

„Les U.P. face à la crise: valeurs, missions, moyens?“  
Colloque Européen des Universités Populaires

**“The reaction of the Austrian Adult Education Centres to the economic crisis:  
an example of good practice?”**

Johanna Lütterfelds

Not just in the last year it has become clear that the global economic situation is critical. One of the first sectors that always seem to suffer from economic downfalls is the educational sector. This seems to be a paradox as especially in times of crisis and drastic changes education and further education, not just restricted to vocational training, are key elements to master the economic and social challenges of the future. Therefore it is vital for organisations within the educational field and political actors to find a common basis and to develop an effective approach to this problematic situation.

The Austrian Adult Education Centres (Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen, VÖV) is the biggest organisation within adult education in Austria. In the year 2007/08 it offered 47.113 courses (only a slight decline of 0,5%) with 455.382 participants (a decline of 1,5%) all over Austria. Interestingly enough women (76,1%) take more advantage of the courses offered by the VÖV. The health sector constitutes the biggest share (39,6%), followed by languages (26,5%) and creativity (15%), politics, society and culture (7,3%), vocational training (5,6%), basic and second-chance education (5,0%), and natural science, technique and environment (0,9%)<sup>1</sup>. Although it is gratifying that the economic crisis so far has not shown significant influence on the overall participation, the trend that the VÖV is heavily based on the health and language sector could be a cause of concern in view of its mission statement as an educational organisation for the Austrian people as a whole.

In the following the Viennese Adult Education Centres (Die Wiener Volkshochschulen GmbH, in the following abbreviated as VHS) as one member of the Austrian Adult Education Centres (Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen, VÖV) shall be observed more closely. It already experienced the changing economic context before the financial crisis actually hit Europe. Already in 2007 a restructuring process was set in progress in order to face the challenges that were presenting themselves to the VHS in general. The most pressing problem was a continuous cost increase. Aim of this restructuring process was to increase the planning reliability through a long-term agreement between the city of Vienna and the VHS, to set clear structures of responsibility, standardization of internal services (e.g. IT, administration, etc.) and a higher level of transparency of the service provision (e.g. controlling).

Result of the restructuring process that in some parts still last until today was the construction of a non-profit umbrella organisation on the basis of a profit centre structure. The VHS is now a joint venture between the city of Vienna, that holds a share of 25,1%, and the former VHS (then called Verband Wiener Volksbildung, VWV), that holds 74,9% shares. The city of Vienna and the VHS agreed on a 5 year service level and financial agreement. This agreement clearly defines the educational mandate and the service level that the VHS is obligated to fulfil. This agreement has an impact first and foremost on the curricula that are being offered by the VHS.

---

<sup>1</sup> VÖV – Statistikbericht 2009 – VÖV Materialien 44, p.2ff  
*Kompetenzzentrum Demokratie & Partizipation*

Now the organisational chart of the Viennese VHS can be described as follows: there are 16 houses (each of which possesses an individual curriculum) and 8 specialized facilities with more than 50 locations available for the VHS within the area of Vienna. More than 700 employees as well as 3.000 freelance trainers are working for the VHS. Overall the VHS offers more than 15.000 courses per year with about 140.000 participants, as well as 5.000 educational seminars.<sup>2</sup>

When looking at the statistics of the last years it becomes clear that the Viennese VHS is on the right track. Although the financial crisis has already reached Europe and shows quite devastating effects in some economic sectors it seems that the VHS has up until now not really suffered gravely. Although the real effects will only be seen in the future the data that is available at this point do not suggest a recession of profits or a great decline in participation in the courses of the VHS.

This data is a very positive sign and gives ground for an optimistic view of the future of the VHS in Vienna. Despite this the VHS has put great emphasis on the fact that especially in times of crisis it is important to stick to their basic principle that adult education should not just consist of professional / vocational training and courses within the health and language sector. In the sense of Life Long Learning democratic and political education, second-chance education, creativity, health education and so on should not be left aside, all of which should be seen under the guiding principle of the personal responsibility of every individual.

