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THE JOURNEY FROM PAST TO PRESENT: FROM ACADEMIC STUDIES TO LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN ESTONIA

ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the development of andragogy as an academic discipline and andragogy programmes at Tallinn University. It also reviews the development of adult education in Estonia and outlines empirical findings from previous research related to the learning experiences and the professional identity of students and graduates of andragogy programmes. The research questions in this paper are: What are the main developments of adult education and andragogy as an academic discipline? How do andragogy students and graduates understand their learning experience and professional identity? The findings suggest that academic studies and learning experiences enable students to construct a strong learner identity, which impacts the formation of professional identity. The sense of professional identity becomes stronger during the period of academic studies and continues to develop as a self-developmental process with professional, educational, and personal choices.

Keywords: *development of adult education in Estonia, andragogy, andragogy programmes, learning experience, professional identity*

POTOVANJE IZ PRETEKLOSTI V SEDANJOST: OD ŠTUDIJA DO UČNIH IZKUŠENJ IN PROFESIONALNE IDENTITETE V ESTONIJI – POVZETEK

Članek se osredotoča na razvoj andragogike kot akademske discipline in andragoških programov na Univerzi v Talinu. Prinaša pregled razvoja izobraževanja odraslih v Estoniji in predstavlja rezultate preteklih raziskav o učnih izkušnjah in profesionalni identiteti študentov in diplomantov andragoških programov. Članek naslavlja vprašanja poglavitnih razvojnih točk izobraževanja odraslih in andragogike kot akademske discipline ter kako študenti in diplomanti andragogike razumejo svoje učne izkušnje in profesionalno identiteto. Rezultati kažejo, da študij in učne izkušnje študentom omogočajo vzpostavitev močne identitete učečih se posameznikov, kar vpliva tudi na oblikovanje njihove profesionalne identitete. Občutek profesionalne identitete postane močnejši v času študija in se nadalje razvija v procesu samorazvoja prek strokovnih, izobraževalnih in osebnih odločitev.

Ključne besede: *razvoj izobraževanja odraslih v Estoniji, andragogika, andragoški programi, učne izkušnje, profesionalna identiteta*

PREFACE

Writing this paper I thought that it is a very demanding task to integrate such important issues into one paper. This task was challenging and gave me an opportunity to create a reflective overview of the history of the academic field of andragogy and the development of adult education in Estonia. My personal academic and professional journey began at Tallinn University at the groundbreaking and transformational time of transition from a socialist social order to a liberal market economy. The restoration of independence marked the beginning of systematic changes in Estonian society, including changes in the educational sphere. The Soviet order was done away with and this brought about changes in the whole society, in people's values and identities (Lauristin et al., 2017). In 2021 we celebrated thirty-five years since the establishment of the Chair of Andragogy (1986) and twenty years since the opening of the bachelor's and master's programmes in andragogy at Tallinn University (2001). It has been a meaningful journey from the past to the present to learn about who our students are as learners, how their professional identity is formed, what the impact of the studies is and how our graduates position themselves in their professional practice.

INTRODUCTION

Andragogy is not an unambiguously definable term and theoretical concept in international scientific literature and the same can be said for the term adult education. The variety of terminology is related to andragogy's interdisciplinarity as a scientific discipline and area of academic research. The ambiguity of the terms andragogy and adult education is connected with different educational traditions, ideologies, paradigms and the formation of the area in different cultural spaces. We view andragogy as a scientific and study area which deals with the learning and teaching processes of adults, their life and learning paths, and the conceptualisation of individual and collective experience in various areas and life situations. We also consider adult learners, adult educators' professionalisation and identity, adult education, training and lifelong learning to be the content and research problem of andragogy (Märja et al., 2021).

