Coping with Change?

How Swiss adult education providers adapt to current challenges at the organisational level

Gollob, Sofie, Swiss Federation for Adult Learning

Poopalapillai, Saambavi, Swiss Federation for Adult Learning

. . .

Abstract

As we will show in the following paper, the disruptive changes in environmental conditions have exerted strong pressure on adult education organisations to adapt to the new circumstances. Firstly, we outline the current economic situation, specifically developments at the level of supply and demand and staffing. Moreover, we examine which factors lead to increased pressure for change in adult education providers. Finally, we look at the scope and goal of change of organisational structures and corporate strategies. We specifically focus on how Swiss adult education providers are adapting their organisational structures, offer and programme planning, and corporate strategies, to cope with current challenges.

1.   Introduction

The last two years have seen major upheavals in the wake of the Corona pandemic and its social and economic impact. Partly because of the prevention of physical interaction, adult education was deeply affected. However, research to this point has primarily focused on the effects on teaching-learning interactions.[1] There is still almost no information about the effects on the organisational level. By presenting data on organisational change in Swiss adult education, we would like to contribute to closing this research gap. The data was collected with a survey conducted by the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning in spring 2022.

As we will show in the following paper, the disruptive changes in environmental conditions have exerted strong pressure on adult education organisations to adapt to the new circumstances. Firstly, we outline the current economic situation, specifically developments at the level of supply and demand and staffing. Moreover, we examine which factors lead to increased pressure for change in adult education providers. Finally, we look at the scope and goal of change of organisational structures and corporate strategies. We specifically focus on how Swiss adult education providers are adapting their organisational structures, offer and programme planning, and corporate strategies, to cope with current challenges. To this purpose, we draw on organisational theories of adult education research.

A particularity to Switzerland is its multilingualism. A big share of the adult education market works in the German speaking part. Slightly less are active in the French speaking part of Switzerland or in different regions simultaneously. Furthermore, categorising the education providers based on their institutional volume , most providers are small or medium sized institution. Only a share of less than 10% are considered large enterprises. Finally, the Swiss adult education market has a distinct character in the form of financing. Most adult education providers are privately owned, with roughly one in ten which are state-owned institutions.

2.   Methodology

The Swiss Federation for Adult Learning conducts an annual online survey with adult education providers in Switzerland. At the moment, it is the only periodic observation of adult education institutions in Switzerland.

As part of a systematic monitoring process, the annual survey consists of recurring standardized questions which focus on four central dimensions of the adult educations market: economic situation, demand, supply, and staffing. For each of the four dimensions the providers are asked to estimate the development in the previous year and the development of the upcoming year , since the survey is always conducted in springtime. With all four estimations for the previous year an index is constructed giving an overall impression of the situation of the previous year in the adult education market. A similar index is constructed for the estimations for the upcoming year, giving an overall estimation of the expectations in the field.

Moreover, the survey focuses on a changing key topic every year. The focus of the survey conducted between April and May 2022 was on changes on the organisational level of adult education providers. The questionnaire was sent out to 2'395 education providers. The net sample size of the analysis is at 210 valid cases. These data, analysed on a descriptive level, provide the basis for further qualitative research. The survey data for 2022 was further explored with three focus group discussions with various adult education providers. The group discussion is a particularly suitable method for

---

[1] See f.e. Denninger and Käpplinger, 2021; European Commission, 2020.

organisational research, as the communication dynamics that arise in groups allow access to collective perceptions and interpretations on the one hand, and individual experiences on the other (Dollhausen, 2010, p. 97). In the following paper, we present selected findings from these discussions in order to deepen the quantitative data.

3.   Economic Situation of adult education providers in Switzerland

The corona pandemic and the related restriction have had an unmatched impact on the adult education providers in Switzerland. In both years (2020 and 2021) the Swiss adult educations providers assessed their economic situation before the corona-pandemic (in retrospect) broadly positive. However, both times most respondents then estimated their economic situation at the time as rather difficult. Similarly, the development of the demand in 2021 (in retrospect) was estimated to be falling for 2020. At the same time, the adult education providers estimated an ongoing decline or sustenance for the demand in 2021. With these estimations from the 2021 data adult education providers did not seem to recover from the COVID-19 crisis.

