



100 years of *Volkshochschule* in Germany – 50 years of DVV International: Signposts for local and global comparative perspectives on adult learning and education

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Abstract

In 2019, German folk high schools – *Volkshochschulen* (vhs) – celebrated the centenary of their inclusion in the Constitution of the Weimar Republic in 1919, an era when they founded local centres in many parts of the country. Ever since, they have played an important part in the adult learning and education (ALE) sub-sector of the German education system, meanwhile reaching a participation level of almost 9 million learners per year. Under the umbrella of its national association *Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband* (DVV), founded in 1953, the vhs offers courses in a variety of subjects and different forms through roughly 900 adult learning centres and almost 3,000 local branches. In 1969, DVV expanded its operations with the establishment of its own institute for international cooperation. DVV International, whose 50th anniversary coincided with the vhs centenary, has institutionalised the diversity and ever-growing scale of cross-border and global cooperation activities of the national association. Marking both anniversaries generated a kind of collective cultural memory which located the vhs in the institutional foundations of a democratic society, and paved the way to advance policy dialogue. At the same time, these anniversaries also fed into a marketing strategy to mobilise higher levels of support and participation. DVV International used the example of the evolution of the vhs system to demonstrate the importance of interventions for better policy, legislation and financing at local, national, regional and global levels. Activities throughout the anniversary year included high-level events, conferences and workshops, publications and studies. Based on these activities and outputs, the authors consider and compare commonalities and differences of ALE milestones in other countries and regions of the world, and their potential for learning from the past for the future.

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Résumé

Les universités populaires allemandes ont 100 ans et DVV International fête son 50^e anniversaire : points de vue locaux et globaux comparatifs sur l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes – En 2019, les universités populaires allemandes – *Volkshochschulen* (vhs) – ont célébré le centenaire de leur intégration dans la Constitution de la république de Weimar en 1919, époque à laquelle furent créés des centres locaux dans de nombreuses régions du pays. Depuis, elles ont joué un rôle essentiel dans l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes (AEA), sous-secteur du système allemand de l'éducation, et enregistrent aujourd'hui un niveau de près de neuf millions d'apprenants par an. Chapeautées par la Confédération allemande pour l'éducation des adultes (*Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband* - DVV), créée en 1953, les universités populaires proposent des cours sur des sujets variés et sous différentes formes par l'intermédiaire de quelque 900 centres d'éducation des adultes et près de 3 000 bureaux locaux. En 1969, DVV a élargi son champ d'action en créant son propre institut de coopération internationale, DVV International. L'institut, dont le 50^e anniversaire coïncidait avec le centenaire des universités populaires allemandes, a apporté une base institutionnelle à la diversité et à l'ampleur sans cesse croissante des activités de coopération transnationale et internationale de la Confédération allemande. Célébrer ces deux anniversaires a fait naître une sorte de mémoire culturelle collective, ancrant les vhs dans les fondements institutionnels d'une société démocratique et ouvrant la voie à la poursuite du dialogue politique. En même temps, ces anniversaires ont nourri une stratégie de marketing visant à mobiliser un soutien et une participation plus importants. DVV International a pris l'évolution du système des vhs comme exemple pour démontrer l'importance des interventions pour faire progresser la politique, la législation et le financement aux niveaux local, national, régional et mondial. Tout au long de l'année anniversaire, des événements, conférences et ateliers à haut niveau ont été organisés, des publications éditées et des études réalisées. Sur la base de ces activités et de leurs résultats, les auteurs ont examiné et comparé les points communs et les différences des étapes marquantes de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes dans d'autres pays et régions du monde, et les possibilités qu'elles offrent de tirer des enseignements du passé pour les mettre à profit à l'avenir.

Introduction

The *Volkshochschule* (vhs)¹ is the most important institution of adult education in Germany, widely known and renowned both within the country and abroad. In 2019, there were 888 vhs centres operating as legal entities in cities and villages all

¹ While this an acronym, it is our preference to present it in lower case instead of capitals, thereby reflecting its appearance in the institution's logo. In this article, we use vhs to refer both to the institution of the *Volkshochschule* (singular) in general and to its learning centres, *Volkshochschulen* (plural), as a group.

over Germany, with 2,845 local branches within learners' easy reach (Reichart et al. 2021, p. 47). The number of enrolments that year exceeded 9,000,000 (ibid., pp. 66, 83, 94, 97, 102), clocking up a total of more than 18,000,000 learning hours (ibid., pp. 66, 83, 94, 97).

Statistical vhs records of this kind have been prepared annually since 1962 by the German Institute for Adult Education – Leibnitz Centre for Lifelong Learning (DIE),² providing rich and interesting material for longitudinal research. A recent study exploring the range of vhs courses since 1962 (Reichart 2018) found that over the years, about one-third (and thus the largest chunk) of the programme was consistently made up of language courses, with English dominating from the start. But Elisabeth Reichart's study also demonstrates the responsiveness of the vhs to new challenges: when the particularly high influx of refugees and migrants into the country in 2015 triggered a sharp rise in the demand for courses teaching German as a foreign language, vhs provision accommodated more than a million participants in 2015 (Reichart 2018, p. 195).

Data on vhs funding fed into another comparative study which looked at adult education in fourteen countries (Duke et al. 2021). According to the German contributors to this study, in 2014 just over half of the vhs revenue (52 %) came out of public funding, while participants' fees constituted 41 per cent, with the remaining 7 per cent coming from a variety of sources (Lattke and Ioannidou 2021, p. 65). Funding is especially relevant to the aspiration of the vhs is to be open for all, to offer a broad variety of programmes, to be affordable, and to provide decentralised high-quality learning opportunities anywhere in the country.

In terms of organisational structure, there are 16 regional vhs associations (one representing each federal state), under the umbrella of the federal vhs association, *Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband* (DVV), founded in 1953, which acts as a service provider for the regional associations, the local vhs adult learning centres and their branches (see Figure 1).

In 1969, DVV expanded operations to international level by creating its own institute for international cooperation, DVV International (Figure 2). With 50 years of activity under its belt, this institute meanwhile provides “worldwide support for the establishment and development of sustainable structures for youth and adult education”, and is cooperating “with more than 200 civil society, government and academic partners in more than 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe” (DVV International 2021a, p. 31). Its

work focuses on literacy and basic education, vocational training, global and intercultural learning, environmental education and sustainable development, migration and integration, refugee work, health education, conflict prevention and democracy education (ibid.).

In this article, we intend to show that, from its very beginnings, the vhs, intertwined with social, cultural and political movements, has significantly paved the way for

² The acronym DIE stands for Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung. Leibniz-Zentrum für Lebenslanges Lernen e.V. [German Institute for Adult Education. Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning].



