



## **ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM DESIGNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR ROLE AND THE ETHICAL DILEMMAS THEY ENCOUNTER**

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### **Abstract :**

The design of adult education programs is a complex and non-neutral process that incorporates technical, social, political, and ethical dimensions. Despite the central role of program designers, their professional identity and the ethical challenges they face remain insufficiently explored in the literature. This qualitative study examines how adult education program designers perceive their role and responsibilities, as well as the ethical dilemmas and challenges encountered in the design of face-to-face and distance education programs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five experienced program designers working in public and private lifelong learning organizations. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that designers perceive their role as multifaceted and difficult to encapsulate within a single professional title, most commonly identifying as scientific coordinators while acknowledging the limitations of this designation. Their responsibilities extend beyond program planning to include administrative, managerial, and instructional tasks. Regarding the ethical dimension of design, although participants recognize that program planning is not a neutral process, they struggle to articulate concrete ethical dilemmas. Ethical issues are often framed as practical or fractional challenges, particularly in distance education contexts. The study highlights the need for increased awareness, training, and critical reflection on the ethical dimension of adult education program planning.

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## 1. Introduction

The design of educational programs in adult education is a complex and demanding process that significantly affects the quality of the educational experience and learning outcomes. Adult education programs aim at the acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as the development of attitudes, promoting the personal, social, and professional fulfilment of participants. The achievement of these objectives presupposes the systematic planning of programs, through which goals, content, instructional methods, and evaluation processes are defined, starting from the educational needs of each specific adult target population (Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024; Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Boone *et al.*, 2002).

The international literature recognizes that program planning is neither a static nor a linear process, but rather a dynamic and reflective practice that requires continuous revision, adaptation, and decision-making at all stages of the design process (Caffarella, 2002; Houle, 1996). At the same time, program design takes place within a context in which technical, sociopolitical, and ethical parameters coexist, influencing decision-making processes and the overall configuration of the program (Sork, 2000; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024).

Despite the pivotal role of program designers, the relevant literature indicates that their professional identity and profile have not been sufficiently examined. There is a lack of clear description of their role, responsibilities, and professional characteristics, resulting in an identity that is often portrayed as multidimensional, unclear, and ambiguous (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Boone *et al.*, 2002; Leftheriotou, 2014).

A second important axis highlighted in the literature concerns the ethical dimension of adult education program design. Decisions made at all stages of the design process are associated with issues of equity, access to the planning process, transparency, content quality, and the balancing of the aims and interests of those involved in program planning (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024). Moreover, in the context of distance education, additional ethical challenges emerge, such as digital inequality, feelings of isolation, and the selection of appropriate digital materials (Boone *et al.*, 2002; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024).

Within this framework, the present study seeks to investigate, through empirical interview data, (a) how program designers perceive their role and responsibilities, and (b) the ethical dilemmas and challenges they encounter in the design of face-to-face and distance adult education programs. Despite the centrality of program designers in adult education, empirical research exploring their professional identity and ethical challenges remains limited, particularly in relation to both face-to-face and distance program design.

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## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 The Role and Responsibilities of the Program Designer

In both the international and Greek literature, the role of the adult education program designer is described as complex and demanding and is defined through a variety of characterizations. Program designers are referred to as scientific coordinators, project managers, facilitators or problem solvers, and agents of social change—reflecting the multifaceted nature of their role (Ritzhaupt *et al.*, 2021; Sugar & Moore, 2015; Boone *et al.*, 2002; Leftheriotou, 2014; Kenny *et al.*, 2005).

The responsibilities of adult education program designers, as documented in the relevant literature (Boone *et al.*, 2002; Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Sava, 2012; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2025), include:

- investigating and analyzing the educational needs of prospective learners,
- designing and developing educational materials,
- determining instructional methodologies and teaching techniques,
- selecting and collaborating with subject-matter experts and educators,
- managing human and financial resources,
- monitoring and evaluating the program,
- coordinating teams involved in the design process.

Communication skills, the ability to negotiate aims and interests, empathy, cultural intelligence and ethical awareness, as well as technological competence, are among the skills considered essential for the effective performance of the role (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Thompson, 2019; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024; Vann, 2017).

### 2.2 The Ethical Dimension and Ethical Dilemmas

The ethical dimension of program planning constitutes one of the critical yet often overlooked issues in the field of adult education. As emphasized by Cervero and Wilson (2006), program planning is an act of exercising “power” and making decisions within diverse organizational contexts in which multiple aims, interests, influences, and social relationships coexist. Consequently, every decision made by the program designer—from more complex issues to seemingly practical matters, such as the selection of content and methodology or even the choice of the learning venue—entails ethical dimensions and dilemmas.

