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Smooth sailing or hidden struggles? Organisational problems in adult education quality development

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Abstract

For over two decades, quality has been a central and widely debated issue in lifelong learning. Drawing on a comparative study grounded in qualitative, reconstructive social research, this article examines organizational problems implementing quality development within adult education organisations. The analysis reveals two core problems: first, the organization's own infrastructure can become an obstacle; second, quality development itself may generate new difficulties rather than solely resolving existing ones. The article reconstructs how adult education organizations navigate these problems in practice. By highlighting the interplay between quality initiatives and organizational structures, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in implementing quality development.

Keywords: qualitative research, grounded theory, expert interviews, quality development, organisational problems

Introduction

This paper[1] examines core organisational problems in implementing quality development within adult education organisations in Germany from the perspective of practitioners. The focus lies on organisational features and processes that, in everyday practice, prove 'tricky' or fail to 'run smoothly' in the context of quality work and that, from a scientific standpoint, fall short of organisational expectations and appear open to modification.

Since the 1990s, quality has been a major concern in German adult education (e.g., Gnahs, 1999; Klieme & Tippelt, 2008) and has also gained prominence in international debates (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2019). Beyond adult education,

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however, quality has become a key issue across all sectors of lifelong learning – from early childhood and school education to social work and higher education (e.g., Betz et al., 2025; Gogolin & Lenzen, 2014; Helmke et al., 2000; Kilinc, 2025; Klieme & Tippelt, 2008). This applies not only to the scientific discourse, educational policy, and research but also to pedagogical practice. For instance, a comparative study on professional groups and organisations in education identified quality – along with consulting, education, resource-related complaints, and cooperation – as one of five concepts relevant across all educational organisations (Nittel & Tippelt, 2019). However, individual educational sectors are scarcely aware of this commonality: they continue to pursue field-specific quality debates without reference to corresponding discussions in other sectors (e.g., Esch et al., 2006; Gnahs & Quilling, 2019; Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz, 2016). Accordingly, research must address not only the educational system as a whole but also its subfields in order to determine the specific significance of quality in each context.

This article focuses on two aspects of quality development in adult education: the experiences of those implementing quality development and the organisational problems encountered. The rationale for this approach stems from the researcher's professional background in coordinating organisational and quality development processes within a pedagogical organisation, where quality work proved to be far from 'smooth'. Reports from other practitioners suggest that this a not an isolated case but a widespread issue in educational organisations (e.g., Feldmann, 2006). Thus, practical experience provided the initial impetus for the study, which also addresses a gap in research, as organisational problems in quality development practice have received little scholarly attention to date (e.g., Altrichter, 2000 or Merchel, 2013).

This lack of attention does not imply that quality as a category, or related procedures such as quality assurance, development, and management, have gone unchallenged. On the contrary, they have been met with scepticism in scientific and policy debates. Early discussions in adult education, for example, questioned whether a concept rooted in industry and the economy could be applied meaningfully to education. Resistance was also based on the argument that responsibility for quality cannot rest with organisations alone, since learners – as co-producers – shape teaching and learning processes as well (Aust & Schmidt-Hertha, 2012; Töpper, 2012). Other argued that quality management was merely a new tool for public cost-cutting (e.g., Aust & Schmidt-Hertha, 2012; further examples for a critical reflexion on quality development, see e.g., Käpplinger, 2017 or Käpplinger et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the focus of this article is on the quality development process itself and the lived experience of practitioners. The guiding assumption is that measurable effects and consequences of quality development cannot be adequately understood without reconstructing this insight (Andersson & Muhrman, 2024). Therefore, this article positions itself within a balanced discourse on quality in adult education, encompassing both studies on the effectiveness of quality development (e.g., Hartz, 2011; Käpplinger, 2017) and research that seeks to illuminate its processes (e.g., Koscheck & Reuter, 2020; Reuter et al., 2020; Käpplinger, 2025).[2]

Research context: Quality discussion in adult education in Germany

Any attempt to reconstruct the discourse on quality in adult education should begin with the considerations summarized by Meisel: 'The discourse on quality assurance, quality management, and quality development has been conducted at different levels, taken up from different perspectives, and consequently accentuated differently in terms of content' (Meisel, 2008, p. 109-110, translation by author).