Figure 1 Infrastructure of the German adult education association, *Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband* (DVV). *Source* DVV International (2022)

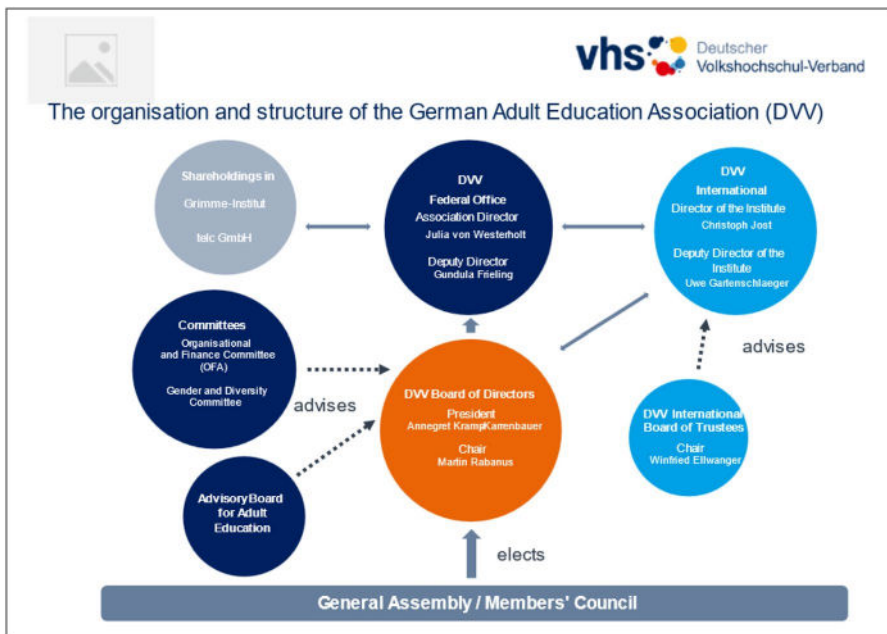


Figure 2 Organisational structure of the German adult education association, *Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband* (DVV), including DVV International. *Source* DVV International (2022)

the enhancement of adult learning and education (ALE). Its impact extends beyond national significance to international comparative relevance. Thus, we argue, the vhs is not a force that is limited to Germany alone, just as its own development cannot be interpreted solely in national terms. This becomes clear by looking at its historical context and development, and by analysing the early international orientation of the vhs and its umbrella organisation, DVV. Especially since the second half of the 20th century, the vhs (in particular, DVV International) has been committed to identifying and solving urgent educational problems which are being discussed from a global perspective and in international settings. Thus, while the vhs has widely influenced the situation of adult education in Germany, the anniversaries of 2019 demonstrate that its merits are not restricted to a mere national level.

We begin the main part of this article by considering the historical context and development of the vhs, the early international orientation of the vhs and DVV and international commitments supporting institutionalised ALE. We then discuss the anniversaries of the vhs and DVV International, and go on to compare these with anniversaries of adult education institutions in other countries, such as the publication centenary of the Adult Education Committee's *Final Report* in Great Britain. We conclude our article with some ideas for future research and some thoughts on the merits of observing anniversaries. Prompting ourselves to look back on the evolution of adult education history in Germany and internationally, and especially from a comparative perspective, we ponder how this might prove fruitful for addressing contemporary issues.

Historical context and development of the vhs

The Enlightenment – Age of Reason

Events and influences (in the years just before and after the founding of the German Empire as a national state in 1871) which led to the establishment of the *Volkshochschule* in Germany in 1919 are manifold, rooted both in national and international developments. The core idea stems from the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries; also referred to by some as the Age of Reason. Its proponents argued that every human being is capable of leading his or her life in accordance with reason; therefore, reason-driven cognition and true knowledge must be made available to everybody. While, within the German context, this did not mean that “common” people were considered to be free to leave their given social status (rather, they were supposed to live the best life possible at their own social level), the Enlightenment in Germany nevertheless addressed all human beings. This explains the rapid growth of adult education in the 18th century. Right up to today, the vhs sees itself as maintaining the tradition of the Enlightenment (e.g. Adorno 1956; Voßkuhle 2019), upholding the central idea of the non-exclusivity of knowledge, and thus foregrounding, on an institutional level, the openness of access to knowledge.

The 19th century: public lectures for workers, craftsmen and women

In the 19th century, these principles were further elaborated. Besides a large number of popular Enlightenment initiatives, such as the dissemination of popular literature and the preparation of exhibitions, more and more educated men began to feel responsible for broadening knowledge among the common people. Notably, from the 1820s onwards, a number of university teachers began to give public lectures for a mass audience, including workers, craftsmen and women. Moreover, institutions dedicated to adult learning, adult education and self-education, the first of which go back to the 18th century,³ continued to be founded throughout the 19th century. Quite a few of those institutions were supported by various educational associations which began to thrive during that time. There were, for example, reading circles, associations dedicated to the education of workers, or of women, as well as associations and societies for enhancing popular knowledge of the sciences. From 1871 onwards, another influential player in the field was the Society for the Dissemination of Popular Education,⁴ which comprised up to 8,400 associations for adult education throughout the country in 1913 (see Dräger 1975, p. 116).

In the first half of the 19th century, educational initiatives aimed at workers and craftsmen grew stronger; they developed into an important root of the labour movement. In addition, from the 1860s onwards, the women's movement emerged, one central claim being the improvement of female education, as a prerequisite for equal rights and independence. All these educational initiatives contributed to preparing the ground for the establishment of the vhs in 1919. All of them demonstrated the need for universal adult education, and that it was welcomed by the intended target group; some of whom also suggested that it was not enough to establish learning opportunities for adults in the big cities, but necessary to reach people across the whole country, both in the towns and in the countryside.

19th- and 20th-century models of adult education in England and Denmark

The two most important additional roots of the vhs, however, are of international origin. At the end of the 19th century, the British University Extension Movement began spreading across Europe, including the German-speaking countries. Thus, the idea of “extramural” educational programmes was embraced, which meant that universities, apart from regular study programmes, also provided special series of “popular lectures” as well as optional intensifying “classes” for anybody, without requiring any formal qualifications, or awarding any certificates. However, the protagonists of the University Extension Movement claimed that the popular programme was supposed to be intelligible to a lay audience, without losing its academic character and scientific accuracy. The popularisation of academic matters proved to be a continuous didactical challenge, and remains so in the vhs today. The

³ The city of Jena, for example, had a literary society, a public library and a musical institute (all of which were established before 1785) and a school for farmers (established in 1791).

⁴ Its German name is Gesellschaft für Verbreitung von Volksbildung.

very name of the institution, “*Volkshochschule*” – literally folk high school –, is a reminder of its connection with the university: it claims to be a “high school”, a university, for the people.

