeracy and literacy (24.1 % vs EU: 21.8 %), and the impact of a adult learner's parental educational background remains influential. Accordingly, educational attainment influences labour market outcomes and wages (OECD, 2024).

It must be indicated that policy concerns in Hungary face several obstacles to realise the joint and complex handling of adult and lifelong learning with quality concerns, since governmental focuses have reduced official narratives and policy interventions. These have served only employability measures and vocational skills development through a top-down approach instead of bottom-up focuses.

As a consequence, adults' low and falling basic skills have not yet been responded to in the government's policy agenda. A project supported by the ESF+ aims to improve the basic skills of people with low educational attainment and unemployed people. This practice has resulted in a very problematic situation for being able to easily demonstrate 'ups and downs' in the same country-specific system. It also means that one cannot consider the country either as a relatively developed or, in the other way round, a relatively under-developed one. Hungary has got some advances in the formation of vocational and labour market-based training programmes for adults, through direct investments in a new vocational and apprenticeship programme. This is as part of the Strategy for Industry 4.0, to incorporate vocational continuing education for adults. However, that has been a reduced context how the former government understood and recognised adult and lifelong learning (Cedefop, 2024).

Accordingly, a number of horizontal tools as monitoring, continuing professional developments for teaching staff in ALE and VET organisations, guidance and counselling for adult learners, RVA practices, national research and development programmes in non-formal and informal learning environments, quality tools and methods have been either neglected or undervalued in the governmental programmes (Kleisz, 2015; Tratnyek, 2015).

The OECD Dashboard of 2023 on Priorities of Adult Learning, reflecting the interdependency between some particularly important factors, highlights those priorities that are considered necessary to the process of developing adult and lifelong learning. That is not to move policy and practice towards using only some of them to improve participation and performance in adult leaning. Those priorities are: i) urgency, ii) coverage, iii) inclusiveness, iv) flexibility and guidance, v) alignment with skill needs, vi) perceived training impact, and vii) financing.

Hungary, based on the figures of a relevant survey of OECD as an inter-governmental organisation, has scored with quite good results on urgency, on alignment with

skills needs and on perceived training impact. But it scored very badly at coverage, at flexibility, and at guidance and financing. Those latest three priorities as indicators well reflect the fact that adult and lifelong learning has got a rather bad social and economic reputation: it is still mainly connected to the image or presumption of constraint, with negative implications, while the lack of flexibility and guidance echoes the dominance of top-down approaches and the limited skills of organisations and individuals to make effective make use of free and autonomous structures and, consequently, a demand and claim for a helping hand. Matters of financing would have to mean something obviously and painfully contradictory. Although the former Hungarian government aimed at accelerating and increasing VET-dominated adult learning and skills development, with limited or low-level financing, together with other missing financing tools, this would inevitably result in limited and stagnating results which pulled back the output of the sector from its expected potentials (Farkas, 2015).

It is necessary to underline that the OECD Dashboard of priorities may indicate some of the aspects of an adult learning and lifelong learning system needing to change in a rather ill-formed setting. Some other missing indicators would also signal a system with severe difficulties and challenges which are not at all easy to turn towards hopeful directions or ways forward for expansion and development. Those missing items are RVA (Recognition – Validation and Accreditation), the quality development of adult learning professionals, guidance and counselling, non-vocational adult learning and monitoring of the sector (Kleisz, 2015; Farkas, 2019; Kovács, 2025).

When relating any of those aspects to the reality of Hungarian adult learning and education, it resonates with problems and constraints: for making a learner-centred system with bottom-up focus, on-going and real consultancies with economic stakeholders; and to turn adult and lifelong learning with a citizenship focus. In this regard, emphasis on making learning cities and learning communities may be helpful to bridge vocational and non-vocational adult learning for the benefit to all. (Németh, 2023) This is now very difficult in a country of centralised actions, over-dominating governmental approaches and narrow citizens' and professional NGOs' voices. I think that the right way to go, and the right scope, is to integrate, collect, share, and use voluntary actions; and have much more international professional partnerships in the region (OECD, 2023).

4 The Covid-19 situation – Making us reconsider what matters and who we are

Hungary, among many other countries, today is facing the huge challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, tomorrow it can only be successful if there are skilled and educated lifelong learners to cope with new situations in both the social and the economic aspect, while respecting dignity, equity and equality amongst our citizens.

In the context of adult learning and education, the global challenges of health and well-being have become among outstanding matters of social and economic concern in

respect of aspects of employability, community participation and family responsibilities. It turned out that the Hungarian situation reflected local/regional problems of health care and health-related services that were inherited and still resonate: challenging dimensions of system-maintenance with the issue of financing; governance resulting in temporary shortages of doctors and nurses to be directly involved in the fight against the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Popovic & Nisavic, 2023).

