

The International Adult Education Academy and Its Contribution to Professionalisation in Adult Education

Lisa Breitschwerdt, Regina Egetenmeyer

Abstract:

Planning and designing lifelong teaching-learning processes requires well-educated professionals in adult and continuing education. Against the background of changing social structures, they must be able to act confidently in interdisciplinary, cooperative and unpredictable interaction situations. This requires the development of professionalism in adult education with respect to the following perspectives: 1) interdependencies within the multi-level system of adult education, 2) inference between academic knowledge and adult educational practice, and 3) mediation processes between different social logics of action. Using the example of the International Adult Education Academy, we present and discuss ways of referencing the three perspectives of professionalism in the academic professionalisation of adult education.

Keywords: Adult Education; Adult Education Academy; Professionalisation; Professionalism Development

1. Introduction

Planning and designing educational offerings for adults requires well-educated professionals in adult and continuing education. Against the background of changing social structures, they must be able to act confidently in interdisciplinary, cooperative and unpredictable interaction situations. The professionalisation of adult and continuing education staff is therefore a key task of the discipline (e.g. Jütte and Lattke 2014; Mikulec 2019). To accomplish this, however, it is necessary to define what is meant by professionalism in adult education and how it can be promoted.

When defining the term professionalism in adult education, it was long common to refer to classical theories of professionalisation, which emphasise the special significance of professions as occupations of a specific quality (Nittel 2000). These theories are based on certain attributes, such as control of knowl-

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Lisa Breitschwerdt, Regina Egetenmeyer, *The International Adult Education Academy and Its Contribution to Professionalisation in Adult Education*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0151-3.06, in Vanna Boffo, Regina Egetenmeyer (edited by), *Re-thinking Adult Education Research. Beyond the Pandemic*, pp. 53-68, 2023, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0151-3, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0151-3

edge, central ethical values or the academic knowledge base of professions. Professionalism is understood in relation to this as a special quality of action. This action is based on specialised (academic) knowledge, skills and competences to be developed and used in individual situations based on processes of reflection and interpretation (Tietgens 1988; Nittel 2000). This specialised (academic) knowledge is usually developed through study programmes in academic settings (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2012; Gieseke 2018; Nittel 2018).

Currently, social changes lead away from the classic concept of professions (Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). These changes include a growing orientation towards markets and customers, a decrease in national licensing and funding in the professions, heterogeneous adult learning populations, and a takeover of professional development by organisations (Kloke 2014, 136-37). This new theoretical perspective gives adult education a new perspective for its professionalisation project and for the design and promotion of professionalism development (Egetenmeyer et al. 2019).

Through the Adult Education Academy ‘International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning’, an international programme has been developed since 2014 that promotes the professional development of (future) adult educators against the background of the changing context of professionalisation. Based on the experiences, this paper explores the question:

How does the Adult Education Academy ‘International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning’ contribute to professionalisation in adult and continuing education?

To that end, we begin by giving a short overview of the programme and setting of the Adult Education Academy (Chapter 2). Next, we outline the understanding of professionalisation and professionalism, which takes into account the changed social conditions and refers to the new theoretical perspectives. Emphasis is placed on the aspects of multi-level perspectives, the connection between academic and practical knowledge, and the mediation between different logics of action (Chapter 3). We present each of these aspects in more detail, both in theory and in terms of how they are promoted in academic studies through the Adult Education Academy (Chapters 3.1 to 3.3). Finally, we summarise the didactical approach of the Adult Education Academy with respect to its contribution to professionalisation in adult and continuing education (Chapter 4).

2. The Adult Education Academy

The Adult Education Academy ‘International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning’ is a one-semester programme that aims to foster a connection between academic learning and adult education practice (see *infra* Danquah et al.; “Professorship of Adult and Continuing Education” 2021). The basic idea of the programme is to apply international perspectives from academic research and practice to various topics in adult education and

continuing education. Based on this exchange, the Academy serves to strengthen a general and deeper mutual understanding of adult education worldwide. The programme is divided into an asynchronous and synchronous three-month online preparation phase and a synchronous two-week face-to-face event, which takes place at Julius-Maximilian University of Würzburg, Germany, in February each year. Participants of the Adult Education Academy are master's and doctoral students in adult education from all around the world. Likewise, the programme enrolls practitioners from the field of adult education and lifelong learning who are affiliated with DVV International or the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA). More than 500 participants from more than 20 countries have attended the Adult Education Academy since 2014 (INTALL 2021). Throughout the whole programme, the participants are accompanied by a team of experienced moderators and learning facilitators who are professors and doctoral students in adult education.

