



The Value of Learning Professionals: Why Economic Independence Is a Quality Issue.

On the precarious position of those who develop an economy's competence. And why their independence is in their clients' best interest.

Second instalment in the series "Lessons from KOMPASS". Data basis: the 2026 Freelancer-Kompass survey, the BIBB/DIE wbmonitor provider survey, the professional associations' fee recommendations, and federal funding and case-law sources.

NET OF BRAINS Thinktank · Winner of the German Demography Award 2022

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Executive Summary

The Uncomfortable Question Behind the Rush for Subsidies

When KOMPASS, a federal ESF-Plus subsidy programme for solo self-employed professionals in Germany, began covering 90 percent of a qualification worth up to €4,500, demand exceeded all expectations, across every sector of solo self-employment. For the continuing-education industry, this is doubly revealing: the money flowed to education providers whose market would evidently be smaller without the subsidy. And among the applicants were learning professionals themselves. An industry that depends on this kind of indirect support does not have a funding problem. It has a value-creation problem.

- 1. The situation is more precarious than the market admits.** Project income in the freelance market fell by 21 percent within a single year, to €6,653 per month; 61 percent name a shortage of assignments as their chief concern, while weekly working hours have risen (Freelancer-Kompass 2026, n=5,412).
- 2. The fee gap is dramatic.** Between the recommended rates for publicly funded providers (frequently below €500 per day, BDVT 2026) and the day rates that scientifically grounded corporate work commands lies a multiple that reflects negotiating position, not competence.
- 3. Dependence is a quality risk, not a private misfortune.** Those who cannot afford to say no economically cannot dissent professionally. Yet consulting, training and coaching live on exactly that: telling an organisation what it does not want to hear. Other professions have institutionalised the protection of independent judgement for precisely this reason.
- 4. The cause is the same one identified in "Lessons from KOMPASS" (Policy Brief No. 1, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20670322):** where nobody measures impact, continuing education becomes a commodity, and commodities compete on price. The industry's price erosion is the bill for its missing impact measurement.
- 5. There are two ways out, and they belong together.** Clients who buy impact instead of squeezing day rates get independent advisers instead of agreeable ones. And learning professionals who master impact evidence and hard skills leave the commodity market under their own power: providers with corporate-client business report the best industry climate (+25 points, wbmonitor), while publicly funded providers stand at -7.

IMPLICATION

An economy that expects continuing education to secure its future cannot afford precarious learning professionals. Dignity here is not social sentimentality. It is an operating condition.

Chapter 1

The Situation: Numbers That Cannot Be Talked Away

Trainers, consultants and coaches work predominantly as solo self-employed professionals. Their economic situation is rarely discussed in public; the industry's self-presentation is one of strength. The data tell a different story:

EXHIBIT 1

Project income is collapsing while working hours rise

Monthly project income in the freelance market, in euros



Source: Freelancer-Kompass 2026 (freelancermap, n=5,412), via heise, 17 March 2026. Weekly working hours rose from 40 to 42 over the same period.

61%

name "too few assignments" as their chief concern;
43% have no secured workload for the months ahead

Freelancer-Kompass 2026

< €500

the day-rate reality at publicly funded providers,
according to the professional associations' fee
recommendation

BDVT/VBT fee recommendation 2026

Added to this is the legal uncertainty created by the Herrenberg ruling on the social-insurance status of freelance instructors (background in the box on page 4; according to wbmonitor the main driver of industry sentiment alongside the economy, BIBB/DIE 2025), and the rush for KOMPASS: 90 percent reimbursement up to €4,500, capped nationwide since spring 2026.

For context: KOMPASS addresses solo self-employed professionals across all sectors, not learning professionals in particular. Which occupational groups actually used the vouchers was never published; the non-recording documented in "Lessons from KOMPASS" (Policy Brief No. 1) applies here too. Two things are nonetheless visible. First, the rush testifies to the economic situation of solo self-employment as a whole: anyone who can only afford a €4,500 investment in their own substance with a 90 percent subsidy is working without reserves for their own development. Second, the continuing-education industry depended on this programme twice over: the funding flowed to education providers whose revenue is now disappearing along with the cap, a de facto, indirect subsidy of the industry. And among the applicants were trainers, consultants and coaches themselves. Nobody would think of subsidising 90 percent of the professional development of tax advisers or medical specialists; their fee structures carry their own development as a matter of course.

