

# 100 YEARS OF VOLKSHOCHSCHULE – 50 YEARS OF DVV INTERNATIONAL. LOCAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

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**ABSTRACT:** Adult education has multiple histories in countries around the globe. In the case of Germany, the year 1919 is of high importance, as the Volkshochschulen (VHS) – literally translated as folk high schools, more broadly as adult education centres – became a constitutional matter. Today, they are the largest institutionalized form of adult education in Germany with millions of participants every year. In 1969, the ongoing international activities of the VHS were institutionalized into what is known today as DVV International. This year's celebrations are used for contextualizing the development of adult education and thus for remembering the past with a view to the future of our profession.

## *1. Introduction*

The year 2019 is an important year for adult education. It brings a number of challenging anniversaries for those of us working in adult education and lifelong learning on a national and global level. The Volkshochschulen (VHS) are celebrating the centennial of their inclusion in the German constitution, and in 1969, the predecessors of DVV International were institutionalized as the international activities division of the VHS national association (Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband, DVV) to reflect their growing numbers and global reach. We look therefore to a double anniversary: 100 years of Volkshochschule and 50 years of DVV International.

When making plans for the 2019 Winter School at Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg, the organizers invited me to co-moderate Comparative Group 8 on *Developing active citizenship through adult learning and education*. This topic was very important to me during my university years and all those decades working for DVV International. So I teamed up with a long-time colleague, Prof. Bálasz Németh, and invited participants to reflect on *Adult learning and education: Active global citizens for sustainable development – a political, professional and personal account* for a Working Paper Series of the Centre for Research & Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning at the University of Glasgow (Duke & Hinzen, 2018).

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My preparations for the comparative aspects of the Winter School generated the idea to additionally give a public guest lecture to present the ideas and practices of anniversaries now happening in German adult education – an idea that eventually became the topic of the present contribution. A set of slides helped to offer some key findings I developed through my involvement in the work of the VHS and DVV International. They guided me through the presentation, which I was to write down only later for this publication.

## 2. *University Context*

A few years back, I started a series of seminars at German universities in Augsburg, Cologne, Hannover, and Würzburg. These institutions were concerned with promoting their students' historical awareness and with remembering the past by looking at selected examples in the field and profession of adult education.

“What are central historical developments that had lasting effects on the way we live together today? How can we work towards a better understanding of the past, which after all has an impact on our present and future? How can educational institutions contribute to that effort? What is the potential of adult education within the process of lifelong learning?” These were the questions we tried to answer in the seminars using select examples of historical dimensions in order to show their local, national, regional, and even global impact.

The seminars used a variety of methods and materials, encouraging presentations and discussions. Important documents were analysed; local memorials and monuments explored and visited. Specific themes were suggested and selected at the beginning of the seminars, such as *1914-2014: 100 years of World War 1, Reconciliation and collaboration between Turkey and Armenia in adult education, The end of German colonialism in Africa*, more specifically in today's Namibia and Tanzania.

These earlier seminars were a good foundation for the follow-up activities I am currently doing with events, meetings, and functions on *100 years of Volkshochschule – 50 years of DVV International* at a variety of institutions. In the seminars, we look at local and global perspectives in adult education and lifelong learning for sustainable development. Again, students are encouraged to select themes for their oral presentations and written assignments. They can have historical dimensions or address today's social reality, for instance the role of VHS in the development of skills and competencies for migrants and refugees. They can select adult education in Belarus, Mexico, or Cambodia, compare studies involving ethnic groups, or analyse the policy and practice of adult education in prison or in environmental emergencies. All of this helps

in getting an understanding of the role of adult education in local and global perspectives.

### 3. *Comparative Aspects*

The VHS is an institution that provides a diverse range of learning opportunities throughout life, but especially for adults. It has similar historical traditions in other countries. We should see them in the context of workers' education, reading and study circles, and university extension. On the one hand, they were part of the late Enlightenment, a legacy visible today in strong components of citizenship education; on the other hand, they were part of the industrial revolution, evident today in employability programmes and vocational training. Of course, there are also many differences and variations when comparing these community-based forms of adult education.