The data from the 2022 polls, however, suggest a slow recovery of the adult education market. The participating organisations expect a mildly positive economic situation for the current year (2022). Half the respondents (50%) consider a positive development of their economic situation.

In contrast to the mildly positive expectations, the expectations for the staffing situation, however, is undecided (neither positive, nor negative). Most providers do not expect great changes in the staffing situation. On the one hand it might be a reluctance to recruitment because of the slow economic recovery and uncertain future. On the other hand, however, one might assume that the institutions are not able to find qualified staff. One underlying assumption is with an emphasis on the qualifications of the trainers. With the pandemic and the digitalisation trainers experienced a shift in their competences, such as in online-teaching. Another hint behind the stagnating recruitment might be the lack of trainers open to work. Research point out how freelancing trainers were laid off (Poopalapillai, Gollob and SGIER, 2021) and therefore, might have changed their career path (Probst, 2020).

To understand the overall situation of the adult education providers the survey asks for their current challenges. In the past years, the restrictions bound to the COVID-19 pandemic rolled a wave of digitalisation over the education providers facing them with a diversification in the offer. Therefore, many providers faced the challenge of combining online and present teaching in the best possible way. In the 2022 survey the digitalisation in the offer (as with the diversification) was mentioned once more. Digitalisation, however, seems to concern not only the area of the offer but the whole institution. Moreover, many adult education providers state the uncertainty as a major challenge. On the one hand this is still related to the corona pandemic as it is uncertain if the measures will be reintroduced. On the other hand, the providers face an uncertainty with their clientele. The providers struggle to understand and estimate the needs for the (future) learners.

4.   Change on the organisational level

Herbrechter/Schrader (2016, p. 1) describe adult education as a multi-level system. They distinguish the level of educational governance, the level of organisations and the level of teaching-learning interactions. In this system, adult education organisations are understood as differently designed "specific frameworks for teaching-learning interactions". Thus, the teaching-learning interaction is the core process of any adult education organisation.

The structure of the organisational framework is strongly dependent on its environment (ibid., p. 18). Adult education organisations have to respond to educational needs communicated by different

stakeholders such as educational policy, the economy, the individual etc. This is why changes in the environment always require changes in the organisations themselves (Dollhausen and Schrader, 2015, p. 174).

The Corona pandemic as a moment of crisis (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021) led to massive changes in environmental conditions. The results of the Provider Survey 2022 show that the pressure for change at the organisational level is currently high. More than half of the Swiss providers consider the pressure for change at the organisational level to be large to very large. This is strongly linked to the developments in the wake of the Corona pandemic. 76% state that the pressure to change has increased due to the pandemic.
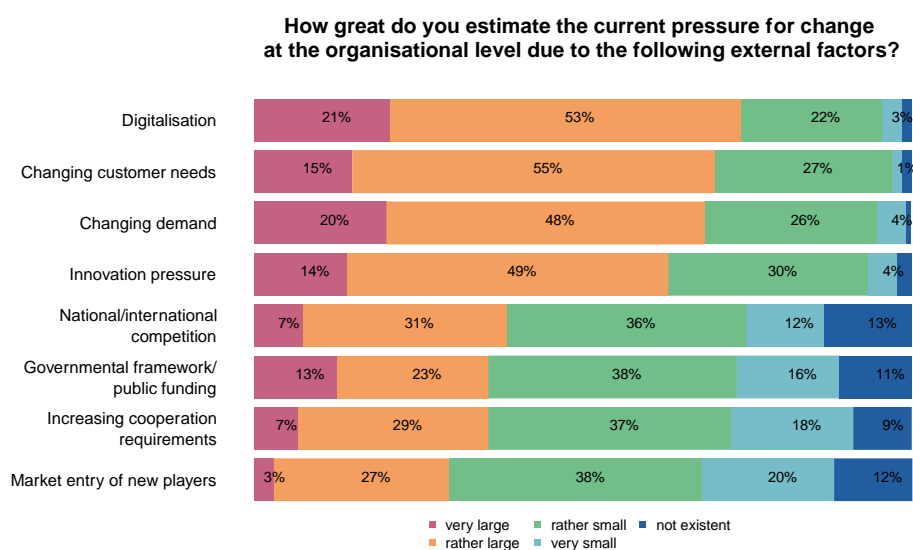
How great do you estimate the current pressure for change at the organisational level due to the following external factors?

