

**Theses of PhD dissertation**

**QUALITY CONTROL AND ACCREDITATION IN ADULT  
EDUCATION**

– WITH ESPECIAL EMPHASIS ON INSTITUTIONS IN THE NORTH GREAT PLAIN REGION –

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**Debrecen, 2009.**

## **Objectives and a short summary of the subject**

This dissertation focuses on the problem of the quality of adult education, which became the center of attention in the years following the political transformation. This period was characterized by the emergence of several different actors on the adult education market. The institutional system of andragogy grew rather heterogeneous, and simultaneously to this, the standard of adult education showed an ever increasing irregularity. The introduction of quality control systems and the appearance of institution and program accreditation in adult education changed this situation, which helped institutions differentiate themselves from those not holding accreditations a necessary and significant area on a market controlled by regulations.

Such comprehensive work disclosing the quality-control and accreditation situation of adult education has not yet been published in Hungary. The study of this field is a justified and essential ambition, as the training of adults has become a central issue, in close connection with the fact that the economy and the labor market redefine their demands: trades learned for a lifetime do not really exist any longer, the concepts of higher education and vocational training are being radically altered, and, in return, life-long, flexible learning becomes necessary, which makes the problem of quality control in adult education all the more inexorable.

This dissertation aims at finding answers to the following fundamental questions: how well can these quality control systems operate in the framework of adult education and to what extent can such tools guarantee the quality of trainings? The operation of such systems is far from being clear and obvious, because the quality control systems and accreditation types utilized in adult education are process control systems examining primarily whether adult education processes and documentation meet prescribed requirements. Real content or the quality of the conveyance of knowledge appear less significant, although education (basic activity) and its ancillary background activities (for example, administration and human resource management) are similarly important from the perspective of quality control. The operation of an adult-education institution and its state of organization affect the training activity and have an impact on the quality of the training as well, thus it would be useful to take into account this holistic aspect when defining the requirements of an accreditation-based quality control system. Satisfying customer demands is also pushed to the background, even though an institution is considered to meet quality requirements only when it constantly monitors the demands of the

social consumer, mainly the demands of students, whose satisfaction is one of the determinant factors of efficient teaching/learning. To be able to rise above the perspective of compliance with formal and bureaucratic quality requirements it is indispensable to analyze the quality-control system at a scientific level and to further develop quality control in a unified and differentiated way by involving and directly enquiring (students evaluation and feedback systems) the market actors and the participating adults.

Through clarifying the set of questions examined theoretically and empirically, this paper intends to provide answers to the questions of to what extent real quality appears in the market of adult education, what factors justify the existence or lack of these, and what internal correspondences may be disclosed in connection to the issue at hand.

### **Theoretical background**

The theoretical part may be divided into three greater sections, the fundamental purpose of which is to define a theoretical frame in which the concepts relevant to the subject matter are clarified along with the surveying and processing of the main theories, views, and findings of the study of accreditation and quality control in adult education. The professional literature is investigated through looking at international and Hungarian works, studies, and essays published in academic journals.

The first chapter contains the definition of fundamental concepts and the specification of definitions which coexist in the practice of adult education and training albeit they focus on different areas, which is performed in accordance with the approaches of primarily Csoma, Durkó, Pöggeler, Sári, and Zrinszky<sup>1</sup>. I deem the term “adult education” justified in the paper, as the stress is on the disclosure of accreditation and quality-control processes in the professional training of adults. Following the outlining of the conceptual groundwork, the field of adult education is classified from different aspects, thus the distinctions between formal, non-formal, and informal as well as institutionalized and non-institutionalized adult educations are given a frame of interpretation. Since following the political transition the situation of adult education changed radically and gained special weight, I consider it reasonable—mainly based on the

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<sup>1</sup> Literature referred to in this brochure is fully listed in the bibliography attached to the actual dissertation.

works of Csoma, Liskó, Mátyus, Polónyi, Zachár, and Zrinszky—to present in a sub-chapter the changes brought about by the turn in 1989-90 as regards society, economy, and jurisdiction.

The second chapter examines the topic of quality and quality control. The chapter begins with the general definition of the term “quality,” where it is either defined as excellence, zero defect, or performance that complies with a specific goal. Relying on the propositions of Csapó, Sz. Tóth, Varga, and Zsolnai, I show how the harmonized activity directed at managing and controlling an organization—quality control—appears in the relations of adult education. After outlining the basic concepts I go on to present the types and models of quality-control process, then summarize the steps of establishing a quality-control system based on the models outlined by Setényi and Sz. Tóth. Following this, I list the arguments found in professional literature for (Bálint, Polónyi, Setényi, Sz. Tóth) and against (Csoma) establishing quality-control systems by pointing out the uniformities, differences, and logical interrelations of the various stances.

