

Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy,
Faculty of Philosophy,
University of Belgrade
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CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH TO IMPROVEMENT OF ADULT EDUCATION QUALITY

Aleksandra Pejatović, Regina Egetenmeyer, Maria Slowey (Eds.)

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

The origins of this collection of papers *The Contribution of Research to the Improvement of Adult Education Quality* lie in many years of cooperation across a large number of associations, universities, faculties, scientific-research centres and other organizations which, in various ways, work in the field of adult education and learning. The cooperation has been considerably strengthened under the auspices of the EU project *European Studies and Research in Adult Learning and Education – ESRALÉ*.

Most of papers in this collection are based on presentations made at an international conference ‘Empirical Research in Adult Learning and Education – Conceptual and Methodological Problems’, hosted by the University of Belgrade, 15 September, 2015, in the context of an ESRALÉ Summer Academy. Other papers were received in response to an invitation to a broader circle of associates working on relevant topics. In total, the collection contains 23 papers, by 38 authors- short biographies of whom are included at the end of the publication.

The overall aim of the papers in this volume is to discuss the role of research in adult education, with a view to expanding the evidence base for the improvement of quality in the field of adult education and learning. policy and practice. Some of the major themes to emerge include: the theoretical-methodological basis of adult learning and education; adult education policies; adult illiteracy; elementary education of adults; vocational adult education; higher education; human resource development; career guidance; on line learning and research; prison education; and the education of vulnerable populations.

Challenges identified include: conceptual and methodological problems in studying adult learning and education; the concept of lifelong learning; aging process and learning; working memory and learning in adulthood; educational needs of adults; adult educational programs; career development; (adult) education and employability; learning in a community; learning cities; organizational learning; co-operative learning; professionalization in adult education; teachers’ role in adult education; the role of schools in adult education; educational opportunities for vulnerable populations...

Some of the theoretical issues and empirical research projects are located with a national environment, while others adopt a comparative perspective.

Overall, it is evident that scientific research has much to contribute to the improvement in policy and practice of adult education and adult learning. The papers in this collection clearly demonstrate the readiness of researchers

LIFELINE METHOD IN RESEARCH OF ADULT LEARNING AND CAREER: TOWARDS THE QUALITY

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Abstract

The paper discusses results of the research conducted with double aim. First aim was to examine the relation between education and learning and career of adults, through research of key periods in line of career, line of education and learning, and research of overlaps and gaps between these lines. All these periods are indicators of certain quality of adult education and learning. Second goal was examination of the quality of the lifeline method which is used in this empirical research, a method known for its application in various career guidance and counseling interventions but with insufficient use in scientific research. The research results show that the line of career is saturated with career transition periods, while the line of education and learning is dominated by formal education. Education is often perceived as important for entry into the profession, but is not perceived as support in critical points in career.

Key words: adult education, adult learning, career development, lifeline method, quality.

Introduction

At the very beginning, it seems important that we single out a few constituents, integral elements that have significantly influenced the conception of

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our research. These constituents that have been an integral part in building a conceptual, theoretical and methodological framework of this study are: career, lifeline method and education and learning.

The first of these constituents is certainly a career. The concept of career changes significantly in the last few decades (Arnold, 2005; Amundson, 2010; Athanasou & Esbroeck, 2008). For summing up what careers are nowadays, we'll use certain characteristics that were given by the authors Mihajlović and Popović, who believe that we can make a distinction between the traditional concept of career and the concept of modern career that has "... an expanded scope. On the one hand, it implies a whole set of different situations related to employment. Thus, among other things, these include unemployment and volunteering. On the other hand, careers have extended time duration. They are already starting with selecting schools, and are followed by the last transfer, a transfer from the world of work to retirement" (Mihajlović, Popović, 2012: 29). In that sense, careers now have more elements which even go beyond employment and work, so we can say that careers more and more present individualized paths.

In the relevant scientific literature which is focused on the study of careers and career development of adults, it can be noticed that the career of adults became more difficult to understand as a series of clearly (usually by age) separated stages that are common to most people. Of course, the contribution of developmental theories that explain career in this way is immeasurable and it is hardly overcome. They are important because at least they offer explanations and classifications for previously "unapproachable" periods through which ones passes on his or hers career path. Careers can nowadays often be seen as a series of individual trajectories that go into the unknown and non-anticipated directions. These directions are marked by ups and downs. It is unlikely that these trajectories follow the pattern that implies "completion of education, first employment, advancement within a single business or working within a single organization by the known rules and finally retirement. This in turn means that individuals must acquire the knowledge, skills, that is competencies that will be required in order to manage their own careers; there is a shift from "giving final solutions' towards activities which aim to support the individual to independently builds his own career" (Mihajlović, 2014: 126).