Preparation Phase (Online, Asynchronous and Synchronous)

The preparation phase usually starts in early November and lasts about three months. It takes place completely online. It includes asynchronous parts of self-directed learning, based on pre-prepared material on the Moodle platform, and synchronous live online sessions with moderators and facilitators. The aim is to prepare participants for the subsequent intensive in-person phase of the programme in Würzburg. This includes preparatory reading assignments on the topics of the intense face-to-face programme in Würzburg. Furthermore, participants prepare a 'transnational essay' on an issue in a specific field of adult education from their national perspective, which is the basis for the work in week two of the following face-to-face event. In addition, an optional programme module on employability in adult education takes place in December and January. Here, practitioners give live online sessions providing insights into their practical fields. In addition, master's and doctoral students are guided to reflect on their own competences acquired so far and to consider options for their further professional biography.

Two-week Programme in Würzburg (Face-to-face, Synchronous)

In early February, an intensive face-to-face programme takes place in Würzburg. In the first week, participants get an insight into topics concerning 'International strategies in adult education' (Master's students) or 'Theories for international adult education - Paulo Freire' (PhD students). The week also includes an overview of adult education structures in Germany and field visits to adult education providers in Würzburg and in the south of Germany. During the second week, participants work in smaller groups of six to eight persons on specific issues in adult and continuing education. The aim is to shed light on the different national perspectives on the issue and, based on this, to analytically

identify commonalities and differences. The participants are prepared for this analytical procedure during the sessions in week one. The basis for the comparison is the ‘transnational essay’ prepared in the preparatory phase.

3. Perspective on Professionalism

The discourse on professionalisation in adult and continuing education in Germany is based on traditional sociological theories of the professions. Overall, it emphasises the special quality of occupations and vocational actions. On a structural level, it concerns the emergence of professions that are characterised by specific attributes as occupations with special qualities, including abstract academic knowledge, authority and monopoly over specified knowledge areas, autonomy over professional associations, or a purely altruistic perspective on common welfare (Mieg 2016). From the structural perspective, professionalisation in adult and continuing education means establishing degree programmes, cross-cutting training programmes, professional associations, and legal as well as financial framework conditions, for example (Nittel 2018).

From the 1990s onwards, the perspectives of professionalisation theory shifted in adult and continuing education, starting from the faltering discussion about establishing adult and continuing education as a profession at the structural level. On the level of action, the focus is now on professional action and the prerequisites and development of professionalism (Gieseke 1988; Helsper and Tippelt 2011). The understanding of professionalism refers to the disputes about professions at the structural level. As the special quality of professional action is based on academic knowledge and specific skills and competences. Professionals are faced with the challenge of interpreting unpredictable action situations in a situational manner and in reflexive recourse to this knowledge. Professionalism is therefore «not a ‘state’ that can be achieved or attained, but a fleeting occupational achievement that has to be produced situationally anew each time» (Nittel 2000, 85)¹. With regard to the level of action and the development of professionalism, the focus is therefore on questions such as the necessary competencies of trainers, the need for further training or spaces for individual development.

Against the backdrop of changing social conditions, a shift can be observed in the debate about professions and professionalism and their development (Breitschwerdt 2022). There are concurrent trends towards a pluralisation of work contexts and an individualisation of professional activity (Pfadenhauer 2003). Fields of activity and job profiles, as well as organisational structures, are becoming increasingly differentiated. This results in requirements for cooperative and interdisciplinary collaboration between different professional groups. At the same time, economic, market-oriented and standardisation trends based on neo-liberal perspectives are finding their way into modern work contexts. This makes individual workers increasingly responsible for managing their own professional careers.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the author.

These changes and their significance for professions and professionalism are taken up by the new professional theories (e.g. Evetts 2003, 2009; Kloke 2014; Schnell and Hirvonen 2018). They refer to classic aspects of professionalisation theories, such as the special importance of abstract academic knowledge as a basis for the interpretation of concrete situations. At the same time, they take up the changing general conditions of working environments and emphasise the special importance of organisations (Egetenmeyer et al. 2019; Breitschwerdt 2022) for professionalisation, renewing the discussion on the formation of professionalism. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the fields of activity, the focus is on negotiations among different stakeholders and clients and on cooperation with other professional groups. A classic understanding of professional activity (abstract academic knowledge, autonomy, altruistic perspective) is interpreted in relation to bureaucratic and economic understandings.

