

CONTRIBUTO TEORICO

The strategic framework of the Hungarian public service continuing education system in the light of digital education.

Il quadro strategico del sistema di formazione continua del servizio pubblico ungherese alla luce dell'educazione digitale.

Balázs Klotz, National Public Service University Istituto di Formazione Amministrativa.

Éva Pallai, National Public Service University Istituto di Formazione Amministrativa.

Gábor Erdei, University of Debrecen Faculty of Humanities.

ABSTRACT ITALIANO

Il capitolo più recente del sistema di formazione continua del servizio pubblico ungherese, sviluppato dal 2012 all'Università Nazionale del Servizio Pubblico, descrive una strategia basata su una piattaforma di apprendimento a distanza che offre gestione flessibile, autoapprendimento e autovalutazione. Dopo 10 anni di collaborazione tra funzionari e esperti, è stato creato un sistema sostenibile e innovativo di formazione per adulti in Ungheria. Lo studio analizza i fondamenti della strategia, la piattaforma di apprendimento e i focus formativi suddivisi per livelli di gestione.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

The most recent chapter of the Hungarian civil service continuing education system has been written at the National Public Service University since 2012. The starting point of the continuing education strategy is an ecosystem based on a distance learning platform which, in addition to flexible time management, provides tools for effective self-learning and self-evaluation. In nearly 10 years of cooperation between public administration officials and further education experts of the National University of Public Service, one of Hungary's largest sustainable, crisis-resistant and efficient adult education systems was created, the main pillars of which are innovation, motivation, digitization and quality. The study details the foundations of the Hungarian public service continuing education strategy, addresses the specifics of the distance learning platform that supports continuing education, and presents the training focuses broken down into management levels.

Introduction

In Hungary, in the period before the change of regime, continuing education was a very important area of the domestic andragogy and adult education system. Further trainings were carried out within the framework of state-owned companies, and further training was carried out intensively in the public sector as well.

After the change of regime, due to the fundamental changes in economic ownership and structure and labor market issues with tension, retraining and the acquisition of new professions came to the forefront of adult education.

In the last 30 years since the change of regime in the economic sector, as a result of the significant settlement of Western European and Far Eastern enterprises, the continuing education culture in Hungary has also been transformed, so education, further education and training are not only an integral part of the organizational culture, but also contribute to adult education and lifelong character shapers of the world of learning. In the last 10-15 years, in addition to strengthening continuing education, workplace learning that better represents employees' autonomy and desire to develop has also become increasingly important. At the same time, in addition to the above, we are also dealing with the fact that a lot of knowledge cannot and does not have time to integrate into the various formalized education and training systems, so workplace learning becomes dominant in many cases (Erdei 2019).

The changes briefly described above appeared more markedly in the economic sector, but the period of regime change did not leave the public sector untouched either.

The topic is also important because, although continuing education is an important field of educational science and andragogy, the areas to be investigated that enjoy priority are not sufficiently published, while this development form and opportunity is indispensable in the world of the knowledge economy and learning society (Choy & Smith & Kelly, 2014). Moreover, this methodological and development framework is in many cases the only way for the necessary new knowledge to reach stakeholders (Kettunen, 2005). It can therefore be seen that it is a very complicated phenomenon and system in terms of its goals, its means, and its role (Knox et al., 2017).

Although the present study presents the continuing education system of public service, and while the professional continuing education of workers in the sector is being implemented, it can also be seen that education and training are actually shifting almost imperceptibly towards workplace learning and self-directed learning (Corrall, 2011).

In the following, we will therefore address one of the important areas of the Hungarian public administration training and education system, some elements of the continuing education of the public service subsystem, and how the continuing education of the public service system is renewed and modernized.

The Hungarian public service continuing education system

Since 2012, the National University of Public Service (NUPS) has been responsible for the operation of the public service continuing education system. Since 2014, as a result of a conscious strategic decision, the public service continuing education system has been based on distance learning, resulting in the formation of one of the largest and most modern distance learning platforms in Hungary: every year, approximately 1,400 public administration bodies provide 76,000 officials with standardized and high-quality continuing education services - even overcoming geographical distances (NKE, 2024).