Chapter three examines the central process of quality control and certification procedures prevalent in adult education, that is, accreditation, mainly based on the works of Cserné, Halász, Kozma, Lawrie, and Linssen. After clarifying the conceptual bases (evaluation, self-evaluation, accreditation) I demonstrate how accreditation activity has developed since the first half the 1990s in secondary, higher, and adult educations. Then I continue to explore the direct features of accreditation in adult education, the legal requirements pertaining to the accreditation process, I presenting the views popular with the professionals by encountering the arguments of Bertalan, Gutassy, Henczi, Jakab, Kozma, Rontó, Sum, and Szüdi.

### **The method and process of research**

The research included accredited adult education institutions operating in the Norther Great Plan region and listed in the National Institute of Vocational and Adult Education database, thai is profit oriented economic organizations, public service institutions maintained by the state or local governments (schools, higher education institutions, Regional Training Centers, Integrated Vocational Training Centers), and also non-profit organizations. Since the research concentrated mainly on a relatively small region, the North Great Plain Region, I managed to examine the accreditation and quality-control specifics of adult education institutions from a holistic point of view. The adult education institutes were assessed between September and December 2008, the

institutions were visited by taking into account data as of 1 September 2008 in the public database relating to accredited adult education organizations of the National Institute of Vocational and Adult Education, and altogether 140 institutions completed the questionnaire out of the 173 accredited adult education institutions operating in the region.

During the research accumulation of data was based on the evaluation of surveys managed by an interviewer and containing the responses of employees of the actual institutions; the aim was to have a quantitative view of the adult-education situation in the region. The questionnaire used in the research is divided into three main parts: the general operation of adult-education institutions and enterprises, the operation of the quality-control system, as well as accreditation. The processing of data accumulated during the survey was performed with the help of the SPSS program: correspondences within the data recorded were queried via frequency analysis, linear regression analysis, variance analysis, correlation analysis, and cross-table analysis. The data were in addition correlated with the findings of other surveys and analyses in the professional literature, continually taking into account the importance of a comparative aspect.

Two major comparative aspects were adhered to during the writing of the dissertation. I compared the statuses of the three counties in the region, establishing that the replies to the survey questions parallel the statistical data as well as reflect the findings of analytical works. By comparing the relations of public service institutions, community organizations, and profit-oriented organizations, it was established that non-profit organizations take part in adult education in an ever increasing degree.

## **Major findings**

I present the findings of the research below, by organizing them around the four major assumptions formulated while planning the study.

**The first assumption** was that institutions that operate accredited, standard quality-control systems have a larger knowledge of quality control than institutions that operate self-developed systems compliant with the requirements of the Adult Education Accreditation Body (hereinafter FAT). The findings, however, did not justify this assumption: organizations adopting a certified quality-control system do not produce better results upon the analysis of quality indicators, that is, they do not have a greater amount of documentation necessary for the planning of the trainings (training plan, training program, human resource management plan), do not meet

less difficulty during the establishment of the system, do not determine more quality goals or indices. The findings were such in spite of the fact that the study demonstrated that institutions establishing standardized quality-control systems utilize counseling services to a greater extent than institutions with FAT systems. This, therefore, shows that an organization can operate in a quality-conscious way even if it does not dedicate greater sums to accept the services of counselors but establishes its own quality-control system.

**The second assumption** concentrated on the counseling assistance utilized while establishing and operating the control system. I assumed that the employment of counselors is not only dependent upon the organization's size but is defined by other factors as well. I assumed, too, that mostly bigger, profit-oriented organizations would utilize the help of counselors. The findings of the research showed, however, that non-profit organizations have a greater demand for such assistance than profit-oriented ones. In my opinion, this is due to the circumstances where the employees have less market and quality-control knowledge, which profit-oriented organizations probably have a greater demand for, as their main goal is the accumulation of profit. I assumed that bigger organizations can allow to establish their systems with the help of counselors, and this assumption was proven—organizations with a bigger headcount indeed utilize such help more frequently as they have the financial means to do so. In addition, associations offering trainings for target groups of more students also make use of counseling more frequently. The findings also showed that—as it was proven with respect to my first hypothesis—institutions tend to use help when developing standardized systems, which, in my opinion, is closely related to the capital adequacy of the given business association: organizations with several different sources can more easily disburse funds to establish standard quality-control systems or use counseling. It was established, therefore, that basically three factors define whether a given institution utilizes counseling help: size, profit-orientedness, and the type of the quality-control system.