Background: what the Herrenberg ruling is. On 28 June 2022, Germany's Federal Social Court (Bundessozialgericht, the highest court for social-insurance matters) ruled in case no. B 12 R 3/20 R that a music teacher at the municipal music school of Herrenberg was dependently employed, and therefore subject to social-insurance contributions, despite working under a freelance contract. Since then, the actual working conditions are decisive, not the contract wording: instructors who are integrated into a provider's organisation are, in case of doubt, deemed employees. For education providers this means back-payment risks stretching over years; for freelance trainers, lecturers and coaches, an unresolved status question. The legislature has responded with a transition rule (Section 127 of the Social Code Book IV, SGB IV, in force since 1 March 2025 and extended in March 2026): until 31 December 2027, instructors are deemed self-employed where both sides intend self-employment and consent to it in writing; from 1 January 2028, compulsory insurance applies. A permanent re-regulation of the self-employment of instructors exists only in draft form (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, BMAS, as of March 2026).

IMPLICATION

The rush for KOMPASS was not a subsidy mentality. It was the moment of reckoning for solo self-employment, and for the continuing-education industry it was proof of how deeply its market hangs on the subsidy drip.

Chapter 2

Why Precarious Advisers Are Bound to Become Bad Advisers

One could dismiss the situation of learning professionals as their private problem. That would be an expensive mistake, and the first to pay for it would be their clients.

The core of every consulting, training and coaching service is an independent judgement: telling an organisation what it does not want to hear. That a project is going to fail. That the problem lies not with the team but with its leadership. That the requested intervention is the wrong instrument. This judgement carries an economic price: whoever voices it risks the follow-up engagement.

This is where the question of fees becomes a question of quality. Anyone whose existence depends on every single engagement cannot pay that price. They become, often without noticing, an executor of what the organisation wanted to hear anyway. Not out of weak character, but out of arithmetic: the ability to say no is a function of one's order book. Intellectual independence has an economic precondition.

Other professions institutionalised this connection long ago. Auditing, the judiciary and medical diagnostics protect the independence of judgement structurally, through fee schedules, security of tenure or professional law, because a dependent judgement is worthless, no matter how competent the person. Continuing education knows no such protection. Its independence rests solely on the economic substance of individuals, and it is exactly that substance which is eroding.

IMPLICATION

A client who squeezes day rates is not buying cheaper advice. They are buying advice that can no longer afford to disagree.

That the findings of "Lessons from KOMPASS" and of this paper are connected is no coincidence: where nobody measures impact, quality cannot be distinguished from agreeableness. Then price decides, price erodes, and with it the independence of those who live on it. The industry's satisfaction culture and the precarity of its providers are two sides of the same coin.

Chapter 3

The Twofold Way Out: Recognition and Self-Empowerment

The situation is not hopeless, and self-pity would be the wrong register. The data point to a way out that can be taken from both sides.

What the demand side can do: buy impact, reward independence

Companies that procure continuing education by impact rather than by day rate solve two problems at once: they get measurably better performance, and they finance the very independence on which the quality of their advice depends. The most effective contribution clients can make is not an act of charity but a procurement decision: make evidence of impact a condition of award, and pay for it.

What learning professionals themselves can do: leave the commodity market

The data show where the exit lies: providers with corporate-client business report the best sentiment in the industry at +25 climate points, while publicly funded providers stand at -7 (wbmonitor, BIBB/DIE 2025). The demanding segment requires two things: the language of decision-makers (business economics, key indicators, return) and demonstrable impact (pre-post designs, validated instruments, effect sizes). Both can be learned. They are hard skills, not gifts.

Those who master them fundamentally change their negotiating position: an offer backed by evidence of impact is no longer a commodity and is no longer negotiated over the day rate but over the result. The investment in these capabilities is therefore not another certificate for the bookshelf. It is the path from price competition to price setting, and a profession that teaches others how to learn should be able to walk it under its own power.

