

Perspectives

PROSPECTS OF FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Folk high schools in different countries are a type of residential college for adult education. Their impact in adult education is greatest in the Nordic countries where their strong position is based on the Danish origin of folk high schools.

In recent years development in society also has forced folk high schools to face a situation where they have had to think of their future. The most important actual problems are: difficulties in recruiting adults to courses, the increasing competition in the 'adult education market' and unsteadiness of financial resources.

In the future the folk high schools will have to extend the co-operation and division of work between the institutions. They also will have to find new special target groups to look for alternative sources of finance and to support adequate quality of teaching. The more folk high schools are able to adapt to the developing society the more secure their position will be in the future.

Résumé

"Folk high school" (école supérieure populaire) est une sorte d'éducation des adultes en résidence. C'est dans les pays nordiques qu'elle a le plus grand impact en éducation des adultes; sa solide position s'explique par l'origine danoise du système.

Ces dernières années le progrès de la société a obligé aussi les "folk high schools" à réfléchir et à analyser leur avenir. Les problèmes les plus importants à résoudre sont: le recrutement des étudiants, la concurrence toujours croissante sur "le marché de l'éducation des adultes" et les difficultés financières.

Pour pouvoir résoudre ces problèmes, les établissements doivent entre eux, élargir à la fois la coopération et la division du travail entre eux. Ils doivent trouver de nouvelles clientèles cibles, chercher de nouvelles sources de

financement et de plus, garantir un niveau de qualité de l'enseignement suffisamment élevé. En Europe, les "folk high schools" doivent également coopérer au plan international; toute l'éducation des adultes des divers pays s'appuie en fait, sur un fond fort semblable de progrès économique et culturel.

What Does the Term 'Folk High School' Mean?

In this article Folk High School is referred to in its broad sense as an institution that functions in the area of general non-vocational adult education. The original model is Danish, and the Danish folk high school tradition has been maintained particularly in the Nordic countries and the Federal Republic of Germany (the *Heimvolkshochschule*).¹ The residential colleges for adult education of Great Britain, the Netherlands and Switzerland, which will be dealt with in this article, do not as such correspond to the Danish folk high school, although similar institutions function in the above mentioned countries—for example the Dutch *Volkshogeschool* and the Swiss *Volkshochschulheim* as a form of the residential college. In these countries different historical factors have had an influence on the national features of development in the organization of adult education.

The history of adult education, on the whole, is not very long. The origins can be found in the late 18th century England, where, as early as fifty years before the establishing of the first Danish folk high school, the First Adult School in Nottingham was functioning.² Also in Holland and Switzerland adult education was in operation even in the 19th century although the founding of the folk high school in these countries is said to have taken place at a later date.³

It is also important to be aware of the fact that the folk high school in its original form, not to mention its original goals, can hardly be identified in any country. Friedenthal-Haase stated that in the tradition stemming from Grundtvig, the folk high school has four essential characteristics.⁴ First, it is a school for everyday life. Secondly, it presupposes maturity and experience. It is intended mainly for young adults. Thirdly, it is a school of national culture. Finally, it is not a school for book-learning, but a place for lively interaction.⁵ The characteristics mentioned are partly unfamiliar to the folk high schools in the Nordic countries today. Mørch-Jacobsen has characterized the situation today by saying that the term 'folk high school' covers a host of different schools, both in the individual Nordic countries and in the Nordic area as a whole.⁶ He goes on by saying that the national characteristics are as much due to vital differences of folk high school tradition and cultural backgrounds as to differences in national legislation. One thing which all Nordic folk high schools have in common, however, is that to a greater or lesser extent they keep their distance from the rest of the educational system and have historically regarded themselves as an alternative to that system. The Grundtvigian folk high school and its principles can be justly interpreted only in the right historical period of time,

whereas today's folk high schools possibly have an emphasis on being an alternative to other education. In the past few years, however, when searching for their place and finding adults for studying, folk high schools seem to have had to approach other educational systems. The problem of existence has forced them to make compromises as to their popular educational principles.

The future of the European folk high schools has been discussed a long time. In 1986, I had a chance to participate in a conference on "The Future of Folk High Schools." This conference coincided with the 25th Jubilee of the founding of the Folk High School Association in Lower Saxony. Delegates attending the conference came from most European countries with a history and tradition of residential adult education: Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Great Britain and West Germany.⁷ In the summer of 1987, I also visited Dutch folk high schools. This international cooperation produced basic material for this analysis of the prospects of folk high schools.

