Folk High Schools and Active Citizenship in Europe

A survey for the Erasmus+ Promociti project January 2023





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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Adult education and active citizenship *1*
3. Contexts of participating schools *2*
4. Perspectives on Active Citizenship *3*
5. Challenges and Dilemmas *6*
6. Successful Approaches *8*
7. School Portraits *21*
8. Appendix: Guidelines for interviews *72*

Editors: Mats Ehn and Jonathan Korsar, Färnebo folkhögskola

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1. Introduction

The Promociti project explores and develops ways in which folk high schools and similar adult education institutions can provide resources and act as focus points for civic engagement, locally, nationally, and internationally. The project involves folk high schools from Austria and Sweden and associations of folk high schools and adult education in Spain, Poland, Austria and Germany. The first step in the project is this qualitative study.

To provide a basis for further work on methodological development, we conducted an interview study in the spring and summer of 2022 on the schools' work on active citizenship. A common interview guide aimed at principals or leading representatives of the schools was developed in a dialogue between Färnebo Folkhögskola and the other project partners (see appendix).

The project managers in each country identified five relevant schools to interview and conducted interviews with the head teachers of these schools. The interview guide asked for background information about the school, and the context in which the school is located. The informants were asked to reflect on successful approaches and working methods, difficulties and challenges, and the extent to which it would be possible for others to use the same methods and approaches.

The transcribed interview responses were sent to Färnebo for collation and analysis. The focus of the analysis is on the schools' different understandings of active citizenship and the school's own role in this. Furthermore, what obstacles and challenges do they identify in order to better work for civic engagement? Emphasis is placed on identifying the successful strategies, approaches, and methods used by the schools.

2. Adult education and Active Citizenship

The Promociti project aims to develop the work of folk high schools on active citizenship. In this context, it is important to emphasize that the link between adult education and active citizenship is strongly supported by international agreements and policies.

In June 2022, UNESCO organized the global adult education conference CONFINTEA VII. The final document, the Marrakech Framework for Action (MFA), recognizes learning for active citizenship as one of the three main areas of adult education. The Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 5), focusing on active citizenship and civic education, was produced for the conference. This report highlights the links between adult learning, active citizenship on a humanistic basis, and the major societal challenges we face globally, nationally, and locally. These include global warming, migration, armed conflict, disrespect for human rights, and inequality. Despite these strong links, the report notes that the adult learning sector is seriously underfunded.

Similarly, the European Commission in its “Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030” highlights the link between adult learning, active citizenship, and community learning. Adult learning is highlighted as particularly important to meet the transition to a low-carbon economy and the digital transformation of society. It is also seen as a key component of gender equality and intergroup solidarity, as well as of the EU's fundamental democratic values.

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) brings together European civil society organizations working in the field of adult education. The EAEA's "Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st century: The Power and Joy of Learning" highlights active citizenship as something that should permeate all adult learning. In particular, it highlights the role of adult learning in providing positive solutions to societal challenges, as well as its importance in sustaining and developing a strong civil society.

3. Contexts of participating schools

The concept of folk high schools can be interpreted in many different ways. In this context, we do not pursue this discussion further. However, for the understanding of this report, it is important to know something about the similarities and differences between the organizations and folk high schools that participate.

ARGE Bildungshäuser Österreich and Verband der Bildungszentren im ländlichen Raum e.V. (VBLR) are umbrella organizations for education centers located in rural areas in Austria and Germany. Ogólnopolska Sieć Uniwersytetów Ludowych (OSUL) is a newly established umbrella organization for a growing folk high school movement in Poland. Federació d'Associacions Culturals i Educatives de Persones Adultes (FACEPA, ES) is a federation of different organizations working with adult learning in Catalonia and Färnebo folkhögskola is one of 155 folk high schools in Sweden.

What they have in common is that all participating organizations and schools work to promote active citizenship, but they do so in different ways and with a variety of activities. For some schools, the local area is the central arena for the work on active citizenship, while others also have a national and global focus.

The financial conditions are very different. Folk high schools in Sweden have continuous public funding, while organizations in other countries are more dependent on generating their own income through projects and participation fees.

All organizations are anchored in civil society but the links to the local level are different.

All schools approach the opportunities and challenges of digitization in their work on active citizenship, but in different ways and with different attitudes.

The importance of volunteers and the approach to volunteering in implementing activities and in driving the school's work on active citizenship varies.

All schools are grappling with issues of how to respond to threats from right-wing extremism, xenophobia, and conspiracy thinking.

4. Perspectives on Active Citizenship

In this section, we highlight some different perspectives on active citizenship that were highlighted by school leaders and other school representatives in our survey. These perspectives do not provide an unambiguous definition of what active citizenship is and what folk high schools should do to promote it, but rather point to a number of working definitions that allow the schools in this study to orient themselves and make different choices related to their activities.

1. Active citizenship as a function of competence

Several school representatives see active citizenship as dependent on certain skills, general capacity development or, in other words, as dependent on citizens acquiring certain competences. The various courses and other activities offered by the schools allow participants to acquire and practise these competences.

2. Active citizenship as voluntary engagement

Another perspective highlighted by several school leaders is active citizenship as all the civic engagement and activities citizens participate in between elections to influence their own life situation, and as part of this the society in which they live. Here, it is often emphasised that active citizenship tends to take the form of volunteering or voluntary work in associations and movements, or in other more local initiatives to improve and develop life in different ways. The folk high schools in the survey are all active in one way or another in supporting local, regional, national and/or international associations and movements.

3. Active citizenship as an issue of justice

Many school representatives also highlight the importance of an equity perspective for active citizenship. For example, it may be that some schools problematize that they don't reach out very much to less vulnerable groups in society. On the other hand, many schools have a primary focus on organising courses and activities that help more vulnerable groups to become active citizens. Related to questions of justice is of course the human rights perspective, an ethical perspective that proclaims everybody equal in terms of their humanity and in line with this distributes rights and duties to everyone in relation to the democratic project.

4. Active citizenship in relation to parliamentary politics

At the same time, active citizenship is of course also perceived as linked to local, regional, and national elections. This is also why several schools are actively working on facilitating pre-election discussions and other topical discussions linked to the policies handled by elected representatives at different levels of society. Political institutions are also often important financially for the work of folk high schools, and they have often, though not always, mandated folk high schools to support active citizenship locally, in a region or nationally.

5. Active citizenship as a function of subsidiarity

Several school representatives highlight that they perceive the principle of subsidiarity – or in other words the decentralisation of all decisions that can be decentralised to as low, and participatory, a level as possible – as very important in society for the public to be able to exercise active citizenship.

6. Active citizenship and cultural work

Cultural work and art have the potential to be an important resource and give people tools for communication and community. It stands out as an important aspect of the work folk high schools do to contribute to active citizenship.

7. Active citizenship in the economic sphere

The economic sphere where we meet as professionals, workers, colleagues, managers and employees etc. is also a sphere where active citizenship can be both present and absent. However, several folk high schools have been involved in citizens' groups' endeavours in the economic sphere, for example in setting up wind energy cooperatives, local cafés that can serve as meeting places in rural areas, tourism initiatives that have provided local jobs, as well as activities together with trade unions or other actors working for a democratic working life.

8. Active citizenship and internationalism

Finally, there is this perspective on active citizenship as something that by its very nature needs to traverse national borders. For example, there is the striving to meet across national borders and learn to build community between people in different countries. There is also the internationalist call of sustainable development for all, in all nations, and the will to be part of a movement able to achieve this in the coming decades.

5. Challenges and Dilemmas

Folk high schools that want to develop their work on active citizenship face challenges and dilemmas. This study identifies several issues that schools need to address.

1. Lack of resources and lack of continuous funding

A consistent challenge faced by schools is the lack of continuous funding for active citizenship work, which makes it very vulnerable. This lack of core funding means that schools must spend a lot of time chasing project funding rather than on their own activities. However, project funding risks lead to the cessation of activities when project funding runs out. It can also be difficult to link existing needs with available project funding. Participation fees are not a sustainable source of income for financing active citizenship work.

2. Lack of recognition

In several countries, folk high schools and civil society adult education organizations are not recognized as fully-fledged institutions within the education system by the authorities. The potential of adult education to promote active citizenship is therefore not fully exploited.

3. Polarization, hatred, conspiracy thinking and anti-democratic movements

Almost all schools testify that they are struggling with how to deal with populist, anti-scientific and undemocratic currents. In an era of fake news, conspiracy thinking and racism, how can we be an inclusive force that counters destructive polarization? How do you get people to overcome fear and dare to meet others in respectful dialogue? Where do you draw the line on what is unacceptable?

4. Lack of commitment and passivity

Several schools feel that there is a declining interest in participating in volunteering and community activities outside the family. During the covid pandemic, these trends have been greatly reinforced, routines have been broken and they may be difficult to re-establish. It is pointed out that young people do not feel they are being listened to or represented and this is a threat to our democratic culture. A major challenge is to find new ways of working that welcome the younger generation. The willingness of our own organizations to change needs to be strengthened and ways of co-creation and decentralized decision-making found.

5. Need for skills development, staffing and networking

It is sometimes difficult for staff to have the time to develop their skills in working on active citizenship and it can also be difficult to have enough staff to meet the needs of different partners. Networking is very important for the development of activities, but it is also very resource intensive. There is a need to create long-term collaborations and projects with partners, but it is difficult to find the human resources for this.

6. The balance between paid and unpaid work

Folk high schools and adult education organizations are embedded in civil society structures where unpaid volunteering is a central component. This can create friction between volunteers and staff, with volunteers feeling exploited and staff experiencing an unreasonable workload.

7. Projecting and New Public Management

Funders are increasingly demanding documentation, reporting and measurability to grant funds for active citizenship work. There is a lack of understanding among public authorities that educational processes leading to personal development and civic engagement are complex processes that cannot be measured in the short term.

The tendency to move from core funding to project funding reduces our freedom to develop our own activities, leads to competition and sometimes even conflicts with other organizations and institutions. The focus shifts from doing good work to writing good proposals.

8. Digitalization

The digital divide has a major impact on our participants. It is as much about having access to digital tools as it is about having the knowledge to use them. This is a major problem for many older people.

The enforced isolation during the pandemic has made it necessary to rethink how digital and hybrid activities can develop the work on active citizenship.

9. Patriarchal structures

In many places, there are deeply rooted authoritarian and patriarchal structures when it comes to leadership. Folk high schools can play a major role in challenging these by supporting women's organizations and participation.

6. Successful approaches

We acknowledge all the challenges and dilemmas identified in the previous section, but we also believe that we can overcome them. This is clearly shown by the examples from the participating schools and organizations. What follows here is an attempt to distill from the material in this survey the successful ways of working to promote active citizenship that exists in the participating folk high schools around Europe. We have recognized ten successful approaches and provide some examples of those. More examples are found in chapter 7 School portraits.

1. Identify and serve the needs of citizens

To effectively support active citizenship, folk high schools need to continuously identify the needs of citizens in their area of operation and design activities that respond to these needs. What is needed is to be able to balance continuity of collaborations on the one hand, and responsiveness to new goals that emerge as society, communities and social movements develops on the other.

A few examples:

Uniwersytet Ludowy w Radawnicy, PL, and Färnebo folkhögskola, SE: Are two schools that have played catalytic roles in welcoming refugees locally.

Evangelisches Bildungs- und Tagungszentrum Bad Alexandersbad, GER: In the framework of the "Together for the Region" network, which we initiated 20 years ago, we are involved in setting up thematic working groups to tackle common issues for the region, such as tourism, care for the elderly or youth issues, and to create projects. We are also active in combating racism and extremism through our participation in programmes such as the Bavarian Alliance for Tolerance and Living Democracy and support local initiatives in the region and across the former border between West and East Germany.

Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Ludowy, PL: Graduates from our school organize social projects for the benefit of their home communities. At the end of the courses, we ask participants to fill out surveys that show us their desire for future active citizenship activities. The school is invited to some communities by our graduates. An example is the establishment of Rural Housewives Association in Mierzyn, co-implementing activities for the benefit of the local community which was created as a result of our project. The Rural Housewives' Association in Mierzyn also collaborated with us around an environmental project, resulting in the operation of a "Repair Café" at our headquarters.

Ludowy Uniwesytet Naturoterapii Anktywnej, PL: Needs, problems and challenges of the local community are a constant element that leads us to talk about active citizenship. Here is one example: During one of the courses, a participant identified the need for accommodation in an old school in the very small town of Żerków. The participant argued that this could provide an opportunity for local women to earn some money and would allow for the development of tourism in this village, which is

very remote from the centers of large towns. We brainstormed with all participants on how we could help. The strategy that emerged spoke of the need to build a partnership between the village hall and an experienced organisation and raising funds to purchase beds, bedding, and shelves, as well as involving the community to renovate, paint etc. The process was carried out over the course of a year and ended successfully. Besides this the best and most durable example of what our work with active citizenship has led to is the Active Tourism Centre in Żerków. And from the area of communication and women's activation, the best is the joint organisation of the event titled "Polka Niepodległa" (independent Polish woman), after which an informal group of women from Brzesko founded the "Brzeszczanki", a Circle of Rural Housewives and educate women in the area of new technologies.

Escola d'Adults de la Verneda Sant Martí, ES: The fact that the school works in the district and that the educational and organizational skills of the school are in demand can be seen in the fact that the town council proposed that we participated in a public tender to carry out the Community Action Plan for La Verneda and La Pau. We presented this to the assembly, and it was decided we should do it with a very rigorous philosophy. First, we conducted interviews on the street, with people with different profiles. Then, we conducted interviews with the different organizations in the neighbourhood, as well as desk research of national and international bibliography. This allowed us to identify the needs that existed in the neighbourhood. Thus, we identified the priority areas in which we had to work; we looked for evidence and researched which European projects had been successful in each of the areas. Subsequently, we held a conference to explain everything we had researched, and we presented the evidence. At these conferences, the people of the neighbourhood themselves chose which successful experiences they wanted to recreate, and the commissions were set up. In this sense, the Plan works according to the same principles as the school.

EICASCANTIC, ES: We listen to the suggestions and needs of the migrants, our participants and volunteers and give our support to them, instead of thinking that we in the technical team always know best because we have academic training. This could be supporting the idea of organizing a joint iftar dinner in the youth project or starting a flea market in the women's project.

Nyköpings folkhögskola, SE: The school is working with a large focus on those who need the most support to be able to exercise active citizenship in Nyköping and therefore prioritize it´s second chance program through which it reaches those groups. In this program they work a lot to develop the self-perception of the participants. They work to strengthen the participants' self-confidence, for example by working with drama and daring to speak in front of a class. In the program they also focus on developing knowledge about human rights.