**The third assumption** hypothesized that organizations established prior to the change of regime are less able to adapt to the changes, encounter more problems during the introduction of the quality-control system, and—accordingly—do not prefer systemized control. The hypothesis was proved: they met more difficulties and supported regular control to a lower degree, in all likelihood because these organizations were created a product of a former regime and the encounter with new challenges required a higher degree of adaptation. Apart from the difference

in shareholding structures, this might be explained by the fact that the conversion to a market economy view fundamentally shook the system of adult education institutions; the year of the change of regime brought about a substantial rearrangement of adult education.

**The fourth assumption** was that accredited adult education institutions regard basically important the operation of quality-control systems and accreditation. Nearly 90% of the institutions held that the quality of their training activity was improved by the operation of a quality-control system. Thus, less than one tenth of these institutions experienced a neutral or negative impact of the quality-control system on the quality of the given training. Since, if during the development of processes no real operational processes can be mapped, the quality-control system will indeed not influence actual operation, which is a possibility where the operation of the quality-control system is not integrated into day-to-day practice but is bogged down in documentation and does not bring about substantial changes in the life of the institution. Therefore, institutions should make an effort to integrate their systems in their actual practice, which—according to the findings—was successful. The motivation to be granted accreditation is also highly important: a great percentage of the institutions deemed accreditation a necessary stage, and it was mainly the smaller institutions that thought so. The operation of accreditation and the operation of quality-control systems were deemed of differing importance by the actors of adult education: it is most important to financers and least significant to the adult learner, which findings may serve as a warning for several reasons. On the one hand, it indicates—as was found in relation to the question focusing on the advantages of accreditation—that accreditation is today still primarily a factor that ensures the availability of funds; on the other hand, it does not present any advantages or concrete performance to adult learners which could represent immediate value during the training process and does therefore not guarantee better-quality training.

My research pointed out two prominent regularities: we may establish that the current control system favors the bigger organizations, with respect to both the prescriptions and their feasibility. They have more means to employ counselor assistance, encounter fewer problems during the development of the quality-control system, and can disburse greater sums to finance the quality trainings of tutors and employees.

According to my second major findings, the availability of accreditation does not necessarily coexist with quality. The professional and methodological preparedness of tutors, the

quality of classes and curricula are not controlled by the accreditation order of procedure, even though the process of adult education goes on in the classroom, in the relation between student and tutor. This is why the requirements should include possibilities to evaluate the quality of knowledge transfer as well. Greater emphasis should be placed on the improvement of actual training quality, which requirement does not necessarily met today, as accreditation is primarily documentation based. In the case if an indeed conscious process control is present, the control of documents contributes to the regulation of processes. Conversely, however, if the quality-control activity only involves paperwork, it cannot have an impact on the quality of the training, and the system is unnecessarily overregulated. Greater stress should be laid upon the study of what actual results the given institute produces. The aim is to ensure that the existence and operation of the quality-control system is important for the adult learner as well. A less documentation-based accreditation system more bent on ensuring the quality and standard of the training would probably have a substantial impact on adult education trainings in the long run.

The results of the dissertation are available for further corroboration and enlargement. Another possible direction of further research is to study whether the changes in the training of andragogy professionals brought about any shift of perspective and if it did, what kind of shift it was; whether professionals that graduated from the Bologna system have a greater amount of quality-control and accreditation know-how; whether they are able to better utilize such knowledge in practice; whether any material changes may result from this in the operation of the institutions. The survey can be expanded with further questions, perhaps more questions that concentrate on the quality of trainings could be integrated in another questionnaire. By modifying the regional dimension, the research may be expanded to include several regions or perhaps the whole of Hungary, in order to learn the differences between the adult-education institutional systems of the regions. It would prove useful to apply a diachronic rather than a synchronic view and repeat the survey a couple of years later, taking into consideration the changes brought about by the continuous establishment and refinement of the control system and the changes that may be experienced on this ever renewing market which reacts most agilely to social changes.



**Peer-reviewed and published journal articles and book chapters of the author related to the thematics of the dissertation:**

Miklósi, Márta (2009). Az Észak-Alföldi régió felnőttképzési intézményeinek néhány fontos jellemzője egy empirikus kutatás tükrében [Some significant features of adult-education institutions in the North Great Plain Region as reflected in an empirical survey]. (available at <http://cherd.unideb.hu/index.php?o=43>; accepted for publication in *Új Pedagógiai Szemle*) (ISSN: 1215-1807)

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Miklósi, Márta (2007). Az élethosszig tartó tanulás jelentősége, gazdasági kérdései [The significance and economic considerations of life long learning]. T. Kiss Tamás (ed.). *Kultúra – Művészet – Társadalom a globalizálódó világban [Culture, art, and society in an increasingly globalized world]*. Szeged: Szegedi Tudományegyetem, 267-272. (ISBN: 978 963 735 675 9)