Apart from the influences on the vhs that came from England, the other pivotal source of the vhs lies of course in Denmark, the motherland of the *folkehøjskole*, which was inspired by Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig. The first Danish folk high school was established in 1844 in Rødding (Jutland). Initially, the Danish folk high school, typically situated in a rural area, was meant to be an educational institution for the peasantry of Denmark, especially young farmers aged 18–30, offering courses during the winter months. Grundtvig conceived the folk high school as a “school for life” with a broad variety of subjects and a focus on individual self-development, but without any examinations. Learning was – and still is – an intensive experience at Danish folk high schools, which are residential: the study groups live and learn together under their roofs for an average of 4 months.⁵

The 20th century: establishment of folk high schools in Germany

From the 1890s onwards, the Danish folk high school (originally, to a degree, representative of Danish nationalism) was observed with interest by German educationalists, some of whom travelled to Denmark and subsequently wrote about their findings after returning home (e.g. Wilhelm Rein, professor of education at the University of Jena). The first Danish-style folk high school on German soil was established in 1905 in Tinglev, just south of the then Danish border (today it is inside Denmark). The German term “*Volkshochschule*” seems likely to have emerged through a verbatim translation of the Danish *folkehøjskole*.

As to the further reception of the Danish-style folk high school in Germany in the early 20th century, there is a seminal work by an expert in agricultural methodology and training, Anton Heinrich Hollmann, which is of exceptional importance in this context. Entitled *Die dänische Volkshochschule und ihre Bedeutung für die Entwicklung einer völkischen Kultur in Dänemark* [The Danish folk high school and its significance for the development of a folk culture in Denmark] (Hollmann 1909), this book can be considered exemplary for a transnational transfer of ideas: it ensured that the Danish-style folk high school, the residential vhs, became known – and attractive – to an interested German public. Most German early-20th-century vhs facilities in Germany were, however, organised as so-called “evening *Volkshochschule*”, a model still in use today. It means that the learning venue is open in the evenings, and people go there to attend a lecture or a weekly course, but return home afterwards.

While the first vhs institutions (or their direct forerunners, out of which the vhs emerged) date back to the 1890s (e.g. Munich in 1896), the most important push towards the establishment of the modern vhs did not occur until after World War I. The old political system of the German Empire collapsed, the Emperor abdicated,

⁵ For more information, visit <https://danishfolkhighschools.com/> [accessed 10 February 2022].

and the first democracy on German territory came into being. Democracy, however, does not need subjects but mature and responsible – educated – citizens, and this, in principle, allows for the building of a flourishing and pluralistic adult educational system. The new Constitution of the German Reich, which came into effect in 1919, included – for the first time in German history – a section which explicitly referred to the vhs. It stated that the popular education system, “including the vhs”, was to be supported on the levels of the state, the *Länder*, and the municipalities (Weimar Constitution 1919, article 148). Thus, it is not by chance that from 1919 onwards, Germany experienced a sharp increase of the number of existing vhs facilities – some people even refer to this rise as a vhs “hype” – which took place in the first years of the Weimar Republic. The vhs facilities were supposed to be places of social gathering and learning, aiming to overcome social separation, to gain clarity in all essential matters, and to find a meaningful life. The vhs was thus confronted with very high expectations, far beyond its capabilities (see Olbrich 1972, p. 93).

Nevertheless, the 1920s were a crucial era for the further development of adult education in Germany, with the vhs being a central player. It was a time of didactic innovation – didactic methods emphasising dialogue on an equal footing for all participants in a rather small learning group became prominent, such as the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* “ [working community], promoting collaborative learning instead of old-style lectures delivered to a passive mass audience. Moreover, the professionalisation of adult educators gained momentum: the view that adult educators working in the vhs needed to be qualified for teaching and facilitating adult learning, and that research on adult education was of critical importance for identifying both learning needs and suitable ways of learning in adulthood. Moreover, some topics of adult education were integrated into academic teaching and research, particularly in the political and social sciences (see Friedenthal-Haase 1991).

Early international orientation of the vhs and DVV

Early foreign roots

As shown in the previous section, the origins of the vhs in Germany lie before 1919. The early beginnings of the vhs were like a movement and they were part of other cultural and social movements of their time. Many of these were not confined to a single country; they could also be found in neighbouring countries or even extended across the European continent, albeit more to the north and west than to the south and east. This generalisation, however, is in itself somewhat fragile, since the first Hungarian folk high school in Bajaszentiván was established in 1914, and the first Moldavian one in Chişinău in 1918. But it is especially the Danish-Scandinavian tradition based on Grundtvig’s concept which is seen as closest to some of the vhs traditions, as already suggested by the closeness of the Danish term *folkehøjskole* to the German designation *Volkshochschule* (Hinzen 2000 [1997]; Friedenthal-Haase 2001).

Substantial research into this period has been undertaken in the context of the work of the Austrian Archives for Adult Education.⁶ Their comparative historical investigations explore the commonalities and differences in the development of popular and community-based education for adults at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, where the institutions bore the same German designation – *Volkshochschule*. In a recent article, two of the Archives' scholars, Thomas Dostal and Christian Stifter, come up with a preliminary conclusion:

The history of popular adult education – and thus of the *Volkshochschule* – has always been characterized by a transnational, intercultural exchange of ideas, concepts, and pedagogical practices, as well as by different ways of theoretical reception and culture-specific adaptation. Without historiographical knowledge, the developments and specifics of “nation-states” can neither be sufficiently described nor adequately understood (Dostal and Stifter 2018, p. 165).

In their suggestions towards deepening future research, Dostal and Stifter (2018) point to six areas worth investigating: (1) the level (e.g. social background) of the actors and providers; (2) the history of ideas, concepts and terminology; (3) a comparison of institutions and providers (in terms of ideals, principles and objectives); (4) pedagogical practices and theories; (5) aims of the educational philosophies and systems; and (6) to what extent the political, social, cultural and legal realities of nation states encourage or weaken the transfer of different foreign models and concepts of popular education.

Further cross-fertilisation

Another example of cross-fertilisation that demonstrates the ways and means of professional exchange and transfer in a slightly later period were of course field trips to other countries' adult education institutions, including sitting in on classes. This experience is described in the report on *Recent Developments in German Adult Education* (Coit 1932). It was written by Virginia Coit, a “travelling tutor” from England who used a scholarship from the World Association of Adult Education (WAAE) to collect first-hand information on ALE in other countries. The WAAE had been founded in 1919 in London, and Germany had become a member soon after. During her travels to different places in Germany, Coit undertook to study the work done at evening vhs, residential vhs, and variations of workers' education. She observes: “One fundamental fact about German *Volksbildung* is that it is demanded by and designed for young men and women of 18 to 25 or 30”, and goes on to argue that “permeating the whole spirit of the new educational centres, lies the complex fact of the *Jugendbewegung*” [literally: youth movement], which she describes as an “open and free movement with joint travelling of youth groups” (Coit 1932, pp. 5–6). Coit made and published her observations only a few years before the closure of the vhs during the national socialist (Nazi) regime, and the disasters of World War II.

⁶ The archive's website is at http://archiv.vhs.at/index.php?id=vhsarchiv-bestaende&no_cache=1&no_cache=1&L=1 [accessed 26 January 2022].

