

## Modernisation of organisations due to migration? Mixed blessings in adult education centres in Germany

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### Abstract

*The following paper discusses as a research question the effects of increased migration by refugees and asylum-seekers on German adult education centres (Volkshochschule - VHS). Other studies have focused on the effects of co-called integration courses on learners, their trajectories, or general societal effects, such as inclusion in the labour market. In these studies, adult education was perceived as a means of how to deal with migration and integration, and the research was less focused on how migration and integration affects adult education centres. Based on modernity theories, this study used quantitative analysis in order to determine if the approximately 900 German adult education centres have changed in the last two decades due to increased migration and different legal frameworks. Program analysis were used in previous studies, while here the provider statistics were used for a longitudinal data analysis. This analysis focused on the following three factors: professional staff, the fields/subjects of provision, and financial sources.*

**Keywords:** Adult education; adult education centre; migration; organisation; staff; Volkshochschule

### Introduction

Many studies on migration and integration have focused on what effects adult education has on migrants and refugees (e.g. Fejes, 2019a; Heinemann, 2014; Käßplinger, 2018; Klingenberg & Rex, 2016; Lückner & Mania, 2014; Öztürk, 2014 Öztürk, 2018a, 2018b; Öztürk & Kaufmann, 2009; Palmén, 2016; Robak, 2018; Robak, 2015; Robak & Peter, 2014; Sprung, 2012; Stanik & Franz, 2016; Subasi, 2018; Wildemeersch, 2017; Zimmer, Lückner & Fleige, 2015). Typical research questions included the learning trajectories of students, the content of the courses, the integration policies, and the effect of adult



learning on social and economic inclusion. Adult education was, in many respects, considered a main tool to use in order to deal with a situation with increased and non-planned migration. This extraordinary situation was frequently framed and perceived as a crisis by parts of the public. The focus of this paper differs from many of these studies. It concentrates on the effects of migration and integration on adult education centres, although it does not intend to analyse, for example, diversity (Öztürk & Reiter, 2017). This paper has an organisational focus on a key institution of adult learning in Germany.

## Theoretical background and research questions

The development of adult education and its institutions is frequently discussed in relation to modernity theories (e.g. Salling Olesen, 2014; Schrader, 2014; Tippelt, 2018). Generally, adult education has historically important functions within the modernisation processes. Salling Olesen (2014, p. 40) stated: ‘The theoretical notion of modernization seems to be a productive backbone in understanding the multiple institutional realities, conceptual meanings, and historical changes of adult education and learning in the context of societal functions of adult learning.’ Furthermore, he mentions literacy education especially as ‘enabling modern societies’ (ibid., p. 41). Modernisation processes are often connected to language policies, because modern societies and governments often have a general interest in promoting communication and sustaining the nation-state as the basis of their power. Generally, it is assumed and expected that adult education will help individuals and society in coping with new situations, transitions, disruptions, or challenges, which are inherent to modern societies. Integration policies refer in many countries to the adult learning of migrants, which contains both the learning of languages and the learning of legal and social norms. Concepts range between the pole of intercultural/transcultural/multicultural learning (Robak & Peter, 2014; Robak, 2018), and the pole of learning how to assimilate and to integrate into the new society. Many studies have discussed different integration concepts critically (Fejes, 2019a), and despite globalisation, countries demonstrate a high degree of difference in how integration policies are exactly shaped. Moreover, national integration policies change over time, although certain path-logics can be observed.

The German integration policy has changed a great deal within the last two decades (for details see Lochner, 2016). It would be paramount and the issue of a different paper to explain all of the changes since the implementation of the new migration law in Germany in 2005, or the many changes made to asylum laws since the 1990s. These changes led to the establishment of integration courses as a tool to support people when arriving and wanting to stay in Germany. These courses are also used as a tool to pressure people to learn new things, like the German language or the legal norms in Germany. Participation in an integration course is a mix between a right and a duty. Additionally, the extraordinary events of 2015, which caused an influx of many refugees and asylum-seekers within a short period of time, led to extraordinary measures to cope with the situation and to also offer support to refugees so that they could integrate into German society and the labour market. The approach in Germany was sometimes described as an ‘experiment’ by people from abroad (e.g. Hockenos, 2018) because many people migrated to Germany within a short period of time and with unknown results. The German policy also differed from a number of other countries in that period of time. The question remains debatable if an ‘experiment’ is an adequate descriptive term, because many regulations and structures were used that had already pre-existed. These included the

blueprints for such integration courses in adult education centres that were used beginning in 2005.

Nonetheless, it is an interesting subject. Perhaps now is a good moment in time to investigate how the providers, the content of their courses, and their staff have changed. I do not want to discuss here what adult education is doing for the society or the migrants. I want to focus on organisational changes. This paper accomplished this goal by using and analysing quantitative longitudinal data from the roughly 900 German adult education centres, also known as *Volkshochschulen* (vhs), between 1992 and 2018. These adult education centres have a rich and multi-faceted history. These institutions were started 100 years ago in different parts of Germany by various political regimes (Borinski, 1944/1945; Gieseke & Opelt, 2003; Olbrich, 2001). These centres continue to be important providers of adult education in Germany.