According to the relevant literature, the ethical issues faced by program designers include ensuring equitable access and inclusion, selecting appropriate educational materials tailored to learners' needs, respecting the principles of adult education, and assuming responsibility toward learners and the organizations involved (Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024).

In the context of distance education programmes, the literature further highlights a range of ethical concerns related to equality of access and issues of exclusion or inclusion in education. These concerns include equity and diversity, surveillance and informed consent, culturally inclusive learning, the appropriateness and compatibility of

technology, as well as consent and confidentiality in online learning environments (Ng & Rodrigo, 2022; Anderson & Simpson, 2007; Slade & Prinsloo, 2013; Thompson, 2019).

Finally, the literature points out that, despite its importance, program designers often do not consciously recognize the ethical dimension of program design (Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024). Nevertheless, program design is not merely a matter of applying specific specifications derived from planning models but rather entails three equally significant dimensions: the technical, the sociopolitical, and the ethical. The technical dimension concerns design specifications, whereas the sociopolitical dimension relates to the conditions of the planning environment and their implications for the design process. The ethical dimension becomes clearer in relation to the other two if one considers that the question "Is option X the right choice?" may pertain to all three dimensions of program planning, while the question "What assumptions and values underlie option X?" pertains exclusively to the ethical dimension (Sork, 2000). Because education is not neutral, the questions "what will be taught," "how," and "for whose benefit" are of critical importance in program planning through which the aims of adult education are realized (Freire, 1970). The ethical dimension is therefore "present" and decisively influences the planning process, regardless of the extent to which designers are aware of it and of how they address the ethical dilemmas that arise in the design of adult education programs (Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024).

### **3. Methodology**

The present study is situated within the qualitative research paradigm, as its aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of the identity of adult education program designers and the ethical dimension of program planning, as these are construed by the designers themselves. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the data collection method in order to elicit participants' experiences, attitudes, and perspectives (Creswell, 2007). The main thematic axes of the interviews were: (a) the role and responsibilities of program designers, and (b) the ethical dilemmas and challenges they encounter in face-to-face and distance adult education.

Purposive sampling was employed for the purposes of the study. A pilot interview was conducted, followed by five interviews with highly experienced adult education program designers who are active in public and private lifelong learning centers, in order to capture, to the greatest extent possible, the conditions of program planning across different organizational contexts. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and fully transcribed, enabling detailed data analysis (Dimitriadou, 2024).

Data analysis and interpretation were conducted through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This flexible yet rigorous approach was selected because it allows for the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase framework.

The study is subject to the limitations inherent in qualitative research, including

limited generalizability of findings and a degree of researcher subjectivity. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers engaged in iterative reading of the transcripts and reflective discussion throughout the analytical process.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Participant Profile

The study sample consists of five adult education program designers with 12 to 20 years of experience in program design within public and private adult education organizations. Three participants belong to the 50–59 age group, while two are in the 40–49 age group. With regard to gender, the sample includes three men and two women.

Three participants are employed in a public/university Lifelong Learning Center, while two work in private Lifelong Learning Centers. Based on their position within the organization, one participant belongs to the Laboratory Teaching Staff, whereas the remaining four are external or scientific associates.

### 4.2 Results and Discussion

#### 4.2.1 The Role and Responsibilities of the Program Designer

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed a particularly complex picture regarding the role and responsibilities of the program designer, structured around two main subthemes: (a) role identification, and (b) responsibilities.

##### (a) Role Identification

All five participants identified the title *scientific coordinator* as the most representative of the program designer's role. In addition, two of the interviewees also referred to the designer as a *project manager*, associating this role with responsibility for and management of the overall program planning process.

However, these choices were accompanied by a strong sense that a single title is inadequate to capture the true scope of their work. As one participant characteristically stated:

“...*scientific coordinator* might be appropriate, but I think a broader title would be needed, because the skills required of a program designer are numerous. Even the term *designer* does not convey the full range of what they do. Perhaps the title should include terms such as program design, development, implementation, and evaluation...” (P1)

Similarly, another participant noted:

“...I would say that *scientific coordinator* is suitable for what a designer does, but it is probably not sufficient. And *project manager* is also quite limiting. The designer

undertakes a wide range of tasks, and therefore, the title *scientific coordinator*, like other titles, is too narrow to accurately express what they do." (P2)

Another interviewee commented:

"...I believe that the term *scientific coordinator* is fairly representative; however, there is no title that would accurately capture [...] everything a designer contributes..." (P3)

Likewise, one participant stated:

"...I would say *scientific coordinator* and *project manager* are titles I would use, because the designer bears responsibility for and manages the entire process..." (P4)

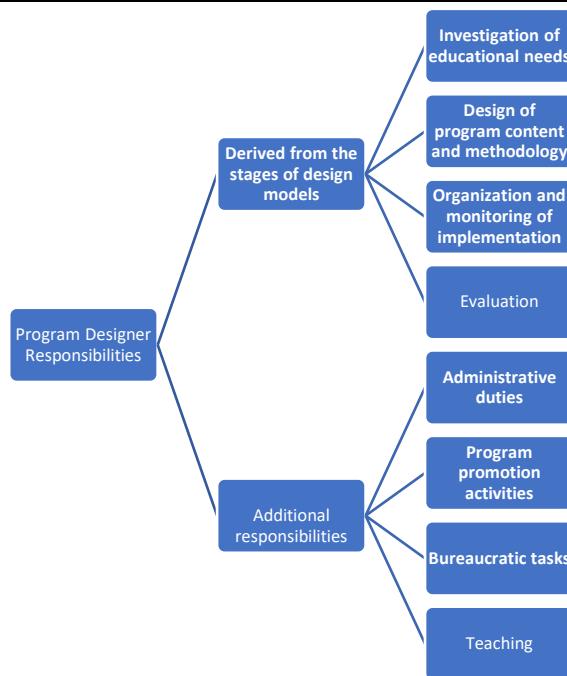
Finally, a participant emphasized:

"...none of these [titles] fully captures what a program designer ultimately does, which is complex, demanding, and multifaceted..." (P5)

As emerges from the above, the difficulty in identifying a representative title for the role of the program designer highlights the multidimensional nature of their "identity" and the complexity of this role. The empirical data of the present study largely confirm findings reported in both the international and Greek literature regarding the complexity of the role of adult education program designers, which is reflected in the use of a wide range of titles—such as scientific coordinator, project manager, facilitator, and agent of social change—with a clear and commonly accepted professional description (Boone *et al.*, 2002; Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Leftheriotou, 2014; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2025).

### **b) Program Designer Responsibilities**

The results of the thematic analysis of the responses regarding the designer's responsibilities are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Responsibilities of the Program Designer

With regard to responsibilities, participants' responses converge on a picture of broad and multi-layered activity, stemming from the stages of adult education program design. More specifically, when referring to their responsibilities, the interviewees state:

"I am responsible for coordinating the educators, and I often also provide training for the educators themselves. This is a multidimensional role, which involves needs assessment, investigating the motivations and barriers of adult learners. Based on these needs assessments, I design the program, implement it on a pilot basis, and concurrently conduct program evaluation."

"...The program designer, as the scientific coordinator, has multiple responsibilities... First, they are responsible for designing the program, then defining the curriculum, preparing the educational material or contributing to its development... And finally, they must also carry out reporting and evaluation procedures..." (P2)

"...The program designer is assigned responsibility for designing the program and must examine and investigate a range of factors... first, the target population and its characteristics, the purpose and objectives of the program—although these may already have been broadly defined by the organization, as a designer, together with your team, you must certainly refine them with precision... develop the curriculum guides, define the timeline, and determine the method of implementation..." (P3)

“...The program designer, together with their team, shapes the content based on the learners' profile, develops an initial curriculum, and designs the educational material in collaboration with subject-matter experts... and determines how the program will be implemented, whether through distance or face-to-face education...” (P4)

“...They must examine learners' needs and any difficulties they may face, propose educators and collaborate with them, possibly supervise or participate in the development of educational material, oversee the educational platform, and prepare the curriculum plan... in general terms, the role of the scientific coordinator involves the design and development of programs, although during the processes of coordination and supervision additional responsibilities may also arise, including the training of educators...” (P5)

However, all interviewees report that program planning is not their sole responsibility, as they are also involved in other tasks, such as bureaucratic and administrative duties, as well as activities related to the promotion of the program. In several cases, they also assume the role of educator:

“...In addition to initial program planning, I am involved in many other tasks, a lot of bureaucratic work... I certainly engage in administrative duties, and often I also need to provide secretarial support...” (P1)

“...Most of the time, it is not only about planning... There are definitely administrative matters that someone needs to take on, as well as secretarial tasks, and of course, at times, it can also be combined with a teaching role...” (P2)

