

Informal possibilities in adult education: civic organizations and conferences

György Szabados* – Troy Wiwczarowski** – Mariann Móri***

Abstract Currently, the educational system is not only a major focus of public attention, but expectations for its future are also rising. In today's economic circumstances, it has become obvious that for uneducated and only slightly educated individuals, particularly for those with little work experience, their chances in the labor market are slim to none. Instead of gainful employment, their lives are based on a vulnerability of being supported by government aid and public employment projects – neither of which are guaranteed over time. Risk is also high for highly qualified employees, as rising and continuously changing expectations force these workers to seek new qualifications, as well as to look for venues for maintaining and enhancing their knowledge. The objective of adult education is to replace and supplement existing knowledge and practice. In addition to formal educational means, non-formal and informal solutions are increasingly widespread. Regarding practices, diverse civic organizations play a growing role in alternative educational activities. This sphere is composed of a variety of types of organizations; the introduction of a new act and the related regulative background will certainly change the character of this sector, the activity of which has already been debated on many forums. Numerous private or quasi-private civic organizations live – in a kind of symbiosis – with many higher education institutions. The most important functions of these civic organizations are to promote greater access to knowledge or experience for freshly graduated adults, supplementing the results of higher education or ensuring the dissemination of educational or research results and the mutual exchange of experiences among lecturers and researchers, by organizing meetings and conferences. The aim of our research is to analyze and expose the motivation, professional and human backgrounds, informal adult education activity and the sustainability of selected civic organizations involved in the organization of adult education conferences and publications. The examinations mainly focus on the practice of those civic organizations operating alongside higher education institutions. Elements of the sample include civic program managers involved in the examined activity. The research method consists of a survey, a case study and private observations. We believe that the examined civic organizations

* University of Debrecen Faculty of Applied Economics and Rural Development
E-mail: szabados@agr.unideb.hu

** University of Debrecen Centre of Agricultural and Applied Economic Sciences
E-mail: troy@agr.unideb.hu

*** University of Debrecen Faculty of Child and Adult Education
E-mail: mmore1@t-online.hu

frequently offer solutions which are unattainable for basic institutions (such as specific funds) or that the dissemination they offer is implemented on a higher level (publication in more important and preferred journals, publications). Such activity does not represent an outsourcing solution by higher education institutions, but is rather a novel, high quality solution in the face of changing job market conditions.

Keywords adult education • conferences • civic organizations

1. Introduction

Currently, the educational system is not only a major focus of public attention, but expectations for its future are also rising. The Hungarian labor market is on its way to returning to pre-crisis conditions - but some indicators still reflect unfavorable macro-economic situations (the effect of the crisis is noticeable in the growing number of the unemployed (Ol h-Pakur r¹)), which considerably affect the relations in employment. In today's economic circumstances, it has become obvious to uneducated and only slightly educated individuals, particularly for those with little work experience, that their chances in the labor market are slim to none. Instead of gainful employment, their lives are based on a vulnerability of being supported by government aid and public employment projects – neither of which are guaranteed over time. Risk is also high for highly qualified employees, as rising and continuously changing expectations force these workers to seek new qualifications, as well as to look for venues for maintaining and enhancing their knowledge. Changing environmental conditions require the re-training of organizations' employees. It is also valid for organizational managers, the overload of which lately seems typical (Dajnoki²). This organizational development can assure qualified work which can entail business success (B csn ³). On the one hand, the modern employee is faced with a requirement for life-long learning; on the other hand, receiving further education has become increasingly difficult of late. V ntus et al.⁴ stresses that organizations-depend on their financial possibilities-need to pursue the professional training of their employees. Werquin⁵ stated that "The labor market is central also because it is a place for the production of non-formal and informal learning situations. Employers in all countries without exception are quick to point out that the most important non-formal and informal learning probably take place at work". He also added that "In Hungary, the formal education and training system does not seem to be in a position to evenly and sufficiently produce the knowledge, skills and competences required by the labor market. Kierzenkowski⁶ argued that "...a rapid decrease in unemployment is a short-term priority to limit social problems and reduce the risk of rising structural unemployment... Demand and

¹ Ol h, J. – Pakur r, M. (2009). Presentation of Balk ny City's State of Employment. The Fourth International Scientific Conference Rural Development 2009. Lithuan University of Agriculture, Lithuania, 15-17. October 2009. 95-97.p. ISSN: 822-3230

² Dajnoki K. (2007): A szervezeti kommunik ci  alapjai. In: Szerk: Dajnoki K.-Berde Cs.: Hum n er forr s gazd lkod s  s vezetés. Szaktud s Kiad  H z, Budapest.

