

Defining Contemporary Adult Professional Development: Insights from Service Users, Providers, and Experts in Latvia (101259)

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Adult education in Latvia continues to face challenges in fostering lifelong learning and ensuring its alignment with labor market needs. Higher participation rates alone do not necessarily result in meaningful gains in professional performance. This study is part of the broader State Research Program "Education" project titled "Elaboration of Evidence-Based Solutions for Effective Professional Competence Development of Adults and Assessment of the Transfer of Its Results into Practice in Latvia" (Project No. VPP-IZM-Izgītība-2023/4-0001). The project aims to develop an evidence-based framework and practical tools to support effective adult professional development and assess how the acquired knowledge and skills are applied in practice. As part of Work Package 2 of the project, 14 online focus group discussions were conducted in November–December 2024. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Latvia (approval dated September 24, 2024; No. 71-43/121), confirming compliance with research ethics principles. The focus group discussions explored questions across six thematic areas (six blocks). This poster summarizes findings from Block 1 on adults' perceptions, beliefs, and associations regarding modern professional development.

Method

Participants

A total of 129 participants took part in 14 online focus group discussions, representing three target groups: 28 experts, 33 providers of adult professional development services (HEI, VET institutions, training centers, SLO) and 68 recipients of adult professional development services (employers and employees represented eight economic activity fields with a higher proportion of employed individuals in Latvia, e.g., public administration and defense; education; health and social care; wholesale and retail trade; transportation and storage; agriculture, forestry, and fishing; construction; manufacturing).

Procedure

All focus group discussions were recorded via MS Teams or Zoom platforms, with prior consent from all participants. Transcriptions were carried out using MS Teams and/or Transkriptor.com transcription features. All transcripts were technically processed and prepared for analysis in NVivo. Based on the results of the theoretical research and on practical experience, an initial coding system was developed and refined throughout the direct coding process (e.g., expanded, reduced, reformulated). Using the Block 1 coding system 40 codes were identified across 4 categories (see Table 1 and Figure 1). 667 code references (30,624 words) were identified, including 355 unique statements. Codes are ranked by the total number of references (i.e., focus group participants' expressions) in descending order, and the percentage distribution of references across the three target groups (experts, recipients, and providers) is compared.

Coding System	Block 1	Categories, including count of codes and references
	Modern Adult Professional Development (beliefs and associations)	1.1. Forms of learning organization (7 codes) [79 references] 1.2. Approaches, methods, principles (12 codes) [242 references] 1.3. Growth and achievement of outcomes (16 codes) [217 references] 1.4. Stakeholders involved (5 codes) [129 references]

Table 1. The coding system of Block 1

Results

According to the results from Block 1, focus group participants of different sectors prefer different forms of learning organization. Experts most often favor formal education and non-formal education, and importance of informal education. However, they do not refer to face-to-face learning, workplace learning, online learning, or blended learning, which may indicate their focus on the structure and content of the education system rather than specific delivery formats. The significance of blended learning and online learning in modern adult professional development is emphasized only by adult education service recipients. Slightly less frequently, they refer to face-to-face learning and workplace learning, which indicates their preference for flexible, accessible, and practical learning formats. They also highly value formal education and non-formal education. Adult education service providers most often highlight the importance of informal education, non-formal education, formal education, and workplace learning, which reflects their efforts to offer diverse learning opportunities tailored to different target groups (see Figure 2). Focus group participants frequently emphasized that modern adult professional development is a vital component of lifelong learning. It must address labor market demands and offer individualized, flexible learning pathways that reflect adults' learning needs. Across all three groups, there is a shared understanding that professional development must be closely aligned with real employment needs. Professional development is largely perceived as a long-term, flexible, and technology-supported process that is strongly connected to labor market requirements. All involved groups – experts, providers, and recipients – emphasize the need for continuous learning, an individualized approach, and the practical applicability of knowledge (see Figure 3).

