

ANDRAGOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY ADULT EDUCATORS: THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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ABSTRACT:

This research explores the challenges faced by teaching and training staff in adult education, focusing on andragogical and institutional difficulties encountered when working with adult learners in the Republic of North Macedonia. Grounded in the theoretical principles of andragogy and lifelong learning, the study examines how educators' prior experiences and engagement in professional development programs influence the quality and effectiveness of adult education practice. The research employs a descriptive and comparative quantitative design, using a Likert-type survey to capture teachers' perceptions of challenges related to learner motivation, learner diversity, time constraints, and institutional support.

The findings reveal that the most prominent challenges are andragogical and motivational rather than disciplinary in nature. Teachers report that adult learners' varied experiences, learning styles, and external commitments require flexible and adaptive approaches—needs not always supported by existing institutional conditions or resources. Although issues of discipline or behavior are rare, respondents emphasize the need for more time, materials, and training in andragogical methods to effectively meet adult learners' needs. Overall, the quality of adult education appears to depend on the dynamic interaction between institutional frameworks, the characteristics of adult learners, and teachers' professional growth as central agents of lifelong learning. Recommendations include strengthening professional development systems, aligning policies with practice, and investing in institutional resources—steps that underscore the need for systemic improvements to empower adult educators in creating relevant, engaging, and flexible learning environments for adult learners.

Keywords: *adult education, adult educators' challenges, andragogical and institutional challenges*

Introduction

This paper examines the challenges encountered by adult education teachers in the Republic of North Macedonia, interpreting these difficulties through the theoretical lenses of andragogy and lifelong learning. The theoretical perspective of **andragogy** highlights how the specific characteristics of adult learners influence teaching requirements. While the European Union's lifelong learning agenda positions adult education as a key strategic goal across Europe, the adult education sector in North Macedonia continues to suffer from systemic weaknesses (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2020). Thus, strengthening teacher professionalism is crucial to bridging the gap between the ideals of andragogical theory and actual practice—especially in contexts where diverse adult learners are served within limited institutional frameworks (Rizova, 2021).

Consequently, the challenges faced by adult education teachers and trainers in North Macedonia can be understood as the combined outcome of learner diversity, the multifaceted nature of the teaching role, and institutional constraints. This conceptual understanding served as the basis for the empirical study and provided a structured lens for interpreting the results.

Andragogy and Teaching in Adult Education

The concept of andragogy, as introduced by Knowles (1990), posits that adult learners are **self-directed**, bring a wealth of prior **experience**, and expect learning to be immediately **relevant** to their lives. Similarly, Savićević (1999) emphasizes that because andragogy acknowledges adult learners' autonomy and prior life experience, teaching adults demands different competencies than teaching younger learners. In practice, when adult educators struggle to meet diverse learning needs, adapt instructional methods, these difficulties can often be seen as a misalignment between andragogical ideals and the practical realities of their teaching environments.

As participation in adult education grows, the professional role and identity of adult educators have become increasingly complex. Educators must continually adapt to changing student profiles and the demands of digital transformation in education. Despotović et al. (2004) argue that gaps in both initial training and ongoing professional development can leave teachers feeling uncertain and ill-prepared to adjust to diverse adult learner needs. Thus, when adult education teachers in North Macedonia report challenges in adapting lesson plans, managing heterogeneous groups, or effectively using digital tools, these issues may reflect the incomplete professionalization of the adult educator role and a lack of sufficient support for that role.

Teacher Challenges in the Macedonian Adult Education Context

Teaching adult learners is inherently challenging due to the **heterogeneity** of the learner population: adults in a single classroom may vary widely in age, prior education, professional background, motivation, and external responsibilities. Such diversity necessitates differentiated teaching strategies, flexible planning, and continuous pedagogical adaptation. In North Macedonia, there are multiple pathways for preparing staff to work with adult learners, yet many current

teachers have not acquired specialized competencies for adult education. Limited institutional support (in terms of time, resources, technology, and staffing) further hampers the implementation of learner-centered andragogical methods. Indeed, the adult education sector in North Macedonia has historically lacked a sufficient number of qualified teaching staff and remains under-monitored, making systematic assessment and reform difficult (Rizova, 2021).

For analytical clarity, the challenges identified in adult education teaching can be categorized into three broad, interrelated dimensions:

1. **Learner-centered demands:** The heterogeneous characteristics of adult learners (diverse ages, abilities, motivations, and life commitments) require instructors to employ a wide range of engagement techniques and motivational strategies tailored to individual needs.

2. **Teacher-centered professional demands:** Adult educators need specialized andragogical competencies, digital literacy, skills for adaptive planning, and opportunities for continuous professional development in order to effectively address adults' learning needs.