In practice of career guidance and counseling, there are a large number of interventions that seek to help individuals. We will not go into the taxonomy of career intervention, nor to outline a variety of methods and instruments that are used in these interventions, but, for the purposes of this study, we singled out one of them, known as a lifeline method. Lifeline method makes the second important constituent of our research. As a method that comes from the practice of career guidance and counseling, we tried to incorporate it into scientific research context. A more detailed consideration of the lifeline method (as a research method) can be found in a separate section of this paper.

The third important constituent of our work is education and learning. It seems to us that, as never before, education and learning and career as well as career guidance and counseling are so connected. Increasing in the complexity of these connections can be illustrated by these words: "In contrast to the time when studying mostly presented the flat line leading to the next key point – employment, students today are faced with much greater possibilities, but also with the challenges related to planning and developing career "(Pejatović, Mihajlović, Kecap, 2014: 38). Although the authors speak about specific group – students, it seems to us that this is not their "differentia specifica", but can be applied to different target groups. There are various ways in which we can approach to this relationship – education and learning can be seen as part of one's career, and also, education can be seen as part of certain activities of career guidance and counseling.

Through our research we attempted to identify the lines of education and learning and the lines of career (or more precisely – education and learning as a part of one's career) by applying the method that is commonly used in the activities of career guidance and counseling. In this article we are oriented towards to: 1) the identification of some (new) qualities of adult education, observed both as the characteristics of adult education, and also as the extent in which these characteristics are present in adult education (Pejatović, 2005: 6) viewed as part of one's career, and towards to 2) consideration of the quality of the lifeline method, in particular its strengths and weaknesses when used in scientific research.

Methodological framework of research

Research goal and tasks

Our research goal is twofold: on the one hand, it is to examine the relationship between education and learning and career development of adults, and on the other hand, it is testing the lifeline method applied to a research of adult education and learning and career development. The first part of our research goal is divided into four research tasks and they are:

1. To identify key periods in the career development of individuals (line of career);
2. To identify key periods in the learning and education of individuals (line of learning and education);
3. To identify key periods in which there is an overlap between the line of career and line of learning and education;
4. To identify key periods in which there is a gap between the line of career and line of learning and education.

Designing the instrument – initial idea and modifications

Our idea for the use of the lifeline method came from the realization of other studies which have investigated certain aspects of careers, education and learning and the relationship between career development and adult education and learning (Career Management – institutional and organizational framework, The transition from higher education to the world of work, Professional development of teachers as an aspect of the professionalization of secondary vocational education etc.), in which we participated either as authors of the research or as contributors to the realization of certain phases of research. When analyzing the results and the instruments used in previous studies, we found to despite the implementation of complex questionnaires which contained a large number of items, there are a number of questions that have no answer. Then, we asked: What could we obtain as a result, if we could say the respondents to draw us their career path as they see it?

Analyzing relevant literature, we came across the study that in methodological point of view was similar to our ideas. This is a research of career development that uses the lifeline method and lifeline technique within, carried out in Japan and implemented by Shimomura (2011). Shimomura states that “lifeline method is one of the qualitative assessment techniques that are currently becoming the focus of attention in careers guidance research” (2011: 90). Lifeline method is often used in the practice of career guidance and counseling, because it represents a good initial resource and provides a good insight into the career for both sides involved in process: the advisor and the client. However, its use in scientific terms has not yet been sufficiently explored. We believe that the area of career development and counseling for now is leading a battle in three, unfortunately, not so close fields: theory, research and practice. In that sense, it seems to us as an excellent idea that certain products of practice could be transferred in the scientific field, and maybe, the lifeline is a step closer towards these reconciliations.

How does it look like, both the lifeline technique and application of lifeline technique in scientific research? Key elements of the lifeline technique which had been used in the study conducted in Japan were years (ages of the respondents) and the value that they attributed to their career (plus and minus). Using the plus on the upper part of the graph and minus on the lower part, the respondents were given space to mark a certain point of career. These points are defined as the ups and downs, as they perceive them (Figure 1).