The modernisation of organisations can be beneficial, but perhaps this kind of modernisation can also be disadvantageous. Modernisation is sometimes rather normatively perceived as simply a slogan for newer and improved structures or approaches. As a theoretical concept, it is in many respects a much more elaborate and often neutral concept (see also: Salling Olesen, 2014, Schrader, 2014). Education generally, and adult education especially, are very important institutions for modernisation processes, even in post-modern societies. This partly explains the political and economic interest in education as a supportive driver. This idea can be criticised as a functionalist and purely instrumental logic connected to education as a tool for adaptation (Zeuner, 2006). It is also important to note that processes of modernisation are manifold and can be characterised by many paradoxes (Loo & van der Reijen, 1997). Modernisation does not rule out that periods or events of regression can happen. The 20<sup>th</sup> century and the atrocities committed by Nazi Germans are a terrible example of how modernised and seemingly civilised nations can fall back in their development. Theodor Adorno and other scholars of critical theory repeatedly drew attention to the dialectic character of enlightenment and modernity, which is also very relevant for today.

Tippelt (2018, pp. 93-96) described, in relation to adult education research, ‘expansion’ and ‘differentiation’ as two key characteristics of modernisation. These were mentioned in addition to other characteristics, such as ‘individualisation.’ Following this approach, a modernised society should seek to establish a more elaborate and differentiated provision for education. It should offer more chances for individualised and tailor-made provisions. Thus, there are normative goals connected with modernisation and its improvements. These can be generally questioned because the call for more resources conflicts with sustainability and the limitations of resources. Today, the end of endless growth seems likely. For decades, this has been a challenge for the modernisation project (Meadows, Randers & Meadows, 1972).

This idea leads to another important question, which cannot be tackled in more detail here. Contrarily, the two characteristics of ‘expansion’ and ‘differentiation’ were used for the following research questions in this paper:

- Did migration and refugees cause an overall expansion of offers of adult education centres in Germany?
- Did migration and refugees cause a differentiation in provisions offered by the adult education centres in Germany?

These two research questions build on a previous historical analysis on adult education centres (Käpplinger, 2018). These questions were also informed by the fact that migration is historically a major stimulus for change and modernisation in societies. Some scholars

have recognized that a major stimulus for (positive) change comes predominantly from the outside: ‘Modern societies receive the impulses for modernization not from the inside. At the inside are those who have fairly accommodated to the conditions. They are the least interested in change.’<sup>1</sup> (Precht & Welzer, 2016). This might be far too bold and general a statement, but it is interesting to study if migration is mainly or completely a societal burden (as it is often perceived and framed by right-wing extremists, xenophobes, or populists), or if it is also a stimulus for growth, differentiation, and generally more progress in society. Nonetheless, such an analysis requires an open-minded approach because the migration issue seems to be an almost ‘toxic’ issue. This is because there are extremes of only approval or disapproval by many people, and this limits the capacity for mutual understanding (Oeftering, 2016).

## Data and methods

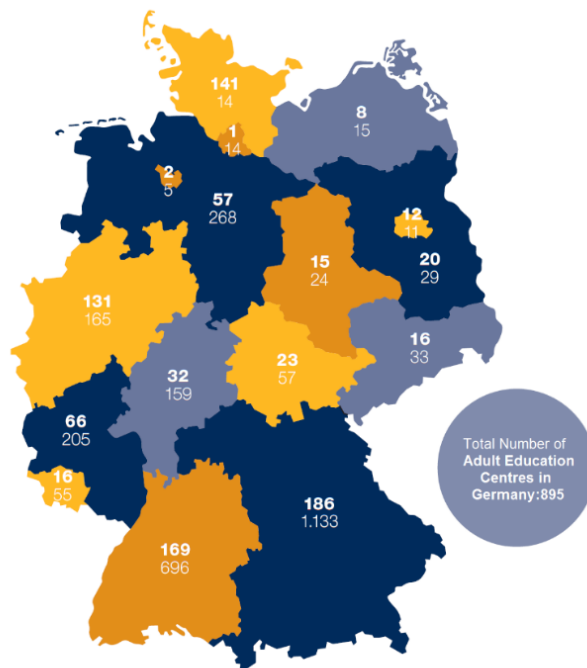
Many European languages know a word for a core institution of adult education invented by Grundtvig in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: *adult education centre* (English), *Folkehøjskole* (Danish), *Volkshogeschool* (Dutch), *kansanopisto/työväenopisto/kansalaisopisto* (Finnish), *Volkshochschule* (German), *Folkehøgskole/Folkehøgskule* (Norwegian), *Folkhögskola* (Swedish), and *népfőiskola* (Hungarian). Nonetheless, the differences vary a great deal between the countries, and despite the joint historical roots, the diverse branches have developed very differently. This paper was framed using primarily the German context. Therefore, I encourage similar studies within other national contexts, or even comparative research in adult education. The reason for this is that the institutions and organisations of adult education are vastly different depending on the country in question.