Heimvolkshochschule Seddiner See, GER: We identify the needs of different age groups in rural areas and develop activities around them, for example in the projects "Toolbox: Youth in the Village" and "Caring Community".

2. Identify your area of activity and engage in networks

A prerequisite for success in listening to needs and designing relevant activities to meet them is presence and participation in relevant networks. It is therefore important to identify the school's area of activity and relevant networks. They can be local, regional, national, or even global. The area of activity can also be thematic. Long-term commitment within networks is key to building trust.

A few examples:

Heimvolkshochschule Seddiner See, GER: We identify other organizations and networks that are also working with active citizenship and volunteerism and organize educational activities and participate in common projects with them. We support the exchange of experiences, project ideas, and dissemination of knowledge between different actors. This started in the 90s with workshops on rural development together with local authorities and organizations where democratic participation was central. Around 400 communities participated in this process. This initiative has been followed by several new projects with a similar focus, e.g. the Village/dialogue project and the Forum ländlicher Raum- Netzwerk Brandenburg.

Katolische Landvolkochschule Oesede, GER: We work continuously to develop our local and regional networks in order to have a social base for our activities.

Nordsee Akademie, GER: Once a month we have a seminar on local politics, addressing a range of issues, for example it has been about the rehabilitation of a railway line in the region with representatives from the community, politics, and institutions. The following topics have also been discussed in the past: rights and duties in local politics, wind power in Schleswig-Holstein, women in local politics, diesel or electricity - the future of mobility in Europe, sustainability in municipalities, the Fairtrade Town concept and the mobility concept in Nordfriesland. In addition to politicians, these seminars bring together a wide variety of interest groups, such as the energy citizens of Schleswig-Holstein and Pro Bahn (a group promoting a better railway system in Schleswig-Holstein), etc.

Uniwersytet Ludowy w Radawnicy, PL: We have developed the "University of Leaders" course aimed at local leaders. This course has in turn led to the creation of the Center for Local Integration for a continuous exchange of experience between local leaders and activists in different fields. We also see it as important to develop our European network and learn from the experiences of other countries on how to strengthen active citizenship. One opportunity is to do this through ERASMUS+.

KBW Treffpunkt Bildung, AT: We address global problems that have a local impact such as the climate crisis and migration by working with associations like Fridays For Future and Antifa Wels.

Escola d'Adults de la Verneda Sant Martí, ES: We are a member of VERN, that gathers all civil society organizations in our area. We are also members of the Women's Council in the district of Sant Martí and the School Council in the district of Sant Martí. We collaborate with the Center Cívic de Sant Martí and the services it provides, such as the library.

Färnebo folkhögskola, SE: Through our international courses there has been a lot of cooperation with organizations working with popular education and active citizenship in Latin America and Africa. For example the participants at Färnebo have supported the work of Tanzanian Folk Development Colleges to defend the right to education for young mothers and the right of decent work conditions for South-African farm workers through the import of fair-trade wine.

3. Let your school be a meeting place

Schools have potential not only to serve as organizers of courses or similar activities. They can also become meeting places where civic groups have their meetings. Courses and other activities should also be designed in order to facilitate meetings between different groups in society.

A few examples:

Bildungshaus Kloster St. Ulrich, GER: For our school being involved in local development work is important. We have been active in initiating Agenda 21 locally, as well as in a project called "Dorf im Dialog". We also invite local people to a Nachtcafé with panel discussions and lectures to discuss agriculture and society once a year. We also facilitate local discussions when requested, for example we have facilitated a discussion on wolves in Baden-Württemberg. We always try to be attentive to issues that concern local people and "keep our finger on the pulse", for example at Nachtcafé we always look for topics that are burning at the moment, e.g. "The cow is not a climate killer", "Can organic food feed the world?" or "Oat milk is not the solution either". We also work as a partner in vocational training for farmers and wine growers. At our school, they participate in two weeks of personal development where they practice communication, self-awareness, etc., which is a basis for becoming active later in life.

Kaszubski Uniwersytet Ludowy, PL: We develop and promote the use of the heritage of the Kashubian culture and language to activate and develop local communities and networks based on dialogue. The multicultural aspect is important in this work. We organize the Active Women's course. For many years we have supported organizing among the elderly and we run the "Seniors have a voice" project where we document their stories for the future.

KBW Treffpunkt Bildung, AT: We organize activities for young people in a new format, e.g. "Mitmachen, Gestalten und Verändern". The important thing here is that it is open-ended and that young people get to take a leading role in shaping the theme and various initiatives.

Nordsee Akademie, GER: The school acts as a "cultural infrastructure" for volunteer (or non-profit) groups working on different issues, both local groups of engaged citizens and local interest groups, as well as think tanks linked to the parties, representatives of the state, local employers, the local minority organizations representing the Danish minority in Germany, the Nordschleswiger and the Frisian.

Bäckedals folkhögskola, SE: We offer the school as a meeting place for the local community and for social, cultural and political events.

4. Be visible leaders and facilitators for active citizenship

To function as a facilitator and multiplier of active citizenship schools and their staff need to be visible in the public sphere. They need to focus efforts on communication besides only arranging courses. There are various ways to do this.

A few examples:

KBW Treffpunkt Bildung, AT: We work with the "beer mat initiative" to discuss the controversial messages printed on beer mats. We [also] highlight and contribute to society's remembrance of the National Socialist period, for example much was done in connection with the 75th anniversary of the end of the war. We organize memorial marches with this purpose.

Bildungshaus Retzhof, AT: We are writing articles in the local newspaper every week focusing on "political education". We are working with films and virtual reality to highlight the history of the concentration camp in Aflenz.

Nyköpings folkhögskola, SE: We work with a cultural café for the whole town, hosted by the participants of the Second chance course.

Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg, AT: We are active in many different networks working on democracy and human rights. This gives us visibility, acceptance, partnerships, and access to information. On the basis of this, we renew our offers based on the suggestions that come from our various contacts. For example, we are now developing activities on organic farming and new techniques for soil improvement, following suggestions from two farmers with this focus. Another example is that we participate in local events to commemorate the victims of Nazism.

Heimvolkshochschule Seddiner See, GER: We strive to be a recognized practice-oriented and competent partner for education and active citizenship locally and nationally. We offer ourselves as moderators in communities where conflicts have arisen.

Volkshochschule Oberösterreich, AT: The mere fact of offering political education creates awareness for topics, because it always needs new impulses, because both trainers and participants tend to ask for little of their own accord. This way activities have increased significantly in the last ten years.

Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Ludowy, PL: Our school engages in activities to solve contemporary social problems, thus showing its audiences that these are important topics and that we should not be indifferent to such things as supporting each other during the COVID-19 pandemic or helping refugees from Ukraine.

5. The whole school should be on board

Working to promote active citizenship should involve everybody at the school, from teachers, course participants to administrative and service staff. This way the school can develop a participatory and democratic culture promoting active citizenship.

A few examples:

Nyköpings folkhögskola, SE: One strategy in the school is to promote civics and active citizenship as part of the participatory democracy of the school itself. Courses at the school have class councils every week. Participant councils take place at the school, also every week.

Escola d'Adults de la Verneda Sant Martí, ES: A basic strategy is that participants should be involved and in control of the school's activities.

Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg, AT: We have given ourselves the task of working on learning for active citizenship and democracy and of planning and implementing events in this area. It is important that there is both an institutional and an individual commitment to this.

EICASCANTIC, ES: We see participation as essential, and active citizenship is transversal in all our activities. At the organizational level we stress member participation in our activities and teamwork to avoid creating hierarchies, hence fostering horizontality.

Röda Korsets folkhögskola, SE: We also try to let the participants' and teachers' experiences lead to new course activities. In this way, we have developed the course "Acting without Discrimination", which builds on the experiences of discrimination experienced by the school's participants.

Ludowy Uniwesytet Naturoterapii Anktywnej, PL: One of the aims of our school is to learn to work in teams, observing local needs and looking for ideas to fulfill them. Increasing environmental health awareness is currently the most important challenge. Our activities are designed in such a way that education directly benefits the students and indirectly influences increase in public awareness.

6. Let active citizenship permeate all your activities

Learning for active citizenship does not have to be specific activities. It can permeate all school activities as an aspect of the activity being carried out, as an approach of school staff and as part of the design of school environments. In this way, crafts courses, vocational training, language courses or various aesthetic activities can be part of the school's work on active citizenship.

A few examples:

Bäckedals folkhögskola, SE: We do not have specific courses on active citizenship. However, learning for active citizenship should permeate all our courses. You have to feel and see that you can have an impact. Therefore, we have a participant's council with real influence and participant representatives in the management group and in various bodies at the school. We also involve our participants and their creative crafting in designing our facilities.

Bildungshaus Retzhof, AT: A course in handicrafts can be a very good training in working together as a group and thinking ecologically about the materials you use.

Färnebo folkhögskola, SE: In all courses at the school, be it profile courses, Second chance courses, study motivating courses, introduction courses for migrants and refugees, we strive to make it possible for participants to understand global relations and access practical tools for change.

Uniwersytet Ludowy Rzemiosła Artystycznego, PL: Our observations over the years have shown that vocational training in a variety of handicraft techniques gives graduates of the two-year course many tools for working with people. This “know how” is then used to serve the community in a variety of ways, including for educational purposes, therapeutic purposes or as an active leisure activity. Beyond this, education at the school is about creating a community based on partnership, democracy, relationship building and shared responsibility for where and when we meet. We create a micro-community where we "train" civic activities.

Kaszubski Uniwersytet Ludowy, PL: We use the expression "from a community of participants to the building and development of local communities". This means that the aim of teaching at the school is, on the one hand, to build a sense of community among the participants, and on the other hand, to encourage students to start or continue local activities through their acquired competencies, knowledge, skills, awareness, and relationships. In the beginning, students learn to be active citizens in the community of listeners and lecturers. Later, they share it with others.

7. Provide participants with the necessary tools for active citizenship

In order to serve society through active citizenship, one needs an ethical compass, personal qualities and practical skills. Folk high schools have great potential to contribute to the development of these skills. This can include working in groups, developing leadership, supporting volunteering, learning about specific issues, etc.

A few examples:

Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg, AT: We think it is equally important to focus on social and emotional skills as on expertise to foster active citizenship. We try to instill courage so that our participants dare to speak out. We invite interesting speakers on current political issues and themes to provide knowledge and information but also to encourage engagement.

Kaszubski Uniwersytet Ludowy, PL: We assume that the didactic or pedagogical process should always start with elements related to the personal development of the participants, which means focusing on personal resources, communication skills, the ability to work in a group and recognising one's own resources. Only after that come different areas of knowledge.

Uniwersytet Ludowy w Radawnicy, PL: We contribute to the knowledge of how NGOs and foundations work and help participants to create their own organizations.

Evangelisches Bildungs- und Tagungszentrum Bad Alexandersbad, GER: What we like very much is the capability approach, to equip people with the skills they need to tackle their challenges. We don't have anything ready-made in the drawer, no rigid concept. We also focus a lot on empowering volunteers in their roles and on the role of volunteering in community development.

Katolische Landvolkochschule Oesede, GER: Our take on active citizenship is focused on voluntarism as a resource for a better society. We not only encourage volunteering, but we help develop the skills needed to take on that role. This can include board work, lobbying, marketing, writing, public speaking, fundraising, project development, school partnerships etc. Volunteering permeates all our course activities.

Röda Korsets folkhögskola, SE: We do a lot of work to create structures for how participants' joint influence will be organized in the school. We do this in order to develop the school and to ensure that the participants take these skills with them into their future lives. It's about being able to make agendas, take minutes, make your voice heard, and chair meetings.

8. Be good listeners and creative didactic designers

Working with adult learning and active citizenship means constantly listening to the needs of participants and partners and adapting content and methods accordingly. Learning can take place in many different ways and in many different contexts and settings. Digitalisation offers many new opportunities and challenges.

A few examples:

Bildungshaus Retzhof, AT: In addition to on-site courses at the house, we work with something that we call Mobile Retzhof which is an initiative to organize courses in other locations to reach more people with our activities. We also organize city walks and other outdoor educational activities, for example on the border with Slovenia.

Bäckedals folkhögskola, SE: We give students the opportunity to carry out building and construction projects at the school themselves and together, such as greenhouses, chicken coops, outdoor classrooms, etc.

SPES Zukunftsakademie, AT: We use and develop creative courses and methods for project activities, future planning, and business development through various forms of participatory dialogue, such as "Art of Hosting", "Design thinking", world café, circle dialogue, FORMAT etc. By developing project activities, we identify new knowledge needs and stimulate civic engagement. "Learning by doing".
We pay attention that our participants on a personal level understand the importance of engagement for themselves and for society and we link social and economic needs and create civic engagement on that basis. We try to focus on the pleasures of civic engagement as opposed to just looking at all the problems and musts. We point to positive examples. A concrete example is the Nah Da project where SPES works with local development groups and through civic engagement creates local development centers to meet identified social and economic needs. This can be done through the formation of cooperatives such as in St Stephen's Afiesl where citizens in the cooperative form now run a cafe, a pub, a shop, and a gathering and meeting place.

Bona folkhögskola, SE: We are making extensive use of the opportunities offered by hybrid working methods and digital tools to reach more people who need to combine family and work life with further studies. Working extensively with digitalization has helped us to evolve during the pandemic and has led to a shift in the balance between on-site and distance learning towards more distance learning especially for those studying at secondary school level in the Second chance course.
We also experience that with a greater openness to using the digital world as a source, we are also entering the digital realms where a lot of communication and debate takes place in today's society. For example, we study forums that were previously deemed not appropriate as sources in a school context, e.g. Reddit and Flashback. It is good to go in and read there with a source critical perspective, it gives good training for participating in today's society.

Volkshochschule Oberösterreich, AT: Our didactic concept in active citizenship focuses on low threshold offers and on topics from people's lives that directly affect them and for which they are passionate. We set experience-oriented offers, so that we can pick up people and achieve self-efficacy. These offers are more likely to be accepted. We see a mandate to strengthen trust in fact-based, scientific, conventional medicine again; this is important for the political climate.

9. Have steering documents that supports your work

Many schools have it as a founding principle to support learning and development for the citizens of their area or for citizens more broadly. When this is written in the statutes or bylaws of the school it gives legitimacy to all such work being carried out in the school.