Based on these developments, professionalism can be understood as the interplay of three perspectives: the perspective on *interdependencies* within the multi-level system of adult education, the perspective on *inference*, which looks at the relationship between research-based knowledge and adult educational practice, and the perspective on *mediation processes* between different social logics of action against the backdrop of changed working worlds. The central point of reference for shaping these perspectives in adult education practice is the organisation (Kloke 2014; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). This is where managerial and bureaucratic elements come together in concrete work contexts, e.g. monitoring of work in social and public services required by the state. The organisation provides working contexts in which professionalism takes shape in an organisation-specific way (professionalism within organisations).

In the following, the three perspectives of professionalism in adult education will be outlined in detail. Based on the outline, we discuss how this aspect of professionalism is supported in the International Adult Education Academy. This discussion provides an insight into how professionalism in adult education can be developed within higher education and how the internationalisation of the programme supports this process.

3.1 Interdependence: Multi-level Perspectives in Adult Education

Professionalism concerns not only the individual development of actors, for instance through training and competence development; it also depends on societal contexts. Major changes in society, such as the extensive digitalisation triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, show that individual development must always be considered in interdependence with surrounding organisational and societal structures. In adult education, multi-level perspectives play an important role for analysing the field (e.g. Lima and Guimarães 2011; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019) – for example, in relation to organisational structures, which are very heterogeneous in Germany for historical reasons (Schrader 2010), or the reflection of didactic considerations which takes place on different levels before and during learning set-

tings (Fleige et al. 2018; von Hippel et al. 2019). Depending on access and depth of knowledge, more or less differentiated models are available. A more comprehensive model used in recent studies (e.g. Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2014; Egetenmeyer and Grafe 2017; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019) considers the following levels (see Fig. 1):



Figure 1 – Multi-level model (Egetenmeyer and Grafe 2017; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019).

The first level is that of adult learners participating in adult education with different motivations and interests. The second level is continuing education staff, who are very diverse in terms of their qualifications and enter the field of adult education in many different ways. Third, the level of programmes and offerings refers to the importance of didactic considerations and design in adult education, which must be taken into account in different ways, depending on content and target groups. On the fourth level of organisational context, the organisation not only plays a role in the professional development of staff but it also implements framework conditions for how employees work together, the understanding of learning, or the design of educational settings. Fifth, the context of the umbrella organisations refers to the specific structures of adult education, which are manifested in the level framing organisations, which shapes different contexts of financial and legal structures and supports infrastructures for working in the field. Finally, the level of social contexts and changes, whose three central reference points (state, market and civil society) shape adult education nationally.

Promoting Multi-level Perspectives in the Adult Education Academy

In the Adult Education Academy, the perspective on the different levels is taken up in various ways. During an online self-study phase, participants learn about the different levels and their importance for investigating adult education topics through academic texts and videos designed for this purpose. Based on this, they prepare a paper in advance focussing on a specific research question with regard to one context, which is frequently a national context (their home country).

During the first week on campus, participants get a deeper insight in multi-level perspectives and their importance for academic work. Using the multi-level model developed by Lima and Guimarães (2011) to analyse educational policy structures, participants are introduced to the differentiation of the following levels:

- mega level: international policies, adult education, lifelong learning;
- macro level: national policies, adult education, lifelong learning;
- meso level: adult education providers;
- micro level: participants in adult education.

Working in groups, participants consider these levels to reflect on similarities and differences of adult education in participants' various countries of reference (e.g. home countries, study countries). Therefore, the multi-level perspective provides a pattern enabling participants to adopt a first structured comparative perspective between their countries of reference.

During the first week, participants perform field visits to various adult education institutions in Southern Germany in order to get to know adult education organisations in Germany. The field visits, too, are observed based on the multi-level perspective. To that end, participants use an observation guideline, enabling them to carry out systematic and theory-based observations during the field visits. Furthermore, the levels become more tangible through the practice examples.

In week two on campus, participants use the multi-level perspective for comparing selected aspects in adult education. Using the analytical perspectives introduced in week one, they develop features for the comparison that take into account the different contexts of the compared aspects (Egetenmeyer 2020). The multi-level perspective enables them to analytically identify similarities and differences as well as reasons for the similarities and differences. For this analytical step in comparative adult education, a multi-level perspective is very important, as arguments for similarities and differences can frequently be found in the different levels, which influence the concrete aspect of adult education (see Fig. 2).