IMPLICATION

Dignity is not a demand made of others. It begins with one's own evidence of impact and is completed by clients who reward it.

What policymakers can do: structures, not alms

Public funding remains sensible, but at the right level: instead of granting individuals small-scale subsidies that end up in administrative gridlock, programmes should fund the structures that make the self-employed independent: access to impact measurement and research, reliable social-insurance rules (the legal uncertainty around the Herrenberg ruling acts like a special tax on self-employment) and public procurement practices that do not themselves act as the biggest price squeezer. Fee recommendations below €500 per day at publicly funded providers currently send the opposite signal.

This appeal can be addressed with precision, because the necessary infrastructure has already been approved and paid for. With "Mein Bildungsraum" ("My Education Space"), the federal government developed the technical foundation for digitally sealed, machine-readable education credentials between 2021 and 2025 (around €154 million spent, *heise* 2025); the issuing and verification service has been run since July 2024 by SPRIND, the Federal Agency for Disruptive Innovation, and is, according to the ministry, "technically adaptable" for further credential types. From early 2027, the European digital identity wallet (EUDI Wallet) will allow citizens to store education credentials throughout their lives; its first use case is the Abitur certificate, the German school-leaving qualification. Continuing education, the largest education sector for adults, does not yet feature in it. Three concrete steps follow:

- 1. Continuing-education certificates as the second use case of the Digital Education Credentials.** Before the operating model is finalised, BMBFSFJ (the federal ministry responsible for education) and SPRIND define a standard for digitally sealed continuing-education certificates (provider, scope, learning objectives and form of assessment in machine-readable form) and connect continuing-education providers to the existing verification service. The federal government would thereby honour its own promise to cover education credentials from school through to adult education, and would give the infrastructure criticised by the Federal Court of Auditors a use case with broad reach.
- 2. An impact standard for certificates.** The 2025 coalition agreement announces "stronger standardisation and transparency of certificates", but leaves open what a certificate should say about learning outcomes. The standard suggests itself: reference to learning objectives plus valid competence measurement before and after the intervention, instead of a mere certificate of attendance. The EU Council Recommendation on micro-credentials (16 June 2022) supplies the ready-made standard elements; Germany has not yet operationalised them for continuing education outside higher education (2025 implementation report of the National Skills Strategy: only "pilot testing").

3. A qualification credential for the instructors themselves. If learners' certificates are moving into the wallet, the qualification credential of those who teach belongs there structurally as well: a voluntary, digitally verifiable credential attesting scientific grounding, didactic qualification and evaluation competence. The models exist: Austria's Academy of Continuing Education (wba) examines exactly these three dimensions in a state-funded, voluntary system; Singapore, from 1 April 2026, ties access to publicly funded training to a register with continuing-development and evaluation requirements (TAEPP). It would need to be mandatory only where public funding flows: AZAV, the German accreditation regulation for publicly funded training providers, already requires instructors' methodological and didactic aptitude today (Section 2(3)), just without a standardised, portable credential.

Impact measurement would then no longer be an appeal to goodwill but anchored in the infrastructure: in the learners' certificates as much as in the instructors' qualification credential. The window is favourable. The Herrenberg transition period runs until 31 December 2027, and a re-regulation of self-employment is due to take effect from 2028 (BMAS draft bill, as of March 2026). A legislature that is re-regulating the status of instructors anyway can anchor professional qualification as a positive indicator of self-employed status at the same time, rather than leaving the question to contract boilerplate.

The Perspective: A Professional Standards Regime for the Profession

Taken to its conclusion, this path leads to something every other teaching profession has long had: a professional standards regime, comparable to chartered or licensed professions. No early-years educator works without state-recognised training, no schoolteacher without a state examination, no physician without professional licensure; for physicians, the duty of continuing education is codified in law as a points system (Section 95d SGB V, the German Social Code on statutory health insurance). Only adult education, and with it corporate learning & development with its leverage on the economy and society, knows nothing of the kind: those who teach here are the only ones for whom qualification and continuing education are left entirely to themselves. A digital education history could carry both, the qualification credential as well as the documented continuing education.