A few examples:

KBW Treffpunkt Bildung, AT: The organization's statutes state that it should "provide a place for different kinds of development, participation and co-creation, which includes courageous and experimental activities that can both fail and succeed, even failures should be seen as an opportunity to learn".

Escola d'Adults de la Verneda Sant Martí, ES: Historically, the school has participated in improvements in the district, so there are now several services for social issues, the subway, a new pedestrian walkway, etc. Our statutes also state that the school's "permanent goal is to reach all people and all sectors of the district to help everyone access the adult education they need".

Bona folkhögskola, SE: Looking at the school's objectives, the central goal is to work to give the most to those who need it most, but it also says that the school's work is about promoting emancipation, confronting patriarchal straitjackets in society, and promoting knowledge about how to influence society.

Heimvolkshochschule Seddiner See, GER: We see our folk high school pedagogy as central to active citizenship. It can be summarized in five principles: Living and learning under one roof, teachers always seeing themselves as learners as well, education through dialogue, orientation towards the common good, and learning with heart, hand, and mind.

10. Lobby for adult education and active citizenship

Despite the support for adult learning and the link to active citizenship in international agreements, the adult learning sector is severely underfunded. It is therefore important to demonstrate to policy makers that the defence and development of democracy depends on active and engaged citizens who understand the value of human rights and that adult education organizations have a unique competence in developing learning for active citizenship. It is also important to highlight the potential of adult learning for local development.

Individual folk high schools have the opportunity to be in continuous contact with local decision-makers and demonstrate the importance of school activities for the local community. In order to influence the long-term funding conditions, the umbrella organizations of folk high schools, such as VBLR, OSUL, ARGE, and FSO (the Swedish umbrella for all folk high schools there), need to be proactive at the national level in demonstrating the needs that schools can meet in terms of democratic participation, working life, health and social welfare and that continuous and sufficient funding is needed for this. In lobbying, cooperation with other civil society organizations should be sought.

A few examples:

Volkshochschule Oberösterreich, AT: We are well networked, for example through the EB Forum Upper Austria. This is a voluntary association of the major adult education providers in Upper Austria, which is committed to ensuring that general education has the same value as vocational education and training and that socio-political issues are addressed.

Kaszubski Uniwersytet Ludowy, PL: For us, national and international networks are important to develop our work, that is why we have been involved in the formation of OSUL and why we participate in international projects together with folk high schools from many parts of Europe.

Evangelisches Bildungs- und Tagungszentrum Bad Alexandersbad, GER: We bring together political leaders for unbiased conversations about the region's challenges without media coverage or an audience. We try to maintain close contact with local politicians, authorities, and civil society organizations. Local issues and needs are central to our work on active citizenship. These can be energy issues, nuclear fuel storage, or motorways.

7. School portraits

What follows here are portraits of all 25 schools that participated in the survey. They describe the schools in general terms. The focus is on how school leaders think about and how the schools practically work in different ways to promote active citizenship.

Biblioteca Bon Pastor, ES

Biblioteca Bon Pastor is a municipal library in the Bon Pastor district of northwest Barcelona. The district has about 35 000 inhabitants. The library started in 2004 and has eight employees including a social educator, which is very unusual for libraries in Barcelona. The library wants to be a resource for the whole district and its inhabitants, and the profile is to serve the social and cultural life of the district. It collaborates with other municipal bodies, civil organizations, and individual citizens. Networking is a basic principle for the activities of the library.

The library is financed by public funds but needs to constantly find additional funding to develop its activities.

For adults, it offers courses in Spanish and Catalan, as well as courses in information and communication technologies. It makes a great effort to identify and understand the needs of the citizens in the area and tries to design activities that meet these needs.

What is active citizenship?



Virginia Cierco Aparicio, director of the Public Library in the neighborhood Bon Pastor:

"For me active citizenship is getting the neighborhood involved. Active citizenship is community work. I believe that participation has to start from the needs of people; an imposed or organized participation is incongruent with starting from their needs."

How do you work with active citizenship?

Our idea is to never do anything alone but always be together with others in our area. Our strategy is to identify activities that make people want to participate. For example, there is a great need to empower women in our neighborhood by raising feminist awareness. Instead of organizing traditional lectures on feminism, we have been involved in organizing workshops for women on self-defense, graffiti and cajon drumming.

We try to link our expertise with the social, cultural and educational needs of our neighborhood.



The library Is active together with the inhabitants of the districts.

Being present in the area is crucial. Bonding and community work are our keywords. We need to be present on the streets and at different meetings to understand the needs and to support important initiatives. We also use WhatsApp a lot to keep in touch with the associations in the area.

We play an important role in connecting people and organizations with whom we have contact and thus facilitating new initiatives.

Main challenges and dilemmas

Our work has been very well received by the citizens of the district. Unfortunately, this has not led to an increase in our budget even though we are now working with many more people and organizations. We therefor need to try to get project funding to develop our activities.

Bildungshaus Kloster St. Ulrich, GER

Bildungshaus Kloster St. Ulrich is an institution of the Archdiocese of Freiburg with an educational mission for the countryside. Based on a Christian view of man and the world, it offers spaces for learning and experiencing to understand, work with and cope with personal and social change processes.

The school aims to be a place for "people of different ages and in the most varied life situations". It offers "education, leisure, life support and retreat". It also works specifically with further education for those active in agriculture and rural areas.

The school was founded around 1950 by the then rural youth pastor Paul Wollmann as an educational center for young people. The building is designed for about sixty people. It has around twenty people in permanent employment.

The school is open 350 days a year and reported 9 500-10 000 participant days per year (before Corona). This means that about 6 000 people visit the house as guests every year. Funded 60 % by own income, the rest by support from the Archdiocese (25%) and public authorities (15%).

What is active citizenship?

Bernhard Nägele, director of Bildungshaus Kloster St. Ulrich:



"Active citizenship means people having the opportunity to take their lives into their own hands, to become active themselves and to experience 'self-efficacy' [and] "another thing belongs to it [...] that our society is structured according to the principle of subsidiarity. The small unit should be able to solve its problems on its own. And only if it is not possible at the small level should it move on to the next level. This is the basic principle of the Christian-Catholic social doctrine, but it is constantly trampled upon everywhere." "The top has to allow the bottom to solve the problems themselves. […] Empowering people to work on their issues themselves and take it into their own hands. That's our definition of active citizenship."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We work at many different levels!

We work with many children and youth camps and here young persons have a chance to explore active citizenship from the task of coming up with a group name together, setting up group rules - "how do we deal with problems?" to "how do we talk to each other?" And, of course, from 9-year-olds to 17-year-olds that also differs. The camps make the young people realize that it's all about them and that if they get involved, then they can make a difference.

We work as a partner in vocational training for farmers and wine growers. At the folk high school Kloster St. Ulrich, they participate in two weeks of personality development where they practice communication, self-awareness, etc., which is a basis for becoming active later in life.

We work with associations based on voluntary work, in our case largely catholic church organizations.



Participants collecting skills which they need to be active citizens. *Photo: Bildungshaus Kloster St. Ulrich*

We work with life orientation courses for people in mid-life who want to see a change, is also a way of working on active citizenship but with a focus on "how can I make my personal life work".

We try to involve everyone in different ways, in small and big ways.

We have volunteers working on camp activities.

For our folk high school being involved in local development work is important. We have been active in initiating Agenda 21 locally, as well as in a project called "Dorf im Dialog". We also invite local people to a Nachtcafé (night café) with panel discussions and lectures to discuss agriculture and society once a year. We also facilitate local discussions when requested, for example we have facilitated a discussion on wolves in Baden-Württemberg.

We always try to be attentive to issues that concern local people and "keep our finger on the pulse", for example at Nachtcafé we always look for burning issues. Examples of topics that have been addressed are "The cow is not a climate killer", "Can organic food feed the world?" or "Oat milk is not the solution either".

We initiated a local working group of organic farmers, conventional farmers and beekeepers to moderate the heated discussion around the Pro Biene-campaign (citizens' petition in Baden-Württemberg for better conditions for bees and insects).

Main challenges and shortcomings

Working on gender issues is new to the folk high school and dealing with mobile phones in children and youth camps is a challenge.

While AFD (a german far-right party) is a threat when positioning their perspectives and issues, the lack of engagement within large groups in society and within the church is an even bigger problem.

The next danger is when more and more is delegated from the grassroots to the top through mergers and organizational restructuring. If municipalities can decide less independently, and things are moved to the county level, then it becomes increasingly difficult to get involved. This is a complete disaster for democracy and for the understanding of what a local village means for a community.

Bildungsschlösser Oberösterreich, AT

Together Schloss Weinberg and Schloss Zell an der Pram forms the Bildungsschlösser Oberösterreich. The units are administered jointly, and the principal is the province of Upper Austria.

Schloss Zell an der Pram is in the municipality of the same name in the federal state of Upper Austria. The castle dates to the late Renaissance and is owned by the municipality but leased to the province of Upper Austria. The municipality has about 2 000 inhabitants.

There are four areas of activity: Courses and seminars, cultural events, celebrations, and tourism

Within the course activities, music is the largest area. Upper Austria uses the houses for a wide variety of events for the further training of its staff.

Both castles are folk high schools and members of ARGE BHÖ.

The number of employees is twelve full-time and 36 part-time including one educator. The two castles together organize about 60 own courses and 90 guest courses in a year with about 6000 participants. Before Covid, the activity was twice as large.

What is active citizenship?



Sandra Panhuber, deputy director, head of quality management and pedagogics at Bildungsschlösser Oberösterreich:

”Inviting to a topic and making a call to inform people that they can get actively involved in that topic. That is, people come to a certain place at a given time and speak, discuss, and participate. These can be events, workshops, etc.”

How do you work with active citizenship?

We do not have the mandate to work on active citizenship, but we do it in some ways. We do not organize our own courses in this area but are open to collaboration with other organizations and institutions. Examples of this are our “Zeller castle talks” and “Village café” where we provide the infrastructure and pedagogical guidance, and our partners provide the content. This year we talked about climate and social justice and local history.

We are a neutral educational institution and do not take positions on issues.

Our ambition is to contribute to a rich cultural life in rural areas.



A panel discussion at the Zeller Castle Talks 2022.

Main challenges and dilemmas

When it comes to promoting active citizenship, it is not an explicit area of work for us from our sponsors. For example, addressing local needs for infrastructure and services is the responsibility of the municipality, not ours. We can host various politically oriented events, but we should be neutral. We also do not have continuous funding to work on active citizenship but must seek project funding for this. We cannot participate in interesting projects if we do not receive full funding.

We seem to see that the interest in volunteering for the common good is decreasing.

Participation fees make it difficult for many to participate but are necessary for our economy. Civic education should be free, but who should pay?

For us as an educational institution to position ourselves as an actor for active citizenship, public funding is needed. The question is, do we want it?

Bildungshaus Retzhof, AT

Bildungshaus Retzhof is located about 40 km from Austria's second largest city, Graz. Seminars, workshops, symposia, association meetings and cultural events take place throughout the year at the Bildungshaus. Private companies also organize events and meetings at the education house.

At the Bildungshaus we organize about 100 courses per year. We host another 100 courses organized by others in the premises. About 80 people can stay in single and double rooms at the school. Of the participants in the courses, 50-60 % are women.

The Bildungshaus works with democratic education, art, culture, creativity, health, and lifestyle. It also aims to be a regional hub for knowledge and learning, and therefore supports community education.

The Bildungshaus is run as a company, but is 100 % owned by the Province of Styria, which means that the school is part of the public sector.

What is active citizenship?

Polonca Kosi Klemenšak, pedagogical staff, Erasmus+ Ambassador and participant in the environmental team:



"So in our pedagogical concepts we follow the pedagogical and sociological approaches of Oskar Negt. […] And he actually talks about an active citizen if you have the following six competencies: identity competence, historical competence, technological competence, ecological competence, economic competence and the competence of social justice.

And these competencies are important for being able to participate in society as a citizen and for developing something like a critical opinion and for recognizing and understanding the interrelationships of social contexts. For example, that you can develop imagination and ideas about how you can make democracy better or how you can live it."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We highlight Negt's model of competencies on our website, which includes videos explaining the different competences. Different courses may not cover all but one or two of these competencies. For example, a course in handicrafts can be a training in working together as a group and thinking ecologically about the materials you use.

We are making a variety of courses focusing on different of the above-mentioned competencies to capture different target groups and create encounters between different people.

We involve the whole staff in quality management days, with themes such as inclusive teaching and accessibility.

We organize photo workshops to highlight different perspectives on society.

In addition to on-site courses at the house, we work with Mobile Retzhof which is an initiative to organize courses in other locations locally to reach more people with our activities.



People learning about the border region between Austria and Slovenia. *Photo: Bojana Hrzenjak*

We organize city walks and other outdoor educational activities, for example on the border with Slovenia.

We work with “community education”, and locally try to reach both old people (most of the students of the education house courses are 40-60 years old) and young people, including children.

We work together with several actors, including Verein Freirum Leibnitz and SOL community garden in Leibnitz, within the "Awareness Region South Styria" to support a democratic way of life in the region and for example support of refugees in the project through internships.

We are writing articles in the local newspaper every week focusing on “political education”.

We cooperate with Pavel House on activities on both sides of the border with a focus on Slovenian writers etc.

We are working with films and virtual reality to highlight the history of the concentration camp in Aflenz.

Main challenges and dilemmas

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the activities of the education center, for example, the number of participants has fallen from around 13000 to around 4000 during the year.

There is still a lot of work to be done to provide accessible texts and learning resources in adult education.

Perhaps we should be organizing more online or blended learning? So far, we have not organized anything in these formats.

We need to network even more and do things with new partners. It's easy to think you don't have time and do things yourself unnecessarily.

Populism and anti-democratic movements are growing in the region. There is a lot of fear and ignorance, which needs to be addressed by bringing people together for example those at risk of cultivating their xenophobia and refugees so that prejudice and fear are countered.

Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg, AT

The Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg was built in 1596 and is in the village of Puchberg with about 2 000 inhabitants near the city of Wels with more than 60 000 inhabitants. The provincial capital Linz is 35 kilometers away.

In 1953, the Diocese of Linz bought the castle and started an educational center for the rural population.

Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg has about 40 employees and organizes its own courses and events as well as hosting others. Around 1 300 courses, events and lectures take place annually with more than 25 000 participants.

The main thematic areas of activity are spirituality, theology and philosophy, social issues and the environment, family issues, health and psychology, art, and culture as well as travel, pilgrimage, and excursions. In the area of learning for active citizenship, they have different courses for example "Experiencing Democracy" and many events on the environment and climate as well as on society and communication.

Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg is a member of, and currently chairs, the Adult Education Forum of the State of Upper Austria and is in the umbrella organization of educational institutions in Austria ARGE BHÖ. It is a member of the Network for Human Rights and Democracy, which brings together some 200 civil society organizations and cooperates with Antifa in the nearby city of Wels, which works against right-wing radicalism and fascism. The school is also in contact with the provincial authorities on issues such as integration and with Initiative Democracy 21, which promotes the right to citizenship.

What is active citizenship?

Helmut Außerwöger, director of the Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg:



"First and foremost, active citizenship is where I live, in the city, in the community, when I am involved in a club or church beyond my family. Whether in music, in the fire department, when I contribute something to the coexistence of the local community.

That's one aspect of active citizenship. Then I would say active citizenship is when I have some interest in politics in my country and for Europe. I inform myself about the media, newspapers, about what is happening in politics and try to get an idea of what is going on.

Another aspect of active citizenship is getting involved concretely in a civil society movement that has certain goals like environmental protection or wants a social center to be built in a community. Or I get involved in a specific political party."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We have given ourselves the task of working on learning for active citizenship and democracy and of planning and implementing events in this area. It is important that there is both an institutional and an individual commitment to this.

We think it is equally important to focus on social and emotional skills as on expertise to foster active citizenship. We try to instil courage so that our participants dare to speak out. We invite interesting speakers on current political issues and themes to provide knowledge and information but also to encourage engagement.

We are active in many different networks working on democracy and human rights. This gives us visibility, acceptance, partnerships, and access to information. Based on this, we renew our offers based on the suggestions that come from our various contacts. For example, we are now developing activities on organic farming and new techniques for soil improvement, following suggestions from two farmers with this focus. Another example is that we participate in local events to commemorate the victims of Nazism.



Ukrainian musicians in the yard of Schloss Puchberg.

Main challenges and dilemmas

The main challenge in our work to promote democracy and active citizenship is to make events that people want to participate in. We have the skills and contacts to make good content, but we don't get the number of participants we want. Here we need new thinking and developed cooperation.

Digitalization is also a challenge. We have many good experiences with digital and hybrid activities, especially in terms of outreach. We have participants who would never have come to our building. But when it comes to activities focusing on personal and social development or art and creativity, it has not worked well.

Bona folkhögskola, SE

Bona folkhögskola is a very local school, where most of the participants come from Motala and the surrounding area. The municipality of Motala has a population of just over 40 000. The school has about 220 participants in various courses. About 130 currently attend the Second chance course after the Covid-19pandemic, but the Second chance course will not stay as big in the near future.

The school was founded in 1984 by the Left Party, went bankrupt in the late 1990s and was reconstructed as an economic association in 1999 with a variety of associations as members. 60 associations are members of the school and about as many private individuals.

Motala was one of the municipalities that received many refugees in 2015, so about half of the participants in the Second chance course have a mother tongue other than Swedish. Many in the primary secondary level are between 30 and 50 years old adults often with family and children. In the Second chance course at upper secondary level, the majority have Swedish as their mother tongue. They are younger, although the average age is over 20, and many have some form of disability.

The school also offers special courses in yoga, choral singing for women, a basic course in moderation, as well as the distance courses “Textlabbet” (a writing course), "Socialism today? Marx, politics, and economics" and "The financial crisis!”. In the latter course, participants are often highly educated. The school also offers vocational training with a focus on digital games and digital community management. The school has no regular boarding house but offers eight places in a collective house owned by the school.

What is active citizenship?

Annelie Dahlkvist, principal at Bona folkhögskola:



“I think that although I am an active citizen, I am concerned that there are so many people in this country who are in a situation where they cannot exercise their active citizenship, for example vote in general elections, and who are not allowed to exercise their civil rights. I don't know what they want because they are excluded. In a way, this also makes me passive, because I have a conception of society that is probably completely wrong. […] Looking at the school's objectives, the central goal is to work to give the most to those who need it most, but it also says that the school's work is about promoting emancipation, confronting patriarchal straitjackets in society, and leading to knowledge about how to influence society.”

How do you work with active citizenship?

We try not to infantilize young adults, but to help them stand on their own feet.

We work actively to guide Second chance course students into workplaces in the local community and to help participants who want to get summer jobs locally.

We are making extensive use of the opportunities offered by hybrid working methods and digital tools to reach more people who need to combine family and work life with further studies. Working extensively with digitalization has helped us to evolve during the pandemic and has led to a shift in the



Demonstration organized by students and teachers at the school.

balance between on-site and distance learning towards more distance learning especially for those studying at secondary school level on the Second chance course.

We also experience that with a greater openness to using the digital world as a source, we are also entering the digital realms where a lot of communication and debate takes place in today's society, for example forums that were previously deemed not appropriate as sources in a school context e.g. Reddit and Flashback. It is good to go in and read there with a source critical perspective, it gives good training to participate in today's society.

Working more in more flexible and digital ways also seems to be a way to change the learning environment so that certain norms are not as present and troublesome for some participants, i.e. more people feel secure in the digital learning environment.

Working more on-site is more important for those who work at undergraduate level.

We work actively on rights and for example address honor-based oppression together with the local women's shelter.

We do a lot of civics focusing on how society works and work at a diversity of social issues. We work with all the classical tools for learning about society in society, such as meetings with people in the local community, interviews, research on many different social issues, etc.

We work with an intermediate step in admissions so that those who apply to the school (and have a need to study) can start to explore or take on flexible learning before the actual course starts (it is called “Bona peers”).

We work on mentoring Second chance course students in such a way that we help participants get what they are entitled to both in society and at school.

Main challenges and dilemmas

We are working a lot on understanding conspiracy thinking and how we can get people to leave this.

One challenge is that we can't grow our Second chance course. This year there were around 150 applicants for the Second chance course that Bona couldn’t accept.

Bäckedal folkhögskola, SE

Bäckedals folk high school is in the municipality of Härjedalen on the outskirts of the town Sveg. Härjedalen is a sparsely populated municipality. It has 10 000 inhabitants on an area of almost 12 000 km^2, the urban area of Sveg has about 2 500 inhabitants. The school was founded in 1954 through local initiatives, with the municipality of Sveg donating the land for the school. The school is owned and run by the region of Jämtland and Härjedalen.

The school employs 25 teachers, but many work part-time. There is also service staff working in the school's boarding house, kitchen, and restaurant. The boarding school has room for 60 residents.

The school's profile is focused on crafts and sustainability. The main part of the activities is long specialized courses and Second chance courses. The specialized courses make up 60% of the activities and the participants are young people from all over the country and they live in the school's boarding house. Participants in the Second chance course live in Sveg or within bus distance of the school and many of them are born abroad. The Second chance courses focus on general competencies and qualifications for further studies. In the summer, the school organizes short courses with a crafts focus.

The school is part of the regional administration and is governed by the Regional Development Board.

It is part of many local, regional, national, and international networks that are relevant to course activities in areas such as crafts, sustainability and self-sufficiency, and cultural history.

It is funded by public grants and to some extent by income from the boarding school.

What is active citizenship?



Magnus Arreflod, director of Bäckedal folk high school:

"*To have the knowledge and ability to participate in society. Our mission is to contribute to learning for active citizenship. During your time with us, you should develop an interest in social issues and gain the tools to be more active in society. The school environment should be characterized by opportunities for participants to have an influence on their learning and on the school.*"

How do you work with active citizenship?

We do not have specific courses on active citizenship. However, learning for active citizenship should permeate all our courses. You must feel and see that you can have an impact. Therefore, we have a participant's council with real influence and participant representatives in the management group and in various bodies at the school.

The Second chance courses, where many participants are born abroad, make many study visits to institutions and organizations to learn about rights and duties.

In our teaching and in common gatherings we address various political issues related to our courses and the place we live in. These may be forestry, nature conservation, food security, rural development, energy supply, Sami rights, tourism, etc.

Participants will have the opportunity to carry out building and construction projects at the school themselves and together, such as greenhouses, chicken coops, outdoor classrooms, etc.

We offer the school as a meeting place for the local community and for social, cultural, and political events.

Our staff participates in various local, national, and international networks for sustainability and crafts.

We work hard to involve our participants in different processes and to give space to their own initiatives. Participants are taught the traditional tools for leading and participating in democratic meetings, such as drafting notices, agendas, writing minutes, and chairing.

Participants will learn how to appeal against government decisions and how to write citizens' petitions. They will also learn how to write letters to newspapers.



Political debate at Bäckedals folkhögskola.

Main challenges and dilemmas

We are governed by the regional authorities and new majorities in the region may change conditions for our activities.

It is a challenge to find time and be able to prioritize more active participation in our networks.

Beside that it’s hard to reconcile new loose forms of organization emerging through social media, where many of our participants and partners are active, with traditional democratic structures. To further develop new forms of participatory involvement in the activities that suit today's young generation.

Another challenge is to counteract destructive polarization and be a balancing force in the political and economic conflicts that exist in our region. This may involve forestry, nature conservation, biodiversity, tourism, migration, climate, etc.

Drom Kotar Mestipen - Asociación de Mujeres, ES

The Drom Kotar Mestipen is an organization by and for Roma women. For more than 20 years, the organization has been fighting to achieve equality for Roma women in all areas of society, through the field of education to enable Roma women to take their place in society.

Drom Kotar Mestipen tries to overcome the triple discrimination faced by Roma women due to gender and ethnicity and a low academic level. It does this by networking with other Roma women's organizations at European, national, and local level in Barcelona.

In the fight for Roma women's rights, the organization works on the right to education, especially vocational training for Roma women. It also works hard to bring Roma women together in local and national meetings to exchange experiences and strengthen the Roma identity.

What is active citizenship?



Vero Santiago, facilitator of the Drom Kotar Mestipen:

"All the activities and courses that we carry out in the entity, arise from the voice and the needs of the women, which means, we make them participants and protagonists in line with our saying that the proposals should be gestated before they are given birth."

How do you work with active citizenship?

The starting point is the needs of Roma women and the discrimination they face. We bring the women together for coffee evenings or larger conferences where they identify the problems they face and discuss how different forms of education could improve their lives and the lives of their communities.



The Roma Women Students Gatherings of Catalonia are one of the most prominent activities carried out by Drom Kotar Mestipen.

I give you an example; because of these discussions, we offer the course of pedagogues of free time. Through this course, there is a positive impact both on the woman who has obtained the title and who is working on it, as well as in her environment and in the school. In the first place, for the women who take the course, because in many occasions they do not believe that they can obtain a degree as they are women with low academic levels. Then there is a transformation in them when they get the degree and work in the schools. Secondly, many of the women are mothers, and they become references for their children and environment. Thirdly, having Roma professionals working in the schools makes it a more inclusive and diverse school, as well as combating stereotypes and prejudices.

EICASCANTIC, ES

EICASCANTIC, Espacio de Inclusión y Formación Casco Antiguo, is a civil society organization based in the old city of Barcelona. The name is an abbreviation of the activity's focus "Space for inclusion and education in the old city". It is a neighbourhood characterized by the presence of many migrants, some newcomers and others who have already lived there for some time.

The organization is organized around the neighbourhood and the needs that exist there.

The Adult Education Program offers language courses (Spanish and Catalan), literacy courses, mathematics, social orientation, and digital literacy courses.

Participants in the activities come from many different countries with a slight predominance mainly from North Africa. The majority are between 20-40 years old, but the activities are open to anyone over 16.

The organization has a horizontal structure that actively discourages different forms of hierarchies. It has about 80 members who contribute financially and through volunteering. There is also a technical team of 10 people.

The activities are funded by grants and projects in cooperation with local authorities and organizations, and by members' contributions in the form of financial support and volunteer work.

What is active citizenship?

Judith Olmo, pedagogical coordinator of EICASCANTIC:



"It is a somewhat complex concept to define. At EICA, it is one of our bases. We are based on the welcoming, which is the base, and from there we build a kind of pyramid; active citizenship for us is the final objective of this pyramid. Basically, it would have two lines. First to get the users to know their rights and duties as participants of the host city and country. And second to accompany them in this process of what specific needs they must become part of the host city in the same way, or as similar as possible to an autochthonous person. This would be, among other things, to cover their language needs, their needs to obtain papers, at the labour level, etc. Along these lines, what we intend to achieve is that by providing facilities and covering these needs, which in the end are human rights, these people know their rights and duties as citizens of the country and can exercise them."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We work mainly to holistically receive and welcome migrants and enable them to become active citizens in society through various projects and programs of which the Adult Education Program is one. Support is also offered in legal matters, labour market orientation, contacts with authorities, and participation in cultural activities.

We see participation as essential and active citizenship is transversal in all our activities. At the organizational level we stress member participation in our activities and teamwork to avoid creating hierarchies fostering horizontality. We see it as very important to work closely together with other organizations in our area, e.g. the Neighbourhood Coordinating Committee.

In our educational work with the migrants in our neighbourhood we focus on their rights as migrants and as citizens. They learn about our neighbourhood and the whole city and how they can participate in different contexts. In this work it is necessary to have an intercultural approach recognizing the values of participants´ cultures of origin.



Participants at EICASCANTIC.

We listen to the suggestions and needs of the migrants, our participants and volunteers and give our support to these instead of thinking that we in the technical team always know best because we have academic training. This could be supporting the idea of organizing a joint iftar dinner in the youth project or starting a flea market in the women's project.

Main challenges and dilemmas

Our biggest challenge is the lack of resources. We do not have continuous funding and therefore have problems doing all the things we want to do. Another challenge is the balance between volunteer and paid work.

The digital divide affects our participants. It is about both access to digital tools and the ability to use them. We organize different types of courses to meet these needs.

Escola d´Adults de la Verneda Sant Martí, ES

The school was founded in 1978 by residents of the district la Verneda Sant Martí in Barcelona. They took over a building previously used under Franco by the Falangist women's organization. It was a social movement that created the school.

In 1986, two associations were created that are important for the school's operation, Agora, an association for all participants, and Heura, an association for women to promote women's right to education. Agora currently has about 450 members and Heura has about 1 350 members.

At the school they talk about "technicians" and "participants". The technicians have executive functions, and the participants are students but also sit on the board of the school and make decisions based on "dialogue and scientific evidence". No one with a university education is allowed to sit on the board. That's how the school was designed from the start. The General Assembly brings everyone together. Likewise, they don't talk about “volunteers”, but about “collaborators”, because they collaborate in whatever they want. They don't just come to give a class and leave; they are collaborators in the project.

What is active citizenship?