Factor	very large	rather large	rather small	very small	not existent
Digitalisation	21%	53%	22%		3%
Changing customer needs	15%	55%	27%		1%
Changing demand	20%	48%	26%		4%
Innovation pressure	14%	49%	30%		4%
National/international competition	7%	31%	36%	12%	13%
Governmental framework/ public funding	13%	23%	38%	16%	11%
Increasing cooperation requirements	7%	29%	37%	18%	9%
Market entry of new players	3%	27%	38%	20%	12%

Figure 1: External factors of pressure for change, N=135

The pressure is particularly determined by external factors (see fig. 1). Many providers consider the pressure to change due to digitalisation (74%), changing customer needs (70%) and changing demand (67%) to be particularly high. But many also mention the pressure to innovate (63%). Less relevant for Swiss providers, on the other hand, are questions of competition and the state framework conditions.

In the group discussions it became clear that for many providers, the changing customer needs represent a particular challenge, as traditional course formats are often no longer convincing. Participants do not want to invest too much time and money. Instead, they want individually tailored offers. Companies in particular are also asking for shorter courses. They demand on-site courses that address concrete problems in everyday work. As a result of the pandemic, it has also become a matter of course that continuing education providers are able to implement parts of the courses online, depending on their wishes.

The pressure that is triggered by the demand side can also be seen specifically at the level of offer and programme planning (see fig. 2). Here, many providers consider the pressure to change in the areas of target group acquisition (74%) and marketing & public relations (71%) to be great to very great. But there is also need for change in the area of development of offers (72%). This shows that providers are under pressure to develop offers that meet the changing needs and to advertise them in order to convince new target groups.
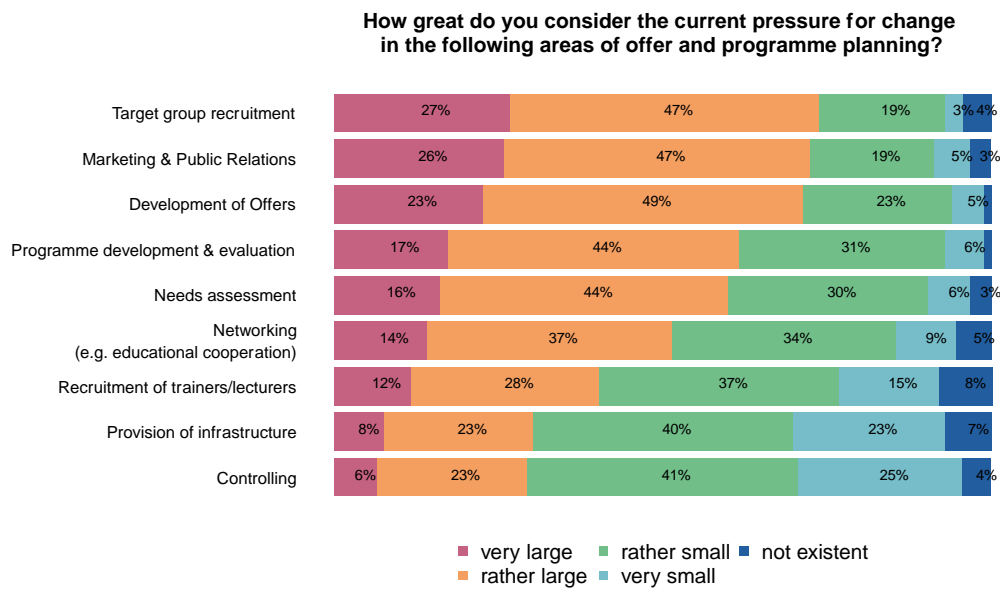
**How great do you consider the current pressure for change
in the following areas of offer and programme planning?**

	very large	rather large	rather small	very small	not existent
Target group recruitment	27%	47%	19%	3%	4%
Marketing & Public Relations	26%	47%	19%	5%	3%
Development of Offers	23%	49%	23%	5%	
Programme development & evaluation	17%	44%	31%	6%	
Needs assessment	16%	44%	30%	6%	3%
Networking (e.g. educational cooperation)	14%	37%	34%	9%	5%
Recruitment of trainers/lecturers	12%	28%	37%	15%	8%
Provision of infrastructure	8%	23%	40%	23%	7%
Controlling	6%	23%	41%	25%	4%

■ very large ■ rather small ■ not existent
■ rather large ■ very small

Figure 2: Pressure for change in offer and programme planning, N=186

Against the background of the great pressure for change that prevails, it is not surprising that a lot is currently changing at the organisational level:

90% of providers are making changes to organisational structures and processes.