In the 1970s, the discussion was largely shaped by input-oriented approaches. In this view, the identification and evaluation of quality were primarily linked to infrastructural conditions, rendering the definition of quality criteria a central prerequisite for quality development (Balli et al., 2002; Weiß, 2006). A prominent manifestation of this orientation was the enactment of the Law for the Protection of Participants in Distance Learning (*Gesetz zum Schutz der Teilnehmer am Fernunterricht*) in 1977, which obliged providers of e-learning courses and distance learning to demonstrate compliance with legally defined quality standards (Stiftung Warentest, 2008).

Other authors, however, interpret this legal regulation and related initiatives as evidence that the early quality discourse was not confined to infrastructural aspects, but rather centred on the pedagogical relationship between instructors and learners. Within this interpretative horizon, quality development appears closely intertwined with professionalization (e.g., Gnahs, 1999; Schmidt-Hertha, 2025). As Meisel notes, 'Efforts to improve the quality of adult education' were 'not always associated with the concept of quality. Rather, quality-related efforts were linked to efforts toward professionalization' (2008, p. 110, translation by author). Against this backdrop, the subsequent assessment by Balli, Krekel, and Sauter appears consistent: from the 1980s onwards, the discourse increasingly shifted to outcome-oriented perspectives, with greater emphasis on exam results and the implementation of degree-oriented measures as indicators of high quality (Balli et al., 2002; Weiß, 2006).

In 2002, a report by the German Federal Court of Audit (*Bundesrechnungshof*) – an independent supreme federal authority responsible for auditing the federal government's budgetary and economic management in terms of compliance and efficiency – identified significant inefficiencies within the Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*). As a consequence, the allocation of public funds to adult education became contingent upon the external certification of both providers and programs (Gnahs, 2005). To operationalize this requirement, the Recognition and Admission Ordinance on Adult Education (*Anerkennungs- und Zulassungsverordnung Weiterbildung*, AZWV) was enacted in 2004 (Hartz, 2011; Töpper, 2012) and later replaced in 2012 by the Accreditation and Admission Ordinance on Employment Promotion (*Akkreditierungs- und Zulassungsverordnung Arbeitsförderung*, AZAV). Since then, providers offering programs subsidized by the Federal Employment Agency (e.g., training vouchers) have been required to obtain AZAV accreditation at both the organizational and programmatic levels. Importantly, while the AZAV stipulates 'requirements for QMS (quality management systems), it does not prescribe a specific model and thus cannot itself be regarded as a QMS, despite occasional misconceptions in practice' (Ambos et al., 2018, p. 11, translation by author).

This distinction has gained increasing relevance in recent debates, as adult education today operates within a landscape characterized by a multiplicity of QMS, each with distinct emphases, operational logics, and epistemological underpinnings (e.g., Hartz & Aust, 2024). Consequently, 'transparency is not in sight' (Stiftung Warentest, 2008, translation by author). While some models – such as EFQM[3] and the ISO model[4] – originate in the economic sector and emphasize efficiency and standardization, others have been specifically developed by providers and professional associations for the field of adult education. A prominent example of the latter is the Learner-Oriented Quality Certification in Adult Education and Training (*Lernerorientierte Qualitätstestierung in der Aus-, Fort- und Weiterbildung*, LQW) (Zech & Dehn, 2021).

In light of these developments, the discourse no longer revolves around whether quality development should be pursued in adult education, but rather how it should be conceived and implemented. Current practices confirm this shift: the wb-monitor study

of 2017 found that 80% of adult education organisations employ a QMS, with 8% even maintaining dual or multiple certifications (Ambos et al., 2018).