Carla Jarque, coordinator of Adult School of La Verneda-Sant Martí:

“It's not that we deal with active citizenship as content; we do explain how they can participate in school and outside, what spaces they have. For example, the school's Women's Group is in the Unitary Platform against Gender Violence, in the Clot Women's Council, in other spaces for participation at city level. Thus, from the beginning, they are explained the right they have to participate in the decisions that are taken and in the organization of their own educational project, and other aspects at neighborhood, district and city level.”

How do you work with active citizenship?

On the website you can read: "The area where the school has the most impact and participation is the district of La Verneda. The school changes with the district and the district changes with the school, so that we improve the social and educational situation of the population. Historically, the school has participated in improvements in the district, so there are now several services for social issues, the metro, a new pedestrian walkway, etc." It also states that the school's "permanent goal is to reach all people and all sectors of the district to help everyone access the adult education they need".

One of the main channels of influence in the district is VERN, a co-organisation of different associations in the district. We are also members of the Women's Council in the district of Sant Martí and the School Council in the district of Sant Martí. We collaborate with the Center Cívic de Sant Martí and the services it provides, such as the library.

A basic strategy is that participants should be involved and in control of the school's activities.

Another strategy is to target those who need the school the most, and focus on these groups, both in the classroom and in the recruitment of participants to the school.

There is a diversity of activities to meet the needs of the district's residents. The school gives courses in initial literacy; languages as Spanish, Catalan, English, French and German; training in ICT, from digital literacy to 3D design and mobile applications; workshops on physical movement, as sevillanas, dance and fitness training; aesthetic courses in ceramics, painting, ballet, etc. The school also helps students to prepare for free access to degrees, so that people can continue their studies. So called dialogic gatherings play an important role. Dialogic gatherings can be literary (in Spanish, Catalan, and English), artistic, musical, feminist, mathematical, scientific, etc.



Meeting at the school.

The fact that the school works in the district and that the educational and organizational skills of the school are in demand can be seen in the fact that the town council proposed that we participated in a public tender to carry out the Community Action Plan for La Verneda and La Pau. First, we conducted interviews on the street, with people with different profiles. Then, we conducted interviews with the different organizations in the neighbourhood, as well as desk research of national and international bibliography. This allowed us to identify the needs that existed in the neighbourhood. Thus, we identified the priority areas in which we had to work; we looked for evidence and researched which European projects had been successful in each of the areas. Subsequently, we held a conference to explain everything we had researched, and we presented the evidence. At these conferences, the people of the neighbourhood themselves chose which successful experiences they wanted to recreate, and the commissions were set up. In this sense, the Plan works according to the same principles as the school.

Main challenges and dilemmas

There are always challenges, but we always try to follow the line Freire was talking about, transforming difficulties into possibilities. If there is an obstacle, we always turn it around, there are always possibilities for something to work.

Criticism indirectly behind someone's back and not in the right forum is an effective way of sabotaging the dialogical method, as well as the movements and aspirations that can democratize society.

Evangelisches Bildungs- und Tagungszentrum Bad Alexandersbad, GER

Evangelisches Bildungs- und Tagungszentrum Bad Alexandersbad is in the small town of Bad Alexandersbad in north-eastern Bavaria near the border with Czech Republic. The village has just over 1 200 inhabitants. It is located near the Fichtelgebirge Mountain range and is part of the district of Wunsiedel with about 75 000 inhabitants.

The institution was founded in 1958 offering long folk high school courses. In 1989 the school was transformed into a modern training center with around 100 courses and 15 000 participants per year. The main funders of the school are the protestant church in Bavaria and the Free State of Bavaria. The school also generates its own income and participates in various projects funded by external parties. In addition to the churches and the authorities, the school cooperates with agricultural organizations, civil society organizations and other educational institutions.

The main subject areas are spiritual education, personal development, rural issues, political education, and environmental issues.

Participants are mainly from the surrounding regions and belong to the older age groups. This year, an anti-discrimination program aimed at young people will be launched.

The school has about 40 employees; teachers and service staff.

What is active citizenship?

Andreas Beneker, pastor and director of Evangelisches Bildungs- und Tagungszentrum Bad Alexandersbad:



"A very decisive point is that we take subsidiarity seriously. That means that issues are solved and dealt with where the people affected actually live. And that's how we understand our work, that we equip people with the skills they need to shape their own local affairs. We are an institution that also focuses on civic education, but we have a broad concept of civic education, which includes the shaping of the community. As an example, we have had courses where citizens can found local cooperatives that then operate wind turbines. I think that's also part of active citizenship, because people are empowered to manage the flow of money so that it goes back into their own community."

How do you work with active citizenship?

Examples of courses on active citizenship include the "Together for the region" network management group meetings, events under the heading "Strengthening voluntary work" and events under the "Living Democracy" program.

The didactic strategy that we are using is basically empowerment. People need to be empowered to do for themselves, what they think is important and what comes up in their community. What I like

very much is the capability approach, to equip people with the skills they need to tackle their challenges. We don't have anything ready-made in the drawer, no rigid concept.

In the framework of the "Together for the Region" network, which we initiated 20 years ago, we are involved in setting up thematic working groups to tackle common issues for the region, such as tourism, care for the elderly or youth issues, and to create projects.

Much of our work on active citizenship is not done as regular courses in our building but as one-day events in different places in the region.

We bring together political leaders for unbiased conversations about the region's challenges without media coverage or an audience. We try to maintain close contact with local politicians, authorities, and civil society organizations. Local issues and needs are central to our work on active citizenship. These can be energy issues, nuclear fuel storage, or motorways.

We also focus a lot on empowering volunteers in their roles and on the role of volunteering in community development.

We are active in combating racism and extremism through our participation in programs such as the Bavarian Alliance for Tolerance and Living Democracy and support local initiatives in the region and across the former border between West and East Germany.



Bringing together local politicians at Evangelisches Bildungs- und Tagungszentrum Bad Alexandersbad.

Main challenges and dilemmas

Our work on active citizenship is often not organized as overnight courses because participants live nearby. This is a major financial challenge as we need to raise funds to run our house. The house is our strength but also our challenge. Our regional networking on active citizenship has no direct financial value for us, but an indirect one because it makes us known as an important partner.

Another challenge is to be able to offer the right activities at the right time. There has to be a demand for what we offer, and this usually requires that there is a concrete and topical situation that we play a part in, be it energy issues, constructive conflict management or challenges due to right-wing populism.

Färnebo folkhögskola, SE

The school started in 1977, inspired by the Danish "traveling school". The focus was on global solidarity, collective living and decision-making, and active citizenship. In 1991 Färnebo folk high school was recognized by the Swedish government as an independent folk high school run by organizations from the Swedish peace, environmental and solidarity movements.

The school has its own facilities in Österfärnebo, a rural village with about 1 400 inhabitants, and in Gävle, a city with about 75 000 inhabitants. It also has distance courses which meet in other localities. Today, the Second chance course in Gävle has about 50-60 participants and the rest of the students are enrolled in different profile courses. There are about 25 people working at the school. The school "produces" some 5 900 participant weeks per year in both long and short courses. 2 100 of these are produced as second chance courses and 3 800 are so-called profile courses.

The school is owned by 13 national Swedish organizations that are part of movements for solidarity, peace and environment. It also collaborate with many other organizations and networks within these movements in Sweden and internationally.

What is Active Citizenship?

Anna-Karin Björnberg, principal at Färnebo Folk High School:



"*Our school adheres to the principle of participatory democracy as a development of representative democracy and active citizenship as an intrinsic part of this development. We see democracy not only as freedom from oppression but also as the possibility to participate. We understand active citizenship as the will and the capacity to take active part in shaping society together with others. Local, national and international social movements are foundations and laboratories for active citizenship.*"

How do you work with active citizenship?

In all courses at the school, we strive to make it possible for participants to understand global relations and access practical tools for change. Our focus areas are solidarity, global justice, feminism, and anti-racism.

We try to provide a broad range of courses that in different ways enables participants to be active citizens. As already mentioned, we have a Second chance course in Gävle, and a range of other course offerings that deals with active citizenship in relation to the goal of sustainable development. Some examples of our courses are: Small Scale Ecological gardening, The Rights of Nature, Feminism and Global Justice, Climate Justice – Local and Global, Creative ways of influencing of public opinion and Practical anti-racism.

Our distance courses generally apply blended learning where the participants have physical meetings during weekends. We also have experience of courses without physical meetings. The distance courses and the blended learning have made it possible for us to reach out to a more mixed group of participants when it comes to age, people active in working life and from different regions.

The didactical strategies we use are different in different courses but may involve giving big responsibility to our students for day-to-day management and codesign of the courses; involving them in producing a blog, a pod radio show, movies or magazines; organizing meetings, seminars/webinars, conferences; organizing demonstrations and campaigns; collection of lists of signatures; setting up new organizations; setting up new projects and linking people to existing campaigns, organizations etc.



Students from the school in a demonstration for climate action in Gävle.

There has been a lot of collaboration between the school, the local development group in Österfärnebo and other local organizations.

We have been organizing “Swedish from day one”-courses with a local community organization in Gävle and together with a network of local groups in Österfärnebo. This work has helped refugees to get started in Sweden and helped prevent/counter racism and xenophobia.

Through our international courses there has been a lot of cooperation with organisations working with popular education and active citizenship in Latin America and Africa. For example, the participants at Färnebo have supported the work of Tanzanian Folk Development Colleges to defend the right to education for young mothers and the right of decent work conditions for South-African farm workers through the importation of fair-trade wine.

Main challenges and dilemmas

The digital divide has sometimes been an obstacle for people of age to participate.

Another challenge is related to time and planning of work. We generally need to integrate our work with active citizenship within courses or find funding and partners for working with projects that complements our courses.

A third challenge is finding forms and focus for more long-term projects in which we can collaborate and be a partner of the organizations with which we work in Sweden and internationally**.**

A fourth challenge is that our prioritized issues are grand, and in themselves involving many societal levels, sectors, and themes. The challenge is to focus our work.

Heimvolkshochschule Seddiner See, GER

The school is in the municipality of Seddiner See in the federal state of Brandenburg in eastern Germany, about 50 km southwest of Berlin. The school was founded in 1993, shortly after German unification, on the initiative of the Protestant Church. Organizations behind the school include local and regional farmers' and rural organizations, cooperatives, and local authorities.

The school has 54 rooms for accommodation, a conference house and seminar rooms. Around 25 people are employed, of which 10 educators.

The school is a training center for the agricultural and rural sectors and offers short and slightly longer courses. Courses are focused on vocational training, rural development, politics, and youth issues. Approximately 5 000 people participate in the course activities during a year.

Funding comes from the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of the Environment and Climate of Brandenburg. A large part of the activities is project funded.



What is active citizenship?

Dr. Antje Pecher, principal of the Heimvolkshochschule at Seddiner See:

"In the context of our educational work, active citizenship means responsible citizens who can make decisions on an informed and discursive basis. Respectful interaction with one another is important in this context. Above all, the focus is on strengthening volunteerism and civil society."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We see our folk high school pedagogy as central to active citizenship. It can be summarized in five principles: Living and learning under one roof, teachers always seeing themselves as learners as well, education through dialogue, orientation towards the common good, and learning with heart, hand, and mind.

Our main didactic strategy is respectful dialogue. On this basis, we apply various methods such as the Future Workshop, the World Café, etc.

We strive to be a recognized practice-oriented and competent partner for education and active citizenship locally and nationally.

We identify other organizations and networks that are also working with active citizenship and volunteerism and organize educational activities and participate in common projects with them. We support the exchange of experiences, project ideas, and dissemination of knowledge between different actors. This started in the 1990s with workshops on rural development together with local authorities and organizations where democratic participation was central. Around 400 communities participated in this process. This initiative has been followed by several new projects with a similar focus, e.g. the Village/dialogue project and the Forum ländlicher Raum - Netzwerk Brandenburg.

We identify important political issues, mainly at the local level, and organize events around them, e.g. water supply or renewable energy. We are always open to suggestions.

We support and develop volunteer work through various training courses.

We identify the needs of different age groups in rural areas and develop activities around them. We have done this through the projects “Toolbox: Youth in the Village” and Caring Community.

We offer ourselves as moderators in communities where conflicts have arisen.



Collection of different topics related to active citizenship.

Main challenges and dilemmas

We are seeing a decline in interest in attending events on policy issues during the pandemic. We do not know why yet and need to analyse and be inspired by the experiences of others.

Dealing with issues of "fake news" and conspiracy theories as well as the tendency not to put up with other people's opinions affects our events. We need to develop our methods to be a stage for respectful dialogue.

Kaszubski Uniwersytet Ludowy, PL

Kaszubski Uniwersytet Ludowy or the Kashubian Folk High School is in the village of Wieżyca in the Polish province of Pomerania, about 46 km west of Gdansk. The first course was organized in 1983. Since 2004 the school has been managed by the Kashubian Folk High School Foundation. This foundation was established by the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association.

The school's mission is the civic activation of local communities through the implementation of various forms of education. Its activities are based on three pillars: active citizenship and social skills, regional cultural history, and ecology.

The school employs six staff members but makes extensive use of guest teachers for various courses and activities. The school cooperates closely with university departments and local authorities and civil society organizations. It was a founding member of OSUL, the umbrella organization of Polish folk high schools. The activities of the school are financed through competitive public project grants.

What is active citizenship?

Mariusz Mówka, president of the board of directors of the Kaszubski Uniwersytet Ludowy:



"I understand active citizenship as conscious involvement in public activities, regardless of the level. Paradoxically, also regardless of one's values, as long as these values do not exclude others from participating in this community. We understand active citizenship as an activity arising from and based on dialogue. Without dialogue, or more precisely without the ability to listen and become aware of the differences in the values professed by different people, the most important step is not possible, that is, the recognition that we can together carry out activities for the benefit of our community. As someone said: 'differing beautifully'."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We use the expression "from a community of participants to the building and development of local communities". This means that the aim of teaching at Kaszubski Uniwersytet Ludowy is, on the one hand, to build a sense of community among the participants, and on the other hand, to encourage students to start/continue local activities through the acquired competencies, knowledge, skills, awareness, and relationships. In the beginning, students learn to be active "citizens" in the community of listeners and lecturers. Later, they share it with others.

We assume that the didactic or pedagogical process should always start with elements related to the personal development of the participants, which means focusing on personal resources, communication skills, the ability to work in a group and recognizing one's own resources. Only after that come different areas of knowledge.

We give participants a better understanding of themselves and their role in the local community.

