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Adult Learner's Motivation for Learning from a Comparative Perspective

Abstract

This paper presents the results of our research related to the motivation of the adults when learning. Our analysis is focused on the comparison of the motivational features of adults learning process in four Eastern and Central European countries (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine). The research is based on a qualitative survey. We used questionnaire of our design to learn about their motivation to participate in trainings, their interest and the possible hindrances. The subjects of the study are adult learners from the mentioned countries (N=556) who were in contact with the research partner institutions. Our results show that the majority of the respondents looked for pragmatic opportunities in learning useful for work and life, but also wanted to develop their interests and expand their knowledge. No country-specific characteristics were found, and potential differences were only observable in some cases.

Key words: *adult learning, motivation, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine*

Introduction

The precondition of the success of adult learning is to know the students' motivation and their interests. This is what the training content, forms of learning and curricular and extracurricular contents can be adjusted to and developed. There are precedents of research into the specific features of adult learners; several studies (Boshier, 1982; Cross, 1981; Courtney, 1992; Crossan et al., 2003; Csoma, 2002;

Dench – Regan, 2000; Gorges – Kandler, 2012, Knowles, 1980; Votava – Husa, 2011) deal with the activation of adult learners, their motivation and the barriers that hinder their learning.

Boshier highlights the following categories of motivating factors for adults:

- 'Seeking social relationships': when learning in groups, there is the possibility to establish new relationships.
- 'Seeking social motivation': solitude, friendlessness and boredom, etc. can all be the results of learning, since human beings are sentient and need everyday connections with the outside world.
- 'Professional advancement': A major motive. The workplace plays a key role in the life of the individual and their families.
- 'Community work': learning may be developed as a result of helping others.
- 'Extrinsic requirements': Non-voluntary learning does exist. The process of learning induced by family or professional life can be stopped due to some difficulty.
- 'The desire to know': One of the main types of motivation is learning for the sake of learning, as it is based on curiosity and the wish to obtain information and knowledge (Boshier, 1982).

Based on research conducted in institutionalised adult education Csoma (2002) distinguishes three groups of learning motives:

- Existential motives. Existential interests are naturally connected to several other motives, and are rather diverse in themselves.
- Another group is constituted by prestige motives: a chance or goal of mobilisation, the improvement of living conditions, requirements of the workplace the individual has to meet – these are all very important for the inclination to learn.
- The third group includes interest obtained through earlier educational activities and the desire to learn.

In our study we attempt to disclose the motives of adult learners involved in the research in relation to the motive groups established by Csoma.

We have found several empirical studies of the topic, which generally target the drives behind the learning process of a specific age group, training level or field, e.g. language acquisition: cf. Kerülő (2010). Several Hungarian researchers of motivation focus not on learning motivation, but on the characteristics of adult learners, yet according to our opinion motivational factors must be taken into account in order to define adult learning. Our research is different since we have taken into account its comparative specific.

In relation to learner's motivation research carried out abroad we mention an OECD survey which analysed '*How Adults Learn*?' (Kerülő, 2010). Another international study was published by UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning containing interviews with adult learners on their careers entitled '*I did it my way*' (Kerülő, 2010).

Methodology of Research

An adult learner is a person who at the time of the survey or in the 12 months before was involved in an adult education activity, because we wanted the respondents to have relatively current experiences of adult learning.

The subjects of the study are adult learners from Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. The sample is not representative but rather an access sampling. The interviewed persons are all adults in contractual relationships with our partner institutions.

We carried out a qualitative survey via a questionnaire of our design. With the help of SPSS software we analysed the data and performed analyses with single and multiple variables.

The goal of research was to examine adult learners in Eastern and Central European countries (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine), to learn about their motivation to participate in trainings, their interest and the possible hindrances. In addition, we wanted to map the areas of knowledge where adult learners are more active and find learning more effective as well as the methods of learning, which we analysed from several angles: on the one hand, whether they prioritised general, vocational or language trainings; on the other hand, the choices between formal, non-formal, cultural or community learning. We also intended to examine the institutions and sources of learning as well as the factors influencing the willingness to learn.