### *The German Volkshochschule (VHS)*

Thus, it is necessary to explain the German *Volkshochschule* (VHS) in more detail in order to support a general comparative understanding for the following analysis. The German Adult Education Association, Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V. (DVV), is the umbrella association of 16 VHS regional associations and approximately 900 public *Volkshochschulen*. It has more than 3,000 regional offices that exist almost everywhere in Germany, according to its own website<sup>2</sup> (see figure 1). The following text and figures were mostly taken from this website. In 2018, these centres provided 700,000 events (mainly courses, but also lectures, study trips, and excursions) with 16.8 million teaching hours and nine million participants.

Adult education centres are the largest provider of general adult education in Germany. However, these also provide vocational continuing education and training. One third of VHS participants asked in the Adult Education Survey (AES) answered that they were motivated to participate in VHS courses because of vocational reasons (Bilger, Behringer, Kuper & Schrader, 2017, p. 13). This is often the case for language courses, even when these courses are not described as being vocationally relevant.

Adult education centres (VHS) are mainly supported by local governments. The heads of the VHS are often employed by the local governments. They have a public educational mandate, which is mainly regulated by regional laws of the federal states (‘*Länder*’) and also by national or European law.



**Figure 1.** Adult education centres per region in Germany. Also shown are the number of centres and branch offices. (Source: dvv)

In rural regions, the adult education centres are often one of the few or even the only public training agencies available for adults. Adult education centres are supposed to be open to all people (with the normative slogan ‘Bildung für alle’) regardless of age, disability, gender, origin, social status, educational level, religion, or worldview. The adult education centres also try to meet their public mandate by setting socially affordable fees for all, as well as reductions for disadvantaged people. The centres work economically, but are not profit-based. Nonetheless, adult education centres must earn more than one-third of their financial resources from enrolment fees, but in some regions the fees can provide up to almost 50% of the budget. With stagnating or even falling public subsidies, the economic pressure on adult education centres is significant. Additionally, the centres often have to compete with other providers in response to the public call for tenders for projects. Project-based financing and new public management have been on the rise for decades. Thus, a ‘driver for change’ might not only originate because of the influx of people (demand-side-driven by migration), but rather supply-side-driven by government policies. Generally, the public mission of adult education centres is not only to reach all citizens, but also to provide a wide range of educational opportunities and themes. The wide ranges of content are structured by these key program areas:

1. Languages, and German as a second language
2. Health
3. Culture and creativity
4. Politics, society, and the environment
5. Work and vocation
6. Basic education/literacy and numeracy

Many VHS in Germany are almost 100 years old. These centres are closely connected to the rise and fall of democracy in Germany (Borinski, 1944/1945). Most of these were closed down or reshaped after 1933 by Nazi Germany. The centres were re-opened using private initiatives and allied forces in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) as well as in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) after 1945 (Gieseke & Opelt, 2003). They developed differently in the FRG and the GDR, but were united after the falling of the Iron Curtain. The VHS are a unique intercultural transfer and merger of the Danish folk high school idea that was developed by Grundtvig and Kold. However, the centres also refer to the British and Austrian university extension movements (Meilhammer, 2000).

### *Methodology used*

Longitudinal data since the year 2000 from the German VHS statistics (Reichert, Lux & Huntemann, 2018) were used for the analysis within this paper. Initiated by the German Institute for Adult Education (*Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung - DIE*) in 1962, the annual survey collects data on the VHS. It contains rich information on staff, financing, events/courses, participation rates, cooperation with other organisations, and information regarding other activities, such as exhibitions. Almost all of the VHS participate annually in the survey, but mergers have decreased the overall number of VHS over time. More relevantly, the data is collected and reported by practitioners within the VHS, while scientists within the DIE support the reporting with guidelines and making plausibility checks on the reported data. Nonetheless, the survey data is not collected by scientists as in other surveys, and I do not know of any public quality reports or other extensive regular reflections on the data quality. Keeping these limits in mind, the survey is still a precious resource in addition to the longitudinal program archive of the VHS located within the DIE (see Käßplinger, 2018). Actually, the mutual usage of the program archive and the VHS statistics could offer rich opportunities for an in-depth analysis. Researchers could benefit from the advantages and disadvantages of both datasets and methods for an enriched analysis. Unfortunately, such a mixed-method approach has rarely been done so far, although researchers have clearly encouraged it (Fleige & Reichert, 2014). The VHS statistics have not been used in research as often as it could be. Longitudinal analysis like the one done by Martin and Muders (2018) showed interesting results. This paper and a previous paper in RELA (Käßplinger, 2018) illustrate at least some of the elements of a mixed-method approach and a longitudinal analysis.