³ B csn  B ba  . (2010): Az id t nyez  szerepe a tartalmi vezetési feladatokban. A Virtu lis Int zet K z p-Eur pa kutat s ra K zlem nyei II.(2-3(No.3-4)) pp. 126-133.

⁴ V ntus A. – T csy A. – Mih k S. (2009): Munkak ri szervezettség a l tartásban. Erdei Ferenc V. Tudom nyos Konferencia, Kecskem t, szeptember 3-4. II. k tet. 639-643. p.

⁵ Werquin, P. (2010): Recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Country practices. OECD Edition.

⁶ Kierzenkowski, R. (2012), "Towards a More Inclusive Labour Market in Hungary", OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 960, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k98rwqw3v8q-en> (last access: 5 October, 2012)

supply of the labor market are of high essence by governance, where information supply and dissemination of information is necessary... the share of under-qualified is very large, even though further skills. In Hungary where the share of under-qualified is very large, even though further skills are acquired outside the formal education sector". An OECD outlook examined and revealed that "[m]ore than 50% of workers nationally possess fewer qualifications than required by their job, which is by far the highest ratio for Hungary in the OECD" (OECD⁷). It is therefore no wonder that further training or lifelong learning is essential to the domestic governmental expectation, when one urging target is the raise of the level of the employed or accessing to the lately quite often communicated full level of employment.

2. Conferences

The objective of adult education is to replace and supplement existing knowledge and practice. In addition to formal educational means, non-formal and informal solutions are increasingly widespread. According to Zaki Dib,⁸ informal education differs from the previous two and supplemented both formal and non-formal education, consisting - among others - of lectures and conferences. He claims that the "higher of systematization and organization involved in informal education activities, the nearer it will be to non-formal activities". OECD classification⁹ details that the basis for the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning is the state of organization and structure, and the presence of learning objectives. "One can also speak about formal education and/or training or, more accurately speaking, education and/or training in a formal setting" From this approach - conferences are also quite often considered as formal education leverages - by having formal settings, clear organization, defined structure (such as schedules) and objectives, which is mostly in connected with learning objectives.

Conferences are usually those venues where awareness raising plays an important role. One project document (ENSURE¹⁰) deals with issues of communication and the subject of awareness. There is a widening gap between the advancement of scientific knowledge and technology and society's ability to capture and use them properly. Better communication of science and technology innovations to the public will help to transcend the diversity of experiences and enable constructive dialogue about the risks and benefits of scientific discoveries and technologies. Information communication is power (Okaka¹¹). Awareness is a somewhat broad and vague term, yet one that is intuitively widely understood. As part of a permanent and interactive communication flow, awareness-raising is a process which opens opportunities for information exchange in order to improve mutual understanding and to develop competencies and skills necessary to enable changes in social attitude and behavior.

⁷ OECD (2011), OECD Employment Outlook 2011, OECD Publishing.

⁸ Zaki Dib, Claudio (1988): Formal, non-formal and informal education: concepts/applicability. Cooperative networks in physics education-Conference Proceedings 173. American Institute of Physics, New York.

⁹<http://www.oecd.org/edu/highereducationandadultlearning/recognitionofnon-formalandinformallearning-home.htm> (last access: 7 October, 2012)

¹⁰ ENSURE (2012): Methodology for an awareness raising strategy. ENSURE project. Central European Programs, 2010.

¹¹ Okaka, W.(2010): Developing Regional Communications Campaigns Strategy for Environment and Natural Resources Management Policy Awareness for the East African Community. Research Journal of Environmental and Earth Sciences 2(2).

Awareness-raising plays an important role when we wish to draw attention to the concerns of certain target groups to a specific issue and inform them in the hope that they will adjust their behavior accordingly (Sayers¹²). In addition to scientific scholars, quite often actors of the business, governmental and civic spheres visit meetings and conferences, in order to acquire new, up to date knowledge. Regarding practices, diverse civic organizations play a growing role in alternative educational activities.