In the survey we examined types of learning motivation and barriers. We focussed on the forms, methods, venues of adult learning, adult learners' needs and the practical use of teaching material. We investigated the background indices (gender, age, school qualification, country, success during school years) influencing these, the ways of using knowledge and skills acquired during adult learning (in the family, in the workplace and local communities); the trainings' potential or real impact on labour market inclusion, on income, health, social and political participation.

The Major Specifics of Respondents

In view of the basic data from the respondents, the following facts can be established: the majority of the respondents, 449 of 577 (80.6%) are women, and there are 108 men (19.4%). Looking at the distribution by age (Fig. 1), over 40% of the respondents are between 36 and 50 years of age.
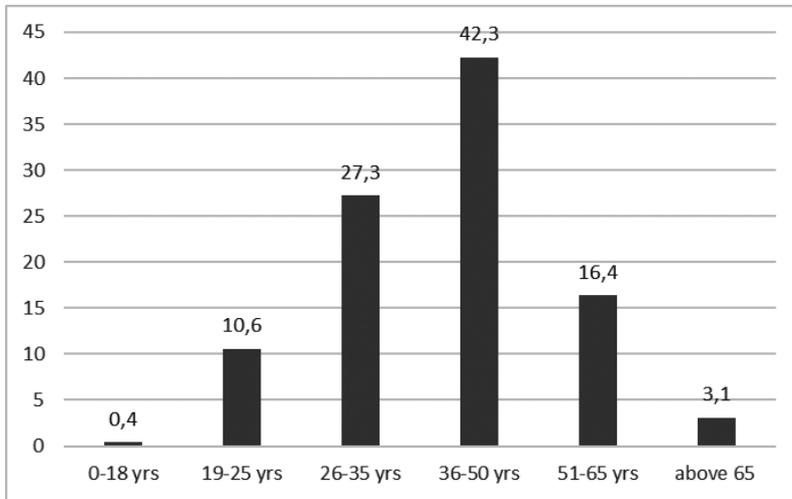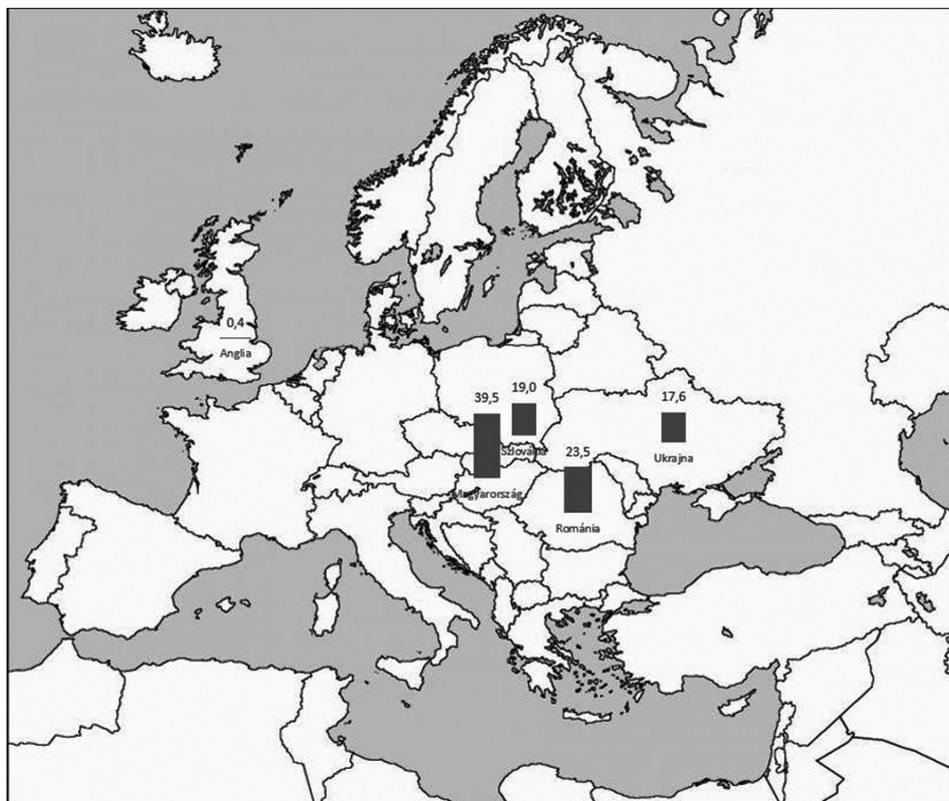