“...No, program planning is not my only activity; there are almost always additional responsibilities... these certainly include teaching, as well as partly administrative tasks, such as assuming responsibility for promoting the program...” (P3)

“...My primary responsibility lies in program planning, but at times it may also be combined with teaching, depending on the program...” (P4)

“...I believe that no program designer is engaged exclusively in program design. Very often, one also has to assume administrative responsibilities, sign contracts, certificates, and supporting documents, and maintain records of all these... and, of course, depending on the program's disciplinary field, one may also take on teaching responsibilities...” (P5)

The findings of the present study are consistent with the responsibilities attributed to adult education program designers based on the core stages of program planning, such as the investigation of educational needs, the design of program content and methodology, the organization and monitoring of program implementation, and program evaluation (Boone *et al.*, 2002; Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2025; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024).

Moreover, the finding that program planning is often combined with teaching or administrative responsibilities is consistent with the relevant literature, which indicates that program design may constitute a primary responsibility or be combined with administrative duties (Caffarella, 2002), and that designers are frequently actively involved in implementation, not only in coordination and monitoring but also as educators (Houle, 1996; Jarvis, 2004).

#### **4.2.2 Ethical Dilemmas and Challenges in Face-to-Face and Distance Adult Education**

##### **4.2.2.1 Program Design as an Ethical Challenge Rather Than a Neutral Process**

All participants conclude that program design is not a neutral process and involves ethical challenges, while the majority consider that it "requires careful consideration and reflection."

Two interviewees provided particularly illustrative statements:

"...No, it is not a neutral or standardized process, since during the design and development of a program you make critical decisions—whether regarding the educational material, the objectives of the program, the methods to be used, or its duration." (P4),

"...I believe that it is not a typical or standardized procedure, given that many aspects encountered in one program may not be addressed in the same way in another; therefore, one certainly cannot proceed mechanically... these ethical challenges require a great deal of reflection and discussion..." (P2)

It is noteworthy that two of the program designers stated that they do not fully perceive the ethical dimension of program design, while one of them additionally reported that this issue has not been a matter of concern for them. One participant characteristically stated:

"...This is a question that has not concerned me in the context of program design... undoubtedly, it is not a standardized procedure, in the sense that the topics and problems encountered are very different... as for the issue of ethical challenge, it is something I do not fully perceive..." (P5)

The interviewees' views are presented in detail in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Perceptions of the Ethical Dimension of Program Design

Perceptions of the Ethical Dimension of Program Design	Responses
Involving ethical challenges	5
It is a neutral process	0
Not fully perceived	2
It has not been a matter of concern	1
Requires careful consideration and reflection	3

**Source:** Dimitriadou (2024).

It is worth clarifying that, regardless of their responses, most participants approached the question with a degree of hesitation, particularly regarding the meaning and significance of the ethical dimension and how it relates to program design, often requesting additional clarification.

Therefore, although all participants in the study agree that program design cannot be characterized as a neutral process, they do not fully grasp the concept of its ethical dimension and evidently struggle to recognize the critical nature of the challenges it entails. This may partly explain the sense of hesitation with which most participants approached the question. Some participants did refer to the fact that such issues require careful consideration; however, even in these cases, they did not appear to clearly conceptualize the meaning of the ethical dimension in program design, acknowledging its importance at a theoretical level but not in practice.

Nevertheless, designers should be sensitized to the political nature of education and to the fact that they do not operate as "neutral experts," since their choices and actions in design are shaped by their beliefs and assumptions (Freire, 2005). As Leftheriotou and Pavlis Korres (2025, p. 5) argue, designers, "through processes of critical reflection, should be 'trained' to examine their perceptions and assumptions about adult education and their role, gradually forming a personal and authentic perspective on design."

#### 4.2.2.2 Ethical Dilemmas in Practice

The interviewees' responses to the question regarding the ethical dilemmas they have encountered as program designers in their everyday practice were relatively general, with not all participants referring to specific examples.