The Development and Present Situation of Folk High Schools in Different Countries

When looking at folk high schools in different countries one must bear in mind that they are a type of residential college for adult education. The adult education varies from one country to another; the colleges also have a history of a different length in each country.

The impact of folk high schools in adult education is greatest, at least in number, in the Nordic countries and West Germany. There their strong position was long based on tradition. In other countries, other adult educational institutions and organizations have taken care of the functions typical of the Nordic folk high schools. It is also clearly seen that the position of general adult education is strong; for instance, compared to other countries, the West German *Volkshochschule* organization also offers extensive general adult education, operating as a kind of evening folk high school.⁸

In Denmark, the first folk high school was founded as early as 1844.⁹ A total of about fifty Grundtvigian folk high schools were founded in Denmark between 1859 and 1870. National missionary movements started schools of their own about 1890, and after 1900 work began on a number of folk high schools affiliated with the labor movement, sports associations and other popular movements.¹⁰ Compared to other Nordic countries, Danish folk high schools are more independent and further away from the actual school system. This means, for example, that they do not confer formal degrees, nor, of course, do they hold examinations.¹¹ However, in Denmark the function of folk high schools has undergone changes which partly involved adapting to the demands of the developing educational system. On the other hand, society has also changed and given folk high schools new challenges.

Alongside the traditional long-term courses, short-term courses have been in operation for a long time. In the (105) Danish folk high schools today, 15,000 people study in long-term courses and 42,000 people in short-term ones.¹² The demands of a developing society have been met by looking for forms of activity and subjects that are important and interesting to adults. For this reason folk high schools also try to fill specialized needs. Some of them, for example, place special emphasis on sports and athletics; others on music, art or drama; and others on problems of working life or special international topics.¹³

In Norway, the first folk high school was founded as early as 1864.¹⁴ After that, folk high schools were being founded at a fast rate, and now there are 86 of them altogether.¹⁵ Almost half of the folk high schools in Norway are run by various Christian churches and other organizations.¹⁶ They have tried to reform the Norwegian folk high schools vigorously by developing legislation, and there has been a strong increase in short-term courses since 1985,¹⁷ the number of which used to be minimal.¹⁸

In long-term courses, which are 33 weeks long, there is an annual participation rate of about 6,000, and every year about 20,000-30,000 Norwegian students take part in short-term courses of various lengths.¹⁹ Problems have arisen in recruiting students, especially for the long-term courses, which have made folk high schools consider a reform of the contents of their teaching and the target groups.

In Sweden, the folk high school activity is almost as old as in Norway. The first Swedish folk high school was founded in 1868,²⁰ and as elsewhere the idea spread quickly. Today there are 125 folk high schools, and most of them are maintained and owned by different organizations. About 40% of folk high schools are sponsored by different county councils.²¹ Most of the Swedish folk high schools organize long-term courses, normally for 30-34 weeks, as well as short-term courses.²²

In the Swedish folk schools, the annual number of students in long-term courses is about 17,000, and about 230,000 in short-term ones. In Sweden there is more competition between institutions offering educational services, so the folk high schools have tried to develop their services and teaching in cooperation with other organizations.

In Finland, folk high schools were established later than those in the other Nordic countries. The idea came from Denmark via Sweden. The first folk high school was founded in 1889.²³ A considerable number of folk high schools were founded in the first decade of the 20th century, and the present number is 90. The Finnish folk high schools can be divided into four categories on the basis of their functional background and sponsoring communities:

- Grundtvigian or provincial folk high schools. These folk high schools have not tied themselves to any political or religious movement;

- Christian folk high schools, which are based in different religious movements and the Evangelical-Lutheran church;
- Folk high schools of social organizations. These are owned mainly by political organizations or trade unions;
- Three folk schools are serving such special groups as the handicapped.²⁴

The 1983 report of the folk high school committee states that the definition of the function of Finnish folk high schools is based on the general functions of adult education. The report also states that the functions of folk high schools have to be viewed in the present situation, and the adult educational needs of the moment should be identified through a situational analysis.²⁵

The long-term courses in Finnish folk high schools have a total of about 6,000 full-time students, which is exceeded considerably by the annual amount of 40,000 short-term students. To meet the challenges of today, Finnish folk high schools have, among other things, increased teaching which qualifies students for a trade, and it has clearly narrowed the gap between folk high schools and the formal school system.