In the international literature there are two co-existing but distinctive terms: adult education and education for adults. *Adult education* is mostly used in the context of non-formal or liberal education (Jarvis, 1998, p. 38). *Education for adults* is mainly related to whatever educational process or adult learning, be it in a non-formal, general, professional, adult or higher education context or education outside any educational institution (Jarvis, 1998, p. 45). In the Estonian professional community we have agreed that we use *adult education* and *education for adults* as synonyms (Märja et al., 2003). The term andragogy was originally used to signify adult learning and teaching (1920–1960), and later (1960–1970) the theory of adult education. The issues of adult learning, adulthood, and subjectivity were added to reflect the changes of the educational concept (1970–1990; Jarvis, 2011). In 1990–2010 the theme of lifelong learning emerged. Finnish educational sociologist

Risto Rinne wrote that the message of lifelong learning has become an extensive social and cultural goal, the realisation of which ideally ensures flexible learning opportunities and expands access to education and learning everywhere and for everyone during their whole life (Naumanen et al., 2008a, p. 248). According to this vision, the acquisition of education lasts the whole life and includes formal, non-formal, and informal learning, and is an opportunity for self-realisation and a human right.

Over the years I have met with many students and graduates and experienced how important, unique and distinctive the learning experience and readiness for lifelong learning were for them. In creating and diversifying learning opportunities, it is important to know and understand, in addition to international developments, the history of Estonian adult education as well as the changes in the field of adult education that have taken place and to better understand the experiences and identities of andragogy students and graduates.

My research questions in this article are: What are the main historical developments of adult education in Estonia? How do students and graduates understand their learning experience and professional identity and how are these comprehensions related to their academic studies? The paper has two aims. First, to give an overview of the important milestones in the history of the development of adult education and andragogy as an academic discipline in Estonia. Second, to reflect on some of the results from previous research related to the learning experience and professional identity of students and graduates of andragogy programmes. The paper is structured in the following way: first, I will give an overview of the history of adult education in Estonia and the academic field of andragogy at Tallinn University. Then I will present a number of theoretical considerations and discuss selected findings from previous qualitative research carried out in 2014–2023.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ADULT EDUCATION IN ESTONIA

European educational trends and values, especially those of Finland, Denmark, and Sweden, have over the years influenced the development of adult education and set an example for Estonia. Nordic-Baltic cooperation in adult education was established in 1936 and re-established after Estonian independence in 1991 (Jõgi & Karu, 2018; Jõgi & Roosalu, 2020). This cooperation was a developmental process that promoted the basic values of adult education: supporting individual growth, inspiring the culture of democracy, transmitting and integrating cultural traditions into Estonian adult education activities, relying on dialogue, equality, voluntariness, responsibility, and valuing education for life. These were the main values of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the early post-Soviet period (Ibrus, 2005, pp. 38–39). Estonian adult education can be seen as an inherently Nordic cultural feature, which relies on the premise of wide social support, originating in the philosophy of Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, whereby any individual is entitled to learn and participate in social decision-making processes (Gustavsson, 2000; Maliszewski, 2008). The typical Nordic non-formal adult education in the form of learning circles, educational associations, and folk high schools has been of significant importance

for Estonian adult education. At the start of the 1990s with Estonia's regained independence the pre-requisites for the professionalisation of adult education were developed and later consolidated (Jõgi & Gross, 2009). I agree with Karin Filander (2012, p. 135) that we need to know historical milestones in order to understand the present struggles of meaning making in adult education, because it has lost its links to its history with the state, to social movements as well as to the historical and ideological roots of progressive and radical adult education.

The history of adult education in Estonia is more than 100 years old and is characterised by similar traditions and values, changes and events typical at the time for Nordic adult education (Jõgi et al., 2008). This history may be conditionally divided into eight periods. In the following, I will briefly discuss this by presenting an overview based on the empirical data from the research project "Nordic-Baltic Cooperation in Adult Education: Experiences and Stories. 2014–2018". The empirical data was collected using secondary data from multiple documentary sources about Estonian adult education and focus group interviews which were conducted with adult education practitioners (Jõgi & Roosalu, 2020).

The start of adult education in Estonia goes back to 1906, when the Estonian Folk Education Association was founded in Tallinn in order to "disseminate knowledge amongst the people" (Laane, 1994, p. 12). The main task of the Association was to raise the level of education by creating learning circles, various educational institutions, choirs, museums, libraries, and the book shop "Rahva Raamat" ("Folk Book"). The Association was the springboard for the idea of Tallinn Folk University. The Estonian Folk Education Association was also active in other towns and areas of Estonia. The activity of the Association may in the contemporary context be interpreted as a systematic and well thought out national strategy of adult education, which was consciously planned and carried out via various educational activities: the foundation of libraries, folk high schools and different courses for adults, and the extended opportunity for adults to obtain secondary education. The *folk high school* was founded and operated in the evenings, giving the chance to learn to the adults unable to participate during the day.