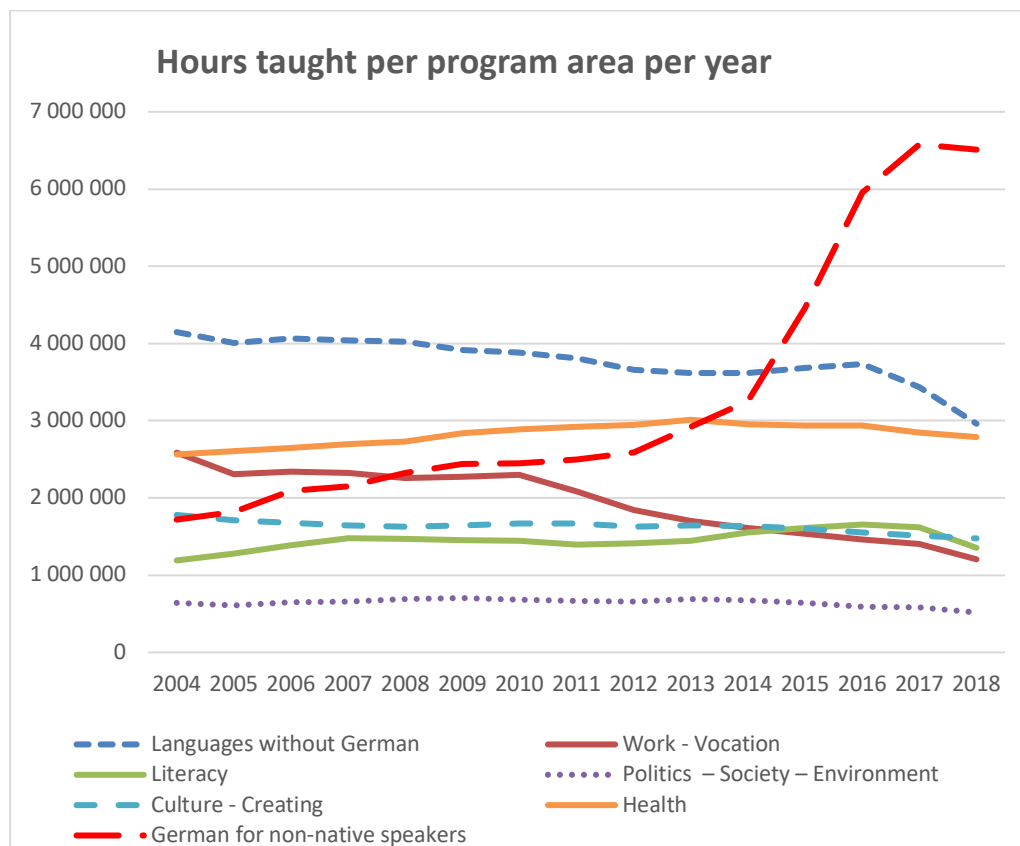
### **Results**

#### *The expansion of and less differentiation in adult education centres due to integration and migration*

The strong involvement of the VHS in recent migration policies has resulted in significantly different program structures, especially after 2015. The VHS in Germany are the biggest single provider of language and integration courses for migrants and refugees. Almost one-third of all integration courses can be found in the VHS, while many other providers offer such courses as well. Additionally, there is a certain level of competition between providers. Governments and administrations use procurement measures (Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019) to put certain pressures on providers, and this decreases professional autonomy. This is important to note because it introduces quasi-market-like mechanisms into this field of education, which are between state and market as regulating forces (Hake, 2016).

The integration courses are not generally obligatory for all migrants in Germany, but if they want to stay in Germany or want to claim social benefits, they have to attend such courses. Thus, there is at least an indirect pressure to take part in these courses, and the immigration office in charge often determines if individual migrants have to participate or not. As already mentioned, the participation within the integration courses can be perceived as somewhere between a duty and a right.

Figure 2 was produced using annual data from the VHS statistics compiled between 2004 and 2018, which was the last year available when this paper was written. The year 2004 was intentionally chosen because the new German migration law was implemented in 2005. Thus, the inclusion of the year 2004 allowed for some comparison of the development from before and after the introduction of the law, although the main focus was on the changes made after the implementation of the law. The descriptive analysis of this data demonstrated that courses in German taken by migrants more than tripled from less than two million hours taught before 2005 to more than 6.5 million hours taught in 2018. In comparison, the other six main program areas available in the statistical information (other languages, health, culture/creating, work and vocation, politics/society/environment) stagnated or declined, while only literacy increased from 1.2 million to 1.4 million hours taught.



**Figure 2.** Hours taught per program area per year. (Source: dvv-Statistik. I processed the data by using data from each year that the statistics were available.)