Definition of key concepts

In the context of this article, two categories are of central relevance: quality and organisational problems. The discussion begins with the concept of *quality*. Within the scholarly discourse, a considerable plurality of definitions can be identified, which underlines the necessity of systematic categorisation (Nittel & Kilinc, 2020). A frequently cited typology in this regard was proposed by Lee Harvey and Diana Green (1993), who distinguish five principal understandings of quality: (a) exceptional, (b) perfection or consistency, (c) fitness for purpose, (d) value for money, and (e) transformation.

The present article draws upon the lexical definition of quality, according to which the term refers to the composition or constitution of an entity (Pfeifer, 1986/2021). This understanding can be traced back to Aristotle, who conceptualised quality as composition and included it among the ten categories through which being can be described (Aristotle, 2006). From this lexical perspective, quality does not denote the value of something (Zech, 2015). In both everyday language and academic debate, however, the term is frequently employed in a normative sense: references to quality often imply not merely descriptive attributes but an attribution of positive value, that is, an implicit judgment of 'goodness' (Egetenmeyer & Käpplinger, 2011; Zech, 2015).

Quality is not static; rather it is subject to change. Such modification is quality development. Importantly, quality development does not necessarily imply improvement, since evaluative judgments are always contingent upon context and perspective. Within processes of quality development, individual features of an organisation are newly introduced or modified. These changes can always be objectively identified and, in many cases, measured, although they are not invariably labelled as quality development (Spahn et al., 2019). In the pedagogical domain quality development primarily concerns the infrastructure of educational services, while it does not directly affect individual or collective casework. It is therefore necessary to distinguish quality development from professionalization, which refers to the process of competence- and knowledge-based qualification of individuals (Nittel & Seltrecht, 2008).

In contrast, quality management, as employed in this article, denotes all procedures that continuously and systematically establish, assess and influence quality. Crucially, quality management necessarily entails an element of external evaluation, specifically in the form of organisational certification. Unlike quality development, quality management is used across organisations; rather, it presupposes external scrutiny, as purely self-evaluation cannot be considered quality management. In practice, quality management is typically operationalised through the implementation of quality management systems (QMS).

Turning to the second central concept, *organisational problems*, it is important to note that their definition remains an almost unaddressed gap within social sciences. Therefore, the study's foundation was the concept of problem. Etymologically, the term problema entered the German language in the sixteenth century via Latin (problēma) and Greek (próblēma), where it denoted an 'obstacle, difficulty, posed (scientific) task, or presented question' (Pfeifer, 1986/2021, p. 1045). In lexical terms, a problem thus refers to a 'difficult-to-answer question, [a] challenging, yet unresolved task, issue, or difficulty' (p. 1045).

The present article adopts Karl Raimund Popper's definition of a problem. According to Popper (1994/1996), problems are understood as *disappointments of*

expectations. This definition underscores the significance not only of successful problem-solving but also of failed attempts, as failures may generate new expectations. In contrast to a widespread tendency in the social sciences to focus primarily on problem-solution, Popper's approach highlights the epistemic value of failure within the problem-solving process. Furthermore, his definition emphasises that expectations are always situated: their validity is contingent upon social, temporal, and spatial contexts, which are therefore crucial for identifying and addressing problems.

Popper's definition is broad and not pre-structured into dimensions or subcategories. This openness was essential for the empirical analysis, since it was the objective of the original study to identify organisational problems inductively from the data – and, in accordance with the principles of Grounded Theory, to avoid imposing an external analytical grid. It allowed the empirical material to guide the identification and differentiation of organisational problems, whereas more pre-grained differentiated conceptualisations, such as Schreyögg's notion of generic problems (Schreyögg & Geiger, 2024), would have risked pre-structuring the data and constraining the emergence of categories. Popper's concept, therefore, provided the foundation for the identification and description of organisational problems.

Method

Regarding the methodological design of the original study – and thus also of this article – it is important to note that organisational problems were not the starting point of the expert interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 1991) with organisational managers. Instead, the focus was placed on quality development within the organisations. First, organisational problems arising in the implementation of quality development could only be meaningfully explored if the organisation-specific ways of dealing with quality were captured as a contextual background. Second, directly asking about organisational problems would likely have prompted informants to frame a wide range of issues under the umbrella of quality, including aspects that may, from a scientific perspective, rather belong to other domains such as staff professionalisation or organisational development. Similarly, issues not perceived as problems by the organisations themselves would have been difficult to identify.