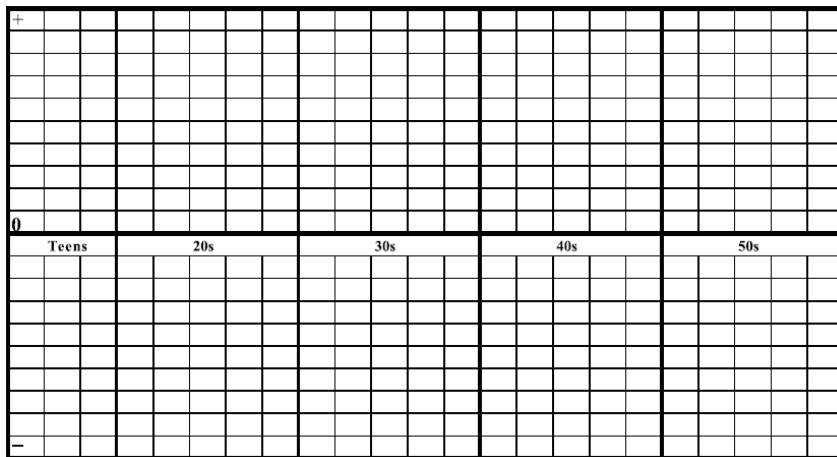


Figure 1. Explanation of Lifeline Method
Used in Survey in Japan (Shimomura, 2011: 90)

We found that this method of constructing the chart is very good because it allows two things important for enquire: on the one hand, enables researchers to obtain comparative reviews of their subject’s answers, and on the other hand, gives to the respondents generally accepted framework within which to place their career paths.

Nevertheless, we have opted for a slightly different application the lifeline techniques. The reason for the different design lies in the fact that during the pilot phase of this study (N = 15), we have received a negative reaction to the instrument and the reason is probably to cultural differences between Japan and Serbia. The greatest resistance from respondents appeared about the “minus” phase because almost none of the subjects in the pilot study want to draw a curve in the lower part of the graph (lines are not descended to minus phase).

Finally, the instrument that was designed for the purpose of this research has three parts. The first part is the graphic part (Figure 2). On the graph provided, which horizontal line was indicating the year or, to be more precisely, periods of life, and vertical line was indicating career development, respondents were asked to draw a line of their career and a line of learning and education. In addition, it was necessary that respondents mark key points or periods in their career development, but also to explain what those points are. Also, respondents had a task that, next to the each key point, they add a “speech balloon” and to explain what these points represented. The second part of the instrument was supposed to give us some more information from respondents about their drawings, but also about the instrument itself. The first question was about asking respondents to reflect on their drawings (lines of career and lines of education and learning) and to explain the relationship between these lines (to explain how they see periods where these lines intersect, overlap or diverge). The sec-

ond question was about asking respondents to explain how they felt in this way of testing (“drawing” their responses instead of writing) and how they saw the questionnaire. The third part of the questionnaire included a set of questions about biosocial characteristics of respondents.

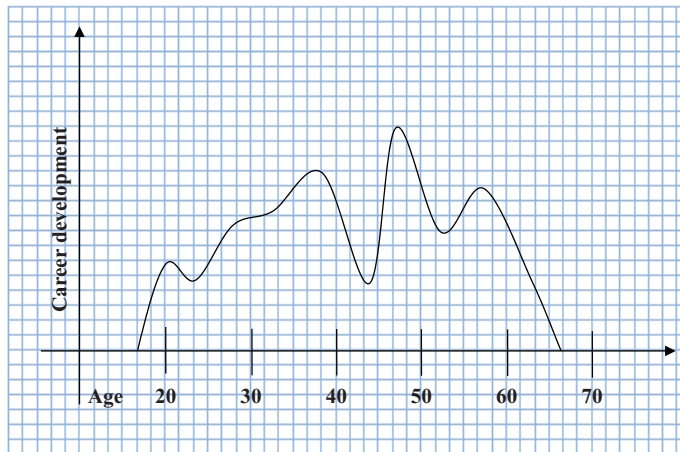


Figure 2. Application of Lifeline Method in Serbia – Design of the Instrument

Conducting research and research sample

The research was conducted in two phases. The pilot study, which had a total of 15 respondents ($N = 15$), was conducted in July 2015. It was very important for the researchers because it pointed out some significant elements which should be modified in the instrument (these changes are described in the section related to the instrument design). After the pilot phase, we started with the realization of the main research. The survey was carried out from July to September 2015. During that period we manage to collect 40 questionnaires.