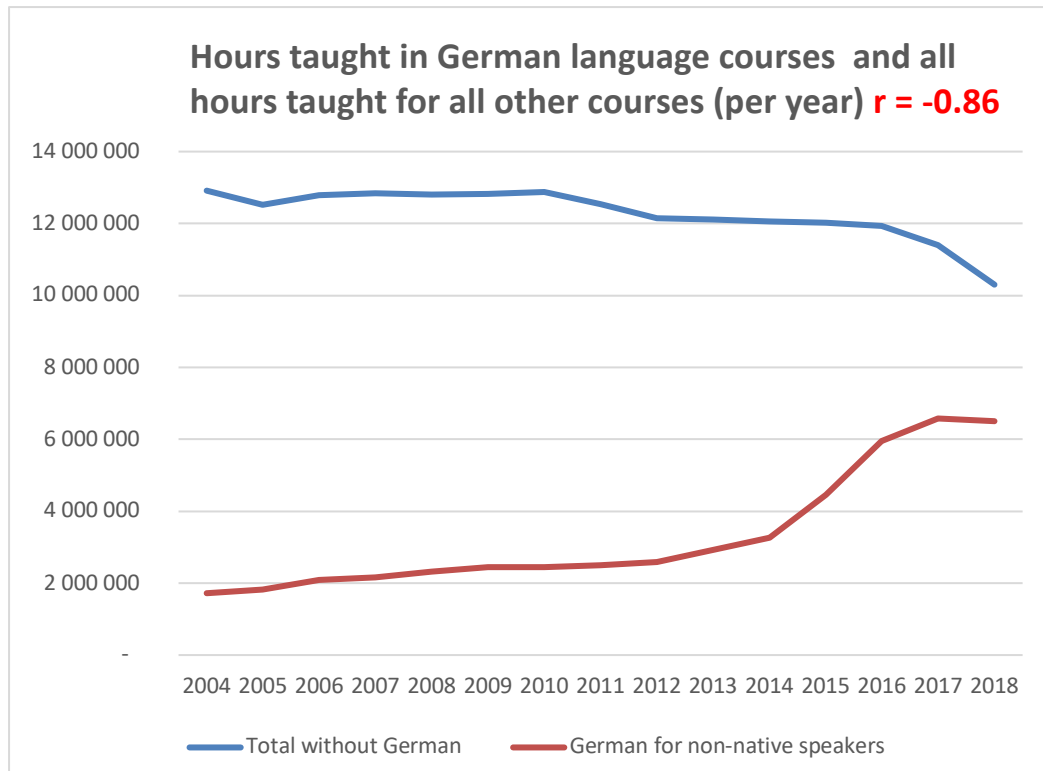
The decline of language courses other than courses in German for non-native speakers, as well as the decline of courses in ‘work and vocation’, are most remarkable. Nonetheless, the decline of the program area ‘work and vocation’ had already started before 2015, which was the height of the so-called refugee crisis. Thus, it is possible to

interpret the challenges of integration as a great chance for the VHS to grow again and reverse the long-term trend of the last 20 years, which saw a slow decline of the VHS. In terms of expansion, the VHS might have benefitted a great deal from migration. The total volume of hours taught increased impressively from 14.6 million in 2004 to 16.8 million in 2018. This increase of the indicator time or volume is even more remarkable, because the general tendency in adult education in the last few decades is to decrease teaching hours. This is due to a number of reasons, such as general acceleration, a preference for short courses, and so on.

Another interpretation or hypothesis is that the increase of language and integration courses for migrants led to a quantitative decline in the other courses. The VHS staff could be too occupied in coping with the challenges of offering a high number of integration courses, and so they lacked the time needed to do other open courses. These open courses sometimes need more planning and so perhaps were more likely not to take place. Explorative interviews with program planners in the VHS between 2017 and 2019 nurture such a hypothesis as being likely enough for further analysis and testing. This was not done in this paper, but it seems to be an important task for researchers to undertake in the future. It was, for example, said that if any course in the open program does not take place, the program area of integration could very rapidly make use of such capacities becoming available. Program analysis will not be able to consider this. This is because the cancellation of open courses cannot be known by program analysis without additional information on cancelled courses, and on courses established alongside the open program. In this respect, the statistics were more informative despite their flaws in other respects compared to program analysis. For example, program analysis allowed for in-depth insights because the provider statistics were highly aggregated without needing to have details from the course descriptions. The latter was what the program analysis used and focused on. Both methods can have complementary values.