The distance education platform - Learning Management System (LMS) framework encompasses the development, implementation, quality assurance of training programs,

the maintenance of the network of instructors and experts, the certification of training courses, the operation of the mandatory examination system, as well as the registration of completed training courses.

Sector management of the area

Sectoral management of the area is managed by the Government through the minister responsible for public administration quality policy and personnel policy, through the head of the personnel center.

The Public Administration Further Education Committee has a special role. The Committee is a professional advisory and review body that assists the minister responsible for public administration quality policy and personnel policy in their duties related to the further training of officials. The task of the committee is, for example, to approve central continuing education programs, approve the registration of instructors and experts, and review annual reports.

Duties of the National Public Service University

NPSU manages the development and quality assurance of public service continuing education programs, develops the distance learning platform, and provides methodological support for employers in the preparation of annual continuing education plans for officials.

Even in Europe, it can be considered a curiosity that the further education of public servants appears as a university task. In Hungary, NPSU is the custodian of the training of civil service officials. In this way, NPSU accompanies the entire professional life of students and officials, from bachelor's and master's courses to postgraduate courses and continuing education, and supports their careers and professional specialization (Kristó & Klotz, 2022).

This development path represents a unique opportunity for creativity and innovation: public service continuing education courses, which are characterized by continuous development in content, technology and methodology, are formed as a result of the joint thinking of teams consisting of NPSU instructors, practical specialists active in public administration and adult education methodology experts. Although the system of tasks outlined above may seem somewhat unusual compared to the classic university structure at first glance - since the target group is different, the knowledge material to be transferred is different, and the teaching method is also different - this, however, is far from being a disadvantage. On the contrary: it offers a unique, mutual development, in which the continuing education system uses the latest scientific and didactic research results.

The fact that the distance learning methods that have been used successfully in continuing education for several years can be incorporated into the framework of the university structure can be evaluated as a particularly positive synergy.

Duties of employers

Employers are responsible for preparing the annual training plan for officials. The annual continuing education plan for the given calendar year includes the study

obligations prescribed for the officials, and also includes the public administration exams that the officials must pass on the basis of legal requirements. (Employees must take a basic public administration exam within one year - this is a so-called stay-in-career exam, since if the exam is not passed within one year, the official's legal relationship - by force of law - will be terminated.)

When determining the study obligation, the range of competencies to be developed revealed during the performance evaluation, as well as the results of the competencies measured on the distance learning platform, are of fundamental importance. Study obligations are registered using study points.

Based on the average of the last five years, 1,350 public administration bodies prepare an annual continuing education plan for 75,000 officials in the public service continuing education system. One official participates in 2 or 3 public service continuing education courses on average. The average study time devoted to further training is 12-16 hours/year/official.

Strategic orientations for continuing training in the public service

In the ten years since 2012, there has been a marked paradigm shift in the design and delivery of further training programs, with a key expectation that learning should be an experience, rather than driven by the need to gain credits. The focus has shifted from lexical knowledge to practical knowledge that can be applied in everyday work.

Traditional examinations have been replaced in many courses by self-testing questions integrated into the curriculum. Innovation, motivation, digitalisation and quality are the pillars of the training system. The system is based on state-of-the-art technologies, it is adapted to the learning habits of adults, it guarantees measurable development, it is inspiring, and it also achieves good results in international comparisons.

Innovation

Innovation is the driving force behind development. In the field of public service further training this has also meant a change of approach, both in the way training services are delivered and in the learning and teaching methodologies.

At the University, we started developing our distance learning system in 2014, so by 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic hit, we had already managed millions of hours of teaching and learning.

The University not only has the technological foundations, but the paradigms of education and the culture of learning can also be seamlessly integrated into the virtual space. We have also made a success of the training-based methodological approach established for face-to-face training by adapting our training courses to an online format.

In the light of all this, and of student feedback, we have good reasons to believe that this distance learning ecosystem, which is outstanding in terms of both its modernity and its scale, and which we have consciously built up independently of the pandemic, can serve as a good model for the development plans of higher education and adult education.

We also provide daily opportunities to share knowledge and to learn from others (experts and colleagues) in our professional communities (professional groups and

channels) created in Learning Management System (LMS) since 2020. Online forums – as tools for community learning and informal learning – can be set up in connection with a training course, or as a platform for people working in a similar job or field, even independently of courses.