At some points, I tried to offer at least some historical-comparative perspectives on other current anniversaries and celebrations in adult education by mentioning a few – such as the United Kingdom, where November 1919 saw the publication of the Final Report on Adult Education by the Ministry of Reconstruction (Report, 2019), the 40th anniversary of the Department of Andragogy at the University of Belgrade, the 70 years since the first CONFINTEA took place in Helsingör in 1949 (Knoll, 2014), or the 50th anniversary of the New Year's Eve speech by Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere under the title *Education Never Ends* (Nyerere, 1979). They all create opportunities to deepen our understanding of adult education as a profession on the move and find out what is similar, or different, or what they have in common.

There are similarities to other forms of community-based adult education, both in Europe and in Asia. One example is the Kominkan in Japan, which followed World War II as an instrument supported by the Japanese government to foster democratic developments; today, the Kominkan system has an intake of almost 10 million participants (Sato, 2016). So much is known and has been written about the beginnings of folk high schools in the Nordic countries, with Nicholas Frederic Grundtvig as their founding father; today, the study circle idea and practice is still strong (Bjerkaker & Summers, 2006). Less is known about other places: Moldova, for example, where the first folk high school was founded in 1918 in the capital Chişinău; or Hungary, where the village of Bajaszentivan saw a gathering with the name of folk high school in 1914.

It would be interesting to adopt a historical-comparative perspective and study community-based institutionalized adult education and community learning centres by taking an in-depth look at their roots, developments, and turns in respect to structures, institutions, programmes,

activities and participants and gain an understanding of their future in the age of digitalization. Maybe this is an endeavour for the near future, when this current flow of anniversary events is over. Such a study could build on a survey which already analysed Community Learning Centres (CLCs) in six Asian countries (Duke & Hinzen, 2016).

#### *4. History as Context*

Anniversaries can serve as cultural memory (Assmann, 2018), an opportunity for us to collectively remember the past for the sake of the future. The 100 years of VHS thus have to be seen in context. From my point of view as a German citizen, I am aware that 100 years ago the Weimar Republic, our first democracy, emerged at the end of the monarchy, at the end of World War I, the November revolution, and the end of German colonialism in Africa and Asia. But the end of something always has the potential of breeding something new and better. That is why we remember the past for the sake of the future.

The year 1919 was also the time when, after a period of intense struggle, female suffrage became a reality. In Germany, it was also the start of the eight-hour work day, the founding of Bauhaus architecture. And now we also celebrate 100 years of VHS as our community-based adult education centres. Nowadays, you find them everywhere in German villages, towns, and cities, with more than 9 million adults participating in all kinds of education, learning, and training activities.

A key success of advocacy or foresight at the time was a clause that was included in the Weimar constitution under Article 148, which read: «Das Volksbildungswesen, einschließlich der Volkshochschulen, soll von Reich, Ländern und Gemeinden gefördert werden» (Translation: The adult education sector, including the Volkshochschulen, shall be supported by the national, regional, and local governments.) Today there is such a governance framework for policy, legislation, and financial support for adult education, which is a fundamental building block available to all centres and their activities (Vosskuhle, 2019).

It should also be noted that, as community-based institutions, each VHS has its specific historical context of why and when it was founded. The VHS in Aachen, for example, was founded only after the end of World War II. It was initiated by the Allies as part of the re-education programme. They saw the VHS as potential institutions to strengthen democracy. Adult educators from Germany were sent to Sweden to study the folk high school system there. In the smaller town of Bornheim, where I live, which actually is a merger of some twenty villages following an administrative reform, the municipality did not establish a VHS until 1979. However, that is reason enough to celebrate 40 years

with a public event, a lecture on digitalization in adult education, and an exhibition in the city hall.

Looking at the planning and implementation of all these commemorative events, we saw the need to do something practical. We therefore welcomed the offer by the German Institute of Adult Education–Leibniz Centre on Lifelong Learning (DIE) to write a handbook on how to celebrate anniversaries in adult education (Heuer & Hinzen, 2018). The book provides a conceptual framework on cultural memory and history, as well as many examples on how the preparations of the current events provide innovative ideas for archives and exhibitions, events and cooperation.