The professional model for this has existed since the 1949 Boulder Conference of the American Psychological Association: the scientist-practitioner model, which requires practitioners not only to receive scientific evidence competently but to examine the impact of their own work empirically themselves (Baker & Benjamin 2000); as early as 1984 it was explicitly extended to educational settings (Barlow, Hayes & Nelson 1984). The model is alive to this day: the German federal licensing regulation for psychotherapists makes research-oriented placements a legal requirement (Sections 13 and 17 PsychThApprO), and medicine is building structured bridges between practice and research with the Clinician Scientist programmes of the DFG, the German Research Foundation (since 2018, more than 400 funded physician researchers). A profession that teaches learning should let itself be measured against the same standard. How necessary that would be is shown by the evidence: 89 percent of more than 15,000 surveyed educators from 18 countries believe in the scientifically refuted learning-styles myth (Newton & Salvi 2020). Such a regime would not be a market barrier but a quality differentiation: it would at last make professional learning practitioners visibly distinct from arbitrariness.

IMPLICATION

The federal government does not need to launch a new project. It merely needs to open the infrastructure it has already paid for to the largest education sector for adults, before the operating model is locked in without continuing education.

Chapter 4

Four Recommendations

1 · To learning professionals: treat independence as a business objective

Evidence of impact and the language of business are learnable hard skills and the most direct route out of the commodity market. Those who can demonstrate their impact negotiate over results, not day rates. The guiding model is the scientist-practitioner: not only receiving science competently, but being able to investigate one's own impact.

2 · To companies: buy independence

Make evidence of impact a condition of award and pay accordingly. The squeezed day rate is the most expensive form of procurement: it buys agreement instead of judgement.

3 · To the professional associations: lead the value debate

Fee transparency, impact standards and the self-assurance to defend both in public. A profession that does not put a figure on its value leaves the figuring to the procurement department.

4 · To policymakers: use the window until the end of 2027

Connect continuing-education certificates as the second use case to the federal Digital Education Credentials infrastructure that has already been paid for (EUDI Wallet from 2027), set an impact standard for certificates, and create a qualification credential for instructors modelled on Austria and Singapore, with the longer-term perspective of a professional standards regime with documented continuing education (Chapter 3). In addition: legal clarity on social-insurance status before the Herrenberg transition period expires on 31 December 2027 (box on page 4), fair public procurement practice and funding aimed at structures rather than alms.

An Invitation to the Conversation

Invitation to expert review: We invite qualified institutions, associations and fellow experts to scrutinise these findings critically; substantive reviews will inform subsequent editions and will be acknowledged by name on request.

This paper, too, is an offer to debate. We put its theses up for discussion at the **NET OF BRAINS Science Lunch**, every Friday from 12:00 noon to 1:00 pm CET, online and free of charge (registration via brain-hr.com). We are available for expert discussions with associations, procurement professionals and policymakers. And colleagues who want to build their own evidence of impact will find methodology, tools and allies in our network.

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Appendix

Sources and Transparency

Data basis. Freelancer-Kompass 2026 (n=5,412), the wbmonitor 2024 (the annual German continuing-education provider survey by BIBB/DIE), the 2026 fee recommendation of BDVT, the German trainers' association, jointly with VBT, case-law and funding sources (Federal Social Court ruling B 12 R 3/20 R and Section 127 SGB IV on Herrenberg; KOMPASS funding directive BAnz AT 28.02.2025 B3, esf.de), federal and EU documents on the infrastructure for digital education credentials (BMBFSFJ, the 2025 coalition agreement, the EU Council Recommendation on micro-credentials, Austria's wba, SkillsFuture Singapore), and the evaluation evidence documented in "Lessons from KOMPASS" (Policy Brief No. 1, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20670322). The reliability of each source is classified in the table below.