The 2010s also saw a complete methodological renewal and transformation of the development of programs. This diversity – the range of learning support tools that can be varied according to individual needs – represents a completely new quality compared to the mere narration of knowledge and compared to traditional education. Elaborating new online teaching formats is challenging, time-consuming, and, of course, demands a well functioning IT infrastructure (Sousa & Marôco, & Gonçalves, & Machado, 2022). The main direction of innovation is to ensure that training is not just theoretical, but also provides knowledge that can be applied in concrete situations. That is why – in addition to our trainers and researchers – we work together with highly qualified and practical professionals, experts in adult learning methodology, who have many years and decades of professional experience. We have built up a complex network of trainers and experts, including public administration experts and teachers from partner universities. Their joint thinking is shaping the further training in public service, which is characterised by continuous reforms in content, technology and methodology.

To increase efficiency and the learning experience, we give preference to practical, competence-building training, based on active participation. The main priorities are: to provide a creative and visual presentation that facilitates the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, to encourage officials to think and to promote problem-solving. To that end, we offer technical-methodological tools such as video presentations, simulations, self-checking questions, tutorial films, e-seminars, individual and group tutoring, and case-based learning in general. Case studies, self-guided interactive exercises, comprehensive questions and legal cases make learning exciting. Hundreds of learners have tried all of these not only in the narrowly defined public service further training, but also in our specialised further training courses. The feedback is clearly and consistently positive.

Motivation

We believe that learning is not a compulsion, but an enjoyable, exciting process of discovery. To ensure that officials see training not as a burdensome obligation, but as a positive opportunity, we offer them a variety of tools for self-development. These tools show officials the way to individual development and motivation.

Training needs vary greatly from time to time. We do not need to provide officials with descriptions, glossaries and studies because they are more interested in getting answers to their concrete day-to-day issues and problems as quickly as possible. Learning and knowledge are most valuable to them if they enable them to do their job better and faster.

All e-learning courses are freely available in the Learning Management System (LMS) Self-development menu. If you encounter a specific, real-life problem in your work, our regularly updated training courses, with their practical approach and realistic legal cases, can be of great help.

In addition to the opportunity for professional development, the Individual Competence Measurement for Officials, which supports personalised competence development, is considered a curiosity in Hungarian adult education.

If officials are keen to test their skills by solving case studies based on real-life situations, and if they want to monitor and measure their progress, they can use a form of playful learning to assess their current level of professional, personal and leadership competences relevant to their work. Besides, they will receive feedback on what tasks they can professionally perform – independently and confidently – in a specific area, and what they need to improve on.

In the competence register, which comprises 131 competences in total, we have defined not only the concepts of the competences, but also the levels of proficiency in them, which – in line with the logic of the European Framework of the Reference for Languages – describe the activities that officials should be able to carry out at each level of competence, from A1 to C2, at 6 levels, i.e. in practice what officials should know in the course of their work. In addition to the concept of each level, their requirements are also defined.

Officials can measure their personal competence level in two ways: by self-assessment, or – for 29 competences, including 2 new ones – by competence measurement through the solution of practical exercises. Self-assessment can be used to estimate the level of a given competence, and measurement can be used to confirm or refute the self-assessment estimate.

This will provide officials with a kind of situation report on their competences, and it will make it clear to them whether or not a training program is appropriate for their level of knowledge. To help them develop their individual development plan, officials will receive a realistic self-image and personalised training program suggestions. The evaluation and systematic analysis of the measurement results are a prerequisite for conscious training planning. Last but not least, officials can continuously monitor their own development path, as the so-called measurement logbook records the results of the measurements, and every official's own learning portal continuously shows the changes in the individual competence profile.

This is also useful for administrative organs, as competence-based training planning and regular (annual) competence measurement provide the basis for the 2-3 year objective of providing employers with real data on the competence of officials participating in further training, on the basis of which employers can tailor the further training of officials.

Competence measurement also sets clear targets and requirements for us when updating our existing programs and developing new training. We develop our training programs based on the expectations of our officials and in line with the competence framework: we are consistent in our view that only further training programs that are aligned with the content and the requirements of the competence register, and thus with the daily activities of officials, can be developed.

It is important to keep developing, renewing and being inspired, even as a leader. This is encouraged by the unique leadership development simulations in Hungary.