A sample of this study consisted of 40 respondents ($N = 40$) from the territory of Belgrade, Serbia. Of these, women ($N = 21$) and men ($N = 19$) are almost equally distributed in the sample.

Research Results

The research results will be presented according to the four main research tasks.

Key periods in the career development

Our first research task was aimed at identifying key periods within the career development of our respondents. When talking about the key periods in

their career, respondents singled out first employment (27). First employment is most frequently occurred among almost all subjects, as (just) the first employment, the first employment with a permanent contract, or the first employment within their profession. The first employment is often the first item that appears at the beginning of their careers, that is, on the graph – as the beginning of the line of career. Changing job was also frequently noted by our respondents as one of the key points in their career (18). By changing the employment, respondents often mentioned change of the organization, job rotation and change of their occupation or profession. It is interesting that these changes often have a positive sign on the graph (growth curve), so it is very possible that these changes were initiated by our respondents.

Promotion on the job is often occurred as another focal point within the career of our subjects (15). Logically, in our graph it is always presented as growth curve. Losing of employment (firing or quit from a job) occurred in 18 cases. Regarded the line of career of our subjects, job loss was usually the lowest point within career of our respondents, but it is often seen as the point from which the line shows the rapid growth – which usually presents the search for a new employment or, in some cases, indicates that respondents, after quitting a job or being fired, decided to start their own business.

Regarding key points or periods in their career, respondents also mentioned the following: reducing wages, worsening of conditions at work, maternity (absence from a job), sickness (long absence), military service, employment in a worse position (regression), pension, relocation, launching independent business and working abroad. When we look at these elements, we can see that there is a domination of those elements that are in close connection with the employment. To a lower extent, elements appear to be distant from a professional domain (maternity, military service). Finally, we can see that their answers are closer to the traditional understanding of career. Also, the answers of our respondents are always associated with some objective change, while only two subjective reflections, the feeling of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction, are listed only in a few cases.

Generally speaking, looking at the graphs and explanations provided, three models of career paths can be observed:

- 1) The first model is a model with many ups and downs of varying intensity (alternation between periods of changes in employment, firing, stabilization within one employment);
- 2) The second model is a model of straight line (the first employment, working at one workplace where respondents do not indicate a particular promotion, retirement);
- 3) The third model is a model of constant growth line (first employment, promotion, moving to higher positions and retirement).

Key periods in the learning and education

Our second research task was related to the identification of the key periods in education and learning. Our respondents frequently mentioned the following key periods in their “line” of education and learning: completion of secondary school (initial education), completion of graduate studies (“faculty diploma”), magister degree, doctorate, specialization, “a bunch of seminars”, courses, foreign languages, computers, self-directed learning of computer skills, acquisition of different licenses needed for working in the field etc.

Results indicate that respondents from the key periods in the education and learning primarily referred to those in the field of formal education. In this sense, it is evident that they are leading elements that serve more for preparing ones for a future career, than elements that are happening in parallel with career, or as a part of career. Also, what is interesting is that often as a focal point, a crucial period in education and learning, states the completion of the initial (secondary or tertiary) education. More specifically, the respondents largely referred to diplomas, certificates and licenses as some of key points, than they referred to (or describe) the process of learning and education itself, that is, some of that process which left a mark on one’s career.

Almost nowhere starting a new course, or a decision to enroll in a course, has not been seen as a key point or turning point in the course of one’s education. Only in two cases the “decision to seriously deal with magister or doctoral studies” is seen as one of the key points. Also, within a description of the lines, we have not met with describing the process of learning and education and/or any changes that it causes. Why is this so? Answers to this question can be found at two places: in the structure and possible unintended suggestiveness of the instrument itself, constructed for the purpose of this study; and in something that we as researchers, theorists and practitioners in the field of adult education, should pay more attention to – in the reasons of participation in education, which raises more questions about the quality of adult education.