For these reasons, the interviews began with open questions about the organisation's quality development (e.g., 'What can you tell me about the quality of your organisation?', 'How do you plan quality development?', 'Why did you choose to work on quality?'). They then moved to a broader discussion about quality (e.g., 'What do you know about quality development in other educational fields?', 'How do you see the future?') and to problems raised by the interviewees themselves (e.g., 'You mentioned difficulties during the certification process. Can you give me an example?', 'You said it can be difficult to involve everyone in this process. Could you elaborate?'). Towards the end, problems were addressed in a more in general way (e.g., 'What would you do differently if you could start over?').

For the data analysis, the original study drew on Fritz Schütze's (1977/1978, 1983) sociolinguistic method). Two key cases were selected for each educational segment. One case was subjected to a detailed analysis. This began with an examination of the interview situation, including the circumstances before and after the interview. The interview was then segmented and structurally described through paraphrasing, reconstruction of communication patterns, analysis of formal features (e.g., pauses, word choices, metaphors) and reflection on research-guiding questions (e.g., 'What functions do organisational problems in quality development/management have?'). The structural

description was followed by an analytical condensation focusing on questions such as: 'What are the key characteristics of the organisation, and its quality development/management?' or 'How do the experts define organisational problems?'

The second key case of each educational field was analysed in a more condensed way: instead of producing a full written formal text analysis and structural description, findings were documented in memos using codes. For the present article, the collected data, observations, and results were re-analysed. Whereas the original study covered three educational fields (kindergartens, primary schools, and adult education organisations), the focus here is narrowed to adult education in order to allow for a more in-depth examination of this specific field and to identify the organisational problems that particularly characterize it.

Findings

In the context of adult education organisations, the implementation of quality development entails two core organisational problems. First, the organisation's own infrastructure – its quality – may itself constitute problems. Second, quality development may not only function as a procedure for resolving organisational problems; rather, it may also generate problems.

Quality as an organisational problem: The mismatch of expected and required resources

Quality development is never without prerequisites. Organisations must mobilize social, temporal, and material resources in order to create and change quality. This finding, which recurs through the data, may appear self-evident but is crucial for the pedagogical practitioners and is consistently emphasized: quality development demands substantial resources and represents 'additional work'. Its benefits do not emerge automatically but must be actively generated. This may also explain why two experts, when asked why one might opt out of quality development, independently and almost reflexively responded: 'It saves a lot of work'. This remark indirectly highlights the extent of the resource demands imposed by quality development – it requires time, personnel, and consequently financial means to maintain and improve quality effectively.

In this sense, the quality of adult education organisations – understood as their infrastructure – can, following Popper's problem definition, be an organisational problem as a mismatch arises between the resources an organisation expects to be sufficient, and the actual resources required for quality development. In this context it should be considered that external procedures such as QMS inevitably generate temporal pressure. For instance, reports must be submitted by fixed deadlines, and evaluations are scheduled at predetermined intervals. Such externally imposed timeframes can, on the one hand, serve as a productive structuring device for organisations:

> Back then, we decided to acquire this LQW certificate, and I found it is a pretty interesting process because the structure for quality development is predefined, and it also made it easier for me to legitimize this ongoing process to the staff, so to speak. [...] without it, as a manager, you have to keep putting it on the agenda.[5]

On the other hand, these externally defined structures can become an organisational problem as they restrict scope for autonomous decision-making which may conflict with the expectation of organisational independence.

The following transcript demonstrates that the presented organisational problem – the mismatch between expected and required resources – also depends on the outcomes associated with quality development:

> In [quality] practice, everything always takes time. So, you're always running the rat race and there's this subjective feeling in internal communication that it actually slows everything down at first. So, when there are lot of seminars that need to be conducted, the quality measures have to be fit in somehow and again questionnaires and communication [...] Of course, if you zoom out, you will quickly notice that, in the long run, these measures actually save a lot of time because you improve and optimize processes. Long-term this also helps to prevent dissatisfaction within the team and with customers, and in the long-term, it's always a good investment. Nevertheless, at certain moments, so to speak, it feels like a burden, like additional work that is perhaps not so urgent right now.