The learner can follow different decision paths in a decision-making situation. Each decision is preceded by a short filmed scene, at the end of which the learner can choose

from three different situations, and the simulation line proceeds according to the decision chosen. In addition to recommendations from the literature, each decision is followed by expert feedback on whether the choice was the right one and on its impact on the situation. If the learner has not followed the ideal decision path, they can start again until they have found the optimal path. Moreover, simulations can be useful and exciting not only for leaders and future leaders, but also for everyone else, as they take self-development to a new level by placing participants in a process, as if they were part of the given situation. By taking on the role of a leader, officials can test themselves and their various skills – without risk, in a supportive environment. They learn independently, but not alone, as they actually receive real-time feedback from the experts, adapted to the situation, and they even have the opportunity to research the topics, as they can use the literature recommendations to explore the given simulation area.

Digitalisation

In the development of the e-learning portal created by the National University of Public Service, we have always strived to provide as many and as wide a range of IT services as possible for further training in public service (Kiss & Klotz 2020) because we agree that ‘technology makes education more efficient, scalable and accessible’ (Grand-Clement, 2017).

3.1. Our digital services

The entire development of the e-learning platform has been aimed at supporting the continuous development and self-development of officials in the digital environment.

The e-learning platform provides a complex, interactive digital learning environment that delivers the expected learning and testing with as little unnecessary inconvenience as possible. In addition to supporting learning, it plays a key role in the management of training as well: it registers the participants’ tasks, learning obligations, certificates, and it is the platform on which employers prepare the individual further training plans for officials.

The functions of the Digital Further Training Portal module are already used by all officials. These functions provide access to learning materials, competence measurement and examination tasks, and they allow officials to participate in the work of expert groups and to monitor the learning obligations.

The progress of the learning is recorded in the student’s logbook, which includes the courses taken and the training required by the employer. The educational material for online training is constantly updated in line with legislative changes and technological developments. The electronic curriculum content system helps users to keep track of this.

Learning Management System (LMS) also includes a parameterisable online exam system, which generates exam sets from questions in question banks and immediately evaluates the completed tests automatically.

The online media delivery system allows users to view live or pre-recorded recordings at a given time. Furthermore, it provides the possibility to view a recording that has been recorded after a live streaming.

In the self-development recommendation system, users can select the competence area they would like to develop. Then the Learning Management System (LMS) will offer them a learning pathway – which may consist of several programs – from the training programs in the training program catalogue, which will take them to the indicated level of the given competence area.

While studying the course material, officials can ask questions from users who are in different teaching roles. The online question and answer system provides a platform for this. The trainer is notified when a question has been submitted, and they can answer it on the same platform.

The further development of the Learning Management System (LMS) is ongoing, with a new, easier-to-use, more transparent interface; a modern, accessible and responsive (including mobile device support) learning portal for self-directed learning; a state-of-the-art, informative, multimedia training program catalogue and training information portal; and a self-service customer relationship management system.

Online learning channels

For officials who have been doing practical work on a training topic for some time, i.e. who have experience of what they will be learning about, exchange of experience is one of the most effective teaching methods. The online professional channels can be used to work on a topical subject (e.g. IT security, integrity, smart cities and sustainability), with the help of experts.

In the forums, which work similarly to social networking sites, a new idea, an innovation or a scientific article generates an active professional discussion between experts and officials with expertise or interest in the topic; the flow of knowledge and information is continuous, up-to-date and cost-effective across a wide range of topics. Officials can choose the topics they are interested in, which they can follow; they can ask questions, make comments and receive helpful reactions from experts or peers.

There are mutual benefits to all of this. These include, on the one hand, putting the official in the spotlight by giving them the opportunity to ask questions, to express their views and to report on their experience, thereby enhancing their professional reputation. Equally important is the opportunity to experiment with new ideas and new solutions by learning about the research and opinions of others, to innovate one's own proven methods and procedures, in short, to make one's own work easier. On the other hand, opening up the opportunity to exchange experience can also be of considerable benefit to the further training system, since the collection of real-life cases greatly expands the toolkit of case-based training, which can be used to train students who have no experience in the subject.