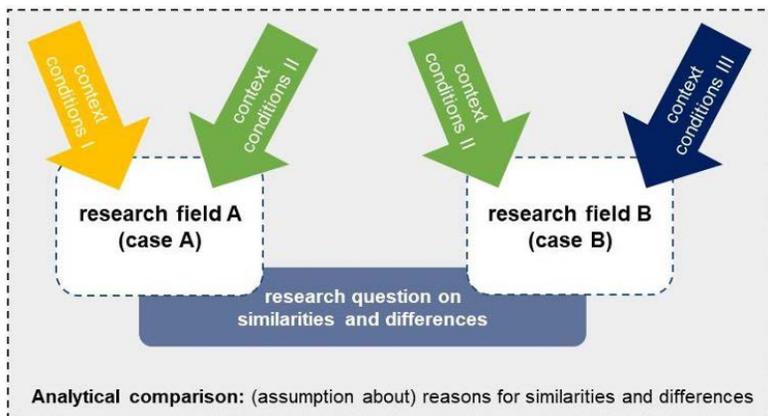


Figure 2 – Analytical comparison as research of context conditions (own illustration).

3.2 Inference: Links Between Academic Knowledge and Practice

Inference between academic knowledge and adult education practice targets the characteristics of professional actions. Professional actions are characterised by the situation that academic knowledge has to be interpreted for each individual practical case. The theory-practice realisation therefore represents the core of theoretical debates about professionalism and its development (e.g. Dewe 1996, 2014; Oevermann 1996).

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the question is which forms of knowledge are inherent in theory and practice (Dewe 1996, 2014) and how these can be linked in individual cases. This linkage is not a simple mediation between scientific knowledge and knowledge of action and everyday life. Rather, it presupposes reflexivity, which must be developed as the core of professional activity (Dewe 2004). The development of (self-)reflexive competences (e.g. Pachner 2018; Dewe and Gensicke 2018) and autonomy of action (Freidson 2001) is therefore increasingly discussed as a central aspect of professionalism development. Self-reflection cannot be assumed or learned in formal settings. Rather, it develops in the course of the individual professional biography. Professionalism from the perspective of inference is «not developed in a succession of academic research and practice, but within the framework of hermeneutic processes that relate the two functional systems of professional practice and research to each other» (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2012, 12). Organisational contexts, especially structures of academic professionalisation, can provide and support the foundations for this (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2012, 2014). But inference also emphasises the importance of continuing education structures for adult education staff to promote professionalism throughout the work biography, such as continuing education opportunities at universities or less formal structures such as professional learning communities.

For promoting professionalism from the inference perspective, it is important to keep in mind that research and practice each represent independent worlds of understanding that can never fully understand each other (see Fig. 3). Rather, the aim of promoting professional competences is to initiate and advance mutual processes of convergence and understanding based on a continuous dialogue (Gómez et al. 2011).

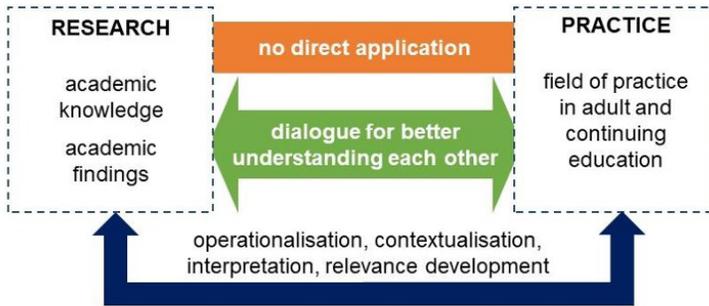


Figure 3 – Dialogue between research and practice as basis for adult education research (own illustration; Egetenmeyer and Grafe 2017; Breitschwerdt and Egetenmeyer 2022).

This dialogue represents the basis of gaining inference. It presupposes an open relationship between the academic discipline and practice characterised by mutual interest. For example, this can mean integrating practitioners' perspectives into study programmes by offering guest lectures in teaching and learning settings or having students complete internships and reflect on them as part of the studies (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2014). But it is also important when it comes to meeting the current needs of adult education practice throughout adult education research. Practice is not only the object of research but actively involved in the whole research process. Based on a relationship of trust, it is about the joint operationalisation of terms and concepts, the joint development of questions, research designs and interpretations (see Fig. 3). The aim of dialogical research is to enhance the relevance of academic investigations and findings for practice. Based on the results provided, practitioners themselves decide what is useful and implementable in their context of understanding (Breitschwerdt and Egetenmeyer 2022).