The Nazi regime and World War II

From 1933 onwards, the German adult education system was integrated into, and subjected to, the process of the so-called *Gleichschaltung* [an at least approximate translation of this term might be synchronisation], which meant that it was aligned to the different authorities of the Nazi state. In all its domains, adult education – always framed by propaganda – was an important tool for national socialism.⁷ Its potential proved to be an instrument for promoting Nazi ideology among the population: for educating Nazi executives, for vocational training in accordance with the aims of the *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* [German labour front], for arranging attractive ways of spending one's leisure time in the context of the *Kraft durch Freude* [strength through joy] organisation, and for educating women (as brides and mothers). A free and pluralistic adult education system, including the vhs system, was no longer possible. The vhs facilities had either disintegrated as democratic institutions, or they were closed by the Nazis, or they had changed their name in obeisance to expectations (e.g. *Deutsche Heimatschule* [German homeland school]), or they had eagerly adjusted themselves to the political circumstances, in order to save the institution and/or to continue – clandestinely – with some elements of a humane education – a plan which generally proved to be illusory (see Friedenthal-Haase and Meilhammer 2022a; Meilhammer 2000).

Rebuilding German adult education after 1945

After the unconditional surrender of the Nazi system in 1945, the victorious Allies agreed that Nazi educational institutions and organisations were to be closed permanently and that Nazi and militaristic doctrines within the German educational system were to be eliminated, while at the same time the development of democratic ideas was to be encouraged. Consequently, soon after the war, the vhs started anew, in each of the four occupation zones Germany had been divided into by the Allied powers.

However, there was disagreement between the three Western Allies (Britain, France and the United States) and the Soviet Union concerning how the envisaged “democratic education” could be conceived and implemented. The Soviet Union aimed at constructing an “anti-fascist” educational system in Germany, with central leadership, ideological alignment, and uniformity of adult educational work. In the Soviet zone, the post-war vhs was not supposed to build on the democratic traditions of the vhs of the Weimar Republic, which were said to have been “bourgeois” in nature. Instead, the mandate was to cling to a new education which would draw on Marxism-Leninism, an ideology which claimed to hold all the right answers for how to view the world.

⁷ The journal we are publishing this article in was no exception. Founded in 1931 by German educationist Friedrich Schneider of the University of Cologne as the *Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft/International Education Review/Revue Internationale de Pédagogie*, it was also misappropriated by the Nazi regime (see Dave 1984; McIntosh 2002).

In the Western occupation zones, however, the intention of rebuilding a democratic educational system meant (with different emphases maintained by the three occupying powers) (re-)establishing democratic structures. It meant distributing new learning material and appointing people who were considered to be non-Nazi, some of whom had pre-1933 adult educational experience, and some had returned from exile. To a certain degree, the post-war vhs in the three Western occupation zones resorted to its own German democratic tradition. International professional exchange was encouraged, and some networks from the time before 1933 were revived (see also Friedenthal-Haase and Meilhammer 2022b).

It should be noted that the taking up of the tradition of learning from exchange and mutual professional support was facilitated by invitations from friendly adult education organisations abroad. A number of Scandinavian folk high schools acted as hosts, and a report for the years 1947/48 shows that more than 50 colleagues from German vhs institutions went to Sweden and generated new knowledge (Hinzen 1994, p. 14). In addition, the education services of the three Western Allies (Britain, France and the United States) were also important at the time. Much of the provision was labelled as *Bildung zur Demokratie* [education towards democracy], or what would in today's terms be called "citizenship education", and it was initiated as part of a re-education or re-construction process, sometimes using a combination of the two as educational re-construction. A close witness of that period was Ronald Haig Wilson, who worked as a Programme Officer for the Cultural Department of the British High Commission in Berlin, and later in the mid-1950s as a Consultant of the Cultural Attaché in the British Embassy in Bonn. In a written interview on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of DVV, he provided details of how he had been able to use British funding to recruit adult educators from Switzerland, the Netherlands and Scandinavia to come to Germany shortly after the end of the war and prepare the ground for cooperation with vhs and other ALE institutions (Wilson 2003, p. 24).

Intensifying international exchange in the 1950s

In 1952, the then UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE)⁸ convened and hosted an international conference entitled "Adult education towards social and political responsibility" in Hamburg (Jessup 1953). During this conference, Fritz Borinski, head of the residential vhs Göhrde (in Lower Saxony) and later professor for education in Berlin, provided a "Note on certain recent developments in adult education in Germany" (Borinski 1953). His insights were influenced by his own democratic practice of adult education in the Weimar Republic, followed by his emigration to England in 1934, where he lived in exile for more than a decade and founded, together with other exiled Germans, the "German Educational Reconstruction Committee" in 1944. He returned to Germany in 1947. In his note to the conference, he pointed out:

⁸ Today, the institute is known as the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). For more information, see Elfert (2013).

When the German adult education movement was restarted it had to establish new contacts with liberal adult education in other countries. After Germany's isolation through the National Socialist policy, and in the midst of the political re-education experiment undertaken by the victorious powers, this was not always easy. But prisoners of war and emigrants returning to Germany frequently brought with them contacts with adult education in democratic countries. Also educators from foreign countries came to Germany and gave valuable help in the reconstruction work. German educators were invited to summer schools or to longer study courses in adult education in the Scandinavian countries, England, France, the United States, Holland and Switzerland ... Many of them returned from their study trips with a deep appreciation of an active social democracy, and a real interest in international co-operation, to become pioneer workers in the country (Borinski 1953, pp. 54–55).

The 1950s also saw a growth of the idea and importance of reconciliation and understanding among nations and peoples. This trend started between France and Germany, often manifested in an increasing acceptance of European countries looking for closer cooperation. Twin-city agreements, especially between representatives of towns and villages, began to flourish and were flavoured with cultural exchanges featuring dance, music or theatre. In a number of these twinning programmes, it was possible to include exchanges between adult educators and their institutions. Later on, these exchange visits were complemented by more regular forms of cooperation. At that time, the vhs and DVV focused in particular on cooperation with adult education and education specialists in industrialised countries, showing growing engagement. To facilitate and institutionalise this work, DVV headquarters created a dedicated section for these kinds of exchange and collaboration. Financial support at that time came from the German ministry of foreign affairs (Hinzen 1994, pp. 15–17).

The idea of building a peaceful and democratic European community through the support of adult education also played an important part in the foundation of the European Bureau of Adult Education with a small office in Bergen in the Netherlands, in 1953. Re-named the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) in 1994 and meanwhile based in Brussels, it operates at a much extended level today. DVV became a member in 1957, and ever since has been very supportive of its professional development, also taking on leadership roles on the Executive Board as well as providing candidates for President or Vice-President. To name an example: in 1964, the then Director-General of DVV was also EAEA's Treasurer and took part in UNESCO's Regional Conference on Adult Education held in Sydney, Australia. It was at this conference that the Asia South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE), now known as the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education, was founded. This extension of global cooperation is discussed in more detail later in this article, in the context of its profound relevance to the work of UNESCO and its series of world conferences on adult education called CONFINTEA (Conférence Internationale sur l'Education des Adultes) as well as the building of a professional adult education civil society movement via the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) (Samłowski 2009, p. 41).

