

**LIFELONG LEARNING IN HUNGARY AFTER THE OKJ:
ANALYZING THE EFFECTS OF THE 2020 ADULT TRAINING SYSTEM
REORGANIZATION**

by

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned Fanni Biborka Kontró, candidate for the program Master of Arts in Public Policy, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research. All sources have been properly credited in the text, notes, and the bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. Furthermore, I declare that no part of this thesis has been generated using artificial intelligence (ChatGPT).

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form as coursework for credits or to another institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 03. June 2024

Name (printed letters): Fanni Bíborka Kontró

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Fanni Biborka Kontró', is written over a light green rectangular background.

Abstract

In 2020, the introduction of a new policy fundamentally changed the Hungarian field of adult education and training by abolishing the “OKJ system” after nearly three decades. There is a general state of confusion in the public discourse around consequences of this change. The aim of my thesis is to map its initial positive and negative implications, by conducting semi-structured interviews with experts on the topic. My findings show that while, there are some positive effects of the policy that contribute to the achievement of a more inclusive adult training system, many stakeholders have major concerns due to the lack of support and transparency around the implementation of the policy and around the decision-making process.

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List of abbreviations

EU	European Union
IT	Information Technology
KSH	The Hungarian Central Statistical Office (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OKJ	National Training Register (Országos Képzési Jegyzék)
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SZJ	List of Professions (Szakmajegyzék)

Introduction

In 2020, the Hungarian adult education and training system has been fundamentally changed seemingly overnight. One of the major changes was the abolition of the ‘OKJ’ system, nearly three decades after its initial introduction. This meant that the vocational qualifications previously listed in the National Training Register, abbreviated as OKJ in Hungarian, were no longer available, and a new system was introduced in its place. The initial news of the end of the popular adult training format caused controversy and confusion in the public discourse and many adults took the opportunity to participate in the last available courses.

Now, four years after the introduction of the policy, researching its implementation and initial impact is relevant. The goal of this thesis is to map the initial effects of the policy change. I formulated two main research questions that provide guidance for the research. 1: How do the different actors of the field of adult education and training implement the changes prescribed in the 2020 policy? What elements affect them positively and which cause hardships for them? 2. What are the initial outcomes of the changes? Are they contributing towards a more efficient adult learning system?

The importance of learning is widely discussed by contemporary economic, social, behavioral theorists. The investment in the education of people can have positive implications not only on their own professional lives (Card 2001, Mayer 2000) and social standing (Bourdieu 1974), but on the economic development of their countries as well (Schultz 1961). The importance of lifelong learning, recognized by international organizations inspired the formulation of many strategies over the past decades (Lisbon strategy, Europe 2020 strategy, Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations). Well-designed and well-implemented national policies can have considerable impact on personal, institutional, even international levels and can contribute to achieving international goals.

In my thesis I map the different aspects that make this 2020 policy successful or unsuccessful in its initial years. I conduct my analysis based semi-structured expert interviews. I structure the discussion of findings based on the research questions the main themes I discovered during the conversations. The main themes are the context and the implementation of the changes, its difficulties and advantages and its future implications. I finish the paper by formulating recommendations and discussing the limits of my research.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

In order to lay the foundations for my research, I first present a literature review, in which I synthesize relevant writings on the topic. I start the discussion broadly, by defining the importance of learning, then I discuss adult learning more specifically, including its advantages, the key concepts related to it and its representation in international strategies. Finally, I summarize the relevant previous research in the field of adult learning in Hungary, including statistics and problem descriptions.

The Importance of Learning

The importance of learning and education has long been discussed in modern societies. A prominent theory in this discourse is the human capital theory, which is widely recognized in the field of economics. Among others (Becker 1962, Rosen 1977), Theodore Schultz (1961) has discussed this theory in his work, *Investment in Human Capital*. According to Schultz, knowledge and skills can be viewed as a form of capital, and the levels of investment in this capital largely define the economic development of a given country. Accordingly, the countries that neglect the human component of their economic processes are bound to find themselves falling behind, while the ones that prioritize investing in the knowledge and wellbeing of the workers are more likely to achieve sustainable development. This investment often takes the form of a government expanding the quality and quantity of education and training

opportunities (Schultz 1961). This theory is underlined by the long-term international trends that consistently show a strong positive relationship between the levels of investment in education and the economic growth rates of countries (Hanushek, Woessmann 2010).

Beyond its economic benefits, learning and the different forms of education also carry a social significance. According to social science theories, knowledge and the levels of educational attainment take a large part in defining the social standing and mobility of individuals (Bourdieu 1974). Those with higher levels of education tend to have better opportunities on the labor market compared to people with less education. They also have a lower likelihood of experiencing unemployment, a higher mobility between jobs, and they often make better salaries and thus are able to afford more goods (Card 2001). For those, who are left behind, not satisfied with their level of education, their chosen vocation or with their general skills adult learning opportunities can provide “second chances” (Mayer 2000).

Key Concepts in Adult Learning

There are a few key terms that are associated with the discourse around the activity of continuing learning past childhood: *adult education*, *adult training* and *lifelong learning*. These phrases are often used synonymously, however, they cover vastly different concepts that are important to distinguish to better understand the different paths that adults can take in order to enhance their skills.

Lifelong learning is the broadest out of the terms, as it not only includes adult training and education, but all forms of formal, informal and non-formal learning from early childhood through all stages of life (Commission of The European Communities 2001). The concept of lifelong learning or lifelong education has been in use since the middle of the 20th century, and since has gained wide popularity in fields related to economics, education, social sciences, and

politics (Field 2001). It often refers to the approach of constantly evolving through conscious learning activity even beyond and after the traditional schooling system (Tight 2002).

The two main terms that are used when discussing learning activities of adults, *adult education* and *adult training* are often blurred together in discourse, however, there are a few distinctions between them. In his book, Tight (2002) discusses these differences at length. As he points out, multiple definitions exist with some differences, however, adult education and education is generally understood as an activity that takes place in an institutional environment in a formal institutional setting. Adult training, however, is not bound to the traditional school system and can also be provided by various firms and companies. He also notes that participation in adult education usually requires a higher level of organization and often a more long-term commitment, than adult training activities. Some theories also distinguish between the two concepts based on the depth and specificity of knowledge that is acquired, adult education being more in-depth and general and adult training being more specific to one area and more surface-level when it comes to basic skills (Tight 1996).