We develop and promote the use of the heritage of the Kashubian culture and language to activate and develop local communities and networks based on dialogue. The multicultural aspect is important in this work.

We have been organizing special courses for local leaders for a long time. During the pandemic, we had a project called Crisis Management Academy where we provided support to leaders who were in a very difficult situation at that time.

We make use of the possibilities of new technologies in working methods and forms.





Participants in Kaszubski uniwersytet ludowy.

We are now putting a lot of effort into active citizenship courses for women, such as the 'Folk High School for Active Women' course. For many years we have supported the elderly and we run the "Seniors have a voice" project where we document their stories for the future.

We work with different forms of neighbourhood education. Under the heading "I, You, We... neighbours" we support the activities of informal neighbourhood groups, women's groups, volunteers etc.

For us, national and international networks are important to develop our work, that is why we have been involved in the formation of OSUL and why we participate in international projects together with folk high schools from many parts of Europe.

Main challenges and dilemmas

The main problem, not only for our Foundation but for the whole NGO sector, is the lack of sustainable funding for the public tasks we perform which leads to the termination of activities when a project contract ends. It is difficult to finance our activities through participation fees.

Another problem is that we are not fully recognized by the public education system in Poland. The authorities need to recognize the non-formal education of adults, carried out in forms other than schools, as one of the most important factors in building social competencies for working life. There is a lack of understanding from the public administration that educational processes leading to personal development that enables one to deal with complex societal challenges take time and cannot be measured in the short term. This is particularly important in rural areas, where adults usually have a poor experience of their education in public schools.

In rural areas, there is a strong tradition of authoritarian male leadership. We challenge this by demonstrating in practice that local cooperation can be developed through dialogue, and joint activities in which women play a major role.

Katholische Landvolkhochschule Oesede, GER

Katholische Landvolkhochschule Oesede is in the countryside near the district capital of Osnabrück in Lower Saxony. The school was founded in 1929, but since 1949 the KLVHS Oesede association has been the school's principal. It is recognized as an independent folk high school by the Lower Saxony authorities.

The main activity used to be the 4-month courses aimed at young farmers. This course still exists but is now a minor part of the activities. The course and seminar activities still focus on agriculture, rural issues, and the environment but most of the participants come for other types of courses. Above all, KLVHS Oesede has established itself as a center for volunteer work.

The school has 46 employees and organizes about 700 events each year with about 30 000 participant days.

The school is financially supported by the Osnabrück diocese and local authorities, but the school also depends on collecting participation fees as well as finding co-financers for seminars and participating in projects.



What is active citizenship?

Johannes Pott, director of the Katholische Landvolkhochschule Oesede:

"We associate active citizenship with volunteerism, where citizens volunteer for society according to their interests and abilities."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We work continuously to develop our local and regional networks to have a social base for our activities. Our take on active citizenship is focused on voluntarism as a resource for a better society. We not only encourage volunteering, but we help develop the skills needed to take on that role. This can include board work, lobbying, marketing, writing, public speaking, fundraising, project development, school partnerships etc. Volunteering permeates all our course activities.

We also encourage former participants to see the school as a resource for the organizations they work in. These could be farmers' organizations, women's organizations, or youth organizations. That they get involved in the development of the school and are happy to become members of the school association. This way we have a pool of volunteers that we can count on.

To be relevant, we pick up suggestions for activities from our networks and include them in our program. As we are focused on what is happening in our local area, we have the ability to quickly address issues that are relevant to our participants. Another way of strengthening our rural networks and communities is that we can offer family counselling and support for cooperation between farmers and other rural residents.





"Ehrenamt" / Volunteering is a fundamental topic of Katholische Landvolkhochschule Oesede Oesede.

Main challenges and dilemmas

We do not have the staff, facilities, or money to respond to all the requests we receive. We need to focus on the local area.

Our core funding is too low, which means we must spend a lot of time chasing projects and co-funding. The tendency of funders and politicians to move from support to institutions to support through projects reduces our freedom to develop our activities and creates competition and sometimes conflicts with other organizations and institutions. The focus shifts from doing good work to writing good proposals.

It is a challenge for us how to relate to right-wing extremism and the “Querdenker” movement. This movement is opposing vaccinations against Covid-19as well as restrictions due to the spread of Covid-19and joins right-wing extremism in its lack of trust for the authorities and established science. We need to provide support to our volunteers on how to relate to these movements in their role as active citizens.

KBW Treffpunkt Bildung, AT

Katholisches Bildungswerk (KBW) is a study association with local organizations throughout Austria. KBW Treffpunkt Bildung is one such local organization which is run by the catholic church in Upper Austria by the Diocese of Linz.

In 2019, they organized around 250 political courses or other popular education events with political content, with a total of 15 000 participants. Under Corona, this activity shrank to 74 courses and events with a total of 3 000 participants in 2020 and 54 courses/events with a total of 2 200 participants in 2021.

The school has seven employees and carry out popular education activities in cooperating Catholic parishes largely with the help of volunteers in the parishes.

What is active citizenship?

Michela Stauder, pedagogue and educational consultant at KBW Treffpunkt Bildung:



"That people shape their own lives, the community life, that means I actively contribute, any kind of involvement and participation, also concerning my very own living-situation: housing and so forth.

The institution KBW already has active citizenship in its structure, in other words the people who work here in the parishes are volunteers and therefore already actively involved as active citizens. And to be honest, it is a matter of cultural commitment (organizing concerts, exhibitions etc.) and also socio-political issues and events […] so active citizenship is structurally immanent, without the initiative of the volunteers the KBW would not function."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We work on active citizenship together with the catholic student union's work. They organize cultural activities to direct popular education on various political issues. The statutes of our organization state that we should "provide a place for different kinds of development, participation and co-creation, which includes courageous and experimental activities that can both fail and succeed. Even failures should be seen as an opportunity to learn".

We also share the vision of popular education for active citizenship with others involved in the networks the school is part of e.g. EB Forum Upper Austria and Forum for Catholic Adult Education and other folk high schools.

We support local forces in the parishes. This is the basic idea of our activities in active citizenship: to support the volunteers in the parishes.

We support participation and engagement for a more peaceful and just world based on social-ethical issues. On our organization's website we highlight diversity of opinion and dialogue as important resources for living together, especially in challenging times.

We work with associations such as Fridays For Future and Antifa Wels.



Commemorative march to concentration camp Mauthausen.

We highlight and contribute to society's remembrance of the National Socialist period, for example much was done in connection with the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

We organize memorial marches with the above purpose.

We organize book talks.

We organize activities for young people in a new format, e.g., “Mitmachen, Gestalten and Verändern”. The important thing here is that it is open-ended, and that young people get to take a leading role in shaping the theme and various initiatives.

We organize “democracy-station-walks”.

We try to address and problematize conspiracy thinking.

We work with the "beer mat initiative" to discuss the controversial messages printed on beer mats.

Main challenges and dilemmas

Digitalization is a challenge, e.g. many of the participants in our organization are a little older and a little less digitally savvy.

In the congregations that KBW Treffpunkt Bildung works with, there is a rising middle age, and a big challenge is to introduce ways of working and learning that are welcoming to the younger generation.

Hate, polarization, neo-Nazism, and conspiracy thinking is a challenge in society.

One challenge is the inertia and slowness of many organizations. Courage is needed! And new ways of working: more co-creation, and decentralization of decision-making. Only then can civil engagement take its place and if it does not, this movement will shrink because new forces in the form of young people will not come in.

Ludowy Uniwersytet Naturoterapii Anktywnej, PL

Ludowy Uniwersytet Naturoterapii Anktywnej or LUNA was established in 2021 by the Vesna Association and operates within its structures, drawing on the organization's almost ten years of experience in activities related to adult education and community activation, as well as building intergenerational bridges of cooperation, integration, and education.

The school is based in the town of Gnojnik in the Malopolska region. Gnojnik is a communal village in Brzeski district, which is inhabited by approximately 2 800 people, and the whole commune consists of seven villages with a total population of approximately 7,500. LUNA has its headquarters in a newly built tourist and educational village called "VESNA COUNTRY". The settlement is located on the southern slope of the Anczykówka hamlet in Gnojnik and has an infrastructure of wooden passive houses such as a modern barn, educational gazebos, a socio-therapeutic garden etc.

The organization currently employs five people on full-time contracts and about six instructors, trainers, and animators on contractual and other agreements. On average, 150 people take part in training, courses, and workshops every year. Our main activities focus on the organization of training courses related to therapies from nature, health prevention, promoting active lifestyles through movement and activities on tourist trails.

What is active citizenship?



Bożena Malaga-Wrona, president of the board of directors of the Association of New Opportunities Regions VESNA and director of the Ludowy Uniwersytet Naturoterapii Anktywnej (LUNA):

"Active citizens have a sense of agency. They can and do take matters into their own hands or support other institutions, individuals, or organizations in processes that they consider valuable to the community in which they live, work or operate."

How do you work with active citizenship?

Active citizenship has been at the heart of our organization since the inception of its activities.

Firstly, there were and are individuals in our organization who have made a major contribution to involving others through social and professional inclusion. They support local government and local authorities at all levels of government through educational programs, integration, reintegration etc.

The best example of effective active citizenship are the joint activities related to the construction of the Vesna Land, because it was the society around our organization that made the decision to build its own place. It is here that volunteers are active planting plants, tidying up the grounds, running activities, etc. Both the parent organization Vesna and our school bring together people here willing to get actively involved, integrating the local community, and tackling the problems currently affecting

small environments, supporting people at risk of exclusion through long pandemic isolation, people who have health problems and elderly people.

One of the aims of our school is to learn to work in teams, observing local needs and looking for ideas to fulfil them. Increasing environmental health awareness is currently the most important challenge. Our activities are designed in such a way that education directly benefits the students and indirectly influences increase in public awareness.

Staff is being involved through frequent meetings in Vesna Land and the organization of attractive cultural, sporting and other events. In 2022 we will organize six major events, five of them under the banner of "Art in the Land of Vesna". They are for all ages from children to seniors and include elements of integration around a collective action. Participants in the events are both ordinary residents of the Brzesko district and the broader Malopolska region, as well as opinion leaders who have a greater influence on the law-making, organization of life at the level of public administration and local government, including parliamentarians, mayors, village heads, etc.



Work in the garden of the school.

Needs, problems, and challenges of the local community are a constant element that leads us to talk about active citizenship.

Here is one example: During one of the courses, a participant identified the need for accommodation in an old school in the very small town of Żerków. The participant argued that this could provide an opportunity for local women to earn some money and would allow for the development of tourism in this village, which is very remote from the centers of large towns. We brainstormed with all participants on how we could help. The strategy that emerged spoke of the need to build a partnership between the village hall and an experienced organization and raising funds to purchase beds, bedding and shelves, as well as involving the community to renovate, paint etc. The process was carried out over the course of a year and ended successfully.

The best and most durable example of what our work with active citizenship has led to is the Active Tourism Centre in Żerków. And from the area of communication and women's activation, the best is the joint organization of the event titled "Polka Niepodległa" (independent Polish woman), after which an informal group of women from Brzesko founded the "Brzeszczanki", an organization of Rural Housewives.

Main challenges and dilemmas

Absolutely in first place are the finances, because we have been struggling with them for several years.

One democratic challenge in society is the top-down imposition of positions and the lack of constructive debate. The big threat here is the withdrawal of some citizens from civic life. We notice that a significant part of the population has locked themselves away in their homes and has limited civic activity. This has been fostered by pandemic isolation, unfortunately.

We also see a threat from low tolerance towards diversity and in all these sensitive areas, education for civil society is needed.

Nordsee Akademie, GER

The school opened in 1923 as Heimvolkshochschule Leck. It was originally an institution focusing on adult education for the local rural population in the North Frisian municipality of Leck. Leck has about 7700 inhabitants and is in the region of Kreis Nordfriesland which is on the border with Denmark. It was renamed to Nordsee Akademie in 2000 and the school was profiled as a modern facility for conferences and seminars and extensive renovations were made from 2000-2005. Today the school has 54 single and double rooms and a restaurant.

The school is one of three schools of the regional authority Deutscher Grenzverein e.V. The school is financed partly by its own income, gets a small part from the municipality of Leck and a larger stake from the state of Schleswig-Holstein.

The school focuses on the following themes: History, politics and culture of the German-Danish borderland and Scandinavia, cross-border encounters, and minority work. In addition, the educational institution offers professional development events and educational trips. For this purpose, regionally existing networks are used, in particular those of the partner Wadden Sea National Park.

In the school offerings on climate change, renewable energy and the environment are increasingly coming into focus. Long-standing cornerstones of its program include seminars and events on art, literature, music, singing, voice training, yoga as a relaxation technique, and theater and writing workshops.

In recent years, the North Sea Academy has specialized in the topic of educational leave (Bildungsurlaub). This format appeals primarily to employees and picks up on the idea of the Heimvolkshochschule. In terms of content, the previously mentioned topics are taken up and worked together with the previously mentioned network.

In addition, the Nordsee Akademie carries out educational work as a cultural hub and network for culture in rural areas (Kulturknotenpukt) and as the home of the Datenschutzakademie (data protection academy). The Datenschutzakademie is jointly owned by the Nordsee Akademie and the independent State Centre for Data Protection in Schleswig-Holstein (ULD).

What is active citizenship?

Aaron Jessen, director of Nordsee Akademie:



“For me, active citizenship is clearly linked to volunteering in Germany and it’s the grease of society. And in my eyes, voluntary work has a long tradition in Germany, especially in rural areas, whether it happens in sports, culture, clubs, and so on. And volunteering is a term that stands on its own, and it's not a question of defining it somewhere. It simply happens out of the motivation to engage and socialize, and of course there are many services and tasks that the state could also take on. But there is a lack of interest, and the state is not able to take on these tasks (non bureaucratically) or doesn't want to do those tasks […] Yes, I think active citizenship and volunteering simply is an engine that's running well in Germany.”

How do you work with active citizenship?

About once a month we have a seminar on local politics, addressing a range of issues, for example it has been about the rehabilitation of a railway line in the region with representatives from the community, politics, and institutions. The following topics have also been discussed in the past: rights and duties in local politics, wind power in Schleswig-Holstein, women in local politics, diesel, or electricity - the future of mobility in Europe, sustainability in municipalities, the Fairtrade Town concept or the mobility concept in Nordfriesland. In addition to politicians, these seminars bring together a wide variety of interest groups, such as the energy citizens of Schleswig-Holstein and Pro Bahn (the railways group), etc.