Non-formal educational activities became even more extensive in 1920–30. This is the period of regulating adult education and the start of the formation of its educational policy. A respective coordination council was set up in the Ministry of Education of the Estonian Republic. The council discussed the national aims of non-formal education and emphasised the need to "involve individuals and all layers of society into the non-formal education to ensure the development of the Estonian nation on the path of democratic statehood" (Laane, 1994, p. 36).

In 1930–1940 the examples for goal setting in non-formal adult education were Finland, Sweden, and Denmark. International relations and contacts supported the sharing of ideas, information, teaching methods, and diverse non-formal educational activities, as well as taking over the long tradition of folk high schools from Denmark and Sweden. The traditional study form of the "learning circle" in Finnish high schools was taken as

an example. The learning circles movement became one of the most considerable and systematic approaches of Estonian non-formal adult education (Laane, 1994, p. 66). In this period, the Estonian Education Union started carrying out its most extensive task of educating professional adult educators. Scientists, intellectuals, artists were registered as adult educators in the Estonian Education Union. They were expected to have higher education, the skills to give lectures in an engaging way and carry out lectures and courses based on adults' needs and interests (Laane, 1994, pp. 69–70).

The Soviet period of 1940–1980 was the time of interruptions and disoriented changes in Estonian culture, values, educational aims and opportunities. 1950–1970 was the start of establishing a system for training and retraining workers in Soviet Estonia and in the 1970s the creation and implementation of a training system for managers and specialists was continued.

The period of 1970–1980 is considered to be significant in the history of adult education in Estonia (Märja, 2000, p. 3) due to the appearance of two directions in adult education: the improvement of qualifications and professional skills for workers and the direction of management and psychology meant for economic managers and school leaders. However, there was a lack of adult educators with the necessary education and skills familiar with the specific characteristics of adult learning and of teaching adults (Märja, 2000, p. 4).

The 2010 Human Development Report of Estonia shows the three waves of changes that took place in the period of 1980–2010. These waves are reflected in the developments that took place in Estonian adult education in 1980–2010. During the period from the end of the 1980s until the middle of 1990s the key words were *freedom* and *self-determination*. The next period from the second part of the 1990s until 2000 was characterised by major state regulation, the formation of institutional structure in education. The most essential characteristic of the third period of 2000–2010 was deeper integration into the European education space (Heidmets et al., 2011, pp. 97–98).

The decade of 1980–1990 may be considered the period of shaping the adult educational policy and modernising the theoretical and methodological basis for adult education. The Chair of Andragogy and Educational Leadership was established at the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute in 1986 with the aim to develop learning possibilities and research. The professional training of education managers was unparalleled at that time: it was long-lasting, systematic, methodologically and theoretically grounded, and made it possible to put the acquired knowledge immediately into the practice of school management (Märja, 2000, p. 10).

The restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 changed the overall legislation regulating the education system. One of the milestones in the history of adult education was passing the Adult Education Act in 1993, which established the basis for legislative and educational policy in adult training, set up the legal basis for adult training and ensured legally guaranteed opportunities for adults. Estonia was one of the first among the former socialist countries which passed similar laws. The implementation of the Act had a major

influence on the role of adult education and its further development in Estonia (Märja et al., 2004, p. 239). The years 1990–2000 in Estonian adult education were the time of searching and of rapid changes, establishing and strengthening international relations and the major growth of cooperation between the public, private, and third sector. The Association of Estonian Adult Educators ANDRAS was established in 1991. This time also marks the start of the Estonian Adult Education National Programme and the creation of adult education legislation. Universities and professional education institutions were actively engaged in the creation and improvement of opportunities for adult learning and there were state financed or municipally funded evening secondary schools and adult upper secondary schools (Märja, 2000, pp. 52–53). In 1997 ANDRAS, first in the Baltic states, launched the Adult Learner's Week and Adult Education Forum in Estonia, which became the beginning of the creation and implementation of adult educators' training programmes. For various reasons, the national programme for adult education was not adopted. However, the discussion about it should be interpreted in the context of our time as an attempt to set up the strategic and methodological basis for the vision of adult education in Estonia, the main principles of which were declared in the Estonian non-formal education programme (Vihalemm, 1995). Despite the absence of doubts about the need for adult education and training, there was too little clarity of concepts and terminology. There were more ideas, thoughts and plans than strategic acts and future vision (Märja et al., 2004, p. 283).