3. Civic organizations

There are diverse definitions applied on civic organizations depending on national or international level (Pierog¹³). According to the latest statistical publications in 2010, the number of civic organizations was about 65 000, and most of these may be considered as classic civic organizations. About a third of them is registered as classic foundations (23 456), the number of membership organizations was 41 531. Within this figure, the number of the two most typical forms are as follows: there was 21 914 private foundations, and 35 042 associations (belonging to what were formerly termed social organizations). Currently, civic organizations may take up numerous activities to achieve their objectives; their social importance is weighted by qualifying as a public benefit organization. Up to the introduction of the new Act on Civic Organizations, this degree depended on whether they took up specific activities listed in the Act on Public Benefit Organizations, namely 22 activities listed in the public benefit categories. The new act on Civic Organization has largely influenced this practice. Now, the degree stands in relationship to the direct or indirect contribution it makes to the realization of public functions. A public function, in this understanding, is a legally determined governmental or municipal task, which has to be met in the public interest, without any profit. Organizing conferences - by means of organizing scientific and cultural events and disseminating knowledge - may be considered as public functions. The Act on Higher Education lists the tasks of higher education institutions, where one of the most important tasks is the education of higher education professionals, experts, and mentions the roles of adult education as well. The activity of organizations-even in the field of education and training-may be fundamentally promoted by achieving application funds (Vántus–Juhász¹⁴).

These are realized by providing the conditions for arts and sciences organizing activities, providing scientific and other services. Considering this point, the activity of civic organizations and the activity of higher education institutions connect to each other in the framework of public functions. It would be difficult to understand the numerous activities which may be realized by civic organizations even by focusing on the organization of conferences by higher education organizations. The National Statistics Office gathers information on civic organizations specialized in education (more than 8000), international relations (more than 800) or professional economic advocacy (more than 4,000). All these organizations could possibly work with conferences, but we do not assume that this number truly reflects the actual number of civic organizations involved in organizing or contributing to conferences. We have also tried to access their number by researching the registry of the National Court. Using

¹² Sayers, R. (2006): Principles of awareness raising. UNESCO Bangkok.

¹³ Pierog A. (2011):  j vezet si kihiv s: civil szervezetek. VIKEK K zlem nyei. II. vf.1-2.159-167.p.

¹⁴ Vántus A. – Juhász Cs. (2008): A megel gedettség  s a motiv ci  összef gg sei a term k-el allításban. XI. Nemzetk zi Tudom nyos Napok, Gy ngy s. m rcius 27-28. II. k tet. 715-722. p. ISBN: 978 963 87831-2-7

its database, we only found 55 organizations where organizing a conference was defined as an objective. The keyword search ‘conference organization’ only resulted in a finding of 10 such organizations.

4. Civic and higher education organizations – a brief case study

We recognized that a close connection exists between civic organizations and academic organizations. Considering the situation of the University of Debrecen, Centre for Agricultural and Applied Economic Sciences, numerous civic organizations, mainly foundations, were established to supplement the prime higher education activities and possibly to find novel possibilities for development. Most of them are still operating, participating in conference and meeting organizing activities. The operation of these organizations is partly independent from the university, which only provides a locus for their operation. The founders were lecturers or they became management members. The activity of the organizations largely depends on the funds they may access. Major sources were the 1% tax refund pledge possible in Hungarian tax system, the former National Civic Fund and certain special application funds. The largest potential of these organizations (theoretically) is human resources, i.e. experts in diverse scientific fields, their non-profit labor contribution and volunteers. A potential in the students is not perceived, in fact volunteerism can be slightly experienced in the entire Centre. Volunteerism is not a dynamically increasing activity. The number of volunteers in the civic sphere decreased by almost 20% according to the latest statistics in the last year (although 2011 was the European Year of Volunteerism). Earlier, our research revealed (among civic organizations in Hajdú-Bihar county) that organizations are good at civil activities, but they are not good masters, owners enough, and management problems are largely connected to this phenomenon. It is partially a problem of the lack of volunteers, more of them would be necessary and professional/expert special knowledge is needed. Although we may assume some organizational problem in involving volunteers, the supply side is equally or more problematic. Although we quite often claim that their knowledge is not adequate (expertise, language) unfortunately the approach to the nonprofit work is controversial. The nonprofit sphere itself is not in, students usually appreciate and emphasize financial values, financial prospects. Although in some professions learning practice is really precious and expensive (such as lawyers), nonprofit organizations may provide meaningful experience usually free. Conferences are usually organized by the cooperation of more civic organizations; a yearly one conference may be predicted. The financial possibilities more or less influence the conference circumstances, but lately really valuable and precious conferences were held.