International Goals and Guidelines on Lifelong Learning

Promoting lifelong learning and the expansion of learning opportunities for adults has been on the agenda of governments and international organizations for many decades. Lifelong learning as a policy framework offers development opportunities on economic and social issues alike (Field 2010). While the question of lifelong learning is undoubtedly important on a global level, in this section of the thesis, I will mainly be focusing on the European discourse, goals, and policies. For Hungary, a country in Europe and a member state of the European Union, this area is the most relevant.

One of the first instances of a European-level commitment to lifelong learning goals was demonstrated by the European Commission's 1995 white paper, entitled "Teaching and

Learning – Towards the Learning Society”. In the paper, the member states were urged to prioritize the improvement of the quantity and quality of learning opportunities for adults as well as for children, while making sure that they provide sufficient amount of information for them as well. The growing need for the active involvement of adults in learning activities was highlighted as one of the aims of the paper: “*Generate education and training demand from young people or adults unable or not wishing to enter either a formal system leading to paper qualifications nor to undergo initial vocational training*” (p.35).

In 2000, at the dawn of the new millennium, the Lisbon strategy outlined a new goal for the European Union, the establishment of a knowledge society and a knowledge-based economy, which was to be achieved by 2010. The strategy emphasized the importance that education plays in achieving this goal. The investment in people was defined as a key part in building a welfare state and modernizing the society: “*a European framework should define the new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning: IT skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills; a European diploma for basic IT skills, with decentralised certification procedures, should be established in order to promote digital literacy throughout the Union*” (European Council Presidency Conclusions 2000). Hungary joined the European Union in 2004, so in order to fit in with their new political environment, the goals and principles of the EU became more relevant during this time than ever before for the country.

The Europe 2020 strategy continued to discuss lifelong learning when it set its goals for the European Union for the new decade, in 2010. The paper drew attention to the problems of early school leaving and low level of educational attainment among adults in the European Union. These problems had been reported to have negative consequences on their position on the labor market. In the section *Flagship Initiative: "An Agenda for new skills and jobs"* the member states have been set the objective of promoting the acquisition of competences necessary for

adults, and facilitating a partnership between education and work opportunities (European Commission 2010).

The United Nations (2015) continued the discourse with goals for a broader set of countries to be achieved by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-s) set out to improve the living conditions of humans globally on issues related to 17 categories. Many of these goals on the UN's agenda relate to adult education and lifelong learning in general. Most explicitly goal 4 discusses this issue in targets 4.3: *“by 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university”* and 4.4: *“by 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship”*. It is also present in other goals, like in target 8.6: *“by 2030, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training”*.

The Hungarian Context of Lifelong Learning

In the past years, the field of lifelong learning in Hungary showed a mixed picture illustrated by various international reports. According to 2023 statistics, in Hungary 9.6% of adults aged between 25 and 64 reported that they have participated in education and training in the previous four weeks. Since 2020 Hungary has been slowly converging towards the EU average, however this number still falls below its reported 12.7%. Both rates are low compared to Sweden and Denmark however, the countries with the highest participation rate, that reported 38.8% and 30.5% respectively (Eurostat 2023). According to Lannert and Holb's (2021) analysis, the PIAAC survey of adult skills shows that the Hungarian adults have approximately average skill-levels among OECD countries, with slightly above-average skill-levels in mathematics. They point out however, that there is a particularly strong relationship between the level of education attained by the adults, their socio-economic backgrounds and their skills in Hungary compared

to the average of OECD countries. Furthermore, the problem-solving skills of the adults who only have a secondary level vocational education fall alarmingly behind compared to those who also have their A-levels (Lannert, Holb 2021).

In the past decades, a great number of problems have been identified regarding the learning opportunities of adults in Hungary. One of these concerns are the inequalities in the accessibility of learning. While continuing education and returning to learning could largely benefit the most disadvantaged people, and those who face long-term unemployment, research shows, that these are not the groups that are most likely to take part in learning activities as adults. The people who are already highly trained and employed tend to participate more in adult education and adult training, further solidifying their advantages (Köllő 2009). The adults that return to education often have families, jobs, and other responsibilities, that makes learning more difficult for them than for children, and thus require more flexibility to prevent falling out (Mayer, 2008). What makes their position even more difficult according to Mayer (2008), is that they, and especially the less trained adults lack the routine and practice of learning for extended periods of time, and may still carry defining negative experiences from their years spent in the school system.

It is also problematic that in government strategies, the broad territory of lifelong learning is mainly reduced to vocational training opportunities for adults, as these can largely improve employment rates (Németh 2022). This trend echoes a problem that is present on all levels of education in Hungary, where the development of basic skills is neglected. However, basic and transferrable skills are more valuable on the labor market than the fast- changing industry-specific knowledge that are taught in vocational training (Hajdu et al. 2015). Hajdu et al. (2015) for this reason promotes the importance of attaining A-levels and higher education, instead of the vocational training that is favored by the recent education policies. The top-down nature of the decision-making process when it comes to lifelong-learning policies has also been

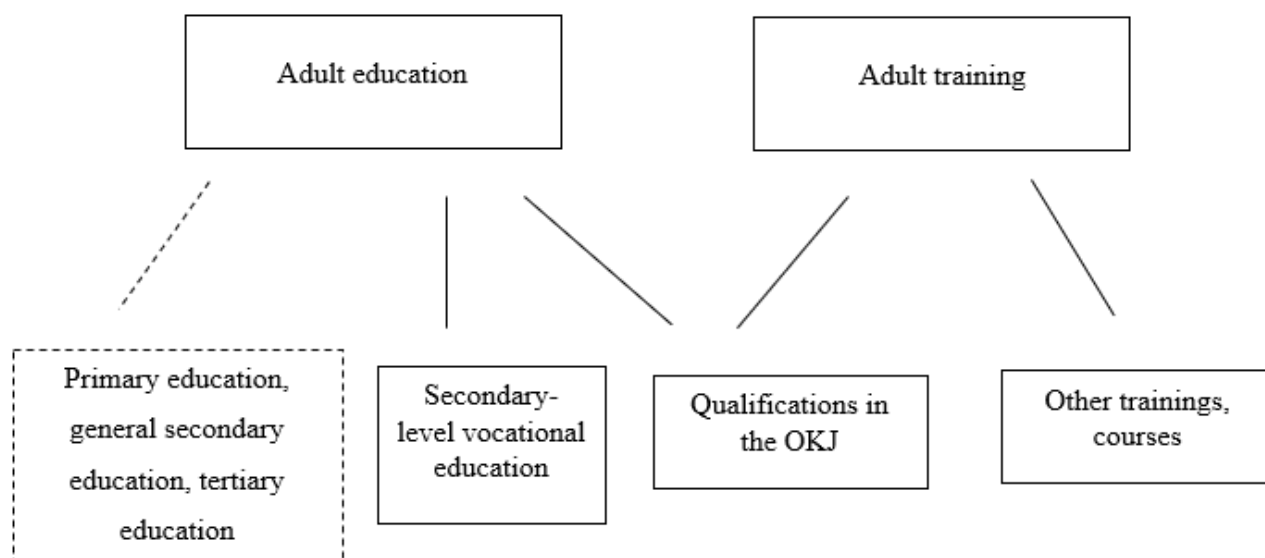
criticized, along with the lack of flexibility and guidance towards the adults who wish to participate (Németh 2022).