As mentioned before one of the guiding structures for the planning of the curricula is the framework agreement between the city of Vienna and the VHS that in some parts is very reassuring (mostly financially, as it gives planning reliability) but can also be restrictive in view of creative potential and possibilities lived out within the curricula. To support the pedagogic assistants within the individual houses the VHS has developed a so-called white paper for the planning of curricula. It was developed not in form of a top-down but in a clear bottom up process, in which pedagogues and directors were closely involved and that included an intense discussion of identity, values and attitudes of the VHS. This white paper was meant to build a competence oriented reference system for the pedagogic personnel and the trainers. It is based on the European key competences for Life Long Learning and defines subcategories for every key competency that follow the threefold path of knowledge, skills and values. What it shall not be is a corset that narrows that programme of the VHS; on the contrary it has been described to be a "night sky" in which the stars show the direction in which to go.<sup>3</sup>

This white paper is closely linked to another project that has taken shape since November 2008. The VHS developed 4 competence centres for the following thematic areas: citizenship, language, new learning methods as well as migration. These competence centres were founded as internal service facilities within the VHS. Their task is to support the management, human resources, but also the individual houses conceptually. They also offer further training courses for the employees and the trainers of the VHS that are being heavily subsidised by human resources. Especially the foundation of the competence centre citizenship is a clear statement of the VHS in the context of the global financial crisis. Basic concept is the idea of active citizenship, a concept that has been introduced and is being heavily enforced by the European Union. The aspiration of this concept is: every citizen (important is that citizenship is not reduced to nation states) living within a society should be able to take actively part in the constitution of the society he or she lives in. In order for the individual to be able to do so there need to be (educational) structures. Adult education plays a great role in this respect. Therefore the VHS offers a permanent programme within this sector, which reaches from basic institutional and historical knowledge to the active training of competences (e.g. conflict resolution, rhetoric skills, interpersonal skills, etc.) and to promote individual and societal responsibility of every citizen. Aim of the competence centre citizenship is to further support the

---

<sup>2</sup> M. Rieder: „Wenn kein Stein auf dem anderen bleibt; Die Neustrukturierung der Wiener Volksbildung (2007 – 2008)“, 2009

<sup>3</sup> „Weißbuch Programmplanung, Teil I“, Wien/Graz 2009  
*Kompetenzzentrum Demokratie & Partizipation*

individual houses in this respect and to guarantee that the VHS will continue to play such an important role within the sector of education for active citizenship. This is, among other things, happening on the one hand through the channel of further education of the trainers and employees, but also through paying attention to the organisational structure as a whole of the VHS and the way individuals treat and communicate with each other within the VHS.

To be credible it is vital for the VHS to openly exemplify what this concept of active citizenship stands for. Therefore a couple of processes have been set in motion. One of them is the quality management process (LernerInnenorientierte Qualitätszertifizierung in der Erwachsenenbildung, LQW) that has been launched recently. Within this process one of the major achievements will be a common mission statement for all the houses of the VHS. The concept of gender and diversity management – one among many - is being regarded as one of the key principles in order to guarantee that the VHS is being credible when trying to teach citizens how to be active in their society and to raise some form of (political) awareness.

To sum up: although the current economic crisis is putting lots of pressure on the VHS to act in regard of economic profit it has managed so far not to lose its principles. On the contrary: the tendencies and trends over the last years clearly show that the VHS positions itself within this challenging frame with the clear statement, that especially in times of crisis it is essential to not just obey economic demands, but to also take into consideration non-economic values and principles. If a new societal orientation is needed it can only be steered bottom-up. For the people to be able to do this they need to be enabled to take responsibility, to be clear-minded, to possess the knowledge and skills necessary in order to shape their society and therefore to overcome the current economic crisis.