"...An ethical dilemma, as you define it, is probably not something I can point to... I would say that there are often concerns and apprehensions regarding the choices and decisions that need to be made..." (P4)

"...There are certainly problems or dilemmas of this nature, and every program design process involves many concerns and difficulties..." (P5)

Those who provided more specific responses primarily referred to issues related to program funding and its implications for quality, time pressure and its consequences

in terms of bypassing or shortening required procedures, as well as equitable participation and respect for all stakeholders involved in the design process:

“...The issue is whether funding can be secured, since you do not know whether the program will generate sufficient revenue to compensate those involved, given that program design and material development entail high costs... There is anxiety about being able to remunerate contributors, which is why one must carefully select the subject of the program, its target audience, and ensure that it will be successful, as success is directly related to quality... In all design decisions, one must be guided by the objectives set, the learners' needs, as well as their motivations and barriers. Since I am both the scientific and academic coordinator of the programs, I have the final say, but always in a democratic manner; it is essential to listen to educators and consider their views...” (P1)

“...There may be certain shortcuts; for example, due to time pressure and in order to ensure that some programs are implemented, educators' training may not take place or may be conducted through expedited procedures... usually, however, without this significantly affecting the final outcome...” (P3)

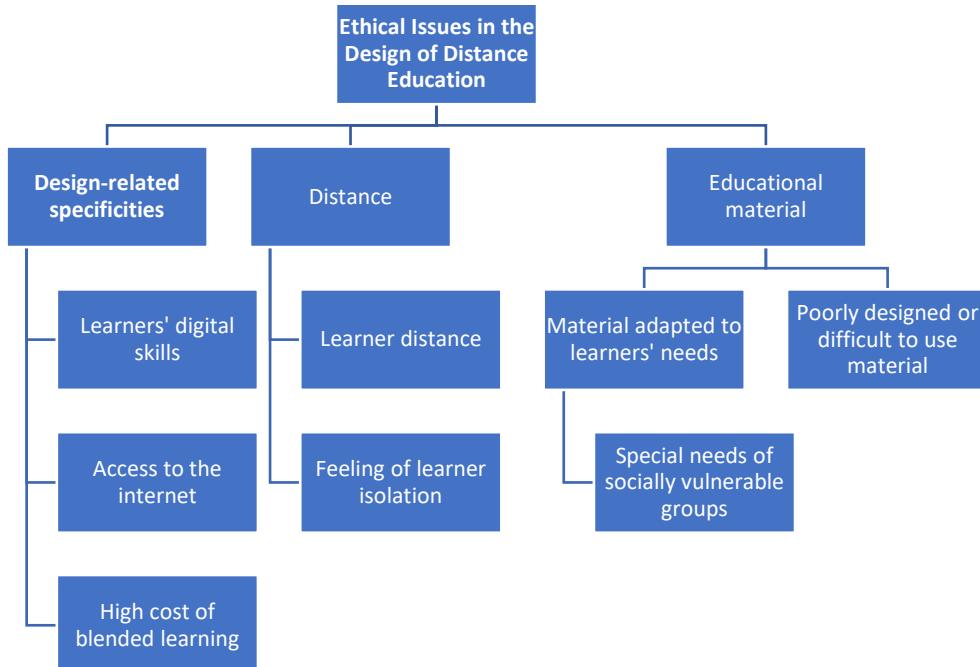
“...Everyone has their own perspective; when we collaborate with educators and other members of the design team, we try to respect everyone's views... if there is an ethical dilemma or issue that we may not have taken into account... I cannot think of anything specific at the moment...” (P2)

Overall, participants did not appear to fully comprehend the nature of ethical dilemmas within the context of program design, as most responded to the question with hesitation. The ethical dimension and its various aspects seem to remain rather vague concepts for the study participants, given that their responses primarily reflected diffuse concerns and general apprehensions. These findings are consistent with the observation that, although the ethical dimension of program design is “present” in every planning process, it is not sufficiently foregrounded in the relevant literature, with significant implications for designers' awareness of its existence (Sork, 2000; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2024). Responsible designers should be aware of their value systems and engage in critical reflection on their practice (Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 1995; Caffarella, 2002).

#### **4.2.2.3 Ethical Challenges in the Design of Distance Adult Education Programs**

The designers' responses to the question regarding additional ethical issues arising in the design of distance adult education programs highlighted the following issues, as presented in Figure 2: the distinctiveness of distance education as a different mode of program design, learner distance and feelings of isolation, poorly designed or difficult-to-use digital materials, limited access to the internet, and the high cost of blended learning solutions.