When we consider education just by looking at the lines on the graph provided, and when we analyze relationship between the lines of education and the age of our respondents, it reveals two regularities. Education occurs either as a straight line throughout the whole life, or as a straight line until a certain moment in life. In some cases, the line of education rises, pointing out that there has been a positive career development, but usually it rises only up to the age of 30. When we analyze previous information together with the data about character of that education, most often we see that it is, again, a formal education. In some cases, the line of education goes beyond the age of 40, but this is case for respondents who gained higher levels of education, magister degree and doctorate.

Based on the lines of education provided by the subjects of the research, we can notice two models:

- 1) Within the first model the line of education appears as a straight line through the whole life, from a key point which states for the completion of the initial (secondary or tertiary) education;
- 2) Within the second model the line of education appears as a curve which goes up, but, in most cases, it goes up to the age of 30 or 40 and it is connected with the formal education (these “ups” are frequently associated with higher levels of education).

Of course, the line of education is not “unconstrained” line because it is, by the questionnaire itself, related to career and to observing education in relation to career.

Key periods – overlap between the line of career and line of learning and education

Our third research task is related to the identification of periods when there is an overlap between the lines of education and learning and career lines. Periods with overlap should be viewed as those periods when education and learning played a supportive role in career development of the individual. These periods, given by respondents, are as follows:

- 1) Employment in the profession,
- 2) Changing employment which requires new knowledge,
- 3) Return to work after an absence – mastering new tasks,
- 4) Prequalification,
- 5) Specialization at the workplace,
- 6) Training for additional job and promotion.

From the analysis of graphs and the respondents’ answers it is evident that education and learning more frequently appear as important in the beginning of a career in the field, as well as in certain turbulent times related to the employment or career. All of these changes regarding ones career are often called transitions. Discussing the quality, Pekeč noted that “transition from (higher) education to employment could be seen as an indicator of quality in (higher) education”, where success in transition implies higher quality in education (2014: 191). Education and learning are here to answer a change induced in the world of work, or they represent useful tool that helps the individual to cope with the changes. Unfortunately, according to results of our study, education and learning to a small extent emerge as factor that supports continuous growth and progress of individuals’ career. Improving in quality of initial and further (lifelong) education could “secure or at least make easier” for young adults to enter first employment, but also to help with all the other steps on the path of career of an adult (Pekeč, 2014: 198).

In addition, education is seen as important for entering the profession. This data is consistent with the information that, although in the instrument we used the phrase adult education *and* learning, respondents refer mainly to education – especially in formal education. In general overview, the lines of education are poorer than the lines of their career. Besides formal education, we failed in an attempt to record all learning activities undertaken by adults during their career. It can be argued that learning activities related to career are not present, because in conversation with respondents we've got the information that they often learn while working in order to keep to date with changes in the world of work. Awareness of these activities is what's missing. In our opinion respondents do not recognize the activities associated with learning on the job and within a job. Thus, we dare to say that our participants, during the career development, undertaken learning activities related to work to a greater frequency than the results of our overview showed.

*Key periods – gap between the line of career
and line of learning and education*

The results show that there are several key period in which the respondents identify the gap between the lines of education and learning and career lines. The first is the period when one overcomes all that was new related to job. It is commonly followed by period of stagnation in terms of education and learning. Respondents were referring to this period as not intellectually stimulating or challenging in any way, which suggested that, for learning to happen, it is usually needed something from the world of work that will directly provoke it, for example a new task or a job assignment, because just “being bored”, still or secure in one place will not create the need to engage in an educational activity. This brings about the important question, and that is what education can do to overcome this gap and to raise awareness of its existence?

Another important period that respondents mentioned is the period of unemployment. This period is viewed as a place where education can and should be located as a support to career development of adults. However, from respondents' answers, it is observed as a situation where there is a gap between education and their career development. First reason for this can be found in how respondents perceive education as a support to career development, as well as how they perceive career itself. It is possible that they see the function of education in career development just as direct support to mastering tasks and demands in specific workplace. It narrows conception of education as a support to career development and narrows understanding of career; but it also seems logical that, during the period when they are unemployed, education has nothing (no career) to support. On the other hand, second reason for such results could be lying in the fact that adults believe that education and learning can be found as sup-

port in finding a new job and get involved in educational programs that could help them, but that they evaluate its effects – in the sense that education does not help them to find a new employment and therefore they perceive a gap between education and career. The third reason opens a possibility that, in period of unemployment, our respondents attended different educational programs, but which are not related to career.