This organisational leader illustrates that quality development requires considerable time resources ('everything always takes time'). For instance, it involves collecting feedback on events ('questionnaires') and organising 'internal communication'. In the short term, this entails a substantial investment of time, which may create an organisational problem if fewer resources are preferred and therefore were expected. At the same time, the leader explains why quality development is nevertheless pursued: although it demands more time than expected, it ultimately generates positive outcomes for the organisation that justify this additional effort. Thus, organisations may accept unmet expectations – and the associated problems – when these are linked to benefits in other domains. For this leader, quality development results in long-term improvements that positively affect both staff and learners (referred to here as 'customers'). He is therefore convinced that, while quality development requires more time resources than expected, it ultimately enables beneficial changes that outweigh the problem.

This example also highlights an important dynamic within adult education organisations: problems are sometimes identified and explicitly labelled as such, yet they remain unaddressed: organisational expectations may be disappointed without prompting any change. The reason for this can vary: an organisation may either be unwilling or unable to engage with the problem. In the case presented here, the organisation deliberately chooses not to deal with the problem because leaving it unresolved is perceived as more advantageous than addressing it. By refraining from tackling the problem, the organisation prioritizes its expectation of achieving valued positive outcomes over its expectation of limiting the time resources devoted to quality development. Consequently, the results of quality development are given precedence over the elimination of the organisational problem.

One of the key findings of this article, therefore, is that the organisation's quality itself can become an organisational problem, since quality development requires the allocation and sustained provision of resources, but the organisation may expect fewer resources to be adequate or necessary. As staffing and the availability of temporal, material, and spatial resources ultimately translate into financial considerations, QMS often intensify this problem, as they can be associated with considerable costs. For instance, the initial certification or recertification for LQW amounts to €5,450 for non-profit organisations with up to five employees and up to €10,700 for organisations with over 200 employees (con!flex Qualitätstestierung, 2026). Within the lifelong learning system, this issue is particularly relevant for adult education, as most of these organisations are not publicly funded but operate in the free market.

How do the organisations address the problem that, within quality development, a mismatch arises between expected and required resources? In general, two strategies can

be observed: organisations either adjust their expectations or modify their quality development to align with their expectations. In practice this plays out in different ways. Since the implementation of a QMS is relatively costly and bound to a fixed timeframe compared to other forms of quality work, some organisations decide against adopting a QMS altogether. One expert, for instance, reported that they had initially planned to introduce a QMS and pursue certification. However, the provider, together with its affiliated associations, ultimately abandoned this idea due to the high level of resources required: 'We actually attempted to introduce quality management and even considered certification a few years ago. However, the provider and its affiliated associations rather quickly stepped back from this plan, simply because of the effort required'. In other cases, organisations may use the structure of a QMS or selectively implement certain elements of it without committing to the costly certification process. Some organisations address the presented organisational problem by separating the formal documentation of practices from their actual implementation. In doing so, they record and present compliance with formal requirements, thereby signalling adherence to external expectations, while everyday practices often diverge substantially. As one interviewee noted:

> Just think about it – even in our organisation, how many rules we have written down somewhere in our rulebook. Go ask someone about a specific rule – right? What really matters is what we practice every day, what we know, and what we pass on.

Another manager observed:

> Well, there are many aspects where we feel that LQW has, in part, turned into a highly bureaucratic behemoth, which has considerable potential to be annoying, because then people end up sitting there, saying: 'This feels like homework' – writing something down, you know? And it doesn't make sense.

Such strategies allow organizations to reconcile the tension between external expectations and limited resources by maintaining the appearance of compliance on paper, while allocating far fewer resources in practice.