The results of the thematic analysis of the interviewees' responses regarding the ethical issues they encounter in the design of distance education programs are illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Ethical Issues in the Design of Distance Education Programs

More specifically, the program designers stated:

“...In general, I have studied blended learning as a more ideal option, because distance education alone—whether asynchronous or synchronous—is not sufficient; face-to-face components are certainly also needed... I implemented this initially, but it increases costs, and in the university context face-to-face delivery often involves additional problems, such as student-led occupations that disrupt on-campus teaching, or other internal issues that hinder implementation. For this reason, I eventually opted for a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes [...]... If someone has such issues [internet access problems]... I have encountered cases where participants could not connect or had a poor connection... I try to address this by sending them emails so they can download the material and access it that way. If, however, you realize that the people you are addressing lack the digital knowledge and skills required to participate, or do not have access to the internet, this must be taken into account during design, so that the program is delivered face-to-face rather than at a distance.” (P1)

“...I would say that designing for distance education is a more demanding process, because you have to deal with the distance between the learner and the educator, or even between the learner and the material... therefore, these issues also need to be addressed...” (P2)

“...Design in distance education certainly takes many factors into account... In everything you do, you consider the potential difficulties learners may face, including feelings of isolation during their participation or difficulties in using the material, and these aspects are incorporated into the design...” (P3)

“...The usability of learning materials in distance education could indeed be an issue... educational material should always be designed in accordance with learners' characteristics and the objectives of the program, especially when addressing vulnerable groups...” (P4)

“...Distance education programs are a different matter altogether. There is the issue that the learner is at a distance and often feels alone...” (P5)

The interview findings indicate that participants do recognize key design challenges in distance education, such as the distinctiveness of distance education as a mode of provision, learners' feelings of isolation, limited access to the internet, poorly designed educational materials, and the high cost of hybrid programs. However, these issues tend to be approached primarily as functional or technical problems, without sufficient engagement with their ethical dimension and the dilemmas they generate.

Nevertheless, the literature on distance education conceptualizes issues such as the selection of appropriate digital materials, the language of instruction, the types of interaction planned during learning processes, and the high cost of participation as ethical issues, as they may lead either to inclusion or exclusion of specific learner groups (Anderson & Simpson, 2007; Bonk *et al.*, 2018; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2024; Thompson, 2019). It is noteworthy that one designer explicitly referred to the adaptation of educational materials to learners' needs and characteristics, particularly when addressing socially vulnerable groups.

These findings further support the argument that program design in adult education is shaped not only by technical considerations but also by sociopolitical and ethical factors, which often remain implicit in designers' everyday practice (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Sork, 2000).

## 5. Conclusions

The present study explored, through empirical interview data, (a) how adult education program designers perceive their role and responsibilities, and (b) the ethical dilemmas and challenges they encounter in the design of face-to-face and distance adult education programs.

According to the research findings, the role of the program designer emerges as multidimensional and multi-layered. Participants attribute to the designer the title of *scientific coordinator*; however, they consider this designation insufficient to fully capture the breadth of the role. The responsibilities described by the participants largely derive

from the stages of program design, yet they emphasize that design is not their sole responsibility. In addition to planning-related tasks, they are involved in bureaucratic and administrative duties, program promotion activities, and, in many cases, also assume the role of educator. These findings are consistent with the relevant literature, in which program designers are described through a variety of titles and associated with multiple responsibilities and duties (Boone *et al.*, 2002; Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2025).

Regarding the ethical dimension, although participants acknowledge that program design is not a neutral process, they experience difficulty in articulating specific ethical dilemmas. They primarily identify issues related to program funding and its implications for quality, time pressure and its consequences in terms of bypassing or shortening required procedures, as well as equitable participation and respect for all stakeholders involved in the design process. The designers' responses make it evident that they do not fully recognize that the ethical dimension is embedded in and influences decisions and choices at all stages of program design. This difficulty should not be interpreted as an individual deficit on the part of program designers, but rather as a consequence of the lack of systematic training on ethical issues, the ambiguity surrounding the professional role of designers, and the organizational pressures under which program planning often takes place.

In the context of distance education, participants recognize the specific characteristics of its design, including learners' potential feelings of isolation, difficulties in accessing the internet, and the possible lack of usability of educational materials, as additional challenges. However, these challenges are not always explicitly connected to ethical dilemmas but are often perceived as functional or operational difficulties. These findings confirm observations in the literature indicating that the ethical dimension of program design is present but frequently rendered "invisible" or undervalued in practice (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2024), and they highlight the need for targeted training and professional development of program designers in issues related to the ethical dimension of program planning (Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2025).

## 6. Implications for Future Research

Future research could be conducted with larger samples and could also incorporate quantitative methodological approaches. In addition, potential differences in perceptions and attitudes between novice and experienced adult education program designers could be further explored.

Future research could also focus on the design and evaluation of targeted professional development interventions aimed at enhancing adult education program designers' ethical awareness and critical reflection, particularly in the context of eLearning.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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