Chapter 2. The Adult Training and Education Policies in Hungary

In the following chapter, I will discuss a recent large-scale policy change that happened in 2020 in the system of adult education and adult learning in Hungary. This change, however, did not affect all forms of learning for adults. When analyzing the changes in the system, I exclude the form of education when adults return to school to finish their basic primary-level studies. I also exclude the cases of where adults return to secondary-level studies that are unrelated to vocational training or education, typically to get their A-levels. Lastly, this policy change did not directly affect university education, so it will not be discussed in this thesis either. These forms of adult education are important, and deserve attention, however they fall outside of the scope of this research.

Adult Education and Training Before 2020

Before 2020, the Hungarian system of lifelong learning distinguished adult education and adult training in a relatively straightforward way, based on the definitions presented in the beginning of the first chapter. In this section, I briefly outline the main areas of this system and provide visual guide in *figure 1* for the easier understanding of the different paths of learning.



1. Figure: The areas of adult learning and education in the Hungarian system prior to 2020

According to Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education, adults who participate in adult education would learn inside the school system, where they can attain primary, secondary or tertiary level of education (KSH 2014). When it comes to the vocational side of adult education, adults could participate by attending as students of the institution, learning the curriculum of the secondary-level vocational courses, or attaining qualifications listed in the National Training Register (OKJ). These adults were students of the institutions they attended either on a full-time, part-time or correspondence basis.

Adult training, however, previously regulated by the Act LXXVII of 2013 on Adult Training was carried out outside of the school system, typically by adult training companies, workplaces or public training centers. These largely varied in their topic, length and goals (KSH 2014). The trainings could offer nationally recognized qualifications in the OKJ certificate, or other, often shorter trainings that contributed to the skillsets of adult learners, but did not provide them with full qualifications.

The 2020 Policy on Adult Education and Training

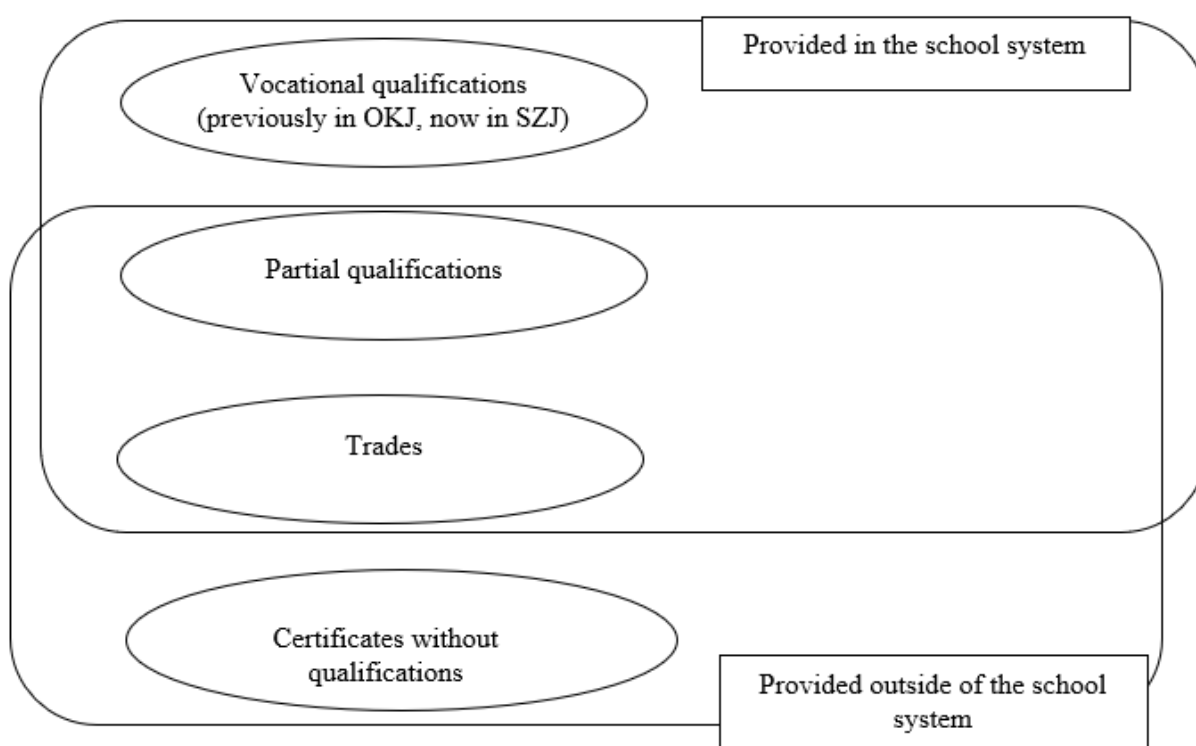
In 2019, a new decree was introduced, that brought deep changes in the vocational training and adult learning system in Hungary from its implementation in 2020. In the following section, I will discuss the changes that were made in the Act of Adult Education and Training in the decree that was introduced in 2019 and briefly mention the strategy that laid the foundations for the policy change.

The base for the decree was the Vocational training 4.0 strategy outlined by the Ministry of Innovation and Technology. The strategy identified the main problems in the system of vocational and adult education, and it outlined recommendations based on these problems. One of the issues identified by the document was the popularity of general education and skills in the Hungarian population over vocational education and industry-specific skills and training (Ministry of Innovation and Technology 2019). The prioritization of this problem is interesting, as it contradicts the findings of education policy experts and international guidelines that stress the importance of basic skills.

In adult learning specifically, the document draws attention to problems related to both the quantity of the students and the quality of the learning opportunities: “*Current adult education and training does not offer flexible learning opportunities, is not focused on the needs of the economy and is inefficient*” (p.20). The quality of the courses offered by the system at the time was a concern identified by the strategy, as it found that the knowledge and the methods of the adult training system couldn’t keep up with digitalization and the fast-paced industry changes. The involvement of companies in training activities was also not at the desired level according to the document.