Other organisations address the organisational problem discussed here by ensuring that quality-related tasks are not carried out by the entire institution but are instead delegated to specific individuals, such as members of management, quality consultants, or groups that either volunteer for this responsibility or are formally appointed by the organisation. As will be shown later, this approach can give rise to further organisational problems, such as the insufficient involvement of teaching staff. Nevertheless, it appears to offer a short-term solution to the initial problem, as the overall resource demand is reduced and thereby brought into alignment with organisational expectations.

Quality development as an organisational problem: The failed expectation of problem-solving

Quality development does not necessarily lead to finding and addressing organisational problems. On the contrary, it often generates problems for the organisation – for instance, when complaints serve primarily as acts of denunciation or when quality development takes the form of a predominantly administrative exercise that scarcely permeates the whole organisation. In such cases, an organisational problem arises precisely because the expectation that quality development should contribute to problem-solving and organisational growth remains unfulfilled. The following example from general adult

education illustrates how the evaluation of events, as a common instrument of quality development, can itself create such an organisational problem:

> You have a yoga class with ten students. This course has taken place for eight years. Let's say that. It's not at all uncommon that the *same* group of participants and the *same* instructor have been together for eight years, that's sixteen semesters [...]. And now, at the end of each of these sixteen semesters, they give an evaluation form to learners [...]. And by the second time at the latest, they say: 'This is all nonsense! [...] We already […] filled it out last time. What's the point of this? We like it here, right? Everything's fine anyway'.

This transcript excerpt illustrates how the organisation's feedback culture – requiring learners to provide feedback at the end of every course – has itself become a problem: since many learners attend the same course repeatedly, they are reluctant to complete the questionnaire, and thus, the organisation's expectation of consistent participation is not met. In response, the organisation's meta-level quality development (the quality development of quality development) has led to a modification of this practice: feedback is now collected only for new courses or newly appointed educators. This example shows once again that either organisational expectations must be adapted, or existing quality practices must be revised in order to address an organisational problem. In this case, the expectation that *all* participants must complete evaluations was replaced by the expectation that ongoing courses need not systematically collect feedback.

Another organisational problem may arise when quality development is ascribed a kind of omnipresence or even omnipotence. Some practitioners operate under the assumption that all organisational aspects and processes can be defined, controlled, and improved through quality development – essentially presuming the possibility of a 'complete picture':

> Job descriptions have the advantage of providing individuals with a sense of security and presenting the illusion to the organisation that they have a complete picture. Which is always an illusion, right? Because there are thousands of tasks that simply can't be included. Job descriptions can sometimes lead to people insisting on the boundaries of their responsibilities. We actually experienced this, foolishly enough, the first time we implemented LQW. Of course, there were requirement profiles and job descriptions. Then one of them stands here and says: 'The printer cartridge? Replacing it isn't in my description.' And another says: 'Not in mine either.' Well, bad for the printer cartridge, I'd say, right?

This excerpt underscores that problems in quality development often arise when organisational expectations about its scope and limitations are not clearly communicated. Quality development should be thoroughly planned, carefully implemented, evaluated, and precisely documented. Equally essential, however, is establishing clarity within the organisation about what quality development entails and what it can realistically achieve – what can be expected. To this end, it is necessary to distinguish it from other processes – such as organisational development – and to specify, for instance, which aspects pertain to professionalism and individual professionalization of educators and thus fall within their own sphere of responsibility.

Furthermore, quality development can itself become an organisational problem when it is driven primarily by the administration or management, with limited involvement of educators or other members of the organisation. While this may serve as a strategy to balance the gap between available and required resources, it may conflict with the organisational expectation that meaningful development requires the active participation of a broad range of stakeholders. The following example illustrates such a tension: despite

the stated expectation of engaging the entire organisation, only a small group of members is actually involved in quality development.

> What impacts the management and other members is really just LQW. [...] Um, [the quality seal from] Hamburg Association for Continuing Education (*Weiterbildung Hamburg*) doesn't interest anyone. I go there as a member, and when they come, they visit me [...] and we sit here together a few hours, and then that's it. Nobody [...] is involved. And our quality consultant basically handles AZAV alone as well. So, we don't need the entire organisation for that.