3. **Systemic and institutional constraints:** Practical limitations such as insufficient time for individualized support, scarce teaching resources, large class sizes, inadequate infrastructure, and weak policy support can significantly hinder the application of best practices in adult education.

For example, a teacher's report of insufficient teaching materials or difficulty in integrating digital technology into lessons is symptomatic of systemic constraints rather than an individual shortcoming. Overcoming the full spectrum of challenges requires a multifaceted approach—one that simultaneously strengthens teachers' professional capacity, bolsters institutional support, and aligns educational programs with the life contexts and needs of adult learners.

Research Methodology

This study is part of a broader effort to reform the adult education system by focusing on teaching and training staff as key agents of educational quality. The main goal of the research was to examine the challenges that adult education teachers in North Macedonia face, in relation to the practical realities of diverse learners, complex teaching roles, and institutional constraints.

General hypothesis: The professional development of adult education teaching staff is directly correlated with supportive national education policies, strong professional competencies, and relevant educational needs. These factors are assumed to positively influence the quality of education and training processes, increase the effectiveness of teaching, and improve learning outcomes for both young and adult learners.

Specific hypothesis: There is a statistically significant difference in the challenges faced by teaching and training staff when working with adults, depending on their previous work experience.

To address the research goals, a mixed-method approach was adopted. The primary research instrument was a questionnaire-based survey (using mostly quantitative Likert-scale items and a few open-ended questions) designed to assess the professional development needs of the teaching staff and to identify the challenges they encounter in practice. The research sample comprised 330

participants, including teachers and trainers from secondary schools, workers' universities, and adult basic education institutions across North Macedonia.

Data Analysis

Table 1. Self-reported frequency of challenges faced by adult education teachers. Values indicate the number of teachers reporting each frequency and (in parentheses) the percentage of the sample

Challenge	1 (Always)	2 (Often)	3 (Sometimes)	4 (Rarely)	5 (Never)	Total
Lack of motivation or commitment	25 (7.58%)	159 (48.18%)	104 (31.52%)	26 (7.88%)	16 (4.85%)	330 (100%)
Large and heterogeneous groups of students	27 (8.18%)	103 (31.21%)	117 (35.45%)	59 (17.88%)	24 (7.27%)	330 (100%)
Different learning needs	32 (9.70%)	148 (44.85%)	120 (36.36%)	21 (6.36%)	9 (2.73%)	330 (100%)
Limited time for individual work/assessment	29 (8.79%)	125 (37.88%)	119 (36.06%)	41 (12.42%)	16 (4.85%)	330 (100%)
Lack of tools or equipment	23 (6.97%)	84 (25.45%)	142 (43.03%)	56 (16.97%)	25 (7.58%)	330 (100%)
Difficulty integrating digital technology	14 (4.24%)	77 (23.33%)	129 (39.09%)	69 (20.91%)	41 (12.42%)	330 (100%)
Lack of teaching materials/resources	17 (5.15%)	81 (24.55%)	135 (40.91%)	59 (17.88%)	38 (11.52%)	330 (100%)
Classroom management or discipline issues	18 (5.45%)	44 (13.33%)	117 (35.45%)	83 (25.15%)	68 (20.61%)	330 (100%)
Designing flexible/adaptive teaching plans	27 (8.18%)	142 (43.03%)	74 (22.42%)	65 (19.70%)	22 (6.67%)	330 (100%)

Results and Interpretation

Lack of motivation or commitment: This challenge emerged as one of the most frequently encountered. A majority of teachers reported that adult learners *often* (48%) or *sometimes* (32%) exhibit low motivation or commitment to their studies. Only about 13% of teachers indicated that this is rarely or never an issue. These results suggest that maintaining learner motivation is a persistent difficulty in adult education settings, requiring teachers to continuously find ways to engage and encourage adult learners.

Large and heterogeneous groups of students: Managing large, mixed-ability classes was another highly reported challenge. Approximately three-quarters of respondents (around 75%) indicated that dealing with large and heterogeneous groups is an issue they face *often* (31%) or

sometimes (35%), with a small subset (8%) saying it *always* occurs. Only about one-quarter of teachers stated that class size and heterogeneity are rarely or never a problem. This highlights class heterogeneity as a common concern, as adult educators must address a wide range of abilities and backgrounds in the same classroom.