5. The role of civic organizations in conference organizations: survey

We edited a questionnaire to survey the practice of conference organization of civic organizations. We are carrying out functional nature examination, the basis of which was established by Berde.¹⁵The questionnaire collected data on the following fields:

- Basic data on the organizations, human background and evaluation of operation conditions.

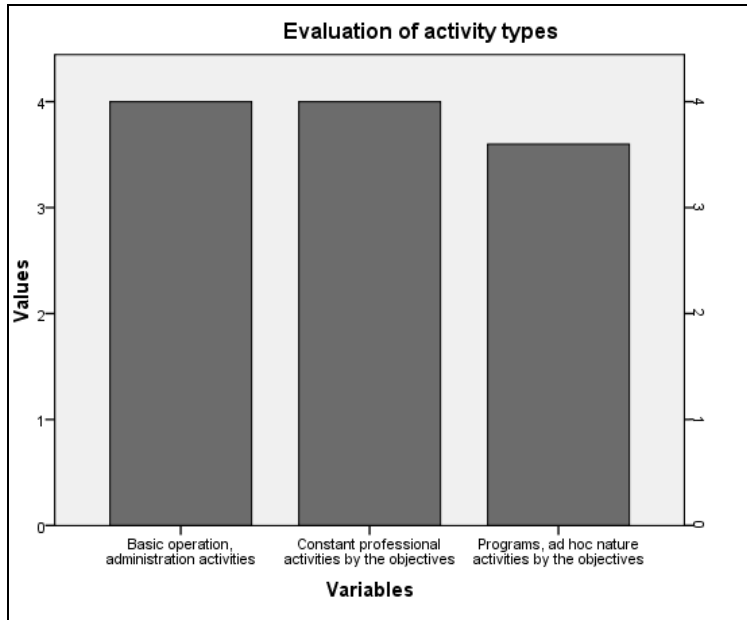
¹⁵ Berde Cs. (2000): A vállalati menedzsment funkcionális vizsgálata a mezőgazdaságban. Habilitációs eljárás tézisei, Debreceni Egyetem, Debrecen.

- Motives for organizing conferences.
- The relationship (and aspects) of the civic organization and the higher education institute.
- Importance in conference organization, contribution.

The questionnaire included 54 variables to evaluate (regarding scaling we have applied selective, multiple selective and 5 degree intensity scale). Unfortunately, space limitations here do not allow us to cover all the examined fields, so we will focus on only the research's most important results. We did not find a complete database on the examined organizations which organize conferences and which have some kind of relationship with an institution of higher education. This is why we could not rely on probability sample taking. Our results are not representative (it is not valid for all the population examined), we only had the intention to show some movements and relationships of civic practice. We put the questionnaire on the Internet (Google docs), and asked quite often advertised-published conference organizing civic managers (in relationship with higher education institutions) to fill it in. We analyzed the results using SPSS 17.0.

The majority of our respondents were from associations, mainly with public benefit degree. The number of members of the organizations in almost all cases exceeds 50; the number of employees was between 0-10 in all cases. Considering the number of volunteers, their numbers varied a lot (from none to more than 11). Regarding operational conditions, the majority evaluated it intermediate level or better. We also have examined the intensity of different kinds of operational activities (Figure 1).