We work with volunteers on various issues, such as training volunteers to help with counting votes during elections. The Nordsee Akademie also act as a "cultural infrastructure" for volunteer (or non-profit) groups working on different issues, both local groups of engaged citizens and local interest groups, as well as think tanks linked to the parties, representatives of the state, local employers, the local minority organizations (the Danish minority in Germany, the Nordschleswiger and the Frisians).

We work to support young first-time voters who get the chance to talk to politicians before they vote.



Meeting with first time voters.

We organize on-site courses for "learning and living under one roof". This is both a pedagogical profile and economically important for the house, hence distance learning and blended learning have not been seen as very interesting.

We say no to collaboration with the AFD (german far right party) as their electoral program and some party leaders are "anti-constitutional, anti-democratic and racist".

We work on youth political education e.g. the project "Mehr als Vergangenheit" (More than the past) with a focus on two former concentration camps in North Frisia, that are now memorials. The latter project has trained young people to work as volunteers with "memorial work". The project ran for three years: "A total of 73 participants have successfully completed the training series and summer schools. This has as well resulted in 21 concept ideas so far, some of which have already been implemented (for example a project week with school students, an Instagram survey on the topic of remembrance culture and bicycle tours) and others are still being implemented (for example an international summer camp, an audio walk, an interactive map, and a flyer for children). About five participants in this youth political education are today regularly involved in the two memorial sites as a result of their participation in a training series/summer school."

Main challenges and shortcomings

Funding is a big challenge.

Outreach is another one. The Nordsee Akademie reaches mostly the well-off. The challenge is to reach out to broader sections of the population.

Nyköpings folkhögskola, SE

Nyköpings folkhögskola is in Nyköping, a town with just over 30 000 inhabitants in Sörmland. This is quite centrally located in Sweden, but at the same time the region with the lowest level of education in Sweden. The region is characterized by the absence of a large central town. The school is run by a local association with several local associations as members, as Arbetarkommun (a federation of different social democratic organizations), the Left Party, labor union districts and clubs, the accordion club of Nyköping, Theatre association Skakan and Nyköping garden association. Most recently, the Nature Conservation Association and the local UN Association have become members.

The school has 40 permanent employees, in addition to a few hourly workers. The school has a small service team (caretaker, administrator, etc.) as the school is a day school without boarding facilities. During a year there are some 300 students on site at the school, but on a typical day there are about 200 students on the premises. Of these, the majority are students on the school's Second chance program, about 120 at undergraduate level and about 50 at secondary school level.

A rather big change in the last five years is that the school has expanded the Second chance program at undergraduate level for participants with Swedish as a second language. From two classes, this activity has increased to five classes and a commissioned training with the Public Employment Service (a so-called SMF-course) with the same focus.

The school is mainly financed by taxpayers' funds channeled through Folkbildningsrådet. In addition, it receives some support from the region.

What is active citizenship?

Annika Nyberg, principal of Nyköpings folkhögskola:



"Active citizenship is something more than just participating in elections every four years. It is something that takes place between elections. It's active democracy. It has to do with that, and with human rights and with the laws and rules that exist in the country. For Nyköpings folkhögskola it also involves not educating an elite, but instead focusing on providing educational opportunities for those who in many ways have the least resources in society."

How do you work with active citizenship?

Nyköping Folk High School is working with a large focus on the Second chance program to reach those who need the most support to be able to exercise active citizenship.

In this program we work a lot to develop the self-perception of the participants. Our teachers work to strengthen the participants' self-confidence, for example by working with drama and daring to speak in front of a class. In the program they also focus on developing knowledge about human rights. In work focused on developing the participants courage and self-confidence, confidence exercises,

forum theatre, and mirroring are some of the strategies applied. A general strategy is to start from the needs of the participants.

Allowing politicians and others to come to the school, where they get to meet one class at a time is a method to promote interaction with the local community.

Another strategy to promote active citizenship focuses on closing the digital divide, and digital capacity development among local seniors.

Within the school participatory student democracy is another strategy to promote civics and active citizenship. Courses at the school have class councils every week. Participant councils then take place at the school, also every week. Hopefully this will lead to both improvement of the activities and a training in active citizenship.



A new semester starts at Nyköpings folkhögskola.

The school tries to work with the Agenda 2030 as a kind of thematic framing for its Second chance program. This involves working with associations and local initiatives that appear in the local area and that teachers or members of the school board are involved in, for example Green Future, the Kulturhuset's arrangement for a “new popular movement”. It also involves working with students in groups on health promotion.

The school is also participating in the local community with a cultural café which welcomes everyone in Enköping and is hosted by the participants of the Second chance course.

Main challenges and dilemmas

One challenge is to help students grasp the importance of being and working together, not constantly being guided by the quite restrictive norms of individual advancement. Also dealing with "corona damage" and some lost social routines.

Other challenges in society that work against the schools’ goals of promoting active citizenship is growing demands on documentation and reporting from the state; ill health among many of the participants, reflecting alienation and increased divisions in society; as well as disinformation and conspiracy thinking among those who come to the school.

Politically there are anti-democratic forces, nationally as well as regionally and locally that want to dismantle Swedish Folk High Schools.

Finally, one challenge is to deepen cooperation with various civil society associations, for example in the form of different projects (requires time and resources, but interest exists). We should also promote more the capacity of students to organize their own study circles.

Röda Korsets folkhögskola, SE

Röda Korsets folkhögskola is in the Stockholm suburb of Skärholmen, a multicultural and socio-economically disadvantaged suburb with approximately 40 000 inhabitants.

The school is run by the Swedish Red Cross and the organization's values are a hallmark of the school.

There are 23 employees, mainly teachers, but there is also an administrator, a vocational counsellor, and a curator. The school is a day school with about 200 full-time students.

The courses have two main focuses, Second chance courses, and specialized courses. The Second chance courses lead to qualification for further studies and are 60% of the activities. The special courses focus on key political issues such as climate change, racism, feminism, democracy, and human rights. In the Second chance courses, most participants are born outside Sweden.

The school is financed by public funds and is subject to the Public Education Ordinance, which emphasizes the importance of working with active citizenship.

What is active citizenship?



Ulrika Sandin, director of Röda korsets folkhögskola:

"In an educational context, active citizenship means taking participants' life situations and experiences as a starting point and enabling them to develop skills to make a difference in their lives. It means raising their level of knowledge, learning about their rights, trusting in their abilities, daring to take their place, having expectations of society, and seeing themselves as active subjects".

How do you work with active citizenship?

Our focus is on our participants, their life situations, and needs. Teachers listen carefully to what issues are relevant to them and plan accordingly. We emphasize mutual learning between teachers and participants.

We do a lot of work to create structures for how participants' joint influence will be organized in the school. We do this to develop the school and to ensure that the participants take these skills with them into their future lives. It's about being able to make agendas, take minutes, make your voice heard, and chair meetings.

Teachers encourage and support participants to share their knowledge by organizing public events such as film screenings, lectures, and exhibitions. They also support participants' civic engagement by teaching them how to write citizens' petitions to local authorities.

One example of how the school can support the participants' advocacy work is that several of them discovered that their children were studying Swedish for immigrants at school instead of regular Swedish even though they were born in Sweden. They raised this with their teachers at the folk high school who encouraged them to take the issue further. They interviewed the children's teachers,

invited the headmaster to a meeting, wrote articles, contacted politicians and officials, contacted researchers, organized public meetings, and made a film. The process led to a visit to the school by the minister responsible for discrimination issues and the setting up of an inquiry. The involvement of the participants brought political attention to the issue, and they felt that their voices had been heard.

We also try to let the participants' and teachers' experiences lead to new course activities. In this way, we have developed the course "Acting without Discrimination", which builds on the experiences of discrimination experienced by the school's participants.

Another line of action is trying to establish contacts with organizations, networks, and authorities in Skärholmen.



Participants present results from a local investigation at Red Cross Folk High School.

Main challenges and dilemmas

In our ambition to work for democracy and human rights in Skärholmen, we need to strengthen and structure our cooperation with movements, organizations, and authorities in the area. The partnerships need to be long-term, and it is difficult for us to find resources for this, while changes in staff at authorities and organizations mean that established channels are lost. We need to become a clearer meeting place for these issues in Skärholmen.

Our special courses need to be integrated with the movements to which the themes of the courses are linked. These could be the climate movement, the asylum rights movement, the feminist movement, etc.

SPES Zukunftsakademie, AT

The SPES Future Academy is in Schlierbach, a town of about 3000 inhabitants in Upper Austria, 40 km south of the provincial capital Linz. SPES is a non-profit private institution founded by local leaders. Its aim is to serve the community and future generations.

The activities have several different branches of which the seminar hotel is a part. SPES' four main areas are education and counseling for municipalities and regions, education and counseling for companies and institutions, parent and family education, and support for job seekers.

SPES has around 30 employees, ten of whom are educators. SPES uses and continuously develops methods for groups, organizations, authorities, and companies to renew themselves through participatory dialogue and project activities.

The Seminar Hotel currently hosts around 200 courses organized by SPES and 350 courses that are hired. Before Covid, the number of courses and participants was almost twice as high.

SPES is a member of the Austrian umbrella organization ARGE BHÖ.

SPES has extensive local, regional, national and European networks and participates in many different types of cooperation, e.g. close cooperation with the Upper Austria region's departments for family, youth, and integration and in several ERASMUS+ projects.

What is active citizenship?

Tamara Wintereder, trainer and process facilitator for community and regional development at SPES Zukunftsakademie in Austria:



"For me, active citizenship means that I don't live in my community as a consumer or that I am simply there as an Austrian or someone living in Austria. It means that I get involved and implement things on my own responsibility. And if I have the feeling there is a lack in any area, I can take the initiative and play a part in my community. And as a next step, I may also implement something, or participate in a project. So, for me, it means getting away from this consuming role to being a creator."

Foto: Thomas Brunner

How do you work with active citizenship?

In collaboration with our partners, we critically and holistically analyse existing systems and practices to develop effective measures that solve existing problems and reinforce existing strengths.

We do not generally have our own active citizenship programs but organize training courses and workshops with partners on civic engagement when requested. This can be at our premises or in different communities.

We use and develop creative courses and methods for project activities, future planning, and business development through various forms of participatory dialogue, such as "Art of Hosting", "Design

thinking", world café, circle dialogue, 4-MAT etc. By developing project activities, we identify new knowledge needs and stimulate civic engagement. "Learning by doing".

We pay attention that our participants on a personal level understand the importance of engagement for themselves and for society and we link social and economic needs and create civic engagement on that basis.

We try to focus on the pleasures of civic engagement as opposed to just looking at all the problems and musts. We point to positive examples.

A concrete example is the Nah Da project where SPES works with local development groups and through civic engagement creates local development centers to meet identified social and economic needs. This can be done through the formation of cooperatives such as in St Stephen's Afiesl where citizens in the cooperative form now run a cafe, a pub, a shop, and a gathering and meeting place.



Group working together at SPES Zukunftsakademie. *Foto: Mayr Richard*

Main challenges and dilemmas

Dependence on project funding is problematic. It is sometimes complicated to link the needs and desires expressed by our partners with available funds.

Engagement is often linked to dissatisfaction with the current situation. This is good but sometimes it can be difficult to develop constructive cooperation instead of increased polarization.

Many young people have the feeling that they are not being listened to or represented. This is a major challenge to democratic culture.

When designing participatory processes for local development it is crucial to be able to understand reasons for resistance to change, to find ways for new people to get involved, and to identify what issues are of importance for the whole community and not only for a small group.

Uniwersytet Ludowy Rzemiosła Artystycznego, PL

The school is a continuation of the Folk High School in Wzdów, which has been in operation since 1959. Since 1986 it has been running handicraft courses, both hobby and professional, training handicraft instructors and journeymen and masters of selected crafts. The school draws on the inter-war traditions of folk high schools in Poland, in which great importance was placed on the preservation of cultural heritage, personal and social development. At the heart of the schools' interests is the preservation of disappearing professions and traditional crafts.

The school is based in Wola Sękowa, in a former primary school building from 1935. The building has a teaching area, equipped handicraft workshops and a small dormitory for 20 people.

One of our most important activities is running of a two-year handicraft course which is a boarding school course, held in a system of four-day assemblies, once a month, from September to June (ten assemblies per school year). The program of which is geared towards practical learning of various handicrafts, such as weaving, embroidery, lace, ceramics, sculpture, wicker, stained glass, applied/useful forms, icon writing and printmaking. The course is run as a paid-for public benefit activity. In addition, there are classes in painting and drawing, art history, ethnography, socio-cultural animation. The training formula of the Folk High School provides for the possibility of acquiring craft vocational qualifications.

An average of 60-70 people take part in the course each year. Participants are adults from all over the country, of different ages and from different backgrounds: big cities, towns, rural areas. The age of participants also varies; there is no upper age limit. However, the team of instructors and lecturers consists of artists and masters of various crafts, mainly from the Podkarpacie region.

During the holiday season, Uniwersytet Ludowy Rzemiosła Artystycznego organizes weekend and holiday workshops, which are aimed at people interested in developing their handicraft skills.



What is active citizenship?

Monika Wolańska, vice-president of Uniwersytet Ludowy Rzemiosła Artystycznego:

"Engaging with the community at a local level and beyond. Awareness of what I can contribute to the community. The need to be in the community as part of identity."

How do you work with active citizenship?

The courses and workshops that take place at Uniwersytet Ludowy Rzemiosła Artystycznego thematically focus on different areas of crafts and handicrafts, but an important question we ask ourselves during the courses is: For what purpose? Most often the answers revolve around the following topics:

- development of personal potential in terms of creativity and entrepreneurship

- increased awareness of the importance of handicrafts in the process of personal and cultural development
- improving social competences for interaction and socio-cultural animation

In the course program, learning for active citizenship makes up a small percentage of the hours, around 10%. It includes classes in socio-cultural animation, which cover topics on setting up NGOs, creating projects for the local environment, diagnosing needs, etc. Our observations over the years have shown that vocational training in a variety of handicraft techniques gives graduates of the two-year course many tools to work with people, which they can offer to their community in a variety of ways, whether for educational purposes, therapeutic purposes or as an active leisure activity.



Students of a two-year course of arts and crafts working on a social project.

Beyond this, education at the school is about creating a community based on the principles of partnership, democracy, relationship building and shared responsibility for where and when we meet. We create a micro-community where we 'train' civic activities.

Several educational, cultural, and social initiatives have sprung up among students and alumni, and several NGOs have been established to serve various communities in the country. Attending our courses gives people concrete skills as tools to work with people. Participating in the courses also empowers them and gives them courage and self-esteem, which pushes them to act for the community.