80% are implementing changes in the area of offer and programme planning.

54% are undertaking a strategic realignment.

The changes made vary in scope (see fig. 3). Almost half of the survey participants consider the implemented or planned changes as targeted optimisation. Around 30% speak of a comprehensive further development and another 14% of a consistent realignment. In contrast, only 9% of the providers are undertaking a radical transformation.

**How extensive do you consider the currently implemented/planned changes
to organisational structures and processes to be?**

- 46%
- 9%
- 31%
- 14%

■ Targeted optimisation: introduction of new tools, replacement of a management or specialist function
■ Comprehensive evolution: redistribution of tasks across departments
■ Consistent realignment: creation of new processes and departments
■ Radical transformation: comprehensive restructuring of the overall organisation
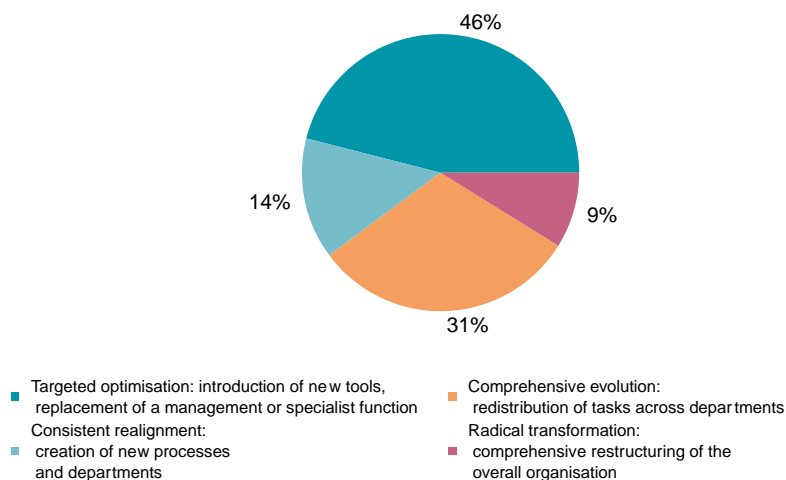
Figure 3: Extent of changes of organisational structures, N=113

This means that almost half of the providers are making targeted optimisations of processes and tools. In the group discussion it became clear that the targeted optimisation is mainly about the digitalisation of workflows and processes. This means, for example, becoming more paperless in the entire course organisation. For one provider, the optimisation consists of optimising communication processes, both externally with the participants and internally. In the course of a consistent reorientation, providers have created new departments to support digital teaching, both on the technical side and with training. These pursue the goal of supporting educational staff, but also of bringing about change step by step. For one provider who participated in a group discussion, digitalisation is the occasion for a comprehensive further development of the organisation. Since digitisation has happened very quickly with the introduction of new tools, the question currently arises as to how the organisation should be structured in the future. This means that it is now a matter of working out corresponding processes, generating strategies and concepts. An entire team is currently dedicated to this topic.

About one in ten providers is radically restructuring the organiation. One provider described the current change process in the group discussion as a radical transformation. The structures of the organisation have been adapted to create "semi-autonomous teams". The goal is greater autonomy for individual teams to become more agile. This is to be achieved by delegating more downwards and giving more responsibility to individual teams. Strengthening the autonomy and personal responsibility of employees in the context of transformation processes also leads to a change in organisational culture. It has become much more important that all employees, but also the clients, can identify with the organisation. Ultimately, this should also serve the acquisition of customers.