STATEMENT	SOURCE	DATE/RETRIEVED
Project income -21% (€8,432 → €6,653); 61% shortage of assignments; 43% without secured workload; increased weekly working hours	Freelancer-Kompass 2026 (freelancermapp, n=5,412), via heise	17 March 2026
Fee recommendation for publicly funded providers frequently below €500/day	BDVT/VBT fee recommendation 2026 (BDVT: German trainers' association)	19 December 2025
Industry climate: providers with corporate clients +25, with public (SGB) funding -7; drivers: economy and Herrenberg case law	BIBB/DIE wbmonitor 2024 (annual German continuing-education provider survey)	26 November 2025
Herrenberg ruling: music-school teacher deemed dependently employed despite a freelance contract; the actual working conditions are decisive	Federal Social Court (BSG), 28 June 2022, case no. B 12 R 3/20 R	28 June 2022
Transition rule until 31 December 2027 (extended March 2026), compulsory insurance from 1 January 2028	Section 127 SGB IV, current version	Retrieved 12 June 2026
"Mein Bildungsraum": development phase 2021 to 2025 completed, transferred into the issuing/verification service for digital education credentials (SPRIND), EUDI Wallet from 2027, first use case Abitur certificate, service "technically adaptable"	BMBFSFJ, "Digitale Bildungsnachweise" (Digital Education Credentials)	Retrieved 12 June 2026
Spending on "Mein Bildungsraum": around €154 million by the end of 2024; criticism by the Federal Court of Auditors	heise online, 11 February 2025	11 February 2025
2025 coalition agreement: "stronger standardisation and transparency of certificates" (without an impact concept); EU Council Recommendation on micro-credentials (16 June 2022) not operationalised in continuing education outside higher education (National Skills Strategy report 2025: "pilot testing")	Coalition agreement CDU/CSU/SPD 2025, p. 74; National Skills Strategy implementation report, March 2025	2025

Table continued on the next page.

STATEMENT	SOURCE	DATE/RETRIEVED
Austria's wba (Academy of Continuing Education): mandatory competence in educational theory, didactics and evaluation (NQF-registered, voluntary, state-funded)	wba, qualification profile wba certificate	Retrieved 12 June 2026
Singapore: TAEPP registration requirement for publicly funded training from 1 April 2026, with continuing-development and evaluation requirements	SkillsFuture Singapore, Information Memorandum	Retrieved 12 June 2026
KOMPASS (federal ESF-Plus subsidy programme for the solo self-employed): 90%/max. €4,500; voucher issuance "capped nationwide from May to expectedly October 2026"	Funding directive BAnz AT 28.02.2025 B3; esf.de	Retrieved 11/12 June 2026
No published statistics on which sectors/occupational groups used the KOMPASS subsidy	Review of BMAS/esf.de publications; cf. "Lessons from KOMPASS", DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20670322	12 June 2026
Missing impact measurement: only 32.1% use evaluation systematically	Haufe Akademie Benchmarking 2025; cf. "Lessons from KOMPASS", DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20670322	2025
Scientist-practitioner model: 1949 Boulder Conference of the APA; dual competence in applying research and conducting it oneself; explicitly extended to educational settings in 1984	Baker & Benjamin (2000), American Psychologist 55(2) ; Barlow, Hayes & Nelson (1984), Pergamon Press	2000 / 1984
Research-oriented placements legally mandatory in German psychotherapist training; since 2018 the DFG (German Research Foundation) has funded Clinician Scientist programmes (23 programmes, more than 400 funded researchers)	Sections 13, 17 PsychThApprO (German federal licensing regulation for psychotherapists); DFG funding initiative Clinician Scientists	Retrieved 12 June 2026
89.1% of 15,405 educators (18 countries, 37 samples 2009 to 2020, predominantly convenience samples) believe in the refuted learning-styles myth	Newton & Salvi (2020), Frontiers in Education, systematic review	2020

About NET OF BRAINS

NET OF BRAINS is a think tank for innovation in learning & development: a community of more than 50 researchers, L&D practitioners and executives, winner of the German Demography Award 2022 (category "New Work Brought to Life"). Its initiator is Dr. Franz Korbinian Hütter (Dr. rer. medic., M.A.), lecturer in Applied Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Applied Management, Teacher Status Member of the American Psychological Association (APA), member of the advisory board of dvct e. V. and of the scientific advisory board of KKV Bildungswerk Bayern, a German educational institute. Contact: fh@brain-hr.com · +49 171 99 79 519

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