1996 marks the beginning of significant changes in adult education, which were initiated by UNESCO and reflected in the adopted declarations and strategic development plans with the aims of creating opportunities for learning and enabling the lifelong learning of everyone (Adult Learning in a World of Risk, Agenda for the Future; UNESCO Institute for Education, 1997a, 1997b). The use of the term lifelong learning in different documents regulating education in Estonia for the most part matched the issues of adult education; however, it was not clear what exactly was meant by it and who, how much, for whom and for what purpose should create the opportunity for adult learning, how to regulate this by legislation, and whose task it is. According to the report for the educational commission of the EU (Märja & Vooglaid, 1995), adult education in Estonia was not considered a factor of social regulation and economics in the 1990s. The state regulation was insufficient and the information and statistical overview of adult learning and training were inadequate. However, despite the inaccuracy of the statistics, it is possible to note that the number of institutions and companies engaged in adult training was growing continuously from 1991 onwards. The training market was diverse and dynamic as far as training providers and content are concerned. However, there were regional problems with access to the professional complementary training as the majority of education providers were located in Tallinn. Despite the variety of opportunities for professional training in Estonia, the participation of the working age population in the training was low. For instance, in 1999 only 11% of the working age population took part in complementary and retraining courses; the majority of them were women with higher education. The people who needed the training most were the ones with poor education and lower

income, but very few of them participated in the trainings (Elukestva õppe vajaduste analüüs, 2002, p. 6).

The period of 1990–2000 is important in Estonian adult education history for many reasons. The decade was the period of formation of public and private institutions of adult education providers and the institutional structure of Estonian adult education (Märja, 2000, p. 44). Three non-governmental umbrella organisations for adult education were established at the beginning of the decade: the Association of Estonian Adult Educators ANDRAS, the Estonian Non-Formal Adult Education Association, and the Open Education Union. The latter two were engaged in the development of non-formal education and the promotion of its ideas (Vihalemm, 1998, p. 245), whereas the primary tasks of ANDRAS were related to the integration of adult education organisations and international cooperation.

The importance of the *period of 2000–2010* in the history of adult education in Estonia is connected with several issues. International cooperation and the transitional period before joining the EU broadened the learning opportunities for adults in higher education. The Bologna declaration (European Ministers of Education, 1999) changed the organisation of studies in higher education. The adoption of 3+2 study programmes initiated the significant growth of open curricula and opportunities for open studies in universities, thus affecting the age structure of the university student body. In 2001 Tallinn University opened bachelor's and master's study programmes in andragogy, giving opportunities to acquire higher education qualifications and continue the academic studies for everyone whose professional interests were connected with lifelong learning, adult education and training.

The framework of national professional standards, including those of an adult educator (established in 2004), aimed at the advancement of professional education, was established to systematically direct adult education development on the basis of data, visions and strategic programmes (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2009, p. 14). The period is also important for adult educational policy development as it coincides with the creation of the first National Adult Education Development Plan 2009–2013. Its implementation follows the principle of ensuring flexible opportunities and access to both formal and non-formal education for adults (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2009, p. 19).

The period of 2010–2020 was the time after joining the EU and its educational space; it brought with it legislation regulations in adult education and diverse learning opportunities for adults. A significant amount of EU resources was invested in opportunities for lifelong learning. The numerous developments of the period include, for instance, participation in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The promotion of adult education was a consistent, cooperative, and purposeful activity and became network based, involving many stakeholder groups. The steady development of adult education over the years was summed up in the mid-term report of the Lifelong Learning Strategy in Estonia 2020: “The system of adult education in Estonia works relatively well” (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2019, p. 21).