3.3. Quality indicators and opinions on the public service further training system

The public service further training system guarantees the methodological and digital conditions that support adult learning habits and make learning an experience. The basis for the individual development of officials is provided by the further training courses included by the employer in the individual further training plans. These courses develop the competences of the person in the job and thus the competences required by the job. This is ensured by the Ludovika University of Public Service and the training institutions

with a certified further training program linked to the system, as well as by the employers through internal training, within the framework of the public service further training system.

All of the officials who participate in public service further training are working adults with limited time to learn, so learning through electronically available course materials is overwhelmingly the most appropriate option for them, both in terms of efficiency and resources. A large part of the further training programs are therefore delivered via distance learning, moving away from traditional classroom teaching, and a significant part of the public service further training provided by the Ludovika University of Public Service is based on e-learning methods.

Conclusion

Since 2012, NPSU has been operating the system of further training for the public service. The past decade has been characterized by developments: during this period, we have developed and shaped the pillars of our extremely broad training portfolio to meet constantly changing learning needs.

At the same time, all of this has required a complex approach, as we have had to adapt to the economic and social environment, digital solutions, and the challenges posed by the new generation appearing in the public service (Kristó & Klotz, 2022).

Renewal in terms of content, methodology and technology, and with it the intention to preserve the constant values of public service, have set us the goals and reference points, with the help of which we can serve the development of Hungarian public service personnel with innovative, digital training forms that encourage self-development, and high-quality further training that will satisfy officials.

Repeated revision of priorities enables us to assess and identify real training needs - specifically with the help of competence measurement -, to emphasize self-development and the learning experience - instead of mandatory training and an exam-oriented approach - and to transfer knowledge that can be used in practice.

Through all this, the NPSU provides the Hungarian public administration with a practical, experiential, inspiring, measurable development guaranteeing a training system that yields good results.

The mission of the continuing education system is for officials to find programs that are valuable to them, their own learning path, and thus see the continuing education system as a tool that supports their individual professional development and helps them perform their duties effectively, making learning a joyful and a rewarding experience for them.

References

Choy, S. & Smith R. & Kelly A. (2014): Continuing Education and Training at Work. in. *Promoting, Assessing, Recognizing and Certifying Lifelong Learning, Lifelong Learning Book Series (LLLB, volume 20)* 151-171.

Caroll, S. (2011): *Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning*. University Libraries and Digital Learning Environments. Routledge, 239-258.

Erdei, G. (2019): *A továbbképzések és munkahelyi tanulások szerepe és helye az LLL-ben*. Debreceni Egyetem Nevelés- és Művelődéstudományi Intézet. kézirat. Debreceni Egyetem, Debrecen.

Grand-Clement, S. (2017): *Digital learning. Education and skills in the digital age*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif., and Cambridge, UK.

Kettunen, J. (2005): Implementation of strategies in continuing education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 19 No. 3, 207-217.

Kis, N. & Klotz, B. (2020): A digitális oktatás új útjai a Nemzeti Közszerológati Egyetemen In: Parragh, Bianka; Kis, Norbert (szerk.) *Az ösztönző állam válságkezelése I.: A koronavírus-válság kezelésének első eredményei*. Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, 207-224.

Knox, B. A. & Conceicao, C. O. S. & Martin G. L. (eds.) (2017): *Mapping the Field of Adult and Continuing Education*. An International Compendium: Volume 1: Adult Learners, Routledge, New York.

Kristó K. & Klotz B. (2022): A nagy tölgyfa asztal új hajtásokat hozott, avagy a közszérológati továbbképzés elmúlt tíz évének tíz fontos eredménye In: Koltay, A. & Gellér, B. (szerk.) *Jó kormányzás és büntetőjog : Ünnepi tanulmányok Kis Norbert egyetemi tanár 50. születésnapjára*. Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, 425-439.

NKE (2024): Ágazati miniszter részére készített jelentés a 2023. évben megvalósított közszérológati továbbképzésekről és az éves továbbképzési tervek végrehajtásáról. kézirat, Nemzeti Közszerológati Egyetem, Budapest, p. 67.

Sousa, M. J. & Marôco, A. L. & Gonçaves, S. P. & Machado, A. d. B (2022): Digital Learning Is an Educational Format towards Sustainable Education. In: *Sustainability*, Vol. 14 No. 3, 1140.