**Figure 1.** Distribution of the respondents by age (n=556)

Regarding country of residence, 39.5% of the respondents live in Hungary, 23.5% in Romania, 19% in Slovakia and 17.6% in Ukraine (0.4% of respondents marked the UK as their place of residence, see Fig. 2).

With regard to respondents' school qualifications, the majority are university graduates, which may have an impact on learning motivation and methods, so we have taken that into account in connection to the questions on the area (Fig. 3).

We were curious to see how the respondents evaluated their school careers from the perspective of success. The results (Figure 4) show that approximately half of the respondents amassed mostly positive or only positive experiences; in addition, there are also positive and negative experiences, which are represented by 47.3% of the respondents. Based on this, we can establish that primary experiences play an important role when choosing adult learning, and these people have some positive learning experience during their schoolyears. This is presumably a precondition to start learning as an adult.

Figure 2. Distribution of the respondents by country of residence (%)
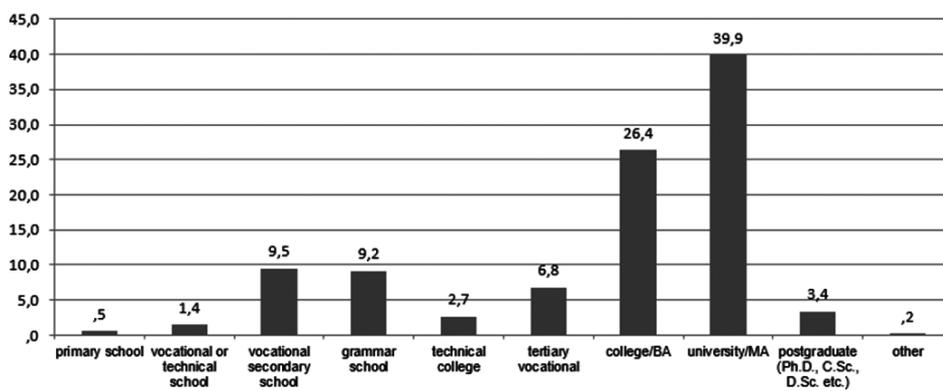
Figure 3. Highest qualifications of the respondents, %
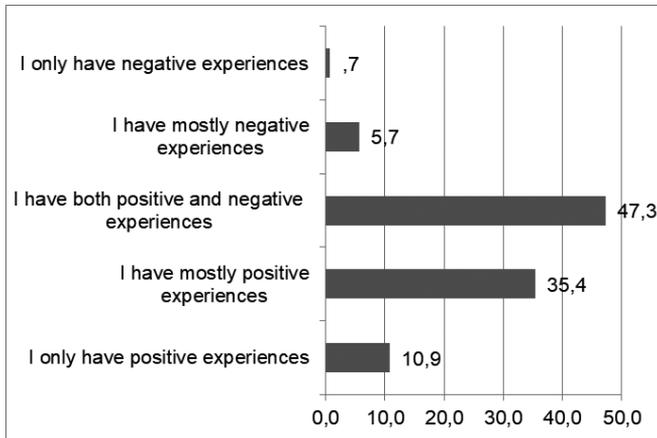
Figure 4.
Success during schoolyears, % (n=543)

We also asked them about their productivity as students, what they thought of their own achievements, and this even more highlights the importance of preliminary experience. 80% of the respondents indicated their achievements as being good, very good or excellent, so primary success at school may promote adults' learning motivation.