ANDRAGOLOGY: DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE AT TALLINN UNIVERSITY

The Chair of Andragogy and Educational Leadership was established at the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute in 1986 with the aim of developing and organising teaching and research activities in adult education and educational management; it has been providing training for adult education professionals for 37 years. The history and development of adult education in Estonia is also closely linked to the development of andragogy as an academic discipline: as a research and teaching strand it was and currently is the only independent academic unit in Estonian and Baltic States universities that focuses on the development of research and teaching at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level.

The bachelor's (180 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System credits – ECTS, 3 years) and master's programmes (120 ECTS, 2 years) both titled "Andragogy" launched at Tallinn University in 2001. Today these programmes are part of the Lifelong and Non-Formal Education academic strand of the Institute of Educational Sciences at Tallinn University. The bachelor's programme has compulsory and core courses modules, as well as special modules: Adult Education and Educator; Adult Learning in Different Contexts. The master's programme consists of three main modules: Professional Development and Identity; Development, Training and Counselling Processes in the Context of Lifelong Learning, and Educational Research. Graduates of the programmes work in non-formal, formal, and informal learning institutions, state organisations, and private companies, for instance, as training managers and specialists, project leaders, human resource developers, and adult educators. The theoretical basis of the programmes is formed by the interdisciplinary concepts of educational and social sciences and based on social-cultural and sociological approaches to the culture of learning, focusing on the humanistic approach to the holistic development of the human being, a vision of the adult learner, and on theories of adult learning. The core values of the teaching practices are learner-centred development, attention to group processes, a focus on reflective, developmental, and group learning, and the active creation of meanings by learners themselves. During the studies, the learning-teaching context supports two interrelated processes: the interpersonal process (dialogue, interaction, and active participation) and the intrapersonal process (self-awareness, autonomy, responsibility, self-regulation, ability to reflect and construct knowledge about themselves, as well as deep, reflective, and critical learning).

Research and development projects have been considered important from the very beginning and included research, development, and teaching activities, international cooperation and participation in international networks. In addition to academic accreditation in 2004 and 2011 and evaluation of groups of educational curricula in 2016, in the period 2008–2015 the curricula of andragogy was the subject of expert analyses in several international research and cooperation projects (e.g. Teaching Adult Educators in Continuing and Higher Education (TEACH); Training of Adult Educators in Institutions of Higher Education: A Focus on Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe; Adult Learning Professions in Europe (ALPINE): A Study of the Current Situation, Trends and Issues; Becoming Adult

Educators in the European Area (BAEA), and Recognition of Adult Educators Experiential and Accredited Learning). All of this has allowed for the comparison of curricula objectives, content, learning outcomes, and teaching practices to similar programmes at other European universities and become the basis for further development work.

An important event was the launch of the interdisciplinary international joint ERASMUS MUNDUS master's degree programme Adult Education for Social Change in cooperation with the University of Glasgow, the Open University of Cyprus, and the University of Malta in 2016. The programme is funded by the European Union for the period 2016–2025 and focuses on faculty and student mobility, international field placements, and consortium-based joint research. The programme offers the opportunity to participate in international placement, which will take place in three semesters in different countries during the mobility periods. Graduates of the programme will receive an international master's degree.

FROM ACADEMIC STUDIES TO LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In designing the future directions of andragogy programmes and in the advancement of learning and teaching practice, it is important to explore and analyse the perceptions of learning and professional identities of the students and graduates of our programmes and the underpinnings of their attitudes to learning and their chosen educational and professional paths.

In the context of the Bologna process, bachelor's and master's programmes have undergone many changes during the years. Implementing and developing curricula is an opportunity to ensure the systematic and research based development of the programmes, their main task being the support of the learning process and the formation of our students' professional identity (Jōgi & Karu, 2020, p. 146). Several qualitative studies have been carried out during the years that focused on the learning, learning experience, and professional identity of the students and graduates of andragogy programmes (Jōgi & Karu, 2020; Karu, 2020; Karu & Jōgi, 2014; Raccioppi, 2023). The theoretical context of these studies is based on social-constructivist and social-cultural approaches and on adult learning theories. The main arguments for carrying out such studies in the context of academic programmes are found in *Linking Teaching and Research Disciplines and Departments* (Jenkins et al., 2007):

- academic departments are central to developing the links between field research and student learning;
- implications for better teaching and supporting learning at the university have to be constructed on the basis of research.