The providers were asked what goals they pursue with their changes on a structural as well as strategic level (see fig. 4). They were asked to indicate the first three priority goals. Many of the changes of structures and processes are aimed at increasing agility, but other topics such as developing the organisational culture and increasing turnover are also priorities for many.
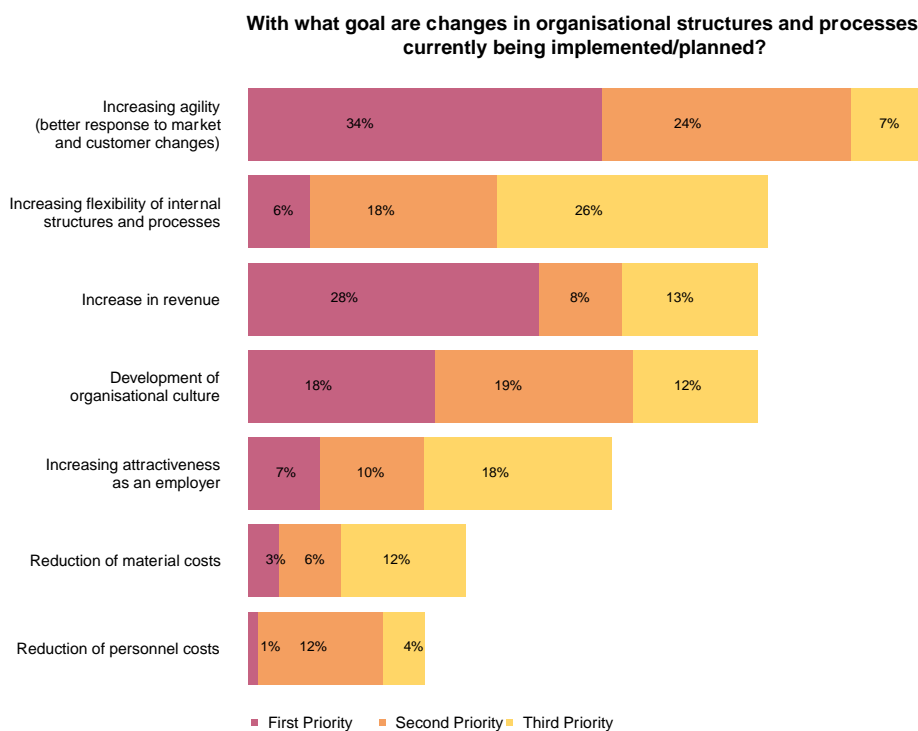
With what goal are changes in organisational structures and processes currently being implemented/planned?

Goal	First Priority	Second Priority	Third Priority
Increasing agility (better response to market and customer changes)	34%	24%	7%
Increasing flexibility of internal structures and processes	6%	18%	26%
Increase in revenue	28%	8%	13%
Development of organisational culture	18%	19%	12%
Increasing attractiveness as an employer	7%	10%	18%
Reduction of material costs	3%	6%	12%
Reduction of personnel costs	1%	12%	4%

■ First Priority   ■ Second Priority   ■ Third Priority

Figure 4: Goals of organisational changes, N=114

The goals of the strategic realignment are very diverse (see fig. 5). The three most frequently mentioned goals are the adaptation of the target group/customer base, growth and digital transformation, whereby growth was most frequently mentioned as the first priority (cf. the orange bar).
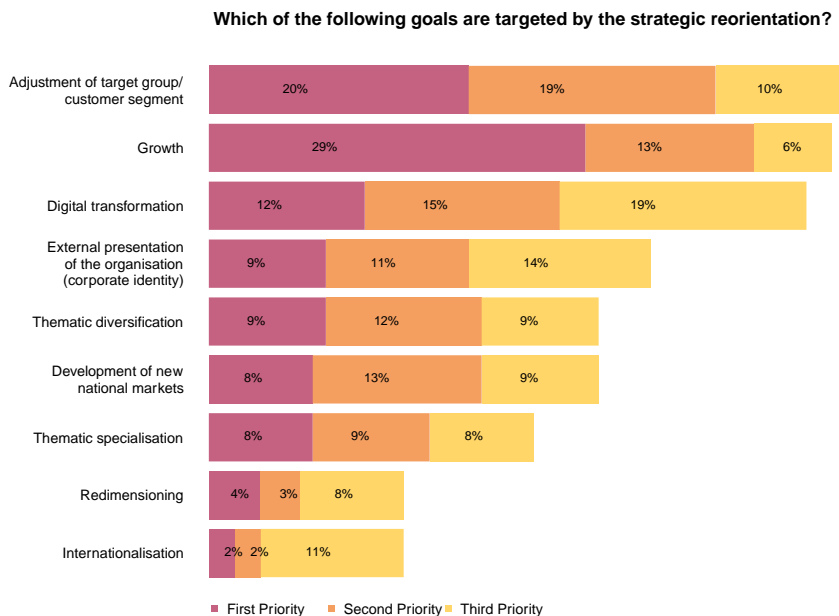
Which of the following goals are targeted by the strategic reorientation?