The 1960s and the aftermath of colonialism

In the 1960s, the decolonisation process especially in Africa was an additional driving force behind the international work of the German vhs. All over Germany, local vhs centres and their branches offered lectures and courses for the public which were thematically related to colonial inheritance, political demands of newly-independent countries, and the right to freedom for people who had been subject to slavery and colonialism or racism imposed by Europeans who referred to Africa as “the dark continent” (Greelane 2020). A number of local vhs centres and their branches also hosted adult educators from Cameroon, for example, setting up internships for them to stay for several weeks or months and study the practice of ALE in literacy, citizenship education, or non-formal vocational subjects as well as their management and administration. These visiting African colleagues held up a mirror to their former colonial power, giving lectures such as “*So sehen wir Afrikaner Europa*” [This is how we Africans look at Europe], presented by Ernesti Shirutse from Kenya at vhs Lauenburg on 3 October 1963. Abdullah Kadir from Iraq spoke on “*Umbruch und Neugestaltung des Orients und das Problem der Entwicklungsländer*” [Radical change and redesign of the Orient and the problem of developing countries]. In 1963, the vhs in Bochum organised a full week (12–18 May) of presentations and discussions under the banner of “*Afrikanische Woche*” [African week]. Siegfried Gerth, who had succeeded Borinski as head of GÖhrde vhs, was equally interested in international matters. He was even invited several times by the Government of Cameroon for longer periods and training events to teach community development or literacy skills (Hinzen 1994, pp. 18–20).

German and international development policies included educational aid, and funds also became available for adult education. Negotiations between DVV and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) were finally successful, and between 1962 and 1972 a series of 12 one year-seminars held at GÖhrde residential vhs for African adult educators trained a total of 310 colleagues from as many as 20 countries (Hinzen and Thamm 2019, pp. 28–29). Also in the 1960s, the residential vhs in Rendsburg started a course for adult educators from Latin America. In parallel, the first country projects were launched in Costa Rica and Columbia, in Ethiopia and Somalia. Subsequently, already in the mid-1960s DVV management kept up a debate on the ever-growing level of activities and therefore the need to create a separate administrative section to set up and maintain cooperation projects with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The DVV Department for Adult Education in Developing Countries was finally established in 1969, and after some re-naming became what is now known as DVV International, while being referred to officially in the statutes as *Institut für Internationale Zusammenarbeit des Deutschen Volkshochschul-Verbandes* [Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association] (Samlowski 2009, pp. 47–49).

Five decades of DVV International

The evolution process of DVV International is well-documented in publications marking its 25th, 40th, and recently 50th anniversaries, respectively (Hinzen 1994, 2009; Samlowski 2015; Hirsch et al. 2019). Together they comprise well above 1,000 pages of analyses, essays, reports and documents which help to understand the institute's development from its small-scale beginnings to its current status with a total of almost 230 staff, two-thirds of whom are women, serving at DVV International headquarters, regional and country offices. About 90 per cent of the employees in the offices are local staff. To strengthen the cooperation with ALE partners globally, 33 colleagues at headquarters handle institutional management, dealing with overarching services as well as administration. There is a rotation system in place which brings management personnel from field offices to headquarters and vice versa from there into the regional offices. The purpose of this practice is to contribute to DVV International's further development as a learning organisation and to enhance quality assurance.

Certain criteria are applied when opening new offices, or when political developments require far-reaching changes, such as those occurring in Afghanistan and Belarus in 2021. The programmes supporting country partners can involve governments, universities or civil society organisations at national, regional or local levels, and address literacy or basic education, vocational training or citizenship education through community-based institutions; increasingly, many of these programmes are using digital and online modes of delivery and participation. One of the institute's overarching activities to strengthen partners and projects is the provision of services through information and communication. These services include a website with a main homepage reflecting the work of headquarters;⁹ and dedicated subsections representing regional and country offices; and publications such as newsletters, blogs, journals or books.

Systematic monitoring and evaluation are conducted using standardised instruments and mechanisms. In 2020, external evaluators covered a number of countries in Latin America, including Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru, and in Europe, including Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova and Ukraine (DVV International 2021a). An overarching *Impact Report 2009–2015* published in 2016 analysed three areas in particular: (1) national and global framework conditions; (2) efforts in capacity development; and (3) educational activities for disadvantaged learners (Avramovska et al. 2016).

It may be argued that the institute has thrived on a well-balanced sense of continuity and innovation. Both of these are forward-looking objectives which have been described time and again, for example in DVV International's *Guidelines*, “a catalogue of tasks that was compiled in 1971” but is “still valid for the work of the Institute today” (Samlowski 2009, p. 50) or in the more recent *Strategic Fields for Action* (Hirsch and Jost 2017). The topical presentations on colonial issues offered at vhs venues in the 1960s serve as an example of such

⁹ The main website is at <https://www.dvv-international.de/en/> [accessed 27 January 2022].

continuity with an innovative orientation, supported today by the “Globales Lernen” [global learning] programme which has also been funded by BMZ since 1977. Its purpose is to strengthen initiatives of the vhs and its regional associations in training and re-training full- and part-time staff; the production and dissemination of teaching and learning materials; the counselling of colleagues working in the vhs on recent innovations; and the networking with other associations, institutions and organisations. Thematically, this programme is related to environmental education, development policies, and global citizenship education, including anti-racist and intercultural activities which are very often related to issues like migration, and work with refugees and asylum-seekers (Buckbesch 2019, p. 144).

International commitments supporting institutionalised ALE

CONFINTEA

In 1949, the series of CONFINTEA world conferences on adult education was launched under the leadership of UNESCO. The first conference was held 19–25 June in Helsingør (Elsinore), Denmark (UNESCO 1949). Ever since CONFINTEA I, these conferences have contributed to the body of knowledge on ALE, and have supported policies and guiding principles for the development of ALE. At CONFINTEA II, held 1960 in Montreal, Canada, the voices of anti-colonial movements made themselves heard, and at CONFINTEA III, held 1972 in Tokyo, Japan, ALE as a sub-sector of the education system was described in much detail. Soon after, in 1976, the first *Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education* was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference (UNESCO 1976). The evolution of the first six conferences up to CONFINTEA VI, held 2009 in Belém, Brazil, is well-documented (Knoll 2014; Ireland and Spezia 2014).

Alongside CONFINTEA III in Tokyo, four participants – Helmuth Dolff from DVV in Germany, Paul Mhaiki from Kivukoni College in Tanzania, Roby Kidd from the Canadian Adult Education Association, and Paul Bertelson from UNESCO, Paris – held intensive talks advancing the idea of a need for a civil society voice for ALE, which in 1973 led to the foundation of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) headquartered in Toronto, Canada. In 1974, DVV hosted the first meeting of the Executive Council of ICAE in Cologne (Hinzen 2019, p. 14).

