

## **General introduction: Adult education in Denmark**

These papers, which have been produced for the transnational European network project “New learning pathways in adult learning”, present Danish experiences with widening participation in adult education.

The aim of participating in the European project is on the one hand to inspire the European policy debate with Danish experience - and on the other hand to become familiar with the development work, which takes place in other European countries so that Danish policy discussions can take advantage of experience made in other countries.

### **Adult education and learning in Denmark**

Denmark has a relatively well elaborated system of adult education. The system has a wide range of educational offers, a closely knit network of institutions covering the country geographically, a good deal of the offers can be attended free of charge or at rather low charges, nearly all kinds of adult education receive substantial public subsidies and most of the activities are regulated by law leaving a substantial freedom of action to local authorities and institutions. Finally a good deal of the participants in formal adult education are entitled to adult education grant which allows them to take leave from work.

The educational offers range from very informal, non-qualifying courses of community education in a variety of subjects, mostly practical and creative, and folk high school courses over general qualifying adult education at the level of secondary school to a great variety of more or less vocationally oriented courses for just about any imaginable purpose and for virtually any group of professionals.

Thousands of classes and courses are established every year to meet the demand. Many different types of educational institutions stand behind the courses. Public educational institutions play a major role, but private non-profit organizations are also important actors - and in some areas there is a place for educational business.

The institutional system is comprised by many institutions which are well distributed geographically. Although Denmark is a relatively small country in terms of area and distances it has a very large number of institutions in the field of education.

A good deal of the educational offers are free of charge, a public subsidy to adult education is quite normal even if the educational offer is given by a private organization (if it is non-profit).

The whole field of adult education is - in one way or the other - governed by the ministry of education. Almost all parts of the education system are regulated by law, be it in details, which is the case of most formal education, or more general as is the case in much general informal education where government influence is limited as far as contents and methods are concerned.

In the Danish education system it is a further characteristic that local authorities (regional or local municipality) play an important role (not least because they finance the activities) in filling out the general frameworks of education decided by Parliament and government. And last but not least the institutions of adult education themselves have a rather wide freedom to act as far as the practical organization is concerned.

Finally Denmark has a relatively favourable system of subsistence for students in formal adult education. Adults attending full-time education are in many cases entitled to an adult education grant, which corresponds to unemployment benefits in term of money.

The adult education is thus able to present a relevant offer of education and learning of virtually any subject-matter and at almost any level within a reasonable geographical distance.

### **The price of success**

The costs of the system are of course relatively high. It is estimated that the public expenses are appr. 14 billion DKK (2 billion Euros), of which half is spent on education and institutions and half on subsistence for participants (mainly in labour market training). To some degree these figures have been accepted as “good investment” - but - on the other hand - they have of course also drawn the attention of political parties on the look out for cut backs and savings on the public budgets as an obvious field of scrutiny and rationalization. The costs were in fact mentioned as a main motivation for establishing a government commission, which was to go over the whole system and to propose reform initiatives.

### **Issues and problems**

In its report the commission paid quite some attention to a number of issues and some problems in the adult education system primarily concerning economic themes. The report noted that expenses were rising at a rate, which was disproportionate with the development of educational activities. An important remark had to do with the fact that relatively few participants acquire formal qualifications in the system - either because the education did not lead to any formal qualification or because participants did not complete courses or because they chose not to pass the final tests. The report considered also the question of overlapping educational offers and suggested that delivery should be more unified. Last but not least the commission deliberated over the possibility that a larger part of the expenses to especially vocational training could be paid by the companies sending their staff to labour market training courses for new qualifications to be used in the companies.

Thus the commission did not invest much interest in other areas, which are seen as important by many actors in adult education. One important concern is - and has been for quite some time - that participation is very unevenly distributed in the population. In short the rule seems to be: The more education a person has the more he or she participates. And there are large groups of people with very little formal education, who virtually never participate - no matter - so it appears - how they are approached and what they are offered. In the 1980'ies and 1990'ies some effort was made to change the

pattern - and in a long perspective adult education has in fact succeeded in reaching part of the groups in question. But there is still a long way to go.

Another concern of adult educators has been the apparent problems of involving and engaging these groups in actual learning activities when they do attend - more or less voluntarily as is the case when unemployed people are "referred" to education in order to improve their qualifications.

Studies in these problems indicate that both informal and formal educational activities pay too little attention to the fact that large groups of adults are "alienated" in relation to education and either fail to recognize that this alienation has to be overcome before learning can take place or are not in a position to work sufficiently with the problem within the framework of a more or less goal directed educational activity which takes it for granted that adult participants will be happy just to be met by an open door to a provision which will assist them in overcoming problems of lacking skills and knowledge.

Education as such is seen by most people as a positive activity and many are pleased when they have the opportunity to participate. But it appears that large groups do not share this attitude - for whatever reason - and special action must be taken if they are to get a favourable outcome from participation. There is little research in this field, so it can only be suggested for further investigation that the Danish system obviously would have to elaborate guidance and counselling services and that adult education must be organized much more with respect to the fact that participants must be won so to say for the idea of participating and that they must realize and accept the outcome of the educational activities.

The Danish system as a whole and the policy emerging after the adult education reform, based on the report of the commission, unfortunately has not invested too much in problems like the ones sketched above. Therefore the Danish contribution of experience to the European debate will be found either in the past or in other fields.

The paper "New trends in widening participation in adult education" presents a number of educational policy initiatives which illustrate efforts to deliver adult education more effectively to a wider public than before and to attract more adults to participation. The second paper - "Innovative approaches to promotion, marketing and outreach in adult learning" - is a case study, which describes the introduction in Denmark of a new programme of adult education, the Preparatory adult education.

In both papers the presentation follows the common template which has been laid down in the project.