

## **Outside the box: The Danish Folkehojskole as educational innovator**

John Collins  
Private researcher  
Merungle Hill, NSW

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*170 years on, the Folk High School continues to supply Denmark a valued educational and social service. Does the modern Folk High School system offer Australian educators a model of relevance?*

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### **Other goals, other systems**

Travelling between various Scandinavian adult educational institutions in 1978, I picked up a couple of hitchhikers, Danish students returning to their school after a short vacation period. As we neared the Funen Island harbour village, which was their destination they invited me to visit their school. What I saw there thirty-five years ago continues to energise my ideas of what constitutes a good education and to yield fresh insights into what is possible and desirable about organised learning activities.

The “school” my hitchhiking acquaintances attended was in fact an old Greek inter-island ferry. The students had decided, in negotiation with their teachers and the school authorities to purchase the vessel. When I arrived they were busily learning ship-wrighting skills in order to make it seaworthy and capable of housing a crew of twenty. Their next step was to learn motor maintenance, sailing and navigation skills because they had decided to sail the boat to a third world country (Venezuela) to take part in developmental projects for several months. They would then sail the boat back to Denmark where it would be sold.

On their return to Denmark students were expected to arrange their own “public examinations”. A public examination consisted of each student hiring a community hall in their home community on a specific evening. They would advertise the fact that they had recently returned from several months abroad and believed they had learned something of benefit to modern Danish society. Members of the public were invited to attend the community hall to interrogate the student and to assess if there was something of value in the student’s experience they could take away from the encounter.

The Danish government subsidised this educational enterprise to roughly 85% of its capital costs and up to roughly 80% of its operational costs. Various local government bodies often provided scholarships to support local youths to attend courses. Banks loaned funds to students to cover costs of attendance. Unemployed students were allowed to continue their benefits while attending such schools.

In the process of involvement in their school the students gained no qualification but learned important skills in communication and negotiation, living in co-existence, and of course many areas of mathematics and geography and various trades. They also learned an awful lot about themselves. They were caught up in a group project and learned to plan, to execute and revise plans. They emerged from their educational experience with runs on the board, confident of their ability to learn, and more respectful of others and themselves.

The “school” I first visited on Funen Island was one of 110 Folkehojskole (literally, people’s universities) in Denmark at the time.

This one was organised by the Tvind organisation, which was later to withdraw from the association of folkehojskoles. Other schools were run by church organisations, political parties, sporting associations, local government agencies, or industry groups. The institution of the folkehojskole had been a significant part of the Danish educational scene since the 1840s and had been exported with varying degrees of similitude to other Nordic and northern European countries and after 1878 the USA where it played a proud part in the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1993 the world's largest folk school was founded in Nigeria.

In May 2012 I had an opportunity to revisit Denmark and to speak with officials of the Danish Folkehojskole Association. In 2012, there are about 75 folkehojskole across a nation with a population roughly equivalent to Sydney's. Most folk schools are found in smaller rural communities where they make a valuable contribution to district economies. Some folk schools specialise in computing, others in sports, politics, various expressive and performing arts/crafts such as music or dance or theatre, ecology, literature, international studies – or a host of other activities. For all of them however at least 50% of the syllabus must be on activities the school can defend as “general, liberal, mind broadening” education.

Many if not most folk schools begin each day with a general assembly of students and teachers. Commonly there will be community singing and administrative announcements. In many schools discussion will be invited on current events in the wider national or international political scene. In most schools students are rostered to assist with cooking, serving and cleaning duties.

Every folk school is publicly funded to about 50% of its operational costs on certain conditions. Those conditions make interesting reading for an Australian, for our post school edutraining system has been subjected increasingly to performance quality management controls and audits and standardising procedures that threaten to sap the essential spirit of learning from our teachers and their students. For the modern Danish folk school to qualify for funding, no vocational skills are to be taught and no marks or grades are to be

awarded. The folk schools must be residential – schools range from 35 to 200 bed capacity -- and must operate for at least 32 weeks of the year, during which they must conduct at least five courses of 4 weeks duration. Students of the folk schools must be 17.5 years of age on entry. School buildings and statutes and regulations must be approved by the Ministry of Education. That is pretty much the regulatory framework. Compare that to the Australian Quality Training Framework if you dare!

In fact, most schools run courses of 12 to 32 weeks each year, with shorter courses of one to two weeks during the summer period. Annual registrations are around 50,000 per annum. This equates to roughly 2% of the nation's adult population.