Different learning needs: The need to accommodate different learning needs and styles among adults was also a significant and widespread challenge. Around 45% of teachers reported this issue occurs *often*, and another 36% *sometimes*, meaning roughly 80% encounter it regularly. Only a very small fraction (about 9% in total) said they rarely or never deal with diverse learning needs. The low variability in responses for this item ($SD \approx 0.86$) indicates broad consensus among teachers regarding its importance. These results underscore that catering to diverse learning styles and needs is an ongoing and universal concern in adult education.

Limited time for individual work and assessment: Time constraints clearly emerge from the data. About 38% of teachers *often* feel they lack sufficient time to work with students individually or to provide personalized feedback, and 36% experience this *sometimes*. Thus, nearly three-quarters of the respondents struggle at least occasionally with inadequate time for individual attention. Only roughly 17% reported this issue as *rare* or *never*. This suggests that many adult educators are pressed for time, which can reduce opportunities for personalized feedback, mentoring, and formative assessment of learners.

Lack of tools or equipment: About two-thirds of teachers reported at least occasional shortages of **teaching tools or equipment** (25% *often* and 43% *sometimes*). Very few (only about 7.5%) *never* face this issue. In other words, resource limitations—such as outdated or insufficient teaching materials, tools, or equipment—are a common obstacle. Many adult education providers appear to have only moderate resources, and this shortage can impede the implementation of effective teaching strategies.

Difficulty integrating digital technology: Integrating and using digital technology effectively in teaching is a moderate but notable challenge. Approximately 23% of teachers indicated they *often* struggle with using information and communication technology (ICT) in their instruction, and 39% *sometimes* do. On the other hand, about one-third (33%) said they rarely or never face this issue, suggesting some variability in digital readiness. These figures imply that while digital competence among adult educators may be improving for some, a substantial number still encounter barriers in training, access, or confidence when it comes to using digital tools in adult education.

Lack of teaching materials/resources: A similar pattern to item (e) is observed regarding **teaching materials and resources**. About 25% of teachers *often* and 41% *sometimes* experience a lack of necessary teaching materials (together roughly 65% at least occasionally). Around 30% report rarely or never having this problem. This reinforces that resource constraints, whether in terms of physical materials, curricula, or institutional support, are a recurring issue. . In combination, items (e) and (g) suggest that inadequate resources (tools, equipment, materials) consistently hinder the teaching process for a majority of adult educators.

Classroom management and discipline: Challenges with classroom management or student discipline are **relatively infrequent** compared to other issues. Only 13% of teachers said they face discipline problems *often*, and 35% sometimes, while a nearly equal proportion (about 46% combined) indicated that such issues are rare or never occur. This aligns with expectations about adult learners, who are generally more self-disciplined and intrinsically motivated than younger students. The data suggest that **behavioral or disciplinary issues** do not constitute a major obstacle in most adult education environments.

Designing flexible and adaptive teaching plans: Developing **flexible, adaptive lesson plans** to suit a diverse group of adult learners is reported as a significant challenge. Nearly half of the teachers (43%) *often* struggle with this, and an additional 22% *sometimes* do, meaning roughly two-thirds find it challenging to design or modify instructional plans to meet varied needs. Only about one-quarter (26%) said they rarely or never have difficulty in this area. This high frequency highlights the andragogical complexity of catering to mixed-ability or mixed-age classrooms. There was also greater variability in responses for this item (some teachers responded “always,” while others “never”), suggesting that a subset of teachers have developed effective strategies for differentiation, whereas others feel much less confident. In general, however, the need to **differentiate instruction and remain flexible** in planning stands out as one of the most common and demanding aspects of teaching adult learners.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study indicate that the most significant challenges adult education teachers face are related to **andragogical differentiation**, sustaining **learner motivation**, and the lack of opportunities for **individualized support**. The highest-frequency challenges – accommodating different learning needs and designing flexible, adaptive teaching plans – underscore the complexity of instructional planning in adult classrooms. These findings confirm that adult educators must continuously balance a wide range of learner characteristics, including varying prior knowledge levels, cognitive styles, and life experiences, when planning and delivering instruction.

The persistent issue of low learner motivation or commitment reflects a central paradox in adult education. While adult learners are often assumed to be intrinsically motivated, their engagement can be heavily influenced by external factors such as employment status, prior educational experiences, work and family responsibilities, and incentives like the prospect of higher salaries. Thus, teachers in adult education are required not only to convey knowledge but also to serve as motivators—fostering self-directed learning habits and keeping learners engaged despite competing outside commitments. In other words, adult educators frequently must take on the dual role of instructor *and* facilitator of motivation.