In other European countries there is, with the exception of West Germany, a noticeable difference from the Nordic model of folk high school, the movement being more toward residential colleges for adult education corresponding to the Danish one.

In Great Britain, the history of adult education is long and varied, with a strong popular educational image, the influence of the Nordic folk high school being seen in the establishing of the residential colleges at the turn of the century.²⁶ Different figures are given for the number of residential colleges for adult education of the folk high school type, but there are only a few colleges arranging long-term courses. Short-term colleges are more common, though their significance in British liberal adult education quantitatively is not similar to that of the folk high schools in the Nordic countries. In any case, the development of short-term residential colleges for adult education since the 1960s is a very significant feature in British adult education.²⁷ Adult education of the folk high school type does not seem to have gained the same kind of footing in Great Britain as in many other countries.

In West Germany, folk high schools have a strong position in the adult education system. The folk high school movement was started in northern Germany, and it was in Germany that Grundtvig's influence principally was seen outside the Nordic countries. In the course of time, two different types of folk high schools were born from this basic start: the *Heimvolkshochschule*, i.e. residential colleges for adult education which were similar to the Danish folk high school, and the *Volkshochschule*, i.e. evening colleges for adult education.²⁸ The borders between the different German folk high schools (*Heimvolkshochschule*) are not very clear, since in the group of residential colleges for adult education there are other

institutions side by side with the clearly Danish folk high schools. Sponsors of these institutions include different church and social organizations. There are about 200 residential colleges, and about a quarter of them are close to the Danish type of folk high school.²⁹

In the present situation, special attention should be paid to the considerable differences between separate federal states in the folk high school activity. The strongest area at the moment is Lower Saxony. One of the important external developmental features in the West German folk high schools has been a pronounced increase in short-term courses. However, recruiting students seems to be a problem.

Typical of adult education in the Netherlands is the variety of traditions which includes Catholic, Protestant and 'general' traditions. Institutions designed for adults, which were of the residential center type, existed as early as in the first decades of the 20th century, but the folk high school based on the Danish model was founded only in 1931.³⁰ The development of folk high schools led, however, in a different direction from the one in the Nordic countries. A feature typical of folk high schools has been the abundance of short-term courses, of a sort similar to those offered by other residential colleges which are the equivalent of folk high schools. While at one time there were as many as nearly 50 residential colleges, of which more than ten were folk high schools, this number was considerably reduced for economical and political reasons, i.e. the state has had less opportunities for subsidizing them.

For a long time there was a noticeable vertical division between residential colleges and folk high schools according to philosophical values typical of Dutch society, a factor that was decisive also at the start of adult education. After long efforts, there is now cooperation in residential college activity and both the state and the institutions themselves have participated in developing it.³¹ Including the whole of residential adult education, Dutch folk high schools now operate on the principle of a kind of private initiative. The institutions plan their courses and after that they can apply for financial support, for example, from the state. However, the state contribution has decreased in recent years, and therefore new solutions for financing have had to be found. The annual number of adult students has been about 120,000: the three main content areas of education are the humanizing and democratizing of work; supporting teaching in schools; and addressing special groups, such as the unemployed, old people, single parents, etc.

In Switzerland, adult education is very distinctive. One of the reasons behind this is a relatively great cultural autonomy exercised by the cantons. This can be seen in a heterogeneous national organization and in the multiplicity types of adult education.³² Adult education in Switzerland is provided mainly by voluntary organizations launched by private initiative. Apart from national bodies there are a number of local associations which do not have a national affiliation. Folk high school activity was started already at the end of the 1920s, but the first folk high school was not founded until 1936. Folk high schools have never established a footing in Switzerland,

although in the beginning the intentions of introducing the Danish folk high school were serious.³³ The fact remains, though, that in Switzerland, as elsewhere, in adult education there are institutions which carry out a similar function to that of the folk high schools in the Nordic countries. The Swiss folk high school itself offers considerably less of a range of functions than in those countries. However, it seems that there is more and more interest in increasing the amount of adult education of the residential college type.