Figure 1 • The evaluation of different fields of activity

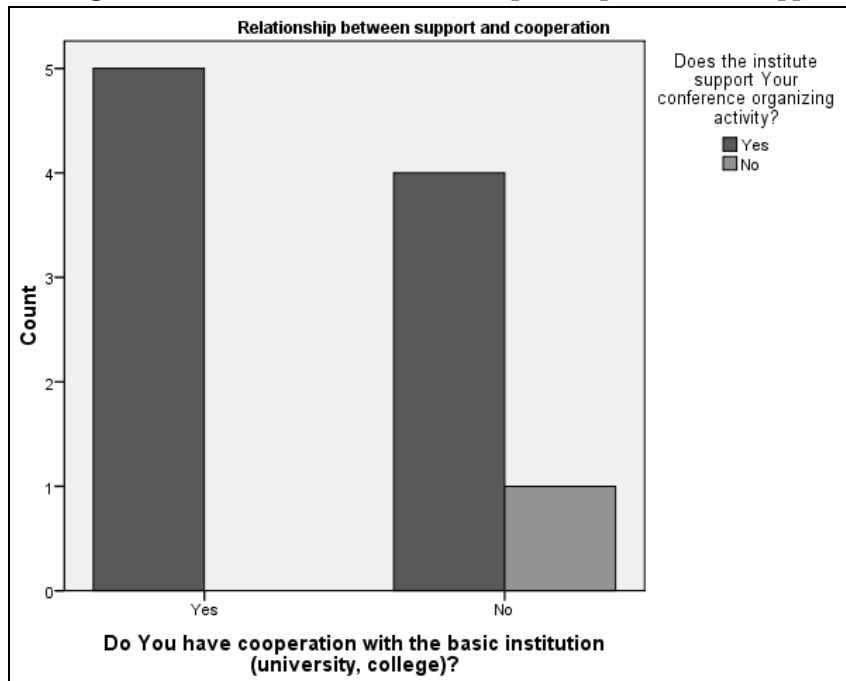


Source: Authors' examinations, 2012.

Results show (means) that the level of basic administration and natural operation activity correspond to the organization's regular professional activities. The intensity of activity of ad hoc program-like activities seems lower. This later result may be explained by the dependence on sources. One of the most important questions is why

these organizations deal with conference organization. The most important motive was to be able to meet the expectations of scientific and professional communities (4.5). The next important reason was to supplement the activity of the basic higher education institution (4.0). The evaluation of the relationship between conference organization and founders' objectives was more than intermediate level (3.7). By introducing cross tabs between the variables of public benefit and the motive to be able to meet the expectations of scientific and professional communities, it seems that, for public benefit organizations, the importance to be able to meet expectations seems higher.

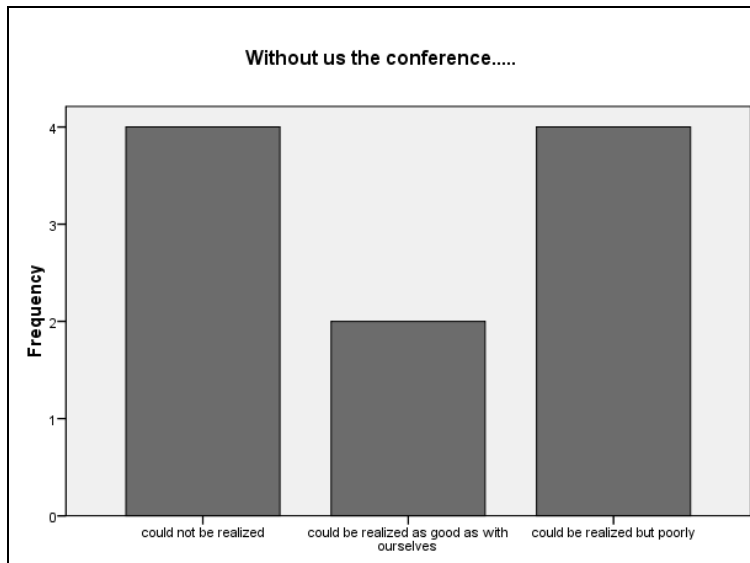
Figure 2 • The evaluation of relationship of cooperation and support



Source: Authors' examinations, 2012.

Some organizations cooperate with their higher educational institutions (Figure 2.). Cooperation by respondents also means different support for organizations. Regarding the frequency of support, the most frequent (typical) was the need to provide necessary services free or inexpensively to civic organization (7 out of 10 organizations). 3 of 10 cases the higher institute provide human resource for the conference organization, 2 provide moral support and only 1 of 10 provide concrete financial assets to organize. Most organizations considered their contribution to be more than favorable to the organization, with a mean of 4.7 totally. Most organizations regarded theirs not be a serious contribution to the successful realization of a conference (Figure 3).