The expert in this excerpt stresses that individuals outside of management are only involved in activities related to LQW: while he himself manages the quality seal from Hamburg Association for Continuing Education, the organisation's quality consultant is responsible for AZAV certification. From his perspective, this division results from a lack of interest of staff and from the limited relevance of their involvement. However, this justification appears unconvincing, as the expert (like many other interviewees) repeatedly emphasizes, both explicitly and implicitly, that effective quality development requires the active engagement of the entire organisation: 'Because all research from organisational science shows that if you just *write* things down in quality manuals or regulation manuals, you can forget about it unless it's lived and passed on by competent and active people in the organisation.'

By contrast, the following expert points out that limited staff participation in quality practices can be a deliberate strategy to protect employees from being overburdened:

> And then I thought (laughing until *), with a […] nice glass of wine, I can also* describe under Controlling why this was a success, and my colleagues don't even (laughing until *) need to know about it. They would just lose it anyway, right?*

The organisation's manager points to an excessive bureaucratization of the QMS in use, from which she appears to want to shield her staff by taking on the requirements herself. The problem with this approach is, however, that the staff does not actively decide to withdraw from participation; rather, the leadership makes this decision on their behalf. Consequently, the teaching staff in this organisation is, to some extent, deprived of opportunities to influence. This raises the question of whether the leadership's true intention is indeed to protect employees from being overburdened and to ensure efficient use of their time, or whether the actual motive may be to restrict their input.

Conclusion

Empirical research on organisational problems in implementing quality development within adult education organisations remains underrepresented. While other pedagogical fields have at least marginally addressed conflicts or certain incompatibilities inherent in quality practice (e.g., Altrichter, 2000 or Merchel, 2013), such discourse is virtually absent in the German context of adult education, despite its substantial practical significance and the explicit acknowledgment of quality-related tensions in international scholarly debates and empirical investigations (e.g., Mufic & Fejes, 2020; Mufic, 2022).

This article has therefore focused on the topic, drawing on the experiences of the personnel involved. The findings presented not only demonstrate the relevance of such research but also illustrate how practice itself responds to emerging problems, thereby offering guidance for other organisations. Consequently, it appears promising for quality research to further pursue this issue. In particular, future studies could investigate

organisational problem-solving in greater depth through case study approaches or by systematically capturing the perspectives of staff members.

Against this background, it is relevant to reflect on the extent to which the presented findings are generalizable. The original study revealed that early childhood organisations and primary schools face similar organisational problems in quality development as adult education institutions. In other words, regarding organisational problems in quality development, a kindergarten and an adult education organisation may be more similar than two primary schools are to one another. This indicates that the specific educational services offered, the legal frameworks under which organisations operate, or even the age of learners are less decisive. More significant are the organisational infrastructure – the quality of each organisation. This factor largely determines which organisational problems may or may not emerge in the context of quality development. This aspect is particularly relevant given the high diversity of adult education in Germany (for instance, due to legal regulations often applying only to specific areas; Nuissl, 2008; Witt, n.d.), which may characterise adult education across many European countries (e.g., UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2019, 2022). Therefore, in other countries, organisational problems in adult education quality development also likely depend primarily on the characteristics, current state, and developmental goals of individual organisations.

What further conclusions can be drawn? This article aims to demonstrate that research on quality requires the integration of multiple approaches: evaluation research and analysis of the corresponding processes and the perspectives of those involved. Without this, understanding may remain limited to identifying which models and procedures yield which outcomes, providing little insight into the structuring and dynamics of the underlying processes.

The research approach presented here can also mitigate the frequently criticized lack of transparency regarding quality in adult education organisations – a concern repeatedly raised in quality discourse – and may thus more effectively address one of the foundational motives behind QMS: consumer protection (Klusemann et al., 2022). Furthermore, it provides deeper insights into the often ambivalent engagement with quality in adult education. Although most organisations now implement quality development, ongoing critique and critical reflection (e.g., Käpplinger, 2017) persist, largely because quality improvements remain entangled with organisational problems. The presented research can enlighten these issues in developing quality.