### *5. Celebrations and Marketing*

Celebrating 100 years of VHS in Germany in 2019 is a high-level, because many local VHS, including Cologne, Düsseldorf, Dresden, Mannheim, or Stuttgart, will be 100 years old, while others are even older or some younger. The centennial will be celebrated at the national level and in a decentralized way all across the country. At the heart of the centennial is the fact that the VHS became a constitutional matter in 1919; that is why celebrations started with a ceremony in February at St. Paul's Cathedral in Frankfurt, where Andreas Voßkuhle, the President of the German Federal Constitutional Court, gave the keynote, bringing the historical perspective of the 1919 constitution to the education-related commitments in today's basic law (Voßkuhle, 2019). More than 500 invited guests attended the event.

Since then, hundreds of celebrations have followed on the community level at individual VHS. In Essen, they even used the slogan of the time, which in German reads 'Aufbruch', a mixture of awakening and joint departure, to remember the past and mark the importance of adult learning for the future. VHS Essen could even prepare a film on their 100 years, which premiered during the celebrations. The screening took place in the Lichtburg, a cinema also founded 100 years back and still one of the largest in Germany. Hamburg is another special case: here, the year 1919 saw the foundation of both the VHS and the university, and both institutions are in the same foundational document by the Senate of the City of Hamburg. University professors at the time were asked to support the VHS through lectures in their respective fields of expertise and interests. A stamp commemorating the occasion was approved by the Minister of Finance and is now in use. DVV International launched a special website providing detailed information on plans and publications, as well as documenting all the events through an interactive map ([www.100jahre-vhs.de](http://www.100jahre-vhs.de)).

Likewise, DVV International and DIE joined hands to produce a major publication. A project team worked together for two years, selecting 100 key events (one for each year between 1919 and 2019) and asking individual authors to write stories (one page for each year, illustrated by one picture) to finally have a book on the history of VHS (Schrader & Rossmann, 2019). In the run up to this important year, the academic journal *Bildung und Erziehung* agreed early to publish a thematic issue to discuss historical roots, provide evidence of developments, dig into urban as well as rural examples, and look into the future. Of this edition, 2,000 copies were distributed to all VHS and representatives of ministries, parliaments, and other institutions in education and research (Hinzen & Meilhammer, 2018). A special issue of the *Hessische Blätter für Volksbildung* followed, discussing today's VHS in the context of political, cultural, and vocational adult education by inviting professionals to provide concise opinions (Hessischer Volkshochschulverband, 2018).

Most importantly, there are activities embedded in a marketing strategy that uses all events to further advertise the VHS and their activities to reach out also to those younger and older adults who may not be close enough to continuing and realizing their learning opportunities. Together with all the state-level VHS associations, the DVV International as a national association is coordinating and disseminating a number of initiatives under the slogan *100 Jahre Wissen teilen*, which can be translated as 100 years of sharing knowledge. This builds on a slogan used 100 years ago by the working class movement: *Wissen ist Macht*, or knowledge is power. The slogan *100 Jahre Wissen teilen* is used by DVV International on all publications, posters, letters, and other communication tools.

## 6. Global Commitments

CONFINTEA is the acronym for the UNESCO world conferences on the development of education, training, and learning during adult life, and brings together representatives from government, civil society, academia, and international organizations. For professionals and civil society, such conferences create the possibility to influence the content and orientation of the global debate and the documents coming out of that debate. Later, the respective recommendations and commitments can be used for advocacy work. CONFINTEA takes place every 12 years. The first was 1949 in Helsingør, Denmark, the most recent one in Belem, Brazil, in 2009. CONFINTEA VII is planned for 2022 in a country still to be decided (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2017).

Non-formal education, especially for youth and adults, is an important part of lifelong learning. Related activities are implemented by community-based institutions at the local level. Governments should therefore

support community learning centres (CLCs) through policy, legislation, and funding. Otherwise, leaving no one behind, the new claim coming from the global level, will remain an unfulfilled promise. However, a look at the current status quo reveals: More can be done and should be done in most countries.

Let us take one example from CONFINTEA VI. The Belem Framework for Action (BFA) states clearly: «Lifelong learning “from cradle to grave” is a philosophy, a conceptual framework and an organizing principle of all forms of education, based on inclusive, emancipatory, humanistic and democratic values». Later, in pointing to details, the BFA states: «We recognize that adult education represents a significant component of the lifelong learning process, which embraces a learning continuum ranging from formal to non-formal to informal learning». And with respect to CLCs, the BFA calls for «creating multi-purpose community learning spaces and centres» (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010).