Strengthening ALE within the concept of lifelong learning

Ever since that meeting, DVV has fully supported UNESCO, ICAE and EAEA in their attempts to strengthen ALE within the concept of lifelong learning (LLL) globally through a variety of measures, including the promotion of ALE in Germany,

contributions to shaping the future of ALE within the concept of lifelong learning, and involvement in CONFINTEA conferences.

- Since the 1960s, DVV has been a member of the German National Commission for UNESCO (DUK), supporting in particular the work in their Education section, helping to bring ALE into the debates of educational, social and cultural matters in Germany. DVV has also supported the translation of UNESCO documents into German. Furthermore, DVV International's current director, Christoph Jost, is a Board member of both UNESCO's Collective Consultation of Non-governmental Organisations on Education for All (CCNGO/EFA) and ICAE, and DVV International's deputy director Uwe Gartenschlaeger is also EAEA's current president.
- In 1994, ICAE was invited by the UNESCO International Commission on Education and Learning for the Twenty-First Century, chaired by Jacques Delors, to comment on a draft report from the perspectives of adult education and lifelong learning. This was achieved with support from DVV International's then director (ICAE 1994), thus feeding into the Commission's seminal report which was published two years later (Delors et al. 1996). In 2020, ICAE invited DVV International to join a group which was asked to develop a contribution to UNESCO's "Futures of Education" initiative. The outcome of this was *Adult learning and education (ALE) – because the future cannot wait* (ICAE 2020). While this contribution was still being finalised, UNESCO published a report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education entitled *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* (ICFE 2021). It is heartening to see that this report includes some important points in terms of locating adult education firmly within the concept of lifelong learning (ibid., pp. 112–115). This new report will certainly have an impact on the preparation, implementation and outcomes of CONFINTEA VII, to be held in Marrakech, Morocco, in June 2022.
- Colleagues from DVV and DVV International participated in previous CONFINTEA meetings, providing substantial support during CONFINTEA V, held 1997 in Hamburg, Germany. Rita Süßmuth, the then President of the *Bundestag* [Federal Parliament of Germany], who was at the time also President of DVV, was elected Chair of the conference. Supporting preparations for the next conference in the series ten years later, DVV International's then director (the first author of this article) joined the CONFINTEA VI Consultative Group, and became a member of the Drafting Committee for the *Belém Framework of Action* (UIL 2010). Yet another decade later, the current director of DVV International was invited to join the CONFINTEA VII Consultative Group. It is our understanding and indeed our conviction that such continuous involvement and collaboration at the highest level enhance the potential to influence global ALE recommendations, and that information and experiences thus gained will radiate back into ALE in Germany, beyond the vhs, through cooperation with DIE and/or DUK (Hinzen 2020).

Additionally, during the period of the Education for All (EFA) agenda between 2000 and 2015, DVV International executives held memberships of UNESCO's

EFA Global Monitoring Report team, the UN Literacy Decade Expert Group and the EFA Higher Education Reference Group. Furthermore, DVV International supported the development of the Education 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the CONFINTEA VI Mid-Term Review held 2017 in Suwon, Republic of Korea, through a number of publications and conferences. DVV International had a strong interest in bringing CONFINTEA and EFA closer together in the SDG Education 2030 Agenda. This is evident in publications like *Knowing More, Doing Better: Challenges for CONFINTEA VI from Monitoring EFA in Non-formal Youth and Adult Education* (Duke and Hinzen 2008), published just before CONFINTEA VI, or *On the Eve of EFA and MDG – Shaping the Post 2015 Education and Development Agendas: Contributions to the Debate and a Collection of Documents* (Fernandez et al. 2014), published just before the World Education Forum (WEF) held 2015 in Incheon, Republic of Korea.

Promoting community-based ALE

In its capacity as the national association of almost 3,000 grassroots vhs facilities all over Germany and thereby responsible for local institutionalised ALE, DVV has always had a particular interest in recommendations issued by UNESCO and its Member States concerning community-based ALE in learning centres, colleges or other kinds of institutions like the vhs. Particularly important recommendations are included in the *Belém Framework for Action*, the United Nations' Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and UNESCO's updated *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education*.

- The importance of increasing provision of and access to ALE was strongly advocated during CONFINTEA VI, and the *Belém Framework for Action* (BFA) clearly states: “We recognise that adult learning and education represent a significant component of the lifelong learning process, which embraces a learning continuum ranging from formal to non-formal to informal learning” (UIL 2010, p. 6). With respect to Community Learning Centres (CLCs), the framework calls for “creating multi-purpose community learning spaces and centres” (ibid., p. 8).
- The overall aim of the fourth United Nations' Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) is to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO 2015a, p. 21). With respect to CLCs, one of the “indicative strategies” of SDG Target 4.a is to “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” (ibid., p. 52).
- Based on the BFA and the SDGs, the UNESCO General Conference held in 2015 came up with a new *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education*, in which community-based and institutionalised ALE were supported by a special clause: the development of effective educational responses implies, among sev-

eral other points, “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, p. 11).

In 2013, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), together with the Korean National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE), initiated research on the wider benefits of CLCs, and supported country studies with a synthesis report (Duke and Hinzen 2017). The importance of CLCs was underpinned by research on *kominkan* CLCs, the Japanese version of community-based ALE (Wang 2019). DVV International provided follow-up with a compendium on related experiences and challenges (Avramovska et al. 2017), and an international conference on “Adult education centres as a key to development – responsibilities, structures and benefits” held in Tbilisi, Georgia, with the participation of UIL (DVV International 2017). Such initiatives can be taken as examples of how experiences from German-style CLCs are shared at international level, offering new angles of and perspectives for institutionalised and community-based ALE – sometimes even radiating back from that forum through UNESCO and DUK in the form of inter-governmentally agreed recommendations. Increasingly, materials developed from these experiences feed into tools which can be used for practical implementation. Examples of such tools are the *Curriculum institutionALE*,¹⁰ the *Curriculum interculturALE*,¹¹ and, most importantly, the *Curriculum globALE*,¹² which after several years and various locations around the world was subjected to review and revision by DIE, DVV International, ICAE and UIL. As of 2021, it will benefit Member States as a UNESCO-recommended tool for the basic and further training of adult educators (DVV International 2020, 2021a).

¹⁰ Initially developed for DVV International staff, *Curriculum institutionALE* is a framework for the organisational development of adult education institutions. It “offers basic elements for defining goals and criteria for the capacity development of adult education institutions, for collecting reliable baseline data, for designing and implementing the capacity-building process, and for assessing progress” (DVV International 2021b).

¹¹ *Curriculum interculturALE* is “is a tailor-made intercultural-didactical training course for instructors and volunteer learning guides who work with refugees in low-threshold language courses. ... It consists of a curriculum as well as teaching and learning materials (methods, videos and dossiers) on themes such as communication, integration, trauma, migration, culture and identity, teaching and learning approaches in different countries, etc.” (DVV International 2021c).