In the different European countries, folk high schools have reached very different positions, but the original Danish and Nordic folk high school activity has been, from the very start, the model that has had an inspiring influence on efforts to develop adult educational organizations. The reception of the folk high school idea and its further development in different countries has been connected with many things, such as social conditions, administrative systems, and other developments in adult education. It is interesting to see that people concerned with folk high schools and residential colleges in Europe have recently been interested in discussing together current problems of their institutions, thus indicating that despite their formal differences, common aims and content can be found among them.

In an international folk high school conference held in West Germany in 1986, a large number of problems were brought up which were shared by folk high schools in most European countries. These are of great importance to the future of folk high schools (and residential colleges) in different countries. Many central issues were presented, and recently one of the most important seems to have been the problem of having enough students (Sweden is an exception in this respect). The second common problem is the increasing competition in the 'adult education market'. The third one is economic difficulties. Although folk high schools, e.g., in the Nordic countries have secured their economy through legislation, economic problems have not completely disappeared.

Direction: The Future

In recent years, developments in society and the educational system have forced many adult educational organizations and institutions to face a situation where they have had to think seriously of the possibilities and conditions of their survival. The needs of developing society have especially increased the need for vocational adult education, which traditionally has never been included in the function of folk high schools. In many countries, however, the question has been raised as to whether folk high schools should change in this respect to keep up with the general changes. Vocational studies have, in fact, been included in folk high school programs in countries with a strong folk high school background, such as Finland in particular and Sweden to a lesser extent. On the other hand, the same lines of development have strengthened the idea that folk high schools should have a strong role of popular education of a liberal kind.

In the Nordic countries, the freedom that folk high schools have is regarded as a strong point. By freedom they mean, as it was put in a Nordic folk high

school conference, not the freedom to do anything but to be able to concentrate on the most essential things at different times. It always means also dealing with basic problems independent of the ideological trends at different times.³⁴

When deciding about their future, folk high schools have been striving for new solutions and trying to test their effect in order to maintain and develop their own function. At the national level, two main principles seem to underline many good solutions: the cooperation and the division of work amongst the institutions.

A look at the most meaningful future-oriented ideas of development shows that the most common European solution is the **increase of short-term courses**; in fact, they are already of great importance. Folk high schools aim to consolidate their position in the future by finding **new special target groups**. Different European countries vary in this respect as well. In folk high schools (and residential colleges) in Great Britain and some countries in Central Europe the unemployed seem to be a more important group than in the Nordic countries. Other target groups are women, foreign workers, single parents, etc. In working with such target groups, folk high schools have a chance to show their social awareness. The social outlook is shown also in the tendency to take advantage of the educational needs derived from the democratization of working life, for instance in the Netherlands. Changes in working life have given folk high schools other possibilities too, for instance, in countries like West Germany, where the idea of educational leave is well developed.

As a result of economic difficulties, folk high schools in many countries have had to look for **other sources of finance** which in the future are likely to be found in the form of various courses either arranged by an established cooperational organization or by the institutions themselves for another organization, with a third alternative being the letting out of their premises to other groups. One aim is that the students' costs should not be raised. Folk high schools will be able to compete because of the **quality of teaching** which is guaranteed by a competent teaching staff. An important means of maintaining folk high school activity is an ability to create such a **study environment** as to give the students a possibility of feeling comfortable both in their studies and their leisure time. The study environment must also be developed in the direction of enabling the whole family to study. There have already been experiments in this field in West Germany, for example.

The more folk high schools are capable of cooperation at the national and international level, the more secured their position will be in the future. The European perspective is always shared by different countries because, for example, the economic development and cultural background is very similar in these countries.

To describe larger European questions, I will finish with a quote by Derek Legge, an Englishman, and his view on the future of residential education:

Various questions have to be asked concerning the future of residential education in Britain. Do we need more colleges of either long-term or short-term nature? Partly it would seem that the answer depends upon an assessment of the balance between the advantages and possible disadvantages of this form of education, and partly upon the willingness of people to avail themselves of the opportunities so offered . . . Besides the difficult question of cost, there are assertions that the courses are shallow and too short to allow for systematic study . . . Against this, there is some subjective, though substantial, evidence that residence makes a significant impact on the development of interest and awareness, and that even a short absence of home and work can effect quite remarkable learning and attitude changes . . . The willingness of people to come depends basically on their expectations and their individual assessment of the value of the experience.³⁵

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