For the new vocational and adult training system the following base values were identified by the strategy: to be dual, transparent, carrier inducing, sustaining and accessible. The two main

target groups of the new adult training and adult education policy were the adults in the more marginalized areas, who are inactive on the labor market and are looking for employment; and the adults who are employed, but wish to develop professionally. In order to accommodate the needs of these target groups, the strategy set out specific targets to be reached following its implementation (interventions no. 36-39). The Government of Hungary approved the strategy for vocational and adult training in Government Decision 1168/2019 and implemented the changes starting from January 2020 in the 12/2020 Government Decree on the implementation of the Vocational Training Act.



2. Figure: The outcomes and providers of the new programs

The decree fundamentally reorganized the Hungarian adult learning system. While previously adult education and adult training were easily distinguishable based on the institutional frame, the changes blurred the lines between them. The new system is best understood by considering the outcomes of certain programs and their providers demonstrated by *figure 2* above. The more

than 700 vocations on the National Training Register (OKJ), previously offered by both institutions in- and outside of the school system were replaced by the 174 vocational qualifications in the List of Professions (SZJ) (Henczi 2021). These new vocational qualifications offer the ability to fill multiple related areas of jobs and can only be taught in vocational schools, adult training companies however can only offer lower-level partial qualifications, trades, or certificates without qualifications, that offer more specific knowledge and can prepare adults for a narrower field of jobs (Pusztai 2020).

A goal of the policy was to increase the number of the adults who participate in vocational training. To achieve this, they implemented changes decreasing the direct and indirect costs of participation. While OKJ trainings were previously often offered by private companies, who typically charged money for their services, the first two of the new vocational qualifications (or partial qualifications) and the first trades are offered for free and only in vocational schools (Pusztai 2020). In her paper Pusztai (2020) helps the interpretation of the policy by summarizing the main changes, like the increased freedom for vocational schools to start training any time regardless of the normal school year. She notes, that the schools are now allowed to shorten the length of training and offer additional reduction for participants based on their previous relevant training and work experiences, and missed classes are also treated more flexible to accommodate the different responsibilities of adult learners. Instead of attending as students of the institutions, the adults enter into an adult training contract with the schools (Pusztai 2020). This change further decreases the distinctions between adult education and adult training in the new system.

Since the implementation of the 2020 policy on vocational training and adult education, there have been publications dedicated to some aspects of the changes, like how it affects secondary-level vocational training practices and what the new system looks like in theory (see Henczi

2021, Pusztai 2020), however there is still a general lack of information around the practical implications of the policy on adult learning.

Chapter 3. Research Design

In the next section, I present my research design, where I first discuss how I arrived to the decision to use expert interviews for answering my research questions and what other methods I considered. I also present the main ethical aspects I considered and followed throughout my research. Lastly, I detail how I designed my interview guide to find the information relevant to my research, and I also summarize my experiences throughout the interviewing and analysis process.

Methodological Considerations, Expert Interviews

There are a number of quantitative and qualitative methods that can be used to answer the research questions. Quantitative data, like the one collected by the Adult Education Survey or self-conducted surveys could provide valuable information on the students, their backgrounds and their perceived mobility and learning possibilities. A concern with this route, however, is that the implementation of the policies is still in progress and in various stages depending on the institutions, so a longer-term effect is not measurable yet. Since there is very limited information available on implementation of the changes and their consequences, I decided to focus on qualitative data collection that allows me to better explore the areas that could be important. I also considered conducting interviews and focus groups with students; however, it is likely that they would only be able to talk about either the period before or the one after the policy change, without providing an overarching view on the system and on its changes. I ended up deciding on semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of adult education policy and adult training. These interviews can provide information on the professional considerations of the changes made in the adult education and adult training system, as well as their perceived

consequences. The experts can also give an overall deeper understanding of the process and the context of the policy change than can be collected from the available literature.

In the case of expert interviews, there are specific qualities to the process to be taken into consideration, which were summarized by Audenhove and Donders (2019) in their book chapter: *Talking to people III: Expert interviews and elite interviews*. According to the theory discussed in the chapter, experts possess knowledge that is obtained through learning processes through work experience, education, research activity, or through occupying specific key positions. They argued, that when interacting with experts, it is not necessary for the interviewer to display naïveté, in fact thorough preparation on the topic and on the work of the interviewees is encouraged. Transparency was also presented as a key aspect when interacting with experts, as it allows them to also gain the information that is necessary for them. The concern of influencing the interviewees' answers by disclosing too much information about the project is less crucial than with other groups, as they often speak from a positions of authority (Van Audenhove, Donders 2019).

Ethical Considerations

The topic of the thesis is a change in education policy, which is not a particularly sensitive area, however, there were ethical aspects to consider, as with any interview process. It was important to not cause harm to my interviewees in any direct or indirect way. I believe that the research only affected the lives of the participants minimally. No direct reward was provided to the participants, although the possibility of further contributing to the discussion around the adult education and training system of Hungary may be seen as a benefit of participation.

Transparency toward the interviewees was considered throughout the whole research process. While the project received no additional funding, I made sure to disclose the home institution of the research, Central European University, during the first interactions, prior to the

interviewing process, as it may carry added political meaning in the Hungarian context. This did not prove to be a problem during the research process; however, it allowed for the avoidance of any impression of deceit. I made sure to inform the interviewees about the research and the protection of their data prior to the conversations in a consent form (see Appendix).

The data policy and consent form contained information about the format and place of the publication of the interviews and the possible consequences of participation, which in this case are expected to be none. In the form, I also assured the interviewees that their participation is on a voluntary basis and it can be withdrawn at any time. While the conversations were recorded, they were anonymized in order to protect the identities of the participants. The form also contained contact information that the interviewees can use at any time to access information about the data that is stored about them. After finishing the analysis part of the interviews, only the anonymized transcriptions were kept and any voice and video recordings were deleted. There were no other parties, researchers or research assistants involved in the process that had any access to the personal information of the interviewees.

The Structure of the Interview Guide

When creating the interview guide, I worked based on the literature and the policy changes that were introduced following the 2020 Government Decree On the implementation of the Vocational Training Act I have previously read. I first wrote down all questions based on the materials, then I organized them into topics and categories. I continuously evaluated and updated the questions based on the new literature I read and based on the experiences of the interviews. I took out initial questions that proved to be irrelevant to the interviewees, added clarifications, where ambiguity was a problem, and brought in topics that emerged during the conversations. Based on the background of the interviewees, whether they participate in research activity, teaching and administration activity or both, I added or left out certain

questions. These questions that are asked based on the interviewee's profile are put in brackets in the interview guide, as it can be seen in the appendix.