Most of the teaching staff are artists and creatives involved in working with various organizations, local authorities, and schools. When teaching art classes, they often share their experience with the students and the rest of the team. They include environmentalists, working for the climate, for animals, for national and ethnic minorities, people at risk of exclusion with disabilities, prisoners and so on. Their personal example is an additional inspiration for course participants.

In addition to socio-cultural animation classes, where we encourage participants to work on writing a proposal that could be implemented in their community, we support the initiatives of course participants by providing advice, teaching facilities and the services of instructors.

The school also has carried out many socio-cultural projects that support active citizenship among different groups of citizens. Those projects have among other things been aimed at promoting artistic handicrafts, development of the social economy and providing vulnerable people with basic skills, in agroecology, crafts, health and personal development and IT.

Main challenges and dilemmas

One challenge regionally is the low level of basic and social competences and the lack of openness to improve one's competences at every stage of life.

One challenge might be to develop our own competence in promoting active citizenship. To talk about it in a more direct way, to monitor and record this aspect of what we do to be able to draw conclusions and develop this aspect of our activities.

Uniwersytet Ludowy w Radawnicy, PL

Uniwersytet Ludowy w Radawnicy is in Radawnica, a small village of about 600 inhabitants near the town of Złotów with about 20 000 inhabitants in northwestern Poland.

The activities of the school have many different branches, folk high school courses, vocational training in health and medicine, treatment centres for boys with social difficulties, cultural events, arts and crafts courses and leadership training for local leaders.

In 2021, around 10 000 people participated in the longer adult education courses, in addition to short courses, seminars, workshops and lectures.

The school is governed by a membership association and is also a member and seat of the Polish umbrella organization of folk high schools OSUL. There is cooperation with several local organizations and institutions, such as the Złotów authorities, the Złotów library, the Radawnica volunteer fire brigade and the Winniczek environmental organisation.

The funding of the activities is diversified, public grants, support for the treatment center, participation fees and various projects are part of it.

What is active citizenship?



Barbara Mincewicz, director of Uniwersytet Ludowy w Radawnicy, board member of the association:

"It is 'not being passive', 'not being all the same'. It is a careful observation of what is happening and a reaction to bad things and good things. Willingness to improve and develop things so that living in a small community is active, in a good neighborhood, with interpersonal contacts. It is also about influencing the improvement of infrastructure for health, culture, and recreation."

How do you work with active citizenship?

We see active citizenship as strengthening civil society and supporting the efforts of citizens to improve their community through engagement. In line with this, we have developed the "University of Leaders" course aimed at local leaders. This course has in turn led to the creation of the Center for Local Integration for a continuous exchange of experience between local leaders and activists in different fields.

We work hard to make connections and maintain relationships with many different organizations, agencies, and individuals to listen to and learn from them.

We contribute to the knowledge of how NGOs and foundations work and help participants to create their own organizations.

We offer ourselves as a local meeting place where the common concerns of our community can be addressed.



Participants at the school.

The boys at the treatment center are offered various forms of volunteer work in the community.

The school plays a catalytic role in welcoming refugees from the war in Ukraine and coordinates various activities.

We see it as important to develop our European network and learn from the experiences of other countries on how to strengthen active citizenship. We can do this through ERASMUS+.

Main challenges and dilemmas

Our main challenge is the lack of continuous and secure funding which makes us vulnerable especially when it comes to administration. How to deal with the hatred and polarization that is expressed in the public sphere is a dilemma when you want to gather and include people.

Volkshochschule Oberösterreich, AT

Volkshochschule Oberösterreich is a non-profit educational limited company of the Upper Austrian Chamber of Labor. It sets educational offers in all districts of Upper Austria in regional offices and branch offices. In Linz and Wels, there is also a magistrate's office at the site. Before the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 about 50 000 participations and 10 000 courses were carried out. There are approximately 25 full-time equivalent employees.

The VHS Upper Austria offers a diverse educational program, with about 50% of the educational offerings in the field of health and exercise. About 25% are in the area of languages and the rest is divided into creative and digital and political education.

Basic funding is provided by the Chamber of Labour, but the school is also financed by federal state and through the Association of Austrian Adult Education Centers. And a large part is financed by participation.

The education program is geared to the interests and needs of local citizens, and deals among other things with topics of sustainability, like Repair Cafés. There is cooperation and collaboration from which the educational offers arise. We are very strong in the area of German courses, and at the moment there is a strong demand due to the war in Ukraine.

What is active citizenship?



Iris Ratzenböck-Höllerl, pedagogical director of Volkshochschule Oberösterreich:

"For me, active citizenship means that on the one hand you are interested in politics in the first place, that you inform yourself, that you vote, that's the minimum. And if one has the time and is motivated, that one participates actively, in some form of civil society. And that's what we want to promote here.

Democracy, openness toward fellow human beings and other cultures, solidarity and social justice are important educational goals for us. In our understanding, education promotes the understanding of social conditions and the political ability to act for better working and living conditions for people!"

How do you work with active citizenship?

The Adult Education Center Upper Austria already offers a platform for active participation because we work very regionally and the course instructor is a local person, and the fees are not very high, so in this respect it is already active citizenship when you teach at an Adult Education Center.

The mere fact of offering political education creates awareness for topics, because it always needs new impulses, because both trainers and participants tends to ask not for them. However, activities have increased significantly in the last ten years.

We are well connected in our work, for example through the EB Forum Upper Austria. This is a voluntary association of the major AE providers in Upper Austria, which is committed to ensuring that general education has the same value as vocational education and training and that socio-political

issues are addressed. We work together with Fridays For Future or OTELOS (Open Technology Labs in Austria), with the regional coordinators of the Upper Austrian Integration Office and are active in the national network of educational guidance. It is important to share successes also within the organization to hear the ideas and best practices of others.

Our didactic concept in active citizenship focuses on low threshold offers and on topics from people's lives that directly affect them and for which they are passionate. We set experience-oriented offers, so that we can pick up people and achieve self-efficacy. These offers are more likely to be accepted. We see a mandate to strengthen trust in fact-based, scientific, conventional medicine again; this is important for the political climate.

Before the pandemic, digital services were an impossibility, there was a great push for modernization, but our motto is "go digital and stay social".



Group travelling to the European parliament with the school.

Main challenges and dilemmas

Funding is a big challenge, there are few funding opportunities that affect civic education and funding pots are not increasing. Another challenge is to build up know-how, and to create liabilities among the trainers. There is also a shortage of trainers due to a lack of time because of changes in society. The structural installation of regional coordinators would also be good, so that we can work better together in the network. However, many collaborations are also very resource intensive. In the long term, however, the establishment of such networks is worthwhile.

In general, it has become more difficult for people to get involved, since there is often not enough time besides social obligations, family and children, and exhaustion from work is simply high. From the state side, the potential of adult education is used far too little for these topics. They underestimate the EB Forum Upper Austria a little. They think always only about school education in relation to political education. But adult education is there for everyone until the end of life.

Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Ludowy, PL

Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Ludowy or the West Pomeranian Folk High School, is a young school, started in May 2017 as a non-public institution, dedicating its activities primarily to adults living in the local, rural area. Due to the fact of direct proximity to the Federal Republic of Germany, the organizers of the school wished to devote a significant part of the institution's activities to the study of the German language (for Poles) and the Polish language (for Germans), and thus to intercultural exchange in the broadest sense.

The model for the creators of the Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Ludowy were the German adult boarding schools (Heimvolkshochschule). At the time, the initiators of the idea wanted the school to become a kind of intercultural center organizing both long (two-year) and short (weekend) courses. In addition, the plan was to prepare exhibitions, vernissages, workshops, training courses and events to integrate the local community (considering both the nearest neighbours and friends from Germany).

Today it is located at 13b Welecka Street in a building that every resident of the local town Mierzyn knows. For the implementation of plans related to the activities of the boarding school in the last days of 2020, we acquired the property of the village of Lubanowo in the municipality of Banie in the district of Gryfino. Upon completion of the renovation work, the ZUL will begin a new stage of its activities and expand the offer of the proposed courses.

It is also worth noting that the founders of the school are members in the expert team for folk high schools at the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, in which they are conducting advanced work on the Program for the Development of Folk High Schools in Poland and are also co-founders of OSUL, the National Federation of Folk High Schools.

The Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Ludowy in Mierzyn is the only institution of civic education in Western Pomerania based on Scandinavian - mainly Grundtvigian traditions. Our holistic educational program is diverse, full of ideas and entertainment.

What is active citizenship?



Angelika Felska, chair of the Board Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Ludowy:

"An active citizen is a person involved in the broader social life, in the local, regional, national or global context."

How do you work with active citizenship?

Since its inception, the school has been committed to building community life in its environment.

Firstly, every year we implement courses for local leaders and volunteers who by completing our 120-hour course, become citizens involved in social activities in their local environment.

Secondly, the school engages in activities to solve contemporary social problems, thus showing its audiences that these are important topics and should not be left indifferent (such as support during the COVID-19 pandemic or helping refugees from Ukraine).

We carry out activities for the development and creative activities of senior citizens, activation, and social development, intergenerational integration, as well as the transmission of values and positive social patterns.



Participants in the school.

We cultivate pre-war local and regional traditions and promote communion with the arts. We propose to support the personal development and potential of individuals in rural local communities, but at the same time to build social ties, to build a "learning community."

Seminars, courses, and workshops in the school open opportunities for individual meetings with friends, neighbours and family. We work to ensure that our diverse offerings reach everyone, regardless of education, wealth, gender, or age - there are no barriers here.

Intercultural communication has also been important to ZUL since its inception. We continue to increase the number of activities in this area. We cooperate with more and more partners in the field of culture or art, both domestic and foreign.

Graduates from our school organize social projects for the benefit of their home communities.

At the end of the courses, we ask participants to fill out surveys that show us their desire for future active citizenship activities. The school is invited to some communities by our graduates. An example is the establishment of a Rural Housewives Association in Mierzyn, co-implementing activities for the benefit of the local community which was created as a result of our project. The Rural Housewives' Association in Mierzyn also collaborated with us around an environmental project, resulting in the operation of a "Repair Café" at our headquarters.

Main challenges and dilemmas

The main challenge is financial. Financial constraints, mainly running activities based on grants, projects, and subsidies. It becomes difficult to implement a course in the active citizenship area when you do not receive funding for it.

Until the pandemic, we did not use hybrid or remote learning, it was only when we were faced with a reduction in our activities that we came out to meet the expectations of our audience and started implementing activities in hybrid format. This was a huge challenge, both for the participants and for us organizers since we had no experience in this area. However, the tremendous success of these activities gave us faith and showed us that the hybrid formula is feasible.

Appendix 1: Guideline for interviews

This is the guideline with questions used in the interviews that were made for the survey during the summer of 2022.

Target group: Directors and pedagogical staff at the folk high schools or other organisations that work in the field of adult education that are chosen to participate.

TEMPLATE

1) Background information:

Name and title/position of the person(s) interviewed.

A short presentation of the institution: History, location, size (number of employees, participants, courses), main activities, number and type of participants in main activities

The context of the institution (partners, networks, financial situation etc)

2) Active citizenship (AC) and the educational mission of our institutions

The PROMOCITI project aims to explore and develop methods for how folk high schools and other institutions for adult learning and education can contribute to active citizenship. The concept of active citizenship can be understood in many ways. It contains values, knowledge, skills and capacities. One way of understanding the concept is that it is based on democratic values and human rights and stresses involvement and participation, be it at the local, regional, national, European or global level. That it addresses the relationship between the individuals and their communities and the need for citizens to have the capacity to take responsible action in order to solve common problems, be it the maintenance of the local voluntary fire brigade or issues like xenophobia or climate change.

What is your understanding of active citizenship (AC)?

What role has learning for AC in your institution?

Is learning for AC explicitly part of the strategic guidelines for your institution (i.e. what does the mission statement, strategic plan, yearly plan and similar documents say)?

How is the staff – pedagogical staff as well as other staff - presently involved in learning for AC?

Do governmental institutions or other sponsors of folk high schools provide guidelines for, or state in one way or the other that promoting AC is part of your mission? How?

Do federations of folk high schools that you are part of provide guidelines for or state in one way or the other that promoting AC is part of your mission? How?

3) Activities, collaborations, and potential to promote AC

Consult your annual reports for 2019, 2020 and 2021. What specific activities or courses related to AC where organised by your school? How many courses and activities? Involving how many participants?

How did the field of AC develop during the last 10 years in your organisation? Has the number of activities and participants decreased or increased?

Who has initiated these activities?

Who is involved in carrying them out?

How does digital solutions and activities support your work with learning for AC? What experiences do you have from work involving blended learning? Lessons learned?

Give some examples of organisations, movements or groups that have been your partners of courses and other activities focused on promoting active citizenship in some way? (Provide name of some organisations and one sentence description for each example given.)

a) *Engaged citizens or more informal groups and networks*

b) *Local community organisations, working to promote community and community interests locally, give some examples*

c) *National or regional organisations and networks*

d) *Other actors as other educational actors, companies, public sector institutions*

e) *International organisations and networks*

How do you work to support and follow up on initiatives for AC coming from participants in your courses and other activities? Examples? Try to single out which different didactical strategies that are employed in the coursers/activities you are involved in!

In what ways are local and regional issues and challenges, experienced by citizens, in the area of the school a starting point for activities around AC / learning for AC in courses etc? What themes or key issues were addressed in this kind of collaborations?

Have your expertise as adult educators been requested by groups in the local community in relation to AC? What groups?

Can you see other institutions or organisations or social movements in your regional or national context carrying out work promoting AC that inspires you or that you think it should be possible to collaborate more with around AC? And that you have tried to relate to or that you think it would be interesting to relate more to in the future?

Also in the regional context which threats against democratic and equal participation of citizens do you see, i.e. antidemocratic movements? How can your work to promote AC counter those?

Do you have documentation of your activities related to AC that you can share? Project summaries, articles, evaluations of activities etc. (in English)

4) Success Factors and shortcomings

What successes have you experienced in promoting AC?

What lasting results can you see?

Why did you succeed?

What possibilities do you see for these experiences to be transferred to other folk high schools?

What challenges or obstacles have you encountered when trying to promote AC in your institution? For example: Funding? Lacking competence of staff? Collaboration with other organisations? Others?

What is needed to overcome these obstacles?

In this report you can read about folk high schools and other educational adult centres, and their work promoting active citizenship in Sweden, Poland, Germany, Austria and Spain.

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