Challenges related to limited time for individual work and assessment, as well as the lack of teaching resources, point to **constrained institutional environments** in which many adult educators work. When class time is largely consumed by covering curriculum content, there is little opportunity

for providing personalized feedback, coaching, or remedial support to learners. This diminishes the capacity for reflective learning and formative assessment. Similarly, difficulties with integrating digital technology and obtaining adequate teaching materials suggest that adult education in North Macedonia is in a **transitional phase**. Educators increasingly recognize the potential of digital tools and modern resources, but practical barriers in training, access, and institutional infrastructure continue to limit their effective use.

Overall, the findings show that adult education teachers encounter more **pedagogical and organizational** challenges than **behavioral** ones. Issues such as learner diversity, motivation, time constraints, and resource limitations dominate the landscape, whereas classroom discipline problems are relatively rare. This pattern reinforces the need for targeted professional development in **learner-centered and andragogical methods**, as well as improved institutional support (e.g., smaller class sizes, better resources, more flexible scheduling) to allow teachers to implement those methods effectively.

Importantly, the data also reveal significant differences in perceived challenges based on the teachers' **previous work experience**. For example, teachers working primarily in adult education institutions reported challenges like designing adaptive plans and motivating learners as occurring "often" or "sometimes" at a higher rate (over 70% of respondents) compared to their counterparts from secondary education settings (around 65%). A Chi-square test of independence ($df = 8$) confirmed that these differences are statistically significant for all the listed challenges ($p < 0.05$). In other words, the **specific hypothesis** was supported: educators with extensive experience teaching adult learners perceive the intensity and nature of challenges differently from those whose experience is mainly with younger students. This finding aligns with the andragogical framework, emphasizing that teachers working with heterogeneous adult populations face more complex teaching demands and frequently operate under less structured or resource-rich conditions.

Conclusion

In summary, this study found that adult education teachers most frequently grapple with adapting instruction to **diverse learner needs**, maintaining learner **motivation and engagement**, and providing individualized support—all within the context of constrained institutional resources. The analysis further showed that teachers' professional experience (and likely their participation in professional development programs) is associated with differing perceptions of these challenges, reinforcing the link between teacher professionalization and educational quality. In particular, teachers with substantial experience in adult education settings tended to report higher frequencies of andragogical and institutional challenges, confirming the hypothesis that prior experience influences the type and intensity of challenges faced.

The effectiveness of adult education depends not merely on the competence of individual teachers, but on a **systemic alignment** between andragogical practice, institutional support, and learner characteristics. Addressing the challenges identified in this study – ranging from diverse

learning needs and low motivation to time and resource constraints – requires a multidimensional approach. Such an approach should integrate ongoing professional learning for educators, organizational reforms within adult education institutions, and supportive policy innovations at the national level. By undertaking these improvements, stakeholders can empower adult educators to realize the core values of andragogy in their classrooms – learner autonomy, relevant and participatory learning experiences, and a strong culture of lifelong learning (Knowles, 1984). Ultimately, a concerted effort to strengthen teacher capacity and provide enabling conditions will enhance the quality and effectiveness of adult education in North Macedonia.

Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions, several actions are recommended to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of adult education teaching:

1. Professional development in andragogical competencies: Provide continuous training and education for adult educators focused on learner-centered and andragogical teaching methodologies. This should include modules on facilitating self-directed learning and encouraging reflective practice, so that teachers are better equipped to address the specific needs of adult learners.

2. Institutional and structural support: Improve the structural conditions of adult education by reducing class sizes (where feasible) and implementing flexible scheduling that allows for more individualized feedback and support. Institutions should establish support mechanisms—such as peer collaboration networks, mentoring programs, or resource centers—to help teachers address challenges and share best practices.

3. Motivation and engagement strategies: Adopt teaching strategies that enhance adult learner motivation and engagement. For example, educators should incorporate relevant, problem-based learning tasks that connect with learners' personal and professional lives. By making learning content immediately applicable and meaningful, teachers can better sustain adult learners' interest and commitment.

4. Investment in resources and digital infrastructure: Invest in up-to-date teaching materials and robust digital infrastructure for adult education. This includes ensuring reliable access to modern educational resources (textbooks, guides, multimedia) and stable digital platforms for blended or online learning. Simultaneously, support teachers in developing digital literacy and pedagogical skills for integrating technology, so that they can confidently use ICT tools to enhance learning.

5. Policy and curriculum development: Strengthen adult education through supportive policies and curriculum design. Educational authorities should emphasize teaching quality, continuous teacher training, and greater institutional autonomy in adult education frameworks. Teacher education curricula (both pre-service and in-service) need to integrate core andragogical competencies, tailoring training programs to the diverse contexts of adult and vocational education. Such policy and curricular initiatives should account for the unique challenges of teaching adults and ensure that educators are equipped to overcome those challenges in practice.

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