Some changes were made to the interview guide since the beginning of the interviewing process, however, the overall structure was more or less constant, containing four main sections: warm-up, adult learning in general, the specific changes in the system and closing questions. I started each section with a sentence that marked the end of the previous section and established the questions that followed. In each section, I had main leading questions to guide the conversation, and sub-questions that clarified the kind of information that I wanted to receive, and were only meant to be asked when they were not touched-upon organically by the interviewees' answers.

The logic of the interview guide follows a gradual narrowing of the questions from general to specific. The first main section of the interview guide is about the introduction of the interviewee, which is aimed to establish rapport and put the further conversation into context. Since I conducted expert interviews, the question and sub-questions are focused around professional life instead of personal life. The second main section contains more general questions about adult learning and about the adult education and adult learning system in Hungary. This section focuses more on overall experiences and opinions rather than specific policy-related questions. The questions in the third section are specifically related to the 2020 policy change. The first questions are aimed at the practical aspects of the changes and the experiences of the interviewees. I end the section with questions about the impacts and future implications of the changes and about the potential next steps. The fourth and last main section contains questions about the interview process and allows the interviewees to give feedback and recommendations.

The Interviewing and Analysis Process

The first step of the interviewing process was to establish what kind of interviewees would contribute most to the topic. I first looked for experts among adult education policy specialists based on publications and institutional websites. I paid no particular attention to age, sex or geographical location, although I tried to maximize diversity when it comes to institutional background. I contacted the potential interviewees via email. In some cases, they agreed, in others, when their experiences were not relevant enough for the subject according to their own judgement, they declined or referred me to other professionals. I also used the snowball method to find participants recommended by previous interviewees. At the end, I contacted over twenty professionals and ended up with conducting seven interviews. Since the topic proved to be niche, the interviewees that could report on their opinions and experiences were all Hungarian. Accordingly, the interview guide and the consent form with the data management information were all written in Hungarian. The English versions included in the appendix are translations I created using DeepL, supplemented by my own translations.

The professionals had diverse backgrounds that can be categorized as academic, administrative and practical, with many overlaps between the categories. The interviews on average lasted around an hour each, with the shortest being 26 minutes and the longest 81 minutes long. Since I interviewed experts, it was expected that some of them might only have a short amount of time available. In these cases, they let me know of their limited availability beforehand, and I was prepared to only ask them the most important and more specific questions, which were typically the ones in sections II and III of the interview guide. I conducted most of the interviews online, with one exception, where the interviewee preferred communication to be conducted via telephone. Compared to in-person interviews, online and telephone interviews allowed for a faster process and more flexibility, as the interviewees resided in various cities of Hungary and could typically allocate time for the conversation outside of office their hours. During the

semi-structured interviews, I made sure to adapt to the style and pace of the interviewee, mainly letting them lead the conversation and only steering it back, when it got too far from the original topic.

Prior to the conversations, all interviewees received their consent forms with the data management information included and they all agreed to have the conversation recorded. The interviewees weren't required to sign the consent form, however, oral agreement was always necessary. For the transcription process, I used Alrite, an online program that transcribes speech to text and is available in many languages, including Hungarian. I then read through the transcriptions, corrected them when it was needed and anonymized them. I uploaded the final transcriptions into MAXQDA, a text analysis software, where I analyzed the texts. In the findings portion of the thesis, I included quotes from the interviews that were translated using DeepL and my own translations.

The analysis of the interviews was done utilizing a qualitative coding technique as described by Saldana (2021). The first cycle of coding involved the individual reading of all interview transcriptions and the coding of various lengths of text based on the meanings, processes, opinions and contexts mentioned. The second and third cycles focused on finding patterns and clarifying categories. This process was made especially convenient by the software that allows quotes from different texts to be viewed collectively according to their codes and categories. These categories provided guidance for the discussion of findings below.

Chapter 4. Discussion of Findings

In the following chapter, I discuss the main takeaways of the expert interviews related to the context of the 2020 policy on adult training and the implementation of the policy, including its difficulties and positive aspects. Finally, I will summarize the interviewees' views on the possible consequences of the policy change on the different stakeholders along with their

recommendations for the future. The opinions and views of the interviewees proved to be highly diverse, however, I tried to accurately represent all of them to the best of my abilities and in many cases I included quotes from the interviewees.

The Interviewees' Views on the Area of Lifelong Learning

The views of the interviewees about the importance of lifelong learning were in line with the literature on the topic (Card 2001, Mayer 2000). They saw it as a second chance for people who are unhappy with their professions, want more mobility or need to be integrated to the labor market. They also stressed the social and individual advantages of learning, as it contributes to an openness in attitude, to a better understanding of the world and to the development of a well-rounded set of interests and activities. Lifelong learning can be beneficial in many areas that are often unrelated to the work of adults, and while these are harder to measure in statistics, they are not to be neglected.

Despite all its benefits however, the topic of adult education and adult learning is largely marginalized in the Hungarian public discourse. The new policies and programs on adult learning are rarely represented in the media, and accordingly, most adults are not well informed when it comes to their opportunities. According to the interviewees, people tend to not have a clear understanding on the different programs and paths, or their timeframes and financial aspects. Andragogy, the discipline of the teaching of adults is also on the sidelines of educational sciences and has suffered a downsizing in its institutional background in the past years. Some experts also experienced difficulties around researching and publishing on the topic due to the constantly changing nature of the policies and their overall lack of transparency.

“So the science of andragogy is in big trouble because the policies of the last 20-25 years have shrunk the field of adult education. Today there are far fewer institutions, I can't give you a number unfortunately, but it would be interesting to

see how the number of public and non-governmental organizations involved in adult education has been reduced over the last 20 years and the capacity of adult training has been squeezed into secondary vocational education.”

To understand the 2020 policy on the reorganization of the adult education and training system, it's important to see the problems that preceded its creation. The experts saw the struggle of the education system to keep up with the needs of the fast-changing economy as a global problem. The problems that appear in early life or during the primary and secondary levels of education carry on to adult education and training as well. In this sense many problems are not necessarily created during the adult years, they are neglected throughout previous years of education.