Results of Research

This essay investigates the data collected in the research in accordance with the main topics in the questionnaire and the characteristics of the respondents. It emphasises the characteristics of adult learning and learning motivation, the methodology of adult learning (tools and techniques of learning) and the circumstances of adult learning (educational institutions, financing).

In the case of the question on the character of the training, for the overwhelming majority of the respondents enrolled in courses learning was mainly connected to their jobs or directed at obtaining professional qualifications or a tertiary qualification in their trade. Examining differences between countries on the basis of the type of adult education, we may see that the differences are not substantial. In all countries the first place is taken by trainings in the workplace followed by tertiary trainings, then in Hungary, Ukraine and Slovakia there are training courses providing professional qualifications, and in Romania we can see recreational courses. In addition, there are language courses and courses for filling a specific position.

Table 1. Type of latest adult training by country

	Hungary	Romania	Slovakia	Ukraine
Courses in the workplace	63	47	32	51
University or college evening school, correspondence or e-learning courses	47	37	24	24
Official trainings providing professional qualifications	35	10	17	14
Recreational courses related to hobbies	19	16	11	11
Language courses	18	5	17	8
Vocational courses for a specific job	11	11	11	6
Driving courses	6	6	4	12
Non-full-time courses in vocational schools and vocational secondary schools	7	1	2	1
Workers' primary schools and grammar schools	2	2	0	0
Other	16	5	6	16

We asked the respondents about the reasons for enrolling in adult education courses. Figure 5 below shows the means of statements, where adult education goals were evaluated on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – least true, 5 – most true). As can be seen, the list is dominated by the expansion of knowledge and skills, then comes obtaining applicable knowledge, followed by obtaining a certificate.
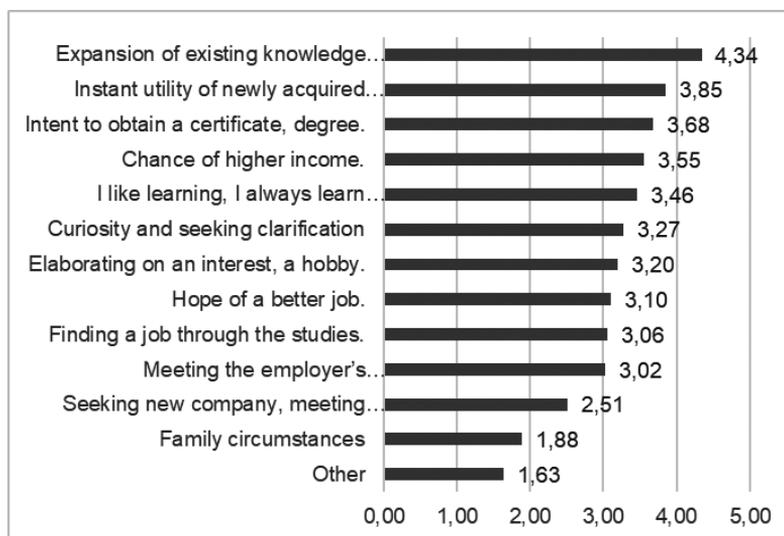
Figure 5. The purpose of starting an adult education course
(1 – least true, 5 – most true)

In order to collate the variables, we carried out factor analysis, by which we managed to differentiate between 3 separate factors in the statements on learning goals (Table 2).

The first factor includes responses which were defined by existential motives, the second group includes motives based on interest, while the third includes goals based on prestige and utilizable knowledge. These perfectly correspond to the Csoma typology. Based on his research on institutionalised adult education, Csoma (2002) divides motives commencing learning into three main groups. Existential drives and existential needs go together with a series of different motives, and are quite differentiated in themselves. Another group of motives is constituted by prestige motives such as a chance of mobilisation, better living conditions, the requirements of the job, which are all very important for the development of the willingness to learn. The third group of motives includes the interest and willingness to learn developed during former education.