Figure 5: Goals of strategic changes N=101

5.   Conclusion

Adult education organisations have been confronted with major challenges in the last two years. As in the rest of Europe, most providers in Switzerland were in an extremely difficult economic situation as a result of the Corona pandemic. For many of them, this was caused by a sharp drop in demand in 2020 and an ongoing decline for the demand in 2021. The data from the survey conducted in spring 2022 suggest a slow recovery of the adult education market. Nevertheless, roughly every fifth participating organisation assessed its economic situation as difficult. Many providers state the uncertainty as a major challenge, especially with regard to the development of demand. The providers are noticing a change in demand, as well as in learning needs but struggle to understand and estimate where this development is going. Digitalisation continues to occupy them as well, as pressure to innovate remains high. These challenges create strong pressure for change in adult education organisations.

Swiss adult education providers are currently focusing on increasing revenue and on growth. This can be explained to a certain extent by the fact that the drop in demand and the corresponding revenue losses of the last few years have to be made up for. Most providers want to reach new target groups which requires intensive marketing measures and needs assessment. Here they are under particular pressure to make adjustments. Since participation rates have stagnated at a low level since the beginning of the pandemic, people need to be motivated to participate in adult education again. Moreover, customer acquisition is very expensive and therefore must aim at keeping a customer for a longer period of time. The providers continue to invest a lot of time in the development of trainings which meet the specific needs of the participants. As our result show, a great challenge is to manage the balancing act between educational need and economic demand. Participants often ask for

individually tailored and efficient trainings, but these do not always meet their effective learning needs.

Finally, the question arises to what extent the current developments lead to comprehensive changes in adult education organisations. Almost half of the providers who participated in the survey estimate the changes as targeted optimisation within the organisation. They have introduced new, mostly digital tools in their teaching activity and adapted internal processes and cooperation. This suggests that, at least for the moment, a comprehensive structural or strategic transformation has not taken place with these providers.

However, many changes go beyond pure process optimisation. One in two providers currently develop their organisation comprehensively or even transform it completely. The changes are mainly aimed at becoming agile, digital organisations to meet the ever-changing demand and facilitate the development of flexible formats and individualised offers. For example, providers have set up new departments to train and support trainers in their digital teaching. Shorter planning cycles require new forms of cooperation and communication. Moreover, employees are becoming more demanding in terms of opportunities for flexible working, both in terms of time and location. Thus, for many adult education providers, the digital transformation goes hand in hand with a development of the organisational culture.

Bibliography

ALHADEFF-JONES, Michel (2021). Learning from the whirlpools of existence: Crises and transformative processes as complex and rhythmic phenomena. In: European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, 12(3), 311–326.

DENNINGER, Anika and KÄPPLINGER, Bernd (2021). COVID-19 und Weiterbildung – Überblick zu Forschungsbefunden und Desideraten. In: Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung, 44(3), 161–176.

DOLLHAUSEN, Karin (2010). Methoden der Organisationsforschung. In: K. Dollhausen, T. C. Feld, und W. Seitter (Hrsg.), Erwachsenenpädagogische Organisationsforschung (S. 91–122). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

DOLLHAUSEN, Karin und SCHRADER, Josef (2015). Weiterbildungsorganisation. In: A. von Hippel, J. Dinkelaker, A. von Hippel, and J. Dinkelaker (eds.), Erwachsenenbildung in Grundbegriffen (1. Auflage, S. 174–182). Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

EUROPEAN COMISSION (2020). Adult learning and COVID-19: challenges and opportunities. A Report from the ET2020 Working Group on Adult Learning. Brüssel.

FELD, Timm and LERCH, Sebastian (2022). Editorial. Bildung im organisationalen Wandel managen. In: Hessische Blätter für Volksbildung, 72(2), 4–7.

POOPALAPILLAI, Saambavi/GOLLOB, Sofie and SGIER, Irena (2021). SVEB-Branchenmonitor 2021: Tendenzen der Weiterbildung nach der Covid-Pandemie. Zürich: SVEB.

PROBST, Pia (2020). Ausweitung des Prekariats?. In: weiter bilden. DIE Zeitschrift für Erwachsenenbildung, 27–29.