Some interviewees had a skeptical view on the decision-makers' reasoning behind the introduction of the new policy. They saw the government decision as a way of increasing control over the Hungarian system of education and training by channeling a large part of the adult training system into state owned schools. They saw the main reason of the policy change as to appear in a more positive light in international statistics, making structural adjustments while neglecting the substance of the discipline.

“I think that there was a very strong motivation here, that there were not enough statistics in Hungary about how many adults were studying. So although there used to be an obligation to provide data previously, very many people did not do so, and so it was put on a completely new basis. Now the point is that all adults who have taken part in training outside the school system should be included in this state adult education data system.”

The Implementation of the 2020 Adult Education Policy

The 2020 policy introduced changes in the adult training system, which affected the stakeholders in very different ways. The experts interviewed could report on many aspects of these changes, as their backgrounds were not only related to research, but to teaching, administration on different levels, advisory activity, training and learning as well. They stressed that the field of adult training and education shows a fragmented picture in Hungary. There are vastly different experiences even between the same types of actors, and some struggled more with the implementation than others.

From the side of the school system, the main change for vocational schools were the introduction of new training courses that had different structures to the ones taught before. They often had to accommodate large numbers of new adult learners, while previously their activities and teaching methods were more focused on secondary-level vocational education. The vocational training centers that manage the vocational schools also needed to expand the scope of their activities and help the schools implement the changes.

“From the founding charter to the restructuring of the professional programs, it is a continuous process, with minor and major bumps, because, of course, in the introduction of a new system, it always has to be reassessed and adapted. Here, it was primarily a matter of adapting to the legislation and changing the mental approach, so that neither the instructor nor the school would treat it as an evening course, but as adult training.”

The adult training companies on the other side however had to adjust to the loss of the right to provide vocational qualifications. Some of these companies had to close entirely, others either focused on providing other kinds of courses that provide partial qualification, a trade or non-

accredited certificates, or they found loopholes in the system that allowed them to continue providing full qualifications.

“What has happened is that the big adult education providers have obtained the right to run non-state vocational schools, so for example a cosmetician course is essentially organized as a vocational school, rather than as an adult training company.”

The Positive Aspects of the Policy Change

Now, four years after the new policy was introduced, the interviewees could also reflect on some of the positive and negative aspects of the changes. According to them, the stakeholders that mainly benefited from the new system were the adults participating in training in vocational schools and the administration of those schools. The adult learners in these institutions experienced substantial financial assistance, as well as the possibility for a more flexible timetable, than previously. In some cases, there were programs that could be attended by people with a lower level of existing educational attainment than previously, further contributing to the accessibility of training to those who can benefit from it the most.

“Basically, anyone who wanted to study as an adult, under the old system, either chose to study in a school-based evening course, which was harder to fit in with their work, or in a paid course, which meant an easier schedule. Now timetables are not a constraint in this respect because we can adapt to our best ability. So adults have an opportunity to learn up to two qualifications for free in schools more easily. Now there is a tabula rasa from 2020, so qualifications obtained before 2020 do not count in this respect.”

According to one some of the interviewees who were involved in the school system, the new policy also allowed the students to focus more on the practical aspects of their training. They are now able to participate in some parts of the training activities in their own workplaces. The examination system in the schools also became more practice-based. While previously students ended their courses with an exam that had written and oral components, according to the new examination, they are typically expected to prepare a portfolio from their works throughout their course, then they participate in a final exam where they have to present and explain a typical task of their vocation.

“The aim of this government was that the examinee should not have to memorize and learn dry theoretical topics, but should be able to explain the work that he or she is doing. This is a professional discussion, and it is not about test items and scoring, but about what you do while you are working, and why you do it that way.”

The administration of vocational schools also experienced increased flexibility and freedom when it comes to planning their courses. The curriculum in the new system is not predetermined, only the output of knowledge that is measured by the new uniform examination system. Now the schools can more easily accommodate the needs of the adult learners, and they can even share some of the training with the workplaces of their students. They also receive additional financial support from the government.

Other actors also experienced some positive aspects resulting from the changes. In the new system where the outcome knowledge is guaranteed, the firms that hire their workforce can be more certain of what tasks they are able to perform. The adult training companies are also benefiting from less ambiguity when it comes to the outcome criteria of their courses. Their administrative system also changed, and in some cases, they have less reporting obligations. Teachers in the school system also experienced that there are some aspects that make the

teaching of adults easier, as they are more familiar with the professional terminology and their motivations are also clearer than in the case of students in secondary-level vocational education. Some interviewees however had difficulty naming any advantages of the change and they found that it brought more difficulties for everyone involved.

The Main Problems with the New Policy

There are many problematic aspects of the 2020 policy on adult training according to the interviewees. These problems are related to the quality of the courses, to financial aspects and material conditions, to the transparency of the system and to the teaching activity. These affect most stakeholders, but according to the interviewees, the teachers in the school system and the adult training companies are the ones that struggle the most.

While the new policy made learning more affordable for many adults, it has also brought financial problems with it. The adult training companies that lost the ability to provide certain types of courses suffered a decrease in funds and in some cases had to make their other courses more expensive. They also had to accommodate a new examination system that required the students to take their exams in central examination centers that often lacked the necessary materials for the exams.

“Because this examination center could not provide the conditions that people would have expected, but they had to pay good money for it, and it violated this principle and also the principle of practice, where you can study, where you can take the exam.”

On the other side, the new areas of responsibility caused hardships for many vocational centers and schools, that don't have the capacity, resources and materials to fill their new roles. Despite the funds provided by the state, there are schools that simply lack the capacity that is needed

for the large number of new students. The teacher shortage is also a substantial problem in all levels of education in Hungary.

“We have a relatively large teaching staff, we have a relatively large pool of teachers, but it is more difficult for a smaller vocational school, a smaller center, to put into practice the flexibility that the law gives them, because they simply don't have the resources.”

While vocational schools had the opportunity to offer adult education previous to the new policy, not all did, and many teachers were not prepared to train the new students. Teaching adults has its own methodology and, in many ways, differs from teaching children or teenagers. Adults tend to have a more heterogeneous background when it comes to their experiences and abilities, they are also often more opinionated, less patient and have higher expectations. Due to the flexibilities that is afforded by the new policy, a large number of adults chose to attend vocational schools, who otherwise wouldn't have done so, and some carry an aversion to state facilities due to bad experiences during their initial studies. Teachers thus have to manage these difficulties without receiving support or training opportunities, while being generally underpaid.

“They're sitting there from 20 to 60 years old, one already knows this, one doesn't, one can't read or write, one has a degree, I don't know, and now she was very upset [a teacher], because she's trying to do everything to the best of her ability, but now she's got very bad feedback from one of the adults, and it's really upsetting her. So they are not prepared.”