Table 2. Factors of the goals of adult learning

|	existential motives	interest-based motives	motives related to prestige and utilisable knowledge
Hope of a better job	**.875**	,047	,083
Finding a job through the new studies	**.852**	,078	,057
Due to family circumstances	**.571**	,271	,038
Elaborating on an interest, a hobby	.163	**,745**	-,033
Curiosity, seeking clarification	.013	**,716**	,150
Seeking a new company, meeting new people	.364	**,680**	-,135
I like learning, I always learn something	-.095	**,678**	,270
Expanding existing knowledge and skills	-.128	,369	**,645**
Instant utility of acquired knowledge and information	.075	,260	**,575**
Chance of a higher income	.551	-,075	**,560**

Looking at adult learning goals by countries (Table 3), we can see that means differ in certain cases, for instance, in the interest motive (curiosity, seeking clarification) for Hungarian and Romanian respondents, and in the existential motive (hope for a better job) for Hungarian and Slovakian respondents. Also, Ukrainian respondents have marked slightly lower in each response for almost all motives, which shows a slightly more negative attitude to adult learning.

Table 3. The purpose of starting an adult education course by country (means)

	Hungary	Romania	Slovakia	Ukraine
Expanding existing knowledge and skills	4,35	4,38	4,36	4,24
Instant utility of acquired knowledge and information	4	3,75	3,98	3,53
The intention of obtaining a certificate	3,84	4,03	3,44	3,11
Chance of a higher income	3,7	3,51	3,7	3,12
I like learning, I always learn something	3,53	3,64	3,32	3,21
Curiosity, seeking clarification	**3,49**	**3,47**	3,06	2,72
Elaborating on an interest, a hobby	3,26	3,52	3,1	2,74
Hope of a better job	**3,34**	2,75	**3,52**	2,61
Finding a job through the new studies	3,25	2,97	3,17	2,63
Meeting employers' requirements	**3,13**	2,63	**3,26**	3,09
Seeking a new company, meeting new people	2,57	2,53	2,45	2,39
Due to family circumstances	2,04	1,89	1,82	1,59
Other	1,72	1,5	1,62	0

Approaching the problem from the perspective of the direct goal of learning the main target is further training, as nearly half of our respondents start learning as adults. Another defining goal is obtaining a new trade as well as participation in retraining. There are no substantial differences between countries, as the responses for all respondents of the given country are dominated by further training (Fig. 6).

We also asked our respondents what they thought the general purpose of learning was (generally speaking, about non-personal motivations). We found that the
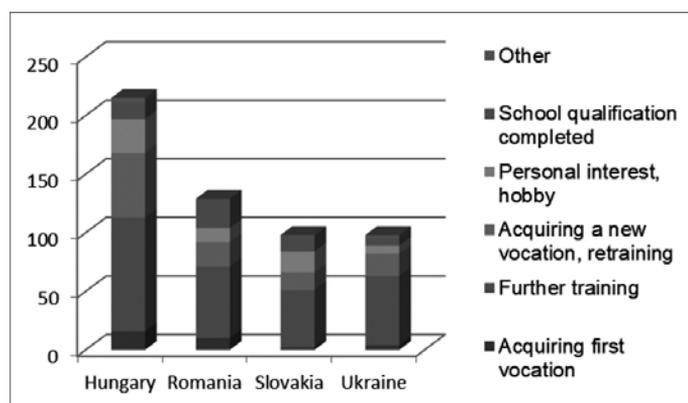
Figure 6.
The (direct) goal of learning (pc)
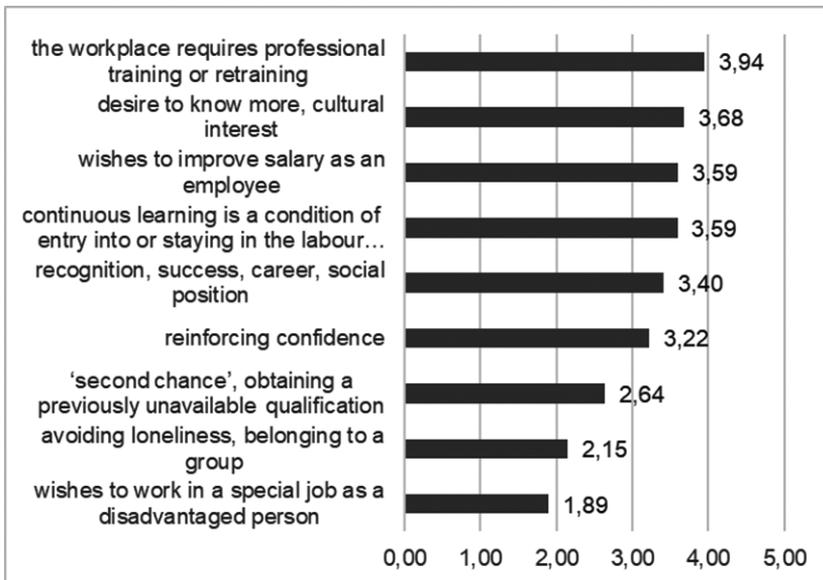
Figure 7. What is the general purpose of adults' learning?
(1 – least true, 5 – most true)