¹² *Curriculum globALE* is “a cross-cultural, output-orientated core curriculum for training adult educators worldwide” (DVV International 2021d). Updated from time to time, its most recent edition was published in English last year (DVV International et al. 2021) and is currently being translated into several other languages.

Centenary of vhs and 50th anniversary of DVV International

The vhs centenary

Throughout 2019, vhs facilities all over Germany celebrated their anniversary with numerous events together with their regional associations and, on the national level, DVV. Being included in the German Constitution of the Weimar Republic was at the heart of the celebrations. In accurate historical terms, of course, only a few hundred vhs facilities actually turned 100 years in 2019. A few others, like Bonn (Preu and Schöll 2018) or Munich, were already older, while many were quite a bit younger, like Aachen, which was established in the context of the Allies' educational reform efforts of re-education after World War II. Larger city vhs facilities, such as Essen, Hamburg or Jena, staged major celebratory events, with keynotes from university professors, high-level representatives of the German government, parliament or city councils, and they included anniversary activities in their centenary year course programmes. Early in 2019, DVV activated a dedicated area on its website called "vhs100" to inform the public about the wide range of activities and document them. The regional vhs association of the federal state of Saxony was supported by its state department to deepen research into the development of vhs, and the findings were widely disseminated through exhibitions which were displayed in all Saxon vhs facilities.

To illustrate what was going on at national level, we have picked four major examples:

- The joint opening of the celebratory year was marked by a public event held in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt am Main, which was attended by hundreds of vhs delegates, and representatives from political, educational and cultural spheres. The keynote speech was given by the president of the German Federal Constitutional Court, Andreas Voßkuhle. He began with a key paragraph on adult education and the vhs in the Weimar Constitution, then turned to education as a public good and its place in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany. He considered how it is fostered and followed up in constitutions, laws, regulations and practice at regional and local levels. He outlined in detail that following the intention of the current German Constitution, it is the responsibility of the state to provide support to institutions and services that citizens need for their access to knowledge, education and opportunities, irrespective of their social background. In terms of what helped to implement this, Voßkuhle mentioned the inclusion of adult education and the vhs in several successive constitutions as well as legislation related to continuing education on the level of the *Länder* [federal states], giving communities and cities the support they need for running dedicated institutions – and thus enabling adults to participate and become enlightened citizens. Characterising this challenge, he used the English term "empowerment", for which there is no equivalent word in German (Voßkuhle 2019).

- DVV and the vhs used the centenary year for an intensive marketing campaign with a specially designed logo, TV spots, posters and publications. Pictures featuring eye-catching collages of well-known figures like Nefertiti (wearing a construction helmet to refer to courses ranging from cultural to professional topics) or Karl Marx (sporting a beard of carrots to reflect courses ranging from social to health-related topics)¹³ were printed on bookmarks, posters or leaflets together with the slogan “vhs – 100 Jahre Wissen teilen” [vhs – 100 years of sharing knowledge], reminding us of the slogan used by the workers’ education movement in Germany 150 years ago “*Wissen ist Macht*” [knowledge is power].
- A high-quality illustrated large-format book was also published to mark the centenary. It had been under preparation for two years, coordinated by a group of ten experts selecting one theme for a story for each of the years since 1919. Two examples are the importance of vhs for the integration of refugees (2015), and the relationship between the students’ rebellion and adult education (1968). The stories are told by different specialist authors, with a double-page spread featuring text and illustrations for each year, reflecting on events in society in terms of their importance for the vhs and vice versa (Schrader and Rossmann 2019).
- Another highlight was the “Lange Nacht der Volkshochschulen“ [Long night of the vhs] staged all over Germany on 20 September 2019. There were themed public events, such as vhs Haar’s “Die Rolle der Volkshochschulen für lebenslanges Lernen und gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt” [The role of vhs for life-long learning and social cohesion]. This particular one brought together Franziska Giffey, then Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth with well-known experts for the sharing of information deepened by dialogue. This event was livestreamed to all vhs facilities, and integrated into their own full programme for their “long night”.

The 50th anniversary of DVV International

DVV International decided to hold its major anniversary event in May 2019, back-to-back with DVV’s Annual General Assembly in the historically relevant city of Weimar, where the Constitution of the first democracy in Germany had been announced on 14 August 1919. The local centre vhs Weimar was an excellent host, offering a number of side events, and national and international participants were able to visit such places like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s residence and garden, or the new Bauhaus Museum, or the site of the Nazi concentration camp in Buchenwald. Here again, we would like to highlight a few anniversary activities:

- Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) Gerd Müller, provided the keynote address at the celebratory event and spoke of the importance of the education of adults for the process of development. UIL Director David Atchoarena described DVV International as a key partner for UIL in

¹³ These images are featured in the German campaign description at <https://www.volkshochschule.de/diskurs/artikel/jubilaeumskampagne.php> [accessed 11 February 2022].

promoting the right to adult education and lifelong learning. “UNESCO is looking forward to continuing its cooperation with DVV International, especially in this crucial phase of the 2030 Agenda. We wish DVV International all the best for the next 50 years” (quoted in Jost and Schriegel 2019, p. 27).

- The 2019 Adult Education and Development Conference, organised by DVV International, was entitled: “The power of adult learning and education – achieving the SDGs” (Jost and Schriegel 2019). In his keynote speech, Aaron Benavot, former director of the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM), asked “Can adult learning and education become a visible contributor to the SDGs?” In preparation for this conference, DVV International published *Youth and Adult Education in the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. Role: Contribution and Further Potential* (Schweighöfer 2019).
- A commemorative book entitled *50 years DVV International: Half a century of adult education* (Hirsch et al. 2019) was launched at the celebratory event. It had been carefully prepared in cooperation with staff and partners as authors, and now tells the story of DVV International and its work through short illustrated essays from different perspectives and from all countries where DVV International has worked since the beginnings in the 1960s right up to today.

Anniversaries as evolutionary signposts of adult education: the comparative angle

Two decades into the 21st century, there seems to be a growing interest in comparative adult education and related research. In 2016, John Field, Klaus Künzel and Michael Schemmann wrote a reflective article for the *International Yearbook of Adult Education* “to celebrate the 200th anniversary of comparative education”. They referred to Marc-Antoine Jullien, who had “laid the foundation stone of comparative education as an academic discipline with the publication of a standardised questionnaire of 266 questions ... in 1816 and 1817” (Field et al. 2016, p. 109). Also in 2016, DIE organised a conference entitled “International (Comparative) Education Research. Multidisciplinary and Cross-National Research Approaches”, held 12–13 September in Bonn.