The changes introduced by the 2020 policy resulted in concerns regarding the quality of available trainings as well. Since it is not required for teachers to be familiar with adult education techniques in order to teach adults, they often need extra efforts to be able to provide

a quality service. Some experts claim that quality assurance was a smaller problem previously, when the training that provided adults with qualifications could be acquired from adult training companies as well. These companies that work on a market basis were in competition with each other, which boosted the quality of their services. They were also often rated by their clients online, which made them more accountable.

“Political decisions are made instead of professional decisions. And it's very, very demoralizing, and it actually destroys the professionalism and prestige of the whole field. So, in short, there is no progress in quality. Unfortunately, what I see is that there is more of a step backwards.”

A large part of the problems and criticisms mentioned by the interviewees were related to the transparency of the new system and to the process of decision-making. Many felt that the new terminology and categories were hard to understand for adult learners, the administration of institutions and professionals as well. According to the interviewees, the sudden big change in the adult training and education system was not accompanied by transparent communication from the decision-makers, which left them confused regarding their new opportunities and obligations.

“I thought it was a step forward, but then what happened was that the law was published, the new requirements were announced, and then the ministry patted itself on the back for having done a good thing there. And the implementation was left out.”

“The system is very complicated and very difficult to communicate to the interested parties. It is very difficult for adult training companies to advertise correctly. They also find it difficult to understand. In fact, the terms used in the legislation are not

terms that are easy to understand, they are confusing, they use similar words for different things.”

Some experts also found the decision-making process to be too centralized and felt like the autonomy of many actors was hurt by it. In the new system, adult learners have less choice regarding the institutions they can attend if they want to obtain an occupation and adult training companies have less choice in what they can provide them with. Some of the experts also thought that the needs of the labor market and big corporations were prioritized in the decision-making process over expert opinions. They found their research activities to be undervalued, not supported enough and experienced difficulties finding transparent data and statistics.

Looking Into the Future: Potential Consequences and Improvements

At the time of the research the interviewees could talk about some initial consequences that they experienced, as well as speculate about the future problems or advantages that may arise. They however could not talk about any long-term effect yet. A change that was already noticeable, though it can differ depending on the region and on specific institutions, was that the number of adults that attend training provided by vocational schools increased, while their number in adult training companies decreased. The school system allowed more flexibility than previously, however was still less flexible, than the adult training companies. This could affect negatively the adults who could afford paying for courses, but don't want to attend training in the school system just to receive accredited occupations. If the schools don't receive more support from the state, the teacher shortage could also get more severe in the future.

While long-term effects can't be seen yet, some of the experts think that the growing participation rate could potentially have positive effects on employment rates. A concern however with the returns of the program on the labor market was that after a certain age, adult learners are less likely to work enough to make the investment worth it in a strictly financial

sense. Others however argue, that any investment in learning and knowledge is worth it, even if it's not easily quantifiable or is more related to softer, social measures.

“So I believe that no education is wasted, even if it is not successful. In this I would definitely say that regardless of the subsequent measurement results, this public investment will pay off, because it may be that if someone enrolls as a pastry chef now as a hobby. We can already say that it is also a result, and not a labor market result, that he or she can bake better cakes at home and that the family relationship will be better.”

For the future, the interviewees had recommendations for correcting some of the problematic elements of the system. To make the quality of trainings better, teachers need more training and support in teaching adults. Some experts also think that the development of basic or soft skills deserve more attention in the field of adult learning and education. Others think that dual training and online learning should be prioritized more.

Adult training companies are largely marginalized due to the system changes, and in the future, they would benefit from more support and guidance from the government. Their administrative burdens would also decrease if they could regain the right to organize their own exams in their own facilities.

Most of all, the interviewees stressed the importance of more transparency and communication when it comes to government decisions. A simpler system and easier vocabulary would help reduce the confusion around the policy. A more gradual and reflexive way of policymaking with the active involvement of experts and professionals is also needed in order to minimize hardships that come with the implementation of policies.

Conclusion of Findings

Overall, the field of adult training and education in Hungary is very fragmented, and the different stakeholders, and even the different actors in the same stakeholder groups experience vastly different problems and advantages in the new system since the introduction of the new policy in 2020. Some interviewees were skeptical about the changes, while others felt mostly benefited by them.

Based on the interviews, the major stakeholder groups that needed to introduce changes were the vocational schools, including their administration and teachers, closely related to them the vocational training centers, on the other side, the adult training companies, above these institutions a main stakeholder is the government with different decision-making bodies. At the user level, the main groups are the adult learners and the firms and companies that employ or wish to employ them. Somewhat outside of the system were the experts and researchers of the field. The interviewees were connected to many of these groups, though they mostly represented the teachers, the administration of the school system and the andragogy experts and researchers. In the future, more research would be needed to further map the opinions and interests of the adult learner and potential learners and the interested sectors and companies.

My first research question was related to the implementation process and to the advantages and hardships that come with it. The main difficulties mentioned by the interviewees were related to the new structure of the institutional system which lacks transparency, to the increased burdens of the teachers and administration in vocational schools. They also mentioned problems, like the loss of clientele for the adult training companies, the more limited choices of adult learners and the problematic centralized practices in policy-making. When it comes to the quality of the courses that provide accredited occupations, some see a decline, while others either don't see any substantial change.

The interviewees also mentioned many ways in which the policy change was beneficial, for example the increased flexibility in the school-provided trainings and the increased financial support for students. The examination system and the training programs in vocational schools also seem to be more practical and skill-based than before. The school administration is also afforded more flexibility when it comes to planning the courses, since they no longer have to follow a set curriculum.

The second research question was related to the effects of the policy. The interviewees couldn't point out any major long-term consequences of the new policy yet, as it is too new. However, they noted, that so far there seems to be a large shift in the number of students, where they choose the courses offered by the vocational schools over the ones offered by adult training companies. The new, increased availability and interest in school offered programs could have positive economic and social implications.

There are many areas however that need development for the optimization of the field of adult learning and education. More financial, material, professional support is needed for teachers, school administrations, vocational training centers and adult training companies. A more transparent, inclusive and communicative policy-making culture could also help achieve better outcomes in the future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The investment in learning possibilities is impactful on many levels. It contributes to the economic development of countries (Schultz 1961), it affects social inequalities (Bourdieu 1974) and it provides second chances for people who are not satisfied with their positions on the labor market (Mayer 2000). The importance of these aspects has been recognized in many international strategies in the past decades as well (Lisbon strategy, Europe 2020 strategy,

Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations). Different national education policies may contribute to or hinder the achievement of these objectives.