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were agreed upon by the United Nations in 2015 to cover the years up to 2030. The overall education goal is to «ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all». And in respect to CLCs: «Make learning spaces and environments for non-formal and adult learning and education widely available, including networks of community learning centres and spaces and provision for access to IT resources as essential elements of lifelong learning» (UNESCO, 2015a).

Based on CONFINTEA VI and the SDG, the 2015 UNESCO General Conference came up with a new *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education*, in which community-based and institutionalized forms of adult education were strongly supported again by a special clause: «creating or strengthening appropriate institutional structures, like community learning centres, for delivering adult learning and education and encouraging adults to use these as hubs for individual learning as well as community development» (UNESCO, 2015b).

In this context, it may be helpful point out that the UN-enshrined right to education should not be interpreted solely as a right to schooling. One may want to argue that in the age of digitalization and globalization, lifelong education and learning is the right we should be struggling for. This is not to undermine or minimize the importance of early childhood education or all forms and levels of the school system. We must have high-quality kindergarten, primary, and secondary schools. But this needs to be continued into vocational and professional training, and that is where adult and higher education come in as educational service providers with a lifelong orientation. The VHS and other forms of adult education and community learning centres play a critical role – especially as the majority of people in society are adults, and being adults is the longest part of life.

## 7. VHS Today

Since their beginnings, the VHS have seen continuity and growth for the most part, interrupted, however, during the Nazi period when the VHS were banned or integrated into the system of Nazi propaganda. After 1945, they experienced different and diverse developments during the period of a divided Germany. The reunification of East and West Germany in the early 1990s was based on the country's federal structure, bringing five new *Länder* (states) together with the eleven old ones, and creating a population of now about 80 million. The VHS in each of the *Länder* built their own associations (e.g. the Bavarian or Saxonian VHS associations); at the national level, those 16 associations with their members make up the DVV International.

If we want to know more about the situation of VHS today, we can easily access the relevant details, as the VHS have full statistical records for the last 55 years. They are collected by DIE on an annual basis, and here are some figures for 2016: all are part of the local village, town, city, or regional structure of education and culture. Half are legal entities as associations; others are part of the municipality or act as not-for-profit companies. All receive funding via legislation on state level, support by the local government, and fees from participants. Overall, Germany boasts more than 900 VHS with 3,000 sub-centres, with VHS Munich being the largest, enrolling a total of 250.000 participants in 2016.

All VHS together had more than six million participants in courses and an additional 3 million in lectures, excursions, or study tours related to politics, languages, health, culture, or vocational skills. Languages and health are the largest areas with around 60 per cent of all course offers. Almost 75 per cent of participants are in the age range of 25-64 years, whereas 16 per cent are older than 65 years, a proportion that has grown by 4.3 per cent in the last decade. Those above 65 are especially interested in issues related to politics and the environment, arts and culture, health and nutrition (Huntemann & Reichart, 2016).

Although the VHS structure is the largest within the system (or market) of adult education providers, it is not the only one. The Catholic and Protestant churches have their own adult education associations, and so do the trade unions, the farmers associations, political foundations, and others. To understand the current situation in Germany even better, it may be helpful to look at the figures that DIE director Josef Schrader offered to a meeting of VHS directors in larger cities: An analysis of the statistics of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research shows that in Germany about 3 million children are in kindergarten, 8 million in primary and secondary schools, 2.5 million in vocational training, and 3 million in colleges and universities. By contrast, all sorts of adult education providers combined (general, civic, vocational, academic) en-

rol 26.5 million people, a figure that shows the high importance of this sub-sector within the lifelong learning spectrum, and the relevance of the VHS contribution of about 9 million participants (Schrader, 2017).

### 8. *DVV International*

The Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association, in short DVV International, was institutionalized in 1969 after a longer period of international activities not only in Europe but also with partners in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There is a diverse history, with cooperation in Europe starting as part of reconciliation after World War II and cooperation in Africa being part of decolonization. It also involved national and regional associations working together: DVV International joined the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) in 1953, and in 1964, DVV International represented EAEA in the founding event of the Asia Pacific Association of Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) in Australia. Together they founded the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) in 1973, following CONFINTEA III, the World Conference on Adult Education, which UNESCO convened in Tokyo in 1972 (Hinzen, 1994).