Almost in parallel, Regina Egetenmeyer (University of Würzburg) developed a “Winter School” into an Adult Education Academy (AEA) on International and comparative studies in adult education and lifelong learning (Egetenmeyer 2015; Egetenmeyer et al. 2017, 2020). This academy is backed by a consortium of some ten European universities who engage in the programme planning of the AEA and send their teaching staff. Each year, the AEA receives an intake of around 70 PhD and MA students (Universität Würzburg 2020). Meanwhile, participants also include practitioners, benefiting from the membership of EAEA and the DVV International offices, and partners send their staff and receive students as interns. During the celebratory year of 2019, the AEA programme was enriched by presentations and discussions on the vhs centenary and the 50th anniversary of DVV International.

2019 was a year where ALE was subject to 50th anniversaries in many parts of the world. Besides the founding of DVV International 50 years ago, 1969 also saw

the establishment of the Irish National Lifelong Learning Organisation (*Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach*; AONTAS). Around the same time, the English translation of Paulo Freire's seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970) was first published, and in Tanzania, President Julius Nyerere titled both his 1969 and his 1970 New Year's Eve speeches "Education never ends" (Nyerere 1975). There are many more milestones which could be mentioned (Koerrenz et al. 2007).

Launched in 1947, the CONFINTEA process passed its 70th anniversary in 2017, already well on its way to CONFINTEA VII, which is scheduled for 2022. The year 2019 also marked a centenary for British adult education, 100 years after the Ministry of Reconstruction had published its Adult Education Committee's *Final Report* on finding a way for the development of adult education after World War I (MoR 1919). More extensive research and comparison along these lines could help to increase the potential of learning from the past for the future (Kelbert and Avdagic 2015), and thus consolidate collective and cultural memory of people and societies (Assmann 2018).

Turning points in the history of adult education: 1919, 1949 and 1969

Briefly, then, adult education is marked by three major turning points in the 20th century: The first one, 1919, fell into a time characterised by the end of World War I, and also the beginning of something new. In Germany, it saw the end of the imperial era, the end of German colonialism, but at the same time the starting point of the first democracy, the voting right for women, and the consolidation of a broad-based social security system.

The second turning point, 1949, fell into a time characterised by the end of World War II. A new global governance system had just been created with the establishment of the United Nations (on 24 October 1945 in San Francisco) and UNESCO (on 16 November 1945 in London), followed by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN 1948). This prepared the ground and provided a fertile context for CONFINTEA I in 1949.

Finally, the third turning point, 1969, is characterised by a time of reform movements, clamouring for equality for women and men and equal opportunities in education; the students' rebellion, Third World activism against exploitation and underdevelopment, and this is a context where Freire, Nyerere and also the establishment of DVV International are well-placed.

A word on the British and German anniversaries

Before we conclude, the British and German anniversaries mentioned earlier in this article merit a few more remarks, since these two countries engaged in exchanges early, and were eager to find out more about adult education each other's countries. Early historical comparative interest is manifested in *British-Dutch-German relationships in adult education, 1880–1930* (Friedenthal-Haase et al. 1991). There is no doubt that the British universities' extension work or the extramural studies targeted an audience similar to that attending the popular lectures given by university

professors in Jena, Berlin or Vienna from the 1890s onwards. It might be more difficult to trace who influenced whom, and by what ways and means such ideas and experiences travelled across the Channel.

Ronald Wilson reminds us that Charles Knowles, who was the Section Chief for Adult Education in the British Control Commission for Germany in 1949, explicitly asked, in the final report of CONFINTEA I (UNESCO 1949), for support towards breaking the isolation of Germany and engaging in cultural and educational exchange between adult educators since there was so much to learn from each other (Wilson 2003). Another classic example of the cross-fertilisation involved in the close exchange between Britain and Germany is the work of adult educator Fritz Borinski, who emigrated to Britain from Germany, and returned after a decade in exile with new personal and professional experiences. There is still much to research in the comparative vein, and engaging in this holds considerable potential towards the further development of comparative adult education as a discipline in its own right (Egetenmeyer 2015; Field et al. 2016).

John Field from the University of Stirling recently wrote a first comparative note on “Adult education centenaries: lifewide and worldwide” (Field 2019). Since his mother tongue is English, and he is fluent in German, he was able to study not only the findings and recommendations of the British Centenary Commission on Adult Education (2019), and colleagues’ related discussions on active citizenship (Holford et al. 2019), but also the documents mapping the history of the vhs in Germany which were published in the context of its centenary (Schrader and Rossmann 2019; Hinzen and Meilhammer 2018). Field characterises the German anniversary as having a much stronger celebratory function, while the discussions prompted by the British anniversary were, in his view, of a more future-oriented nature, perhaps also aiming to influence other ongoing inquiries into lifelong learning. He adds, however, that the

broadly civic and humanistic ideals of the Volkshochschulen and the 1919 report also heavily and directly influenced the wider movement through their leading role in the World Association for Adult Education in its early years (Field 2019, p. 485).

Finally, arguing there were “more pressing reasons for looking again at the underlying ideas of 1919 and their relevance today” (ibid.), Field also comments on the *Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4)* (UIL 2019), which is based on a survey among UNESCO Member States. He remarks that the “low priority given to learning for active citizenship and community building are striking and even alarming” (Field 2019, p. 486).

Outlook

Anniversaries, such as the centenary of the *Volkshochschule*, or the 50th anniversary of DVV International, can be a useful source for educational research, and they can trigger learning processes in terms of inviting people to “look back to the future”. They are opportunities for reassessment of essential educational problems,

investigating how they are manifested at a given time, or in a given region, and how they are shaped by, and also reach beyond, national circumstances. Therefore, the function of anniversaries is not solely – perhaps not even primarily – to celebrate what has been achieved in a “round” period of time (and to retain, or gain, political and social support). Their function is also to pause for a moment of reflection (and abstention from everyday business) to concentrate – once again – on what is really important, which strategies have proved successful (and which ones have not), what difficulties and what challenges can be identified with respect to the future – also in the light of the past.

We are actually into another anniversary this year. Every five years ever since 1951 the vhs come together for a nationwide event – the *Volkshochschultag* [vhs assembly]. Its 15th session will be held this year as a hybrid event in the city of Leipzig with the local vhs as the key host. Under the motto “vhs 2030: *Zusammen in Vielfalt. Nachhaltig. Vernetzt*” [vhs 2030: Together in diversity. Sustainable. Connected], the conference will address the three major issues of the future that pose new challenges for us politically and socially, and thus also for adult education.¹⁴

In stepping back, we are likely to find that the core of educational problems of the past, or in other countries, is not in fact as different from our own present situation as we may have initially believed. It is also likely our hunch will be confirmed that the international character of European ALE systems and the global character of the problems we are facing indeed point to the need for tackling our tasks from a wider perspective. In this sense, looking back at 100 years of *Volkshochschule* and 50 years of DVV International might prove fruitful for addressing contemporary issues, exploring questions such as: how can we ensure overall access to ALE? or: what role can ALE play on the way to sustainable development? or, last but not least: how can ALE contribute to open, inclusive and coherent societies?

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¹⁴ For more details on this upcoming conference, visit <https://www.volkshochschule.de/microsite/volkshochschultag/english.php> [accessed 25 February 2022].

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