In Hungary today, the most challenging and necessary topic of health and well-being is to make people recognise their own responsibility towards their own health and their community members' health. In this regard, people as adult learners must learn to become and stay vaccinated so as resist viruses. This is a rather complicated issue at a time of uncertainties and a globally connected world with full of fake-news and propaganda. Therefore, adult education should help people to become and stay critical thinkers and consider what things are at stake, referring to social cohesion, stability, economic growth and prosperity, together with equitable, inclusive and tolerant environments. This whole matter definitely points out that active citizenship education needs to be developed in several contexts in Hungary.

5 Explaining the predominant focus on VET

Having scrutinized the world of adult learning and education, some recent trends show that Hungarian adult education and training have been deformed to mainly and exclusively reflect issues of VET, and more precisely, continuing Vocational Education and Training for adults both in formal and non-formal structures. From an opposite angle, this means that Vocational Education and Training has become a major and dominant field for government – recognised adult education and training with the aim of strengthening employment and employability of adults through labour-market oriented training programmes provided by VET centres in each county across Hungary and financed by the national budget (Laczik & Farkas, 2019).

It was the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MKIK) which emphasized setting up such a scheme to train adults in vocations through skills development, based on the skill needs of major big employers in the country. The Act on Adult Education and Training of 2013 (LXXVII/2013 Act on Adult Education), and its modification through a 11/2020 govt. decree aimed at registering and declaring the start of specific programmes for adults, in accordance with the aim of the National Government to raise necessary skills and competences of adults referring to labour market needs (Kovács, 2025).

This new Decree was accepted by majority vote of Government parties MPs last year to initiate further high-quality development of non-formal training programmes for adult learners. Its aim has been to keep central government actions tied to the needs to the major multinational industrial and trade firms, and still keep SMEs away from such focuses, together with minimizing the certainty of educational and training enterprises to initiate individual trainings in skills and competence development, together

with participating with their bids in particular VET programmes. These kinds of orientations can be easily linked to OECD's skills policy frames (OECD Skills platform) and seen at the CEDEFOP platform through country reports (Bükki, 2019).

One significant consequence of a fragmented and reductionist orientation is the lack of concern towards other important fields of adult learning and education demonstrated by UNESCO as needed to raise participation. That is why the former Hungarian government could not be identified as an active participant in participatory discourses at UN and at the UN High-Level Panel (UNHLP) to focus on Agenda 2030 and its SDGs, in the context of quality education and lifelong learning. Also, Hungary has not yet been very active in the Council of Ministers of the EU to enhance adult learning for the last ten years and beyond. Consequently, it has not made use of the non-vocational-oriented adult learning initiatives of the European Commission, with equitable, inclusive and equality measures of better participation by vulnerable groups of adults across Europe and its regions suffering difficulties, inequalities and deprivation.

International governmental and non-governmental organisations must call for more active involvement of nation-states in the development of adult learning programmes, to raise both employment and active citizenship, with a clear and balanced format, in order to avoid reductionist views, and focus to get legitimated. Another reason for such an approach is in case we may want to help underrepresented and vulnerable groups of adults to be given more attention and care. To get integrated and get access to adult learning we need to reconfigure law, financing and policies to result in better provision in adult education with a learner- centred focus. This is very much demonstrated today by ICAE, DVV International, the European Lifelong Learning Platform and EAEA as civil society platforms of adult learning and education to strengthen the role, the visibility and necessary involvement of their voices, through dialogue, platform-building and common actions as We are ALE, which is also not at all visible yet in Hungary, at any official professional bodies' activities or platforms. One may find internationally oriented and led campaigns and activities at only a small number of civil society groups, some university departments and institutes having been engaged in the research and development of adult education and learning, which are devoted to non-vocational adult learning and education (Popovic, 2022).

6 Professional Development and Research: the Role of EPALE HUNGARY

One important and exceptional positive example is the EPALE Hungary platform (run by the National Office of Vocational Education and Training and Adult Learning), where a special platform has been formed since 2017 in accordance with the EPALE platform itself. This might be considered as the only case where non-vocational adult education practices are collected with country and topic-specific scopes.

The Adult Education Committee of the Pedagogical Commission of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has created an Open Group of Adult Education Research and

Development at EPALE Hungary to discuss certain issues for research and development recognised as current trends and issues (EPALE, 2025). These are:

- Intergenerational learning;
- Museum Andragogy/Adult Education in Museums;
- Digitalisation – the role of digital education in the learning of adults;
- Andragogy and Adult Learning Policies – In between employment and social cohesion;
- Andragogy and the profession of adult educator;
- Learning Communities and Learning Cities in the Dimension of Andragogy/ Adult Education;
- Adult Education Research and Basic Skills Development.

Those topics have generated discourse amongst some young researchers and lecturers with both academic and professional backgrounds to collect and share ideas, narratives and critical approaches to how adult learning participation, performance and partnership-based actions can be pursued in mutual commitment.