Promoting Perspectives on Inference in the Adult Education Academy

Insights into adult education practice are a key focus of the Adult Education Academy, which is developed in different ways. During the first week, there are field visits to adult education providers in South Germany, providing insights into adult education organisations. Practitioners present their organisations on site and guide participants through the premises. The participants are prepared for these practice explorations through an overview of the institutional and organisational field of adult education practice in Germany. Furthermore, participants are introduced to an observation grid for the field visits before going there. The grid comprises different theory-based observation categories on which participants are asked to take notes. For example, those categories are 'political-administrative guidelines', 'political priorities', 'organisational and ad-

ministrative dimensions' or 'conceptual elements of public policies'. After the visits, participants return to campus and reflect on their notes together.

In addition, practitioners from various international adult education organisations (DVV International and EAEA) join the Adult Education Academy as participants. They add practical perspectives on the various topics to the academic discussion and they present their work with a focus on one of the comparative groups. Furthermore, by participating during both weeks, practitioners get an insight into current issues and research projects in adult education. This promotes the direct exchange of academic and practical perspectives between students, practitioners and lecturers during the event, highlighting the importance of lifelong learning throughout the professional biography for developing professionalism. Moreover, it enlarges the perspective of the professors and academic teachers about international adult education practice.

3.3 Mediation: Relationship Between the Logics of Professionalism, Bureaucracy, and Economics

In relation to new professional theories, professionalism is to be understood as a mediating action between different logics (Breitschwerdt et al. 2019; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019). It no longer traditionally refers to an underlying profession but is becoming increasingly hybrid in differentiated fields of activity (Noordegraaf 2007, 2015). Work contexts and action situations are becoming increasingly complex. Professionals with different expertise work together in an interdisciplinary and cooperative way. Adult education has always been an area of the educational system connected and referring to other disciplines and functional systems. For example, it relates to psychology and sociology when it comes to the question of reaching target groups and their learning motivations. Likewise, it relates to economic principles when budgeting course plans or supporting the development of competences as a learning target in vocational adult education. In addition, state regulation of work contexts continues to decline. Other control mechanisms for professional activity are taking its place. On the one hand, these are characterised by market-oriented standardisation criteria outside the professional context, such as quality management systems and certifications. On the other hand, responsibility for monitoring professional performance is increasingly being placed in the hands of the actors themselves (Pfadenhauer 2003).

Adult education as a field of work is permeated by these processes of social change, which necessitate a changed approach on professionalism. In this hybridity of work contexts, being professional means understanding and mediating between the ideal-typical logics of professionalism, bureaucracy and economics (Freidson 2001) in concrete situations (see Fig. 4).

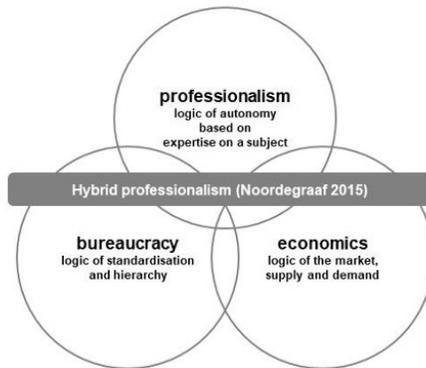


Figure 4 – Perspectives on hybrid professionalism (Breitschwerdt et al. 2019, 89).

The perspective on (1) professionalism emphasises the autonomy of adult educational expertise in action. Based on this expertise, adult educators have the sovereignty to organise, plan and implement educational processes for adults. From the perspective of (2) bureaucracy, requirements and processes of standardisation and hierarchisation introduced by public authorities become relevant. These include, for example, quality management requirements that have to be implemented in adult education organisations and programmes in order to obtain public certification. With the perspective of (3) economics, questions of supply and demand in the independent adult education market are taken up. Adult educators and organisations are challenged to design their own educational offerings in a cost-covering or profit-oriented way. Among other things, this includes comparing their own goals with the needs of different target groups articulated on the market. Being a professional adult educator means being able to balance and mediate between the demands of the three perspectives in specific situations of action (Breitschwerdt et al. 2019; Egetenmeyer et al. 2019).