workplace is an extrinsic motivating factor, but in second place there was the will to know and cultural interest (Fig. 7).

Comparing general motivation and personal motivation (data from Fig. 6) we may establish that the means are higher for the personal question, but preferences are similar.

In an analysis by countries, there are no substantial deviations, in certain cases the values differ for Ukraine, but not significantly.

Table 4. What is the general purpose of adults' learning?
(1 – least true, 5 – most true) (means)

	Hungary	Romania	Slovakia	Ukraine
'Second chance', obtaining a level of qualification that was not available formerly	2,65	2,81	2,90	**2,10**
The workplace requires professional training or retraining	3,95	3,73	3,81	**4,32**
The goal is recognition, success, career, social position	3,54	3,38	3,49	3,02

	Hungary	Romania	Slovakia	Ukraine
The goal is entry into or remaining in the labour market	3,92	3,57	3,65	2,83
Wishes to improve salary as an employee	3,78	3,40	3,64	3,40
Building self-confidence	3,19	3,33	3,29	3,09
The will to know, cultural interest	3,75	3,71	3,57	3,59
Special jobs as disadvantaged people	1,97	2,02	2,01	**1,47**
Avoiding loneliness and belonging to a group	2,29	2,05	2,32	**1,84**

We were curious to know the factors hindering learning, too. This question may help adult educational partner organisations in designing their training courses. How can training courses be made more successful, how can learning be more productive for adults? The responses show that in the background there are mainly extrinsic factors related to the workplace and family, while intrinsic, individual barriers are less typical. The organisational practice of the institutions organising the training appear as moderate barriers (Fig. 8).

In order to collate the variables, we carried out factor analysis, by which we differentiated between 3 conspicuous factors in relation to learning difficulties
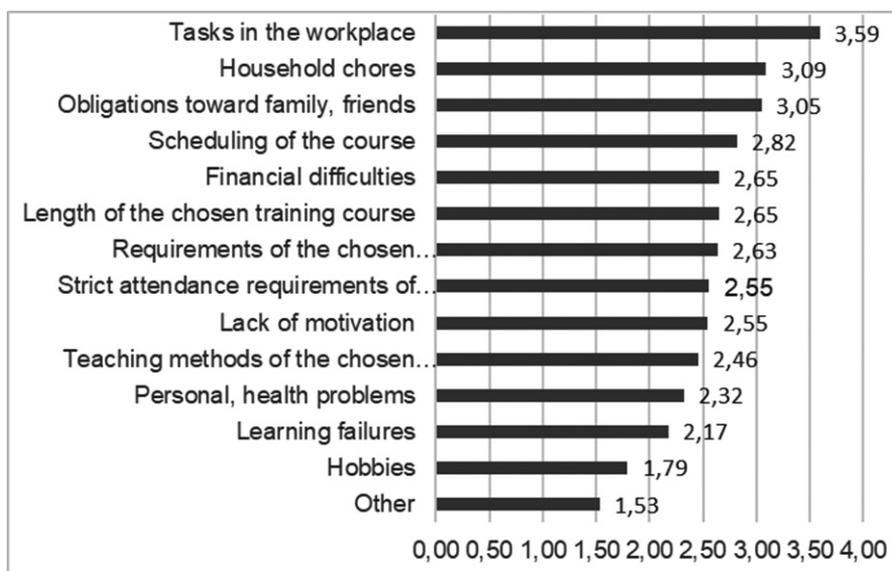
Figure 8. To what extent do individual factors hinder learning?
(1 – lest true, 5 – most true)

(Table 5): the barriers connected to institutional organisation, individual intrinsic factors and extrinsic factors are clearly separate.