A particularly important outcome of this Adult Education Academy program is a recent collection of studies published by the University of Florence: International and Comparative Studies in Adult and Continuing Education (Egetenmeyer et al., 2020). This publication includes a paper on learning cities with reference to the case of Pécs, Hungary compared to trends in India, Palestine, and the UK.[1]

Another valuable example of Hungarian universities being involved in international research and development of skills and competences of basic skills teachers. Therefore, the University of Pécs joined EBSN and its consortium to develop an innovative framework for this purpose. Starting the European Year of Skills for 2023, the Professional Development Series (PDS) of EBSN has reached an advanced phase of applying MOOCs to develop the professional skills and competencies of basic skills teachers helping adult learning to improve with better performance. Providing contributions to policy cooperation at the European Union level, the KA3 Action of the Erasmus+ programme supported the development of six innovative Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as part of the project Professional Development Series for Basic Skills Teachers (PDS4BST). These MOOCs are designed to engage teachers, educators, mentors, and facilitators of adult learning to develop professionally in a digitalised learning environment adaptable to changing learning needs (European Basic Skills Network, 2023).

Members of the Adult Education Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences have recently tried to debate and refer to the trends and issues signalled by EAEA, ICAE, ESREA on the one hand, and also to those of UNESCO UIL, OECD and ILO on the other under the SDGS discourse. In this regard, around thirteen to sixteen members of the Committee have discussed influential aspects of the Futures of Education focus and related comments, for example that of ICAE, and collected reflections on WEF publication of Future of Jobs 2025 (WEF, 2025), and to the OECD PIAAC survey's

1 https://fupress.com/catalogo/international-and-comparative-studies-in-adult-and-continuing-education/4405

relevant materials on the changing skills of adult learners in Hungary. This means that professional academic bodies are aware of international trends; and are relating their own research work and analytical studies to highlight aspects of global trends compared to local and regional realities (Adult Education Subcommittee of HAS, 2025).

7 Concluding Remarks

The Education and Training Monitor2025 of the European Commission clearly indicates that adult learning participation has recently been measured by the Hungarian government at 62.2 %, above the EU average of 0.9 %, for 2022:

This echoes two things: one is that the indicated statistics are far beyond realities; seemingly adults participate in learning activities beyond statistical reach, resulting in higher figures than expected. Another issue is that the rate for Hungary is above expectations to reach a more competitive adult public with better skills and competences. This underlines the necessity to put clear and stronger emphasis on expanding adult learning opportunities in NVAL (non-vocational adult learning).

To address skills shortages Hungary by 2025, a regulation on short courses leading to micro-credentials and their certification was published, and the piloting of individual learning accounts between 2025 and 2027 was announced. The implementation of micro-credentials in Hungary would benefit from a single transparent approach across educational sectors and regular reviews drawing on stakeholder feedback, including learners. The adult training legal framework sets out the main features of a new adult learning fund (to be operational from 2027), which should finance policy development, labour market forecasting and large-scale training. Details on how individuals, especially the most vulnerable people, can benefit from the fund, as well as the source of funding, are not yet available.

The falling as well as stagnating figures of participation in adult and lifelong learning reflect some obvious consequences which mark urgent needs for research and development:

- The disappearance of adult basic education to promote basic skills will result in skills shortages of adults and skills mismatches in national employment structures. In order to handle such a problem, countries like Hungary need well-trained adult educators to enhance adult learning with effective and relevant methods. We need to demonstrate that adults must read, write and communicate through digital tools, according to the claims of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 1995) and adult educators have immense responsibilities to develop those skills through participatory actions of adults with accessible forms and timing;
- The challenges of intergenerational and intercultural learning will change place of community development and will definitely claim collaborative actions amongst sectors like public education, VET, higher education, workplaces, etc. and community development and culture/arts so as to realise lifelong learning mostly in urban settings. In this regard, research can help better identification of

learning needs and relevant formations to be implemented to enable adults collect and share good knowledge. The claim of the New European Action-Plan on Adult Learning to promote learning cities and learning communities for effective knowledge transfers and upskilling/reskilling might be a proper tool in the scope of continuous learning of adults (Council of the EU, 2021).

- The diverse issues of sustainability will widen the scopes of adult and lifelong learning both in social, economic and in environmental dimensions. Matters of equity, fairness, equality and inclusion will play important roles to provide relevant forms of adult learning for vulnerable groups of adults to make them becoming resilient in their communities. (Kalenda, 2024) We need more research work in adult learning and education to highlight the importance of active citizenship connecting local and global. Learning City-regions focused research work needs further collaborations (PASCAL International Observatory, 2025) and integrate HEIs for this purpose, based on the third mission of universities (Eucen, 2025; Németh, 2023).
- Developing quality research and development work in adult learning and education, needs further enhancement of professionalisation of adult educators through internationally driven programmes, project and initiatives. An important element is that young adult educators get real experience of understanding key thinkers and practitioners in adult education but also deepening knowledge on disciplinary aspects with research-based findings. All of these will help approaching adult learning and adult learners with sensitivity and care.

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