We consider the development of our students' professional identity as a learning process and an ongoing part of the formation of the professional identity of adult education professionals, the focus of which is developing an understanding of adult learning and the self as a learner.

Learning and learning experience are part of higher education studies, life, and identity. The theoretical research of learning has for a long time been focused on the humanistic, social-constructivist, and critical approach (Brookfield, 2005; Brookfield & Holst, 2014), and during the last decade also on holistic, social-cultural, and biographical approaches (Formenti & Castiglioni, 2014; Hoggan, 2016; Merriam, 2017). The researchers have raised important questions about psychological (Dirkx, 2006; Johnson & Taylor, 2006; Wolfe, 2006), phenomenological (Lonka, 2018; Yorks & Kasl, 2002), and social (Jarvis, 2011) aspects of adult education. The studies dealt with the processes of deep learning and their connection to the psychological and social well-being of adult students (Fujiwara, 2012; Schuller & Wattson, 2009), the formation of experiences and identity (Antikainen & Komonen, 2003), life course and biographical processes (Baumgartner, 2001; Biesta, 2008; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017).

Adult learning is observed in different contexts, e.g., communities, voluntary associations, various areas of life like healthcare, employment, education, and in different organisations, e.g., universities (Fujiwara, 2012). The studies about adult learners are presented in literature on sociology, psychology, and educational philosophy with various epistemological, theoretical, and methodological approaches (Formenti & Castiglioni, 2014, p. 244), which all expand the overall understanding of the learner and learning. Learning in adult age is seen as an individual, emotional, social, lifelong, and life-embracing process. It is partly conscious, partly unconscious and unexpressed (Rossiter & Clark, 2007). Learning is related to human life, stories and time, supports adaptation to changes and coping with the challenges of adult life, self-realisation and development (Phillips & Soltis, 2015). Therefore adult learning is recognised to be lifelong, continuous, ongoing, and life-embracing. Peter Jarvis views adult learning as a lifelong and continuous process that takes place at any stage of life (Jarvis, 1998, p. 38) and conscious living as lifelong learning, emphasising that adults have always had the capacity to learn continuously and that this is not a new phenomenon, in earlier times there was simply less need for it (Jarvis, 2009).

Conceptions of adult learning have over the years been the subject of interest for many researchers studying the phenomenon, discourse, process, and experience of adult learning. According to the research traditions of learning as a lifelong process, the method of qualitative study is applied in life history research (Jarvis, 2011) and biographical study (Alheit, 2011; Alheit & Dausien, 2007). Learning comprehensions are variative and shaped through life and learning experiences, they differ from generation to generation and depend on the unique experience of the learners and their relations networks.

COMPREHENSIONS OF LEARNING AND THE FORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY

In one of our first research forays into students' comprehensions of learning, we were interested in the following question (Karu & Jōgi, 2014): what are the comprehensions of students of self as a learner and as an adult educator in the professional studies context?

Empirical data for this research was collected during four semesters from 17 students aged 21 to 51 from different fields of adult education practice. We used multiple methods of data collection: reflective writing, thematic essays, and narrative interviews. The data was analysed using thematic analysis and pragmatic phenomenography (Karu & Jögi, 2014, p. 111). The findings showed that the students' learning experience and comprehensions of learning are variative. The comprehensions of learning were strongly connected to methodological and teaching approaches that we used in the teaching practice and linked to previous experience and self-conceptions. At the same time there was a common and pervasive understanding of learning as an ongoing process. Learning is experienced as a significant, continuous, enjoyable process and is associated with the transformation of knowledge and self:

I think learning experiences are really special and significant for me as an educator. Since learning for me is a continuous and lifelong process, it is basically a hobby, then it is ok for me to keep a rhythm that makes the learning process enjoyable. (Student V, 31 years old)

Comprehensions of learning are the foundation of professional knowledge and a part of identity formation, and learning is also considered a meaningful part of life:

I believe that learning is beneficial and meaningful if you have an internal interest and motivation for lifelong learning. Continuous learning has become a part of my life, also a part of my professional work. (Student A, 49 years old)

The idea of lifelong learning is maximalist, contradictory, and allows for a relatively wide interpretation (Naumanen et al., 2008b, p. 263; Saar, 2010). The identity of an adult learner is complex, develops during academic studies, in the course of the whole life and is based on the adult's perceptions of self and comprehensions of learning and, in addition to social factors, is also affected by individual peculiarities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Such an identity is "socially given, maintained and socially changing" (Antikainen et al., 2009, p. 221).