Table 5. Learning difficulties – factor analysis

	barriers related to institutional organisation	individual, primarily intrinsic barriers	individual, primarily extrinsic barriers
Requirements of the chosen course	**,822**	,276	,048
Length of the chosen course	**,814**	,178	,088
Schedule of the chosen course	**,810**	,114	,124
Strict roster at the chosen course	**,787**	,271	,094
Teaching methods of the chosen course	**,698**	,353	-,012
Learning failures	,215	**,775**	-,082
Personal, health problems	,167	**,688**	,081
Financial difficulties	,133	**,681**	,237
Lack of motivation	,384	**,641**	-,065
Responsibilities towards family and friends	-,022	,132	**,841**
Household chores	,036	,166	**,833**
Duties in the workplace	,173	-,043	**,629**

We asked the respondents what tools they used characteristically during learning. They marked the individual tools 1-5. The most characteristic was the use of the Internet, but books, computers and textbooks also appeared at a mean value of over 3.5. The items of tool use show three marked factors: IT devices, electronic devices (radio, TV, CDs, DVDs) and traditional tools (Table 6).

Table 6. Tools of adult learning

	IT devices	electronic platforms	traditional tools
The Internet (e.g. browsing online and online materials)	**,825**	,031	,185
Computers (e.g. teaching software)	**,782**	,167	-,031
Multimedia/ e-learning materials	**,573**	,176	,041
TV/ radio programmes	,085	**,894**	,059
CDs/DVDs, software	,334	**,739**	,094

	IT devices	electronic platforms	traditional tools
Newspaper and journal articles	,077	**,509**	,479
Textbooks	-,026	,093	**,808**
Other books and print material	,165	,060	**,790**

Interestingly, age had no defining role in the choice of tools, young people do not characteristically use more IT devices.

We also wanted to know students' preferences as for the organisation of the learning process, and individual learning was marked very highly (4,18). This might be due to the fact that adults are limited by their circumstances, but also to the fact that the secondary educational system socialises its participants in this way.

With regard to teaching methods the highest mean was allotted to a participant-based system, discussion), in which adults' previous life and professional experiences and primary knowledge can be used. However, this is followed by demonstration and presentations, which primarily focus on the teacher. Activating methods (group work, training, situational methods) came only after these. Adult education professionals have the popular presumption that adults prefer participant-based, activating methods. This was not clearly seen in the responses. This may be due to various different factors; on the one hand, the type of new content designed for adult learning processes (some contents, theoretical and new information can be more productively taught by teacher-based, frontal methods), and on the other hand, any previous experience of the given methods.

Conclusions

In our research the respondents were adults in a relationship with our partner institutions, which is a reach sample and not a representative one, but it was sufficient to achieve our goal, that is, to learn about the characteristics of adult learning of adults in the scope of the organisations. Our partners received useful information from the research findings to use when planning their future activities.

No country-specific characteristics were found, and potential differences were only observable in some cases, e.g. the type of adult training, and the purpose of starting learning as an adult.

The background variables were not definitive either, so we presumed that school qualifications and age could influence the findings, but these, too, were not deter-

mining in relation to the individual motivations and barriers to adult learning and the choice of method.

The findings prove that the majority of the respondents looked for pragmatic opportunities for learning useful for work and life, but also benefiting their personal interest and fulfilling their desire to know more. In addition, the barriers are complex: the hindering factors are the workplace and family obligations. These show that we need to raise the awareness of employers with respect to trainings for adults.

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