Organizational respondents felt that their most important contribution to the conference was providing relationship and competence (its mean importance was 4.5), which was followed by mobilizing human resources (4,3). The evaluation of contributing to the access of financials and flexibility offered by the organization seems equal (4.00).

Figure 3 • The evaluation of private contribution (success)

Source: Authors' examinations, 2012.

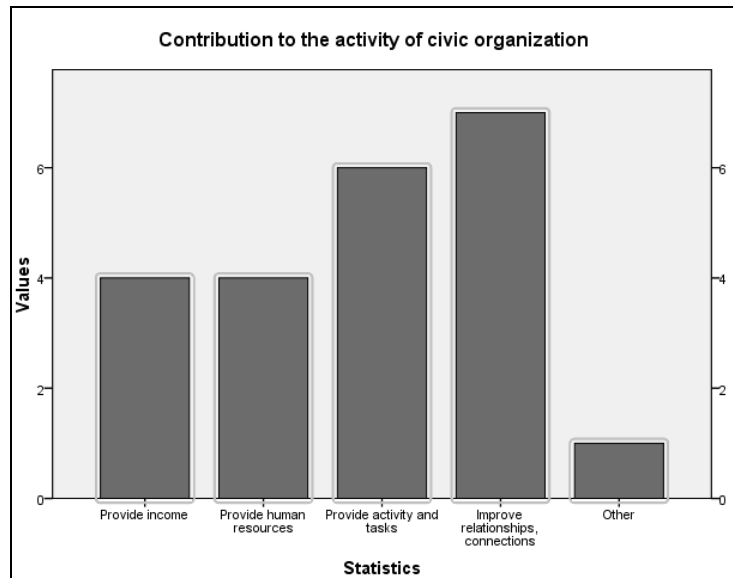
We also examined the most important sources of organizing conferences by civilians. Of ten conferences, in 9 cases application funds are applied. Second frequent sources were the utilization of private sources and receiving conference fees (a mean of 8). The importance of other sources is really low, including the importance of the higher institution's contribution (3 out of 10 cases). Regarding conferences, an important issue is the conference publication. Our respondents revealed that the majority (6 out of 10) feels the publication to be a meaningful extra contribution to the conference issues, such as publication in journals and 3 of 10 consider it neutral. Regarding the relationship between conference attendance and a publication possibility in a high quality issue, we found that only 2 out of 10 respondents considered it to be attractive and 4 responded neutrally. On the other hand, all respondents maximally emphasized the relationship between the professionalism/prestige of organizers and attendance (participant attractiveness).

Regarding the conference organization, the role of civic organization management is dominant (4.6). With considerable difference, the role of other actors (employees, volunteers, experts and other members) almost equals it, at an intermediate level.

We also tried to reveal the importance and contribution of conference organization in the life of the civic organizations we examined. Results are illustrated in Figure 4.

Results show that the most important contributions are the improvement of relationships (7 out of 10) and to provide activity and tasks (6 out of 10). The importance of resource type contributions (human, income) is less frequent (4 out of ten).

Conferences have a dominant impact on the activity of the organizations we examined. Half of the organizations highlighted that without the conference organization, their activities would fundamentally change and 3 out of 10 stressed that their activities would slightly change. Only 2 out of 10 organizations proved to be conference-independent, meaning that conference organization is not their prime activity.

Figure 4 •The contribution to the activity

Source: Authors' examinations, 2012.

Summary

Focusing on conference organizing activity, we may declare that conference organizing civilians receive only slight support from their respective higher education organizations. A conference is mainly supported by services which do not have a direct financial aspect. Organizations feel that they are making serious contributions to conferences. Most civilians use application funds in support of their organizational activities. Publication in high quality journals was considered to be their most meaningful contribution, but had low appeal in the responses we received. This last result is slightly controversial in practice, as lately many scientists - in view of the requirements for academic promotion – are attempting to publish more frequently in high quality journals. The prestige and professionalism of organizers proved to be an absolutely dominant factor of attractiveness. Conferences also play an important part in the activity of organizations, mainly in the fields of providing activity and improving relationships. Regarding these kinds of organizations, conference dependency is quite high.