From an andragogical point of view, the learners themselves and their personal and learning experiences constitute the resource for learning and identity development (Knowles et al., 2015). We consider experiences and learning to be essential pre-requisites for adult learning, including the learner's identity and experiences, in the context of education and course of life (Elder et al., 2003) on the basis of the phenomenological and narrative approach (van Manen, 2001) and P. Jarvis's (1992) model of social learning.

In our later research on the development of the professional identity of our students, we approached professional identity from the social-cultural point of view which emphasises the relationship of identity with learning and social context. The socio-cultural approach links the learning comprehensions, learning context, and professional activities with learning and identity formation processes. Based on Wenger's (1998) ideas that learning becomes meaningful in the light of identity formation and learning considered is

the transformation of identity, we understand professional identity as an inter-relational, lifelong, and dialogical process that is socially constructed through learning, discourses, and interactions; it develops during the process of learning, which involves reflection on the learning experience that shapes the learner self and learner identity (Jōgi & Karu, 2020, p. 149). The focus of this study was on the formation of professional identity in the context of learning at the university and to look at how a professional identity is formed during and at the end of academic studies, as well as how students construct their learning experiences and understanding of being a learner and an adult education professional. The sample consisted of two groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students (N=64). The empirical data was collected using a survey with open questions concerning learning and experiences of learning, and written self-reflections from students' learning portfolios. The collected data was analysed using pragmatic phenomenography analysis (Jōgi & Karu, 2020, p. 151).

The findings from this research showed that professional identities develop through learning experience, which shapes the learner's self and learner's identity:

Learning at the university has given me the direction and the key for becoming an adult educator and andragogue. It's up to me what kind of doors I will open with this key. (Postgraduate student K, 24 years old).

The sense of professional identity becomes stronger over time, but is still developing until the end of one's studies. The creation of the learner's identity and contextual learning are going on at the same time and manifesting through changes in one's comprehensions of learning and future self.

I see myself as a lifelong learner who supports and learns to learn from others. I have understood that learning is a deeply personal and internal process for each person. I am like an artist who chooses the colours and creates my own painting. (Graduate student S, 26 years old)

The formation of professional identity was experienced by students over time as a conscious and also partly unconscious process, an uncertain learning journey, which involved present, past and future, and was explained using similar metaphors: the journey, travelling, discovery trip, trail, mission trip. The data analysis showed that the pre-requisites supporting identity and learning are self-awareness, curiosity, creativity, ability to adapt, and the skills to create and develop social relations. These pre-requisites may be considered the learner's identity features which support adaptation and indicate the connections between life and learning, the sense of need for lifelong learning, strong motivation to commit to the learning process, self-reliance, and learning skills (Crick et al., 2004; Knapper & Cropley, 2000).

Academic studies and learning experience enable students to construct a strong learner identity, which in turn impacts the formation of professional identity. The long-term

study of generations of learners carried out in Finland demonstrates similar findings and highlights the impact of previous learning experience on adult identity and life choices, including educational choices (Antikainen, 2006, p. 243; Antikainen & Komonen, 2003). The earlier typical linear model of an adult life course, with youth being spent learning, followed by the working period and retirement, has nowadays been replaced for many people by the overlapping model, where the borders between personal life, leisure time, study and work are getting blurry, overlap or are missing, so one studies when there is a need, an opportunity or interest (Vanttaja & Rinne, 2008, p. 89). Thus, the formation of the adult learner's identity and learning is life-embracing and lifelong, related to individual experience and influenced by the studies, learning process and changes in learning comprehensions. Comprehensions of learning, the learner's identity, and identity formation are crucial resources in the development of professional identity in the learning context during academic studies but also for the future professional development of adult education professionals.