Room capacity is often limited in the VHS. Renting new rooms is not that easy, especially when the difficult real estate market in Germany is considered. This can result in a lack of classes other than integration courses. A 'substitute hypothesis' seems to be likely after summing up all of the hours taught in the other courses, and correlating these with the hours taught in language courses for migrants (see figure 3):



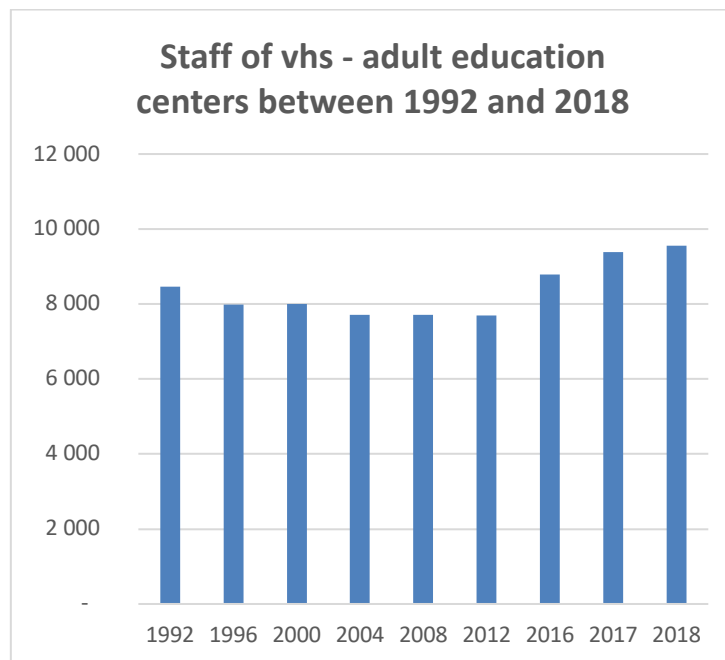


**Figure 3.** Hours taught in German for migrants, and hours taught in all of the other program areas per year. (Source: dvv-Statistik. Data processing is my own.)

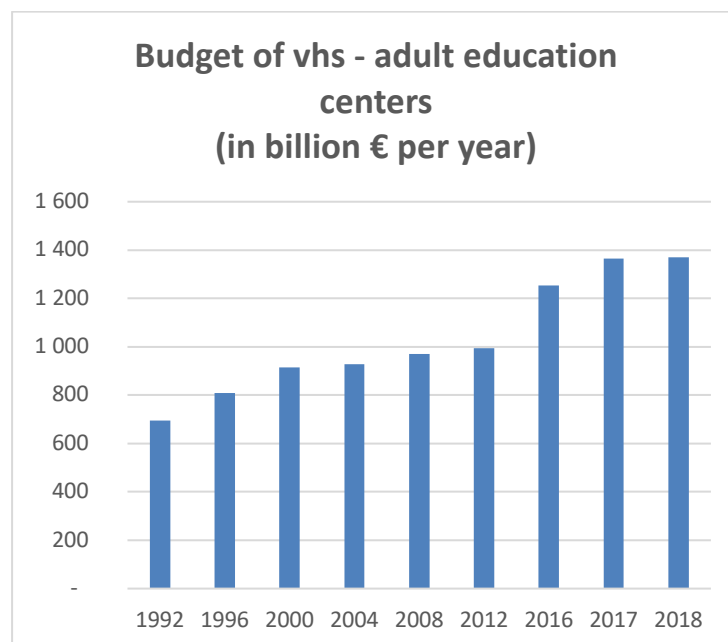
The correlation is strongly negative ( $r = -0.86$ ), which might prove the hypothesis. It has to be handled with great care because this is only a bivariate analysis with possible unobserved third influences and hidden factors, such as demographics or changing labour markets. Such an interpretation forgets that the hours taught have overall increased between 2004 to 2018, while most program areas had already been declining for a long time. Thus, it has to be stressed that the VHS have overall flourished in recent decades. Nonetheless, the differentiation in and plurality of program areas might have suffered, making the programs less diverse in content compared to the past. There is a certain danger that the VHS have become predominantly public language schools, while other program areas decline and become increasingly peripheral. The original public mandate of *adult education for all* might become an increasingly hollow phrase. For example, the share of all language courses (German and other languages) in relation to all hours taught increased between 2004 and 2018, from 40.1% to 56.3%. However, it is also important to note that this dominance is especially valid for the indicator hours taught, while the indicators of participants and courses were less dominated by the language program area. It is crucially important to reflect critically on the selection of indicators, because each indicator has advantages and disadvantages. Only an analysis of a variety of indicators comes close to something like a holistic picture. Selecting only one indicator might be totally misleading and even manipulative. Thus, only one-third of all participants and all courses were located in the language area, which is a sharp contrast to the tendencies described earlier. Language courses are comparatively more time intensive than other program areas, which sometimes made use of single events that lasted only a few hours. Contrarily, this is also a reason why language courses were attractive for many program planners, because the indicator ‘hours taught’ was often a main benchmark for regional policy, or even an indicator mentioned in laws or regulations related to laws in financing

the VHS. Single events, such as a public lecture, were much less attractive. This is important to note because the VHS are often indirectly under economic pressures, despite being a public institution. So-called new public management is an important background variable, although its relevance depends a great deal on regional factors.