In my thesis, my aim was to discuss the implications of a 2020 policy that fundamentally changed the system of adult education and training in Hungary. The line between adult education and adult learning was blurred, when the ‘OKJ system’ as it was often referred to in public discourse was abolished, and adult vocational training was channeled into the public school system (Henczi 2021). Although the policy change affected many people, there seemed to be a general state of confusion around what it actually meant and what its implications were for the future.

I conducted my research based on two research questions: 1: How do the different actors of the field of adult education and training implement the changes prescribed in the 2020 policy? What elements affect them positively and which cause hardships for them? 2. What are the initial outcomes of the changes? Are they contributing towards a more efficient adult learning system? In order to answer these questions, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with experts from different fields related to the topic.

According to the interviewees, most stakeholders implemented major changes with more or less difficulty. The school system had to accommodate the growing number of adult participants and they had to adapt to a more active role in the adult training system. The adult training companies however, who were previously key players in the vocational training of adults had to adjust to a loss in clientele, as they were no longer allowed to hold trainings that provide their students with vocational occupations, only lower-level certificates. The adults experienced less financial burden, as their first two occupations could be obtained free of charge, however they needed to adjust to participating in the school system, which was optional prior to the policy change.

A main difficulty with the implementation of the policy was the fact that the key stakeholders of the adult training and education system were not prepared for the changes. Many of them were confused about their new roles due to a lack of transparent communication from the policy-makers. The school system also lacked infrastructure, capacity and many of the teachers had no experience in training adults. Many of the adult training companies struggled to stay afloat, didn't know how to communicate the changes, promote their courses, and get new clients. Since the courses were accredited based on outcome instead of curriculum, a new examination system was introduced, but while it meant a more practice-based criteria for the schools, the students in adult training companies experienced a more complicated process. Other aspects made the implementation easier, like the increased flexibility for the organization of vocational trainings provided by schools.

The initial effect of the policy change was an increased number of participants in the school system and potentially in adult learning overall. The promotion of free adult training in the future could contribute to a sustained increased participation rate. This would likely have a positive effect on the labor market, and on the overall wellbeing of adults as well. While some parts of the new system seem to contribute to the international lifelong learning goals, there are other parts that raise serious concerns. The quality of the trainings did not seem to improve, while some experts thought it even got worse. The sustainability of this system is also questionable due to the lack of transparency, overall confusion, capacity issues and the burnout of teachers.

Based on the interviews, a reevaluation of the system with the involvement of experts and practitioners is recommended for the policy-makers. They should also focus on simplifying the system and clearly communicating any changes. Teachers, schools, and vocational education centers need more resources and guidance to help accommodate the new adult learners. The

adult training companies would benefit from right to a larger scope of accredited courses and from having their own examination systems.

There are several limits to this research. Besides a time-constraint, there is also lack of information on some aspects. Since no data was available on the budget, participation and employment rates, an impact evaluation couldn't be done at this time. However, this thesis can provide basis for future qualitative and quantitative research. Further discovery of the experiences and needs of teachers in particular could be interesting through surveys, interviews or focus groups. The qualities, motivations and preferences of adults who participate in learning, through the analysis of quantitative data, like the one provided by the Adult Education Survey could also provide insight into the effects of the policy.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview guide

I. Warm-up questions

1, I would first like to ask you to briefly tell me about yourself.

- (What is your job in this organization?)
- (What does the organization do?)
- (OR: What is your research focus? How did you get involved in education?)
- What attracted you to this field?

II. Let us turn to the issues related to the situation of adult education and training

1, Why is adult learning important?

- Is adult education and training important?

2, What are the main problems of adult education and training in Hungary?

- Are there similar problems at other levels of education?
- Who are affected by these problems?
- What are the consequences of these problems?
- What were the main problems before the reform of the adult education system?

III I would now like to turn to the reform of the adult education system in 2019.

1, What are the main changes?

- Who are the ones affected by the changes (students, teachers, adult education institutions)? And in what way?

- Has accessibility for students changed?
- What are the financial implications of the reform?

2, How do you see this issue being reflected in the political sphere?

- How does it appear in the public discourse? Does it appear at all?

3, How have you been affected by these changes?

- (What changes had to be introduced? How have you and your organization adapted to the changed legal framework?)

4, What led to the change in the law? What could be the main reasons?

- Who do you think was the target of this change?
- Does the change now seem to have achieved its purpose?

5, Has the role of the A-levels changed? How?

- What is the relationship between secondary and adult vocational education? How far are the two separate?

6, Has the quality, length, etc. of education changed? What are students learning and how?

- Compared to the previous system, how does adult education adapt to other adult responsibilities?
- Who teaches the students? How are they prepared for this task?
- Has there been an impact on early school leaving?

7, What is the impact of this change on the labor market? On the labor market opportunities for students?

- Has the prestige of qualifications changed?

8, What are the long-term consequences of this change? How successful do you think this program is?

- Economic or social impact?
- Positive or negative consequences?

9, What changes do you think should be made in the future? Why?

- What difficulties are there that should be addressed?

IV. Thank you. These were the most important questions for me, and I would like to conclude by asking:

1, Is there anything that I did not ask you but that might be relevant to the topic?

2, Do you have any questions for me?

3, Do you know anyone else I could contact about this research?

Appendix B: Data policy and consent form

Dear Participant!

This research examines the situation following the restructuring of the adult education system in Hungary. The research is conducted by Fanni Kontró, a student of Public Policy at Central European University. The purpose of the interview is to collect data for a Master's thesis, which will be published in the university's publicly available database. What you say in the interview will be anonymous, and neither your identity nor the persons or institutions you mention will be revealed. Thank you for participating in this survey. Your participation is voluntary. You can opt out of the survey at any time and ask to have your data deleted or find out what data is held about you. The conversation will be audio-recorded so that you can listen back later and summarize what you said. You will not benefit financially from the conversation. As the interviews are anonymous, you cannot be identified and therefore there can be no negative consequences.

Declaration of consent

I have read or have had read and understood this research information and I agree to the processing of my data. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and have received satisfactory answers to those questions.

I am participating in this research voluntarily and I understand that I can refuse to answer and I can withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reason.

I agree that the information I provide may be quoted in research reports.

Participant name

Signature

Date

Thank you for helping me with my research!

Contact for further information:

Kontró Fanni Bíborka

(email address and phone number)