Promoting Perspectives on the Relationship between the Logics of Professionalism, Bureaucracy and Economics in the Adult Education Academy

The Adult Education Academy takes all three logics into account. During the whole programme, participants are asked to engage with theoretical and research-based perspectives on adult and continuing education and to reflect on them in relation to their own life world as students or practitioners. This emphasises the perspective of professionalism in adult education based on different theoretical perspectives. But by reflecting on participants' individual contexts, the approach takes into account that they are working and studying in contexts affected by different framework conditions, such as legal or financial requirements. While practitioners are already more familiar with the economic perspective, students get a deeper insight during the employability part of the

programme ‘Working in Adult Education’. Here, practitioners recount ‘employability stories’ from their own work contexts and students are accompanied by the reflection on their own competences and future professional path. Finally, the bureaucracy logic is taken into account during the Adult Education Academy through aspects of project funding. Various sources of funding are available for participants to help finance their participation in the Adult Education Academy (e.g. DAAD Summer School, ERASMUS+). These cover travel and accommodation expenses during their time in Germany. To receive that funding, participants have to go through an extensive application process in which they have to prepare and submit all the necessary documents and forms. From their perspective, participants thus gain an insight into the bureaucratic framework of international event management. Through the transparent procedure (all information is published on the website and participants are advised individually), they get to know different funding bodies and gain an insight into the project and funding framework conditions and how these influence the design of an event.

4. Conclusion

This paper discusses a perspective on adult education professionalism that takes into account the changing work and action contexts in a knowledge-based society that is both pluralist and increasingly individualised. We conceptualise professionalism in adult and continuing education as the interplay of three perspectives: 1) interdependencies within the multi-level system of adult education, 2) inference between research-based knowledge and adult education practice and 3) mediation processes between the logics of professionalism, bureaucracy, and economics. Academic professionalisation (Egetenmeyer and Schüßler 2012) is a central area in which professionalism is promoted and developed in relation to the three perspectives presented. We use the example of the Adult Education Academy to show how such professionalism can be promoted and cultivated within the framework of organised structures (see Fig. 5).



Figure 5 – Promotion of professionalism throughout the Adult Education Academy. Own illustration.

The inclusion of multi-level cross-cutting perspectives (interdependence) within the Adult Education Academy promotes the understanding that research topics and questions of adult education are related to multiple contexts. In order to understand them, it is first necessary to analyse the context of a research topic or question. Understanding adult education in a multi-level perspective helps to differentiate the corresponding levels of the research topic or question to be analysed and to understand the influence of its contexts. Participants gain insights into these perspectives and are given tools for performing such an analysis on their own during the Adult Education Academy. Further, by doing their own comparison they have the opportunity to transfer their knowledge and try out the methods they have learnt on a specific example.

Given the heterogeneity of the field of practice in adult education, a basic understanding of the empirical and practical field of adult education is necessary for the development of professionalism (inference). Adult education researchers must always consider the relevance of their approaches and objects of investigation to adult education practitioners. This requires a fundamental interest in the design and needs of practitioners as well as the creation of a relationship of trust to initiate dialogues between research and practice. Therefore not only academic education but also continuous opportunities for insights into adult education practice is needed. Through the combined participation of students and practitioners, this exchange is made possible during the AEA and is strengthened through the joint work on topics over several months. In addition, long-term networks between future researchers and practitioners in the international field of adult education are formed through this close cooperation (e.g. Network on LinkedIn; co-authoring articles).

Professionalism as an ideal-typical logic (Freidson 2001) of autonomous, science-based action is always related to other logics of action (mediation processes). These must be linked to each other. Adult education is located at many interfaces to other functional systems and disciplines. Professionalism gets hybrid (Noordegraaf 2007) and requires an understanding of adult education as it relates to the logics of professionalism, bureaucracy, and economics (Breitschwerdt et al. 2019). During the Adult Education Academy all three logics are promoted. The theoretical perspectives and methods of adult education, presented and discussed during the programme, provide a deep insight into adult education as a professional field. Aspects of economics are addressed by reflecting on the practical perspectives presented and by participants' own path of employability. Finally, bureaucracy perspectives are taken into account by organisational questions that participants have to deal with to be able to participate in the programme (e.g. manage paperwork for the funding).

Overall, the article outlines that the Adult Education Academy is a programme that promotes the professionalism of (future) adult educators in a university-based, academic setting. At the same time, due to its openness and flexibility, the programme integrates practice-related, cross-level and international perspectives and enables reverse connections to academic discourses. In this way, fundamental structures of professionalism development are developed,

piloted and established, taking into account the requirements of modern working environments in adult education.

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