Return to work after an absence is another period that our respondents suggested as a period of the gap between education and learning and career. Nevertheless, they perceive that they are now lacking specific knowledge and skills they need in order to perform tasks on the job. It is interesting that returning to work after a long absence was identified, from our subject's answers, as the period when education is supporting the career development of adults, but also as a situation when educational support is missing.

Considering other results, it is surprising that the respondents perceive gap between education and learning in those periods in career when they are employed outside their profession or when they are starting their own business. We think that the reason for this perception of the relationship between education and learning and career of adults comes from believing that main purpose of education is in preparation for the profession or occupation. However, the entry into a profession that differs from ours, seeks acquisition of new knowledge and skills, regardless of what kind of job it is.

All these findings indicate that the education as a support to the career development of adults lacks in some important points of one's career. Future research should reveal why such results were obtained, and in which ways education can act to reduce this gap.

Concluding remarks

At the beginning of this article, we underlined that we had two aims; on one side, it was to search for a new qualities in adult education related to career development and, on the other side, it was to explore and reflect the quality of the lifeline method when used in scientific researches. Starting from the first, and by reviewing at the results of our research, we came across a couple of answers as well as questions that are important for the further consideration of the quality of adult education.

Looking at the line of adult education and learning, we realized that in respondents' answers dominates formal education and main purpose of it is in obtaining diplomas and certificates. The process of education is almost never described as important for their career. Respondents rarely refer to specific knowledge and skills that were significant. Only in a few cases subjects reported evidence or statement of self-directed learning. In this regard, we believe that

further research should focus more about the learning process. Also, results indicated that decline of the line of education occurs around age 30 or 40. Education as a support to career usually occurs in periods around the first employment, but appears to be lack at critical periods of career (unemployment, long absence, changing in employment). This finding is considered perhaps the most important finding of our study. According to previous, the key questions for future considerations of quality in adult education are: What are possible educational activities intended to support adults in critical points of their career? In what extent can adults have access to these activities? And which categories of adults have the access? Whether and how to assess these activities and evaluate effects?

The second aim of this paper was consideration of the quality of the lifeline method when used in scientific studies in the field of adult education and learning and career development. Quality of the lifeline method will be presented through strengths and weaknesses of its application. Strengths of using lifeline method are as follows: 1) *Comparable and overall picture* – it reveals on how one sees the important periods in their life related to education, how they value certain elements related to education, and also provides access to comparable picture of education and career; 2) *It cannot be done superficially* – lifeline truly engage respondents and leaves them no space to answer a questionnaire without thinking about it; 3) *Provides new insights to the respondents* – as they reported, with overlooking at their graphs, they now they are thinking differently about their careers and education. Particularly interesting are statements of feeling sorry about earlier decisions regarding education or because they are no longer engaged in educational process; 4) *Encourages reflection and discussion* – among the respondents, but also with researchers; 5) *Provides freedom* – and, quite unpretentious, this instrument presents sort of a journey through the professional domain of life; 6) *Allows for data to be read repeatedly* – respecting on somewhat limited methodological framework of research, data become very inspiring bearing ways in which researchers can “follow” the lines.

Despite numerous values, from the experience in our research, there are some weaknesses of lifeline method which are affecting its quality. These weaknesses are as follows: 1) *May cause fear among respondents* – which proved to be a major problem and was first spotted in the pilot research. Given the fact that the instrument in its first form was different by appearance (consisted of boxes and “plus” and “minus” sections on graph), respondents said that they had problems with completing a task, that it seemed “like a math problem”, and had impression that they must fill in each cell or box on the graph provided; 2) *Requires to set a common frame of reference* – and because it is not an easy task for respondents, requires the presence of researcher; 3) *Requires time to be done well* – for lifeline doesn't contain items that one can just check, scratched off or fill out; 4) *Provides freedom* – having no pre-set categories is both an advantage and a disadvantage; 5) *Can simplify data* – simplifying data is not in itself the lack of

this instrument, but as such may become when interpreting the data. In this regard, an important question is how researchers interpret and measure the value of ups and downs of the lines?

Reflecting on all the above, we have many reasons to argue that lifeline method has its imperfections, but is also a method rich in its potential and can and should be used to improve the quality of researches of adult learning and education, as well as researches of career development of adults. Also, regarding findings of this study, there is space for improving in quality of education, which could be to a greater extent recognized among the adults as a factor that supports their career and their personal growth.

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