One of the most recent alumni researches (Raccioppi, 2023) focused on analysing the sense of professional identity in andragogy programme graduates. The research question was how the professional identity of graduates is formed. The theoretical framework of this study drew on Knud Illeris' (2014) identity structure, three-dimensional approach to learning and Jack Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory. A purposive sample of 6 graduates was formed. The data was collected through narrative interviews and analysed using narrative analysis (Raccioppi, 2023, p. 19). The findings showed that professional identity is formed through transformative learning in the tension between cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. It is important to add that professional identity formation is not a process dependent on academic studies; however, previous learning experience at university influences how professional tasks, different life events, and professional identity are interpreted and what meanings are given to the experiences and identity formation.

There are similar findings in our previous research (Jōgi & Karu, 2020; Karu & Jōgi, 2014). Graduates conceptualise learning as a lifelong and continuous process and interpret a wide range of experiences as a lifelong learning process. In terms of professional identity formation, three main factors emerged: environment, social relations, and transformative events. The process of identity formation is dominated by adaptation, independence, self-transcendence, and self-esteem, the meanings of learning, courage, responsibility, pushing boundaries, social relationships, learning, and the uniqueness of people and experiences. The common meaning was that "the academic studies in andragogy programmes offered a possibility to study and learn like adults, not like passive students in other university programmes" (Graduate student K, 32). The learning environment and andragogy studies were highlighted as meaningful experiences related to life changes, life events, people and self-reflection, expanding one's world view, and noticing learning (Raccioppi, 2023).

Our previous findings also showed that the sense of identity becomes stronger during academic studies that have a particular impact on the development of professional identity

in relation to comprehensions of learning, being a learner, and the vision of oneself as a learner (Jõgi & Karu, 2020). Thus, analysis of the empirical data confirms this and at the same time suggests that personal, social, and professional identities are closely inter-related. Professional identity formation is also at the forefront of the work environment, providing opportunities for continued learning and for understanding and supporting others. The graduates' narratives confirmed that professional identity ensures professional development by enabling people to relate to their own personal identity.

In summary, the findings from all three qualitative studies discussed above suggest that the sense of professional identity in students and graduates becomes stronger over time and continues to develop as a self-developmental process with professional, educational, and personal choices. The findings also highlight that the professional orientation and identity of our students during their studies needs to be systematically reflected and supported. The development and formation of a professional identity is a complex and interrelated process, where students need new ways of defining themselves as learners and professionals in adult education. Systematic self and group reflections, including written reflections on learning experiences and future selves during the academic studies, are crucial individual and collective resources for professional identity formation.

CONCLUSIONS

In 2021 we honoured, together with our students, colleagues and social partners, the 35th anniversary of the academic field of andragogy at Tallinn University with the conference "Celebrating Learning". Andragogy as an academic discipline for us has the potential for sustainable development at Tallinn University. The curricula taught in its framework will in the nearer future be affected by international cooperation, the interdisciplinary approach, and the solutions of novel educational technology. Estonian researchers' perceptions of andragogy as a scientific discipline may change over time due to disciplinary challenges and interdisciplinary influences. The future of andragogy as an academic discipline is a future full of challenges and requires continued and systematic development and research activities.

The historical overview and the findings presented in this paper have value for further discussion and development of andragogy programmes, especially in discussions on the advancement of learning and teaching practices of adult education professionals. This paper does not provide a complete overview of adult education and andragogy as an academic discipline in Estonia, but will hopefully spark interest or curiosity for comparative research on the professionalisation of adult education and the development of professional identity in adult education professionals.

For the most part, the stories of researchers, developers, and university professors in Estonia and other European universities who have contributed the most to the teaching and learning process and to studies in adult education, devotedly working, cooperating, believing and hoping, still remain unwritten and untold, not shared or analysed. That

is why I hope this paper will be of interest to those researchers, scholars, and doctoral students who are motivated to carry out comparative studies of adult education and wish to capture the narrative of how andragogy as an academic discipline and adult education developed in Europe. Until now such an overview or grand narrative has been lacking.

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