The major increase in and the organisational benefits of changed migration policies for the VHS as organisations becomes clearer when looking at the staff structures and finances in the VHS statistics (see figures 4 and 5):



**Figure 4.** VHS staff (management, administration, and program planners) between 1992 and 2018. (Source: dvv-Statistik. Data processing is my own.)



**Figure 5.** VHS Budget between 1992 and 2018. (Source: dvv-Statistik. Data processing is my own.)

From 1992 until 2012, the staff structures and the budgets for the VHS were either decreasing or slowly increasing. Considering inflation, the financial increases were in reality decreases. This development changed a great deal after 2016. Two hundred and sixty million Euro were spent on the VHS, and the staff increased by more than 1,000 people. It is important to note that the results shown in figure 4 were solely based on leaders, program planners, and administrative staff in the VHS. The much larger group of teaching tutors (who taught mostly on a freelance basis) were not included here, as they formally did not belong to the institution where they worked. These tutors were employed on a non-permanent contract basis by the VHS. The analysis of this staff and the effects of migration on these external personnel would require a separate analysis.

Overall, the VHS as organisations benefitted a great deal from migration. They were able to grow substantially in relation to personal and financial resources. It remains to be seen what will happen after the big migration influx that occurred in 2015. It is unlikely that such an influx will happen again, and so the need for integration courses will most likely decrease in the future. Does that mean that the VHS will experience a similar decrease in their personnel and financing? If this happens, the flourishing of the VHS might have been only one more episode in its history. The COVID-19 crisis raises fundamental questions, as well. It is debatable if all of the VHS will survive the economic crisis during and after COVID-19, because some of the VHS have the legal status of private associations, and so do not have the public duty to secure the survival of each VHS. It may be that the finest hour of the VHS in 2015, and its biggest crisis in 2020/2021, occurred/will occur within the timeframe of only a few years. This development is highly dynamic.

### **Conclusion and outlook: Mixed blessings and a need for further research**

Now, turning back again towards the core research questions:

- Did migration and refugees cause an overall expansion of offers of adult education centres in Germany?
- Did migration and refugees cause a differentiation in provisions offered by the adult education centres in Germany?

We can observe ambivalent answers in relation to these questions. The VHS have recently experienced a significant expansion in relation to their personnel and budget, which clearly increased after two decades of stagnation. The overall volume of provision has also increased a fair amount. The influx of migrants, and the role of the VHS in the politically assigned core role of providing many language and integration courses, were extraordinary historical events. It was also a decision in favour of the VHS, when considering it in relation to the financial and personnel resources of the VHS as an institution.

Nonetheless, these positive and modernising developments of differentiation and growth for the institution and its personnel (Tippelt, 2018) are accompanied by less positive effects and, at least, ambivalent challenges. As was already mentioned, modernisation is a paradoxical project (Loo & van der Reijen, 1997). Assuming that modernisation has only positive side effects and no negative ones is illusory. For example, the analysis seemed to indicate that the courses and program areas have lost a certain richness and plurality. The previous level achieved in thematic differentiation seems to have lost ground because the provision of language courses gained so much

momentum. This could be perceived as these courses playing too dominant a role in the curriculum. There is a certain danger that the process of differentiation in the program has stopped, and it might be necessary to re-establish more plurality in the provision of a bigger variety of themes within the program. This is also valid for the mainstream integration approach, which is politically externally defined and rather monolithic. It does not allow for variety and plurality in the provision of different course forms and intercultural exchanges.

However, this critical interpretation has to be itself critically reflected upon. It requires further research in order to be confirmed, rejected, or further differentiated. The analysis presented here was predominantly based on quantitative and aggregated data in relation to the main program areas. It was also based on some information from the general and national discourse on migration and adult education. There might be more recent diversity, which could be hidden behind the main trends and located within the different program areas or within single VHS centres. Program analysis can most likely analyse this better, because it can look into the course descriptions and the rich information regarding the content there (Robak & Petter, 2015). Recent years have seen a vivid discussion in at least some of the VHS about how ‘cross-over’ can be achieved (Brose, 2013; Lückner & Mania, 2014; Zimmer, Lückner, & Fleige, 2015; Weiß, 2018). ‘Cross-over’ refers to how migrants can be encouraged to take part in the six other open program areas beyond language courses. ‘Cross-over’ asks for transitions and goes beyond target groups. It could also support more learner-centred approaches, because the mainstream integration language courses are framed by political decision-makers, and the nationally defined curriculum and assessment standards for these integration courses do not really encourage or do not really allow learner-centred approaches.

Here, there are also approaches that seek to employ former migrants/refugees as trainers/teachers in the ‘open’ programs. This would help in avoiding that migrants are constructed monolithically as people who have to learn, because there might be migrants who can teach others as well as learn. Overall, migrants are, in many respects, a diverse group (Öztürk, 2018a). This is important to note because it is unfortunately the case that migrants are perceived as a homogeneous group, which is utterly misleading (Öztürk, 2018a). The institution of the VHS could be open to a more diverse personnel with additional migrants on their staff, which is not yet a reality for the VHS (Öztürk & Reiter, 2017).