Additionally, in the context of organisational problems, it became evident that practice not only substantiates the connection between problems and quality but also reveals potential strategies for addressing them. Quality development in adult education organizations is inherently resource-intensive, involving substantial demands on time, personnel, and material resources. Organizations respond to mismatches between expected and actual resource needs through adjusting expectations or quality practice (including a variety of strategies such as selectively implementing elements of a QMS, separating the formal documentation of practices from their actual implementation, or delegating responsibility to designated individuals). While these approaches can reduce immediate resource pressures and align practice with organizational expectations, they may also generate new organisational problems, such as insufficient staff involvement.

Furthermore, the analysis of the presented cases demonstrates that quality development in adult education organisations is characterised by ambivalence. While it is often introduced with the expectation of supporting problem-solving, organisational learning, and overall development, in practice it frequently generates new problems. Interestingly, when quality development itself becomes an organisational problem, the quality development of quality development frequently emerges as the most viable

solution. This self-referential nature of quality development reflects what Niklas Luhmann (1970) describes as a ‘reflexive mechanism’, a phenomenon also observed in other quality research contexts (Nittel & Kilinc, 2019, 2020).

In conclusion, quality development cannot be regarded as a neutral or purely technical instrument. Rather, it is deeply embedded in organisational structures, resource logics, and power relations. For this reason and in order to avoid the emergence of organisational problems, successful quality development requires not only careful planning, implementation, evaluation, and documentation but also an explicit clarification of and communication about expectations regarding its scope and limitations.

Notes

1 The empirical basis of this article is a study (Kilinc, 2025) that employed expert interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 1991, 2011) with the heads of kindergartens, primary schools, and adult education organisations. Situated within the tradition of qualitative and reconstructive social research, the project followed the methodological principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and drew on the approach of Comparative Research on Pedagogical Professional Groups and Organisations (e.g., Nittel et al., 2012; Nittel & Tippelt, 2019). Organisational leaders were selected owing to their mediating role between the theoretical perspectives and the practical implementation of quality, as well as their central position among various stakeholders (e.g., QMS representatives and organisational staff). The interview material was analysed using Fritz Schütze’s sociolinguistic method (1977/1978, 1983), which allowed for integrated analysis of formal-linguistic and content-related dimensions. The final sample consisted of 20 interviews.

2 In contrast to the field explored in this study, other areas within the lifelong learning system – most notably early childhood and school education – are characterised by a well-established tradition of impact-oriented research. This is reflected in large-scale international assessments (e.g., PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS) and major longitudinal projects such as the European Child Care and Education Study (European Child Care and Education Study Group, 1999) and the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education Project (Sylva et al., 2004; Taggart et al., 2015).

3 In 1988, fourteen companies, with the support of the European Commission, established the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) (Amelung et al., 2018; Stiftung Warentest, 2008). The EFQM Excellence Model (European Foundation for Quality Management, 2026) places particular emphasis on self-evaluation and self-reflection (Ambos et al., 2018). Within this framework, organisations assess their performance and development across nine criteria: leadership, people, policy and strategy, partnerships and resources, processes, as well as people results, customer results, and society results, along with key performance results (Stiftung Warentest, 2008).

4 The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) was founded in 1946 with the objective of developing internationally comparable standards (International Organization for Standardization, n.d.). The ISO model applies to the entire production process of an organisation, with the overarching goal of systematically preventing errors and fostering continuous improvement. It defines five key elements of quality management: ‘leadership, resource management, production, measurement, analyse and development, as well as the continual improvement of the system’ (Stiftung Warentest, 2008, p. 3, translation by author). As learner satisfaction constitutes the core evaluation criterion within the ISO model (Stiftung Warentest, 2008), it is assessed regularly to inform and promote ongoing development.

5 The transcript excerpts included in this article have been lightly edited for readability and linguistic consistency, with non-verbal vocalisations removed.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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