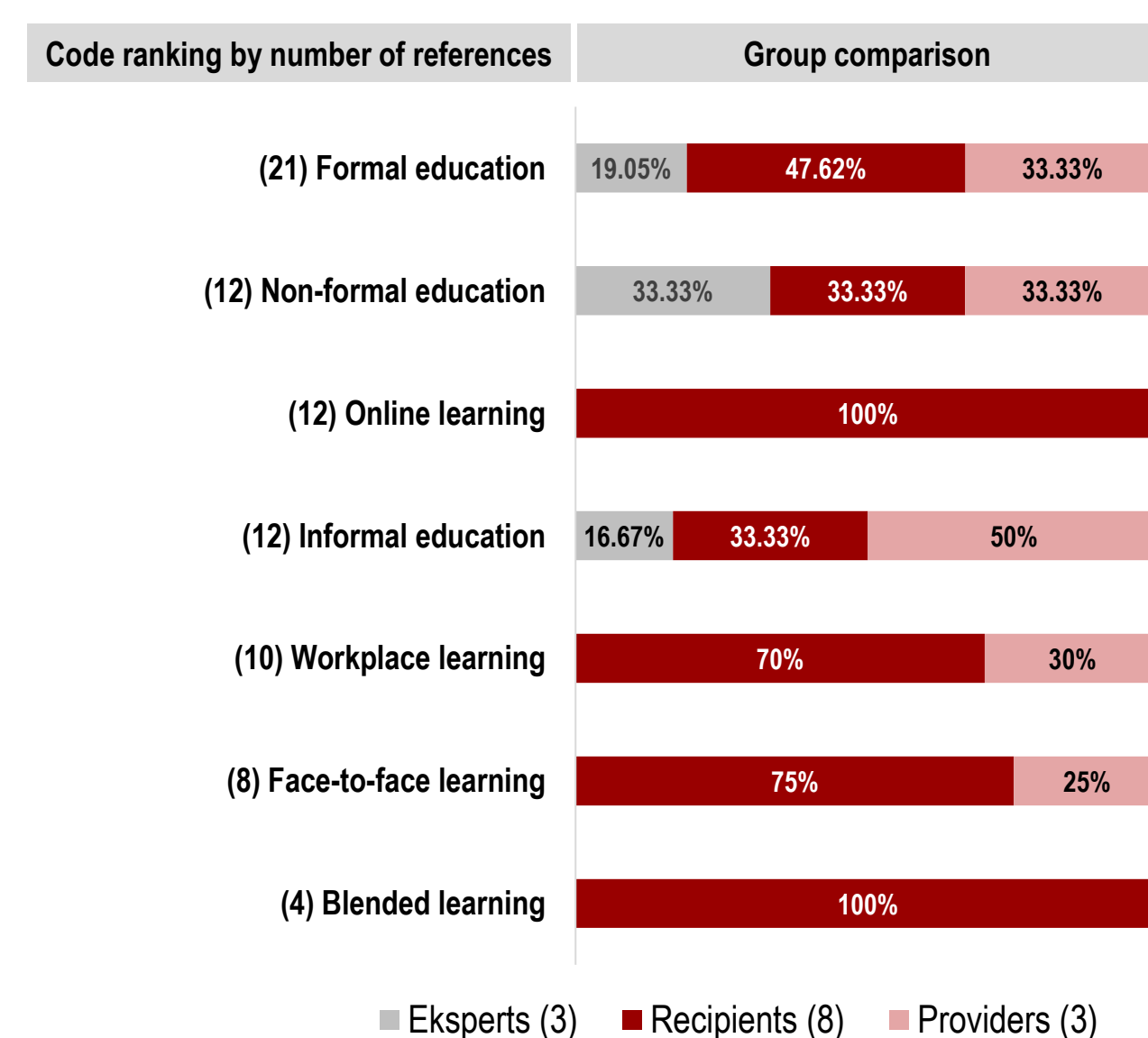


Figure 2. Results within the category 1.1: Forms of learning organization

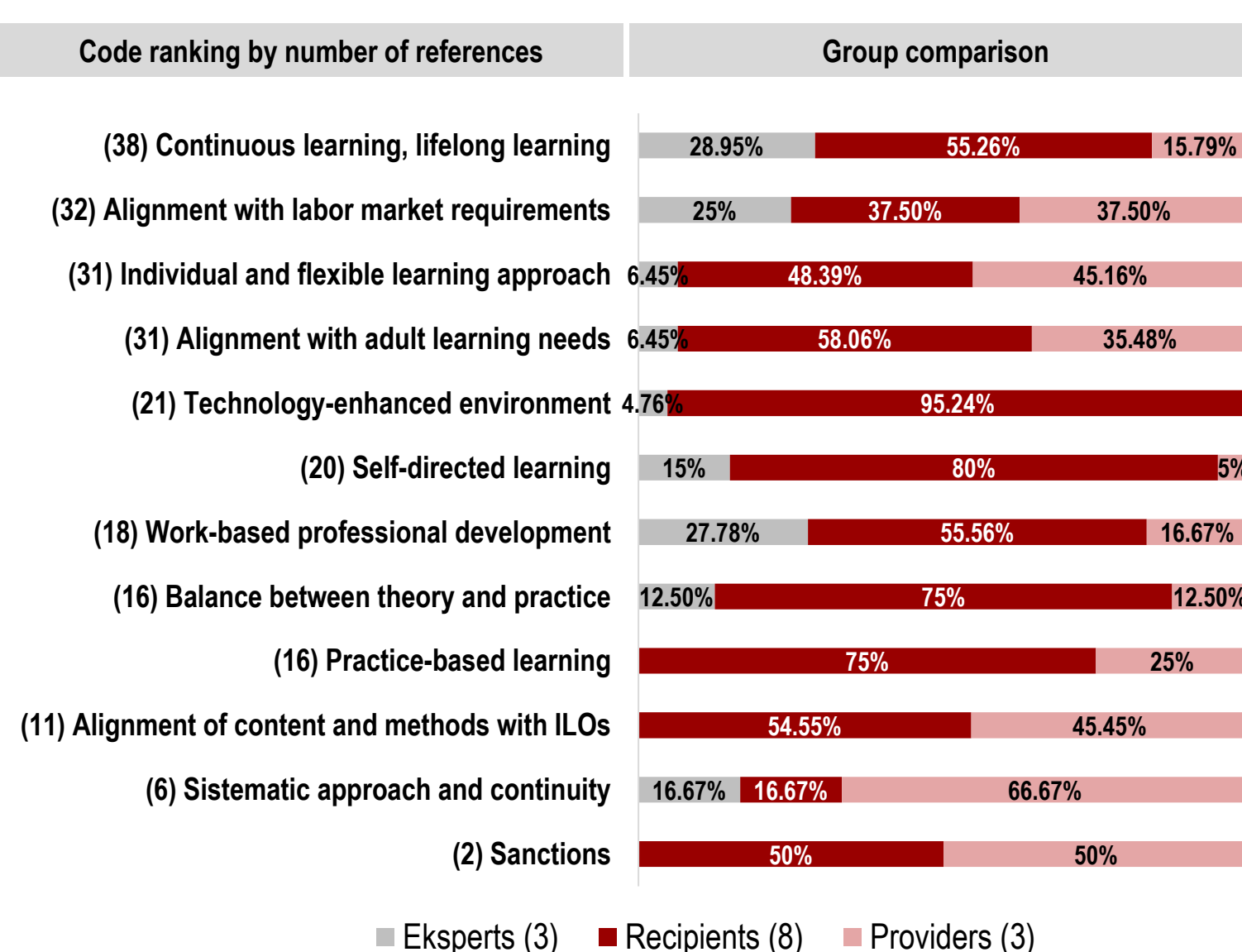


Figure 3. Results within the category 1.2: Approaches, methods, principles

Adult professional development is perceived as a multidimensional process that combines practical application, labor market requirements, personal growth, and collaboration. Experts, providers, and recipients emphasize the importance of a flexible, results-oriented system that fosters individual growth and competitiveness in the labor market. The main focus is on enhancing professional knowledge and skills – including their practical application – while also supporting personal growth, well-being and vitality, work efficiency and productivity (see Figure 4). The effectiveness of adult professional development depends on aligning with labor market demands, addressing learner needs, and fostering systemic, collaborative approaches among stakeholders within an integrated and flexible ecosystem (see Figure 5).

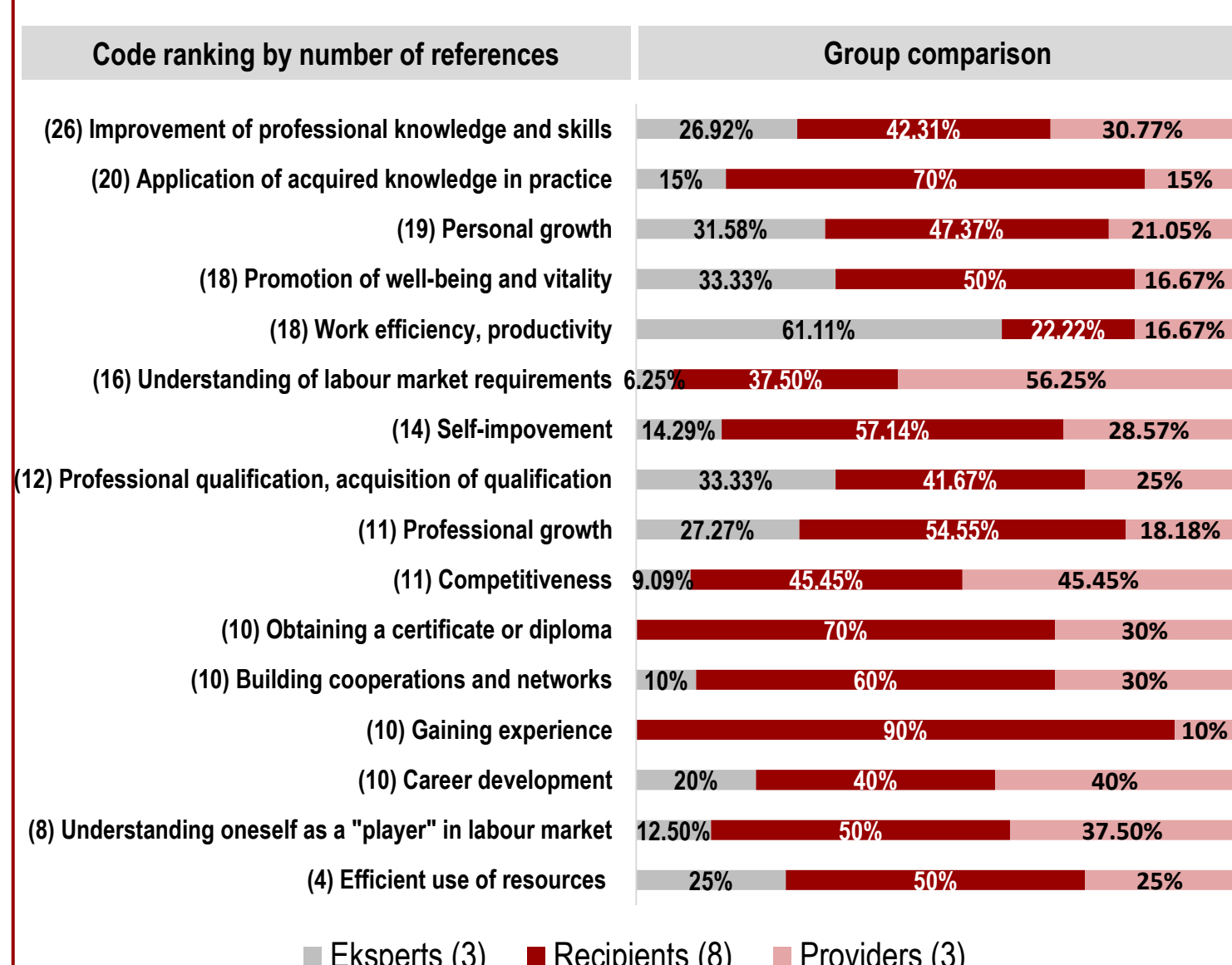


Figure 4. Results within the category 1.3: Growth and achievement of outcomes

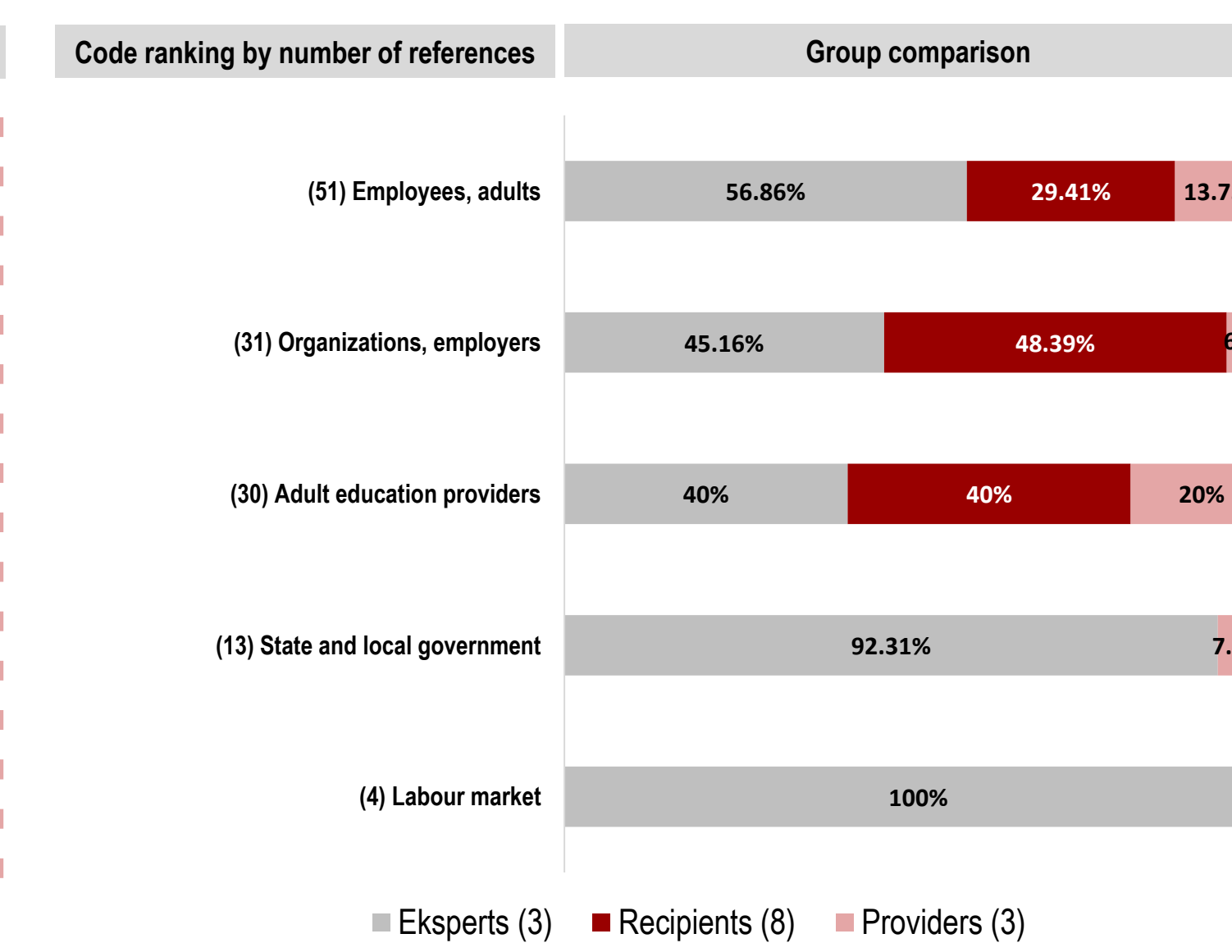


Figure 5. Results within the category 1.4: Stakeholders involved



Figure 1. The coding system and coding results of Block 1

Conclusion

Each target group emphasizes the learning formats that best align with its role in the professional development process: experts focus on systemic aspects, recipients prioritize practicality and accessibility, and providers highlight diversity and adaptability in their offerings. Preferences vary according to the roles and needs of each group. Experts emphasize formal and non-formal education structures, reflecting a systemic perspective and alignment with regulatory frameworks. Adult education service providers underscore informal, non-formal, and workplace-based learning, demonstrating efforts to ensure diverse and adaptable opportunities. Meanwhile, adult education service recipients value blended, online, and face-to-face learning, as well as workplace learning, reflecting their need for flexibility, accessibility, and practical application.

Discussion

Adults prefer autonomy in learning, valuing self-direction and control over goals, methods, and pace. Self-directed learning is not only a core principle of adult education but also a critical pathway toward autonomy and transformative learning, challenging traditional, instructor-centered paradigms (Kruszelnicki, 2020; Loeng, 2020). Lifelong learning among adults is strongly linked to goal orientation and self-efficacy (Hee et al., 2019; Knowles et al., 2020). Adult professional development motivation varies by age and literacy, underscoring the need for differentiated approaches in adult education (Yamashita et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Directions

The focus group approach captured culturally embedded perspectives on professional development in Latvia, but these context-specific insights may limit transferability; future studies should explore cross-cultural comparisons to broaden applicability.

Practical Implications

Monitoring adult professional development needs through regular interviews can form an updated view of current demands in professional development; it is useful in helping to develop professional development programs with strong practical value, tailored to specific economic sectors and adult learning needs; tailor skills development initiatives to the workplace culture, addressing the time constraints and motivational factors identified in the study; and promote communication about the benefits of learning, thereby reducing barriers for adult learners.

References

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