The increased resources might lead to better overhead structures, from which other program areas could also benefit. VHS associations have increased their staff, which was mainly caused by the influx of money connected to migration and integration.

It is also important to analyse if programs offered to the non-migrants have at least partly suffered by an increased provision for migrants/refugees. Additionally, the exchange and intercultural encounters of migrants and non-migrants are also very important in many respects (Robak, 2018, p. 212). This goal was perhaps even better achieved previously, because the present measures of the integration policies define migrants as a special target group. This causes a tendency towards ‘othering’. This is addressed in their own program area with the assumption that learning German is the core integration measure. The advantages of a new migration policy might have negative side effects (Käßplinger, 2018) because it supports a selective approach for groups defined by legal status, rather than inclusive measures with diverse groups of learners. Diverse groups that include migrants and non-migrants can allow for intercultural learning (Robak & Petter, 2015) or even transcultural learning.

Nonetheless, the language courses are heavily regulated by external and governmental forces using quasi-market measures (Hake, 2016). There seems to not be a

great deal of professional freedom in planning these courses (Palicha & Weiß, 2020). These regulations sometimes remind people of a kind of policing related to the official immigration regimes, although migrants themselves have advocated for their needs and contributed a great deal to the widening of the courses offered through their own protests (Weiß, 2018).

The story of the integration courses in Germany is complex and rich in ambivalences. It is far from being easily labelled as solely advantageous or disadvantageous. Actually, there is still a need for an in-depth analysis of different indicators and differentiating between regions. Nonetheless, people perceive these centres as challenging the ideals of adult education (freedom of choice, learner-centred approaches, lifeworld orientation, etc.). This is the reason that in previous papers I used the phrase ‘sweet poisoning’ in relation to the integration courses and adult education centres. This phrase caused mixed responses that included both affirmations and disagreements (Palicha & Weiß, 2020). The institution and personnel of the VHS benefit from increased public investment, but the core ideals of a learner-centred adult education might be endangered. At the least, this deserves attention and critical reflection is needed. It is important to study and analyse this idea without making quick judgements out of a purely academic or idealistic positioning. The situation is, in many respects, ambivalent and sometimes paradoxical. The changes of migration and integration laws are a modernising influence for Germany. This is because many previous governments promoted migration for workers to stay a limited period of time, but not for people with the chance and the desire to stay here (*‘Gastarbeiter’*). Germany was ideologically constructed as solely a country of emigration without immigration for decades before the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, the present situation is certainly far from ideal, but much closer to the realities and lives of many migrants. It is interesting to see which role adult education plays within this wider context (e.g. general migration policies, public opinion), and how this role is changing. Additional research could also look beyond the VHS, or compare the VHS with other public or voluntary providers in adult education, because it is likely that not all providers and organisations were affected similarly by migration and integration. The same is most likely valid for the comparison of different regions (e.g. urban versus rural regions), because populations and migration movements differ a great deal regionally. The national figures provided here were solely intended as an overview of the issue, and this might hide a lot of the differences within nations.

Presently, the migration peak seems to have already been reached in Germany, and the COVID-19 crisis has moved to the foreground. It is endangering the VHS. It seems to be very unlikely from a political standpoint that as many people could once more access the country as they did in 2015, although the collateral damage of COVID-19 might cause people to flee and to become refugees. Before COVID-19, the number of language courses for migrants were already stagnating or even decreasing in the VHS in some regions. Because of COVID-19, many courses had to be cancelled. Additionally, social distancing is a big burden for the provisions of the VHS, which cannot be totally digitalised. This raises serious concerns. Was the flourishing of the VHS only a brief blossoming? Will the VHS no longer be a sustainable development after the mastering of the migration ‘crisis’ and the new COVID-19 crisis? Overall, the recent developments of the VHS are ambivalent in many respects and need continued observation.

What is also lacking in a European perspective of adult education research is an in-depth comparison of different national integration regimes, practices, and results. There are, of course, texts available (e.g. EAEA, 2016; Klingenberg & Rex, 2016; Palmén, 2016), but it seems to not be enough. We need much more research in this dynamic field. A comparison of countries could provide additional information about different practices,

as well as stimulate mutual learning and critical reflection on each country's national practice. However, this would also require a more coherent and joint approach towards migration and integration, while European countries and governments presently seem rather divided, and COVID-19 has deepened differences so far. A core task of researchers and research may be needed in order to exchange additional knowledge and experiences that go beyond borders.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Original quote before translation: 'Moderne Gesellschaften bekommen ihre Modernisierungsimpulse nicht von innen heraus. Denn im Innenraum sitzen ja die, die sich in den Verhältnissen gut eingerichtet haben und an nichts so wenig interessiert sind wie an Veränderung.'

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