The history of DVV International is documented quite well, as the two previous celebrations – 25 years in 1994 and 40 years in 2009 – were both used for collecting a wealth of documents, reports, studies, and statistics, which are helpful for anyone interested in its development. Taking these anniversary volumes together, they cover almost 1,000 pages with numerous examples on how DVV International was influenced by political, social, economic, and cultural decisions, and how in turn DVV International as part of civil society advocacy action tried to influence global adult education and lifelong learning policies and practices towards sustainable development and poverty reduction (Hinzen, 2009).

Today, DVV International cooperates with some 200 partners in more than 30 countries through its regional and national offices. One of its activities is supporting local adult education centres on three levels: Interventions on the macro level are related to policy, legislation, and financing; the meso level deals with the training of staff and infrastructural developments; the micro level concerns the diversity of activities reflecting a variety of themes and courses for the different target groups, including those continuing their education and learning in later life. Since 1973, the journal *Adult Education and Development* has been published, and in recent years it has covered important issues of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including *Communities, Skills and Competences, Inclusion and Diversity, Role and Impact of Adult Education* ([www.dvv-international.de](http://www.dvv-international.de)).

DVV International has just published a commemorative book titled *50 Years DVV International. Half a Century of Adult Education*. It is a collection of stories looking into 50 countries where work was done in the past or is taking place now (Hirsch, Jost & Waschek 2019). It was made available for the major event of the anniversary year, which was celebrated alongside the Adult Education and Development Conference (AEDC) in May 2019 in Weimar. This AEDC specifically dealt with adult education and learning within the implementation of the SDG, a key issue in all the work of DVV International throughout this decade. The AEDC was also prepared by another publication on *Youth and Adult Education in the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. Role, Contribution and Further Potential* (Schweighöfer, 2019).

During the previous AEDC in 2017 in Tbilisi, Georgia, a set of key messages on Adult Education/Community Learning Centres (AEC/CLC) were agreed upon, including:

*Policy, legislation, and financing:* For AEC/CLC to function well, similar legal provision, governance, and support structures as those available for schools, vocational training, and higher education are needed. Funding should be adequate, predictable, and sustainable.

*Roles, functions:* AEC/CLC are multifunctional and innovative institutions. They cater for education and training, community information, opportunities for counselling to learners and potential participants, and act as social and cultural meeting places and centres for arts and exhibitions.

A report on the inputs and outcomes of that conference was made available in an article *Erwachsenenbildungszentren als Entwicklungsfaktor – Verantwortung, Strukturen und Nutzen* (Translation: Adult Education Centres as a Key to Development: Responsibilities, Structures, and Benefits) (Hinzen & Jost, 2018). Again, an interesting collection of case studies on *Adult education centres as a key to development – challenges and success factors* was prepared in advance and later distributed widely as part of the DVV International series on *International Perspectives in Adult Education* (Avramovska, Hirsch & Schmidt-Behlau, 2017).

## 9. Looking Ahead

Community-based adult education is an important component in the work towards a system of lifelong learning. In the age of globalization and digitalization, institutions of education, training, and learning change in many respects. But as much as we believe in the importance of kindergarten, schools, vocational and higher education and struggle to support them as institutions, adult education also needs an institutional back-up. Policy, legislation, and financing are required for all sub-sectors of edu-

cation. Only then can VHS and other adult education centres provide their professional services to those who want to continue their learning after and outside schooling.

This lifelong, life-wide, and life-deep dimension calls for a high level of cooperation of all sub-sectors in education and training, and serious joint efforts with so many institutions in the social, economic, and cultural sectors, like cities, companies, and museums. If this cannot be achieved, then we will not see a system of learning opportunities throughout life.

In the future, the local and national dimensions of VHS, as well as the global perspectives of DVV International, will be strongly oriented towards policies and practices of sustainable development. Global education monitoring reports such as *Education for people and planet: Creating sustainable futures for all* (UNESCO, 2016) will hopefully monitor closely the contribution of adult education and lifelong learning on an annual basis, which should lead to higher recognition. For the time being, it may be wishful thinking to see stronger support for adult education centres around the globe by local and national governments as well as the international development aid architecture. On the other hand, the German case of the VHS and its inclusion in the constitution 100 years ago shows that such moves can make a difference. Let us therefore cooperate towards such a better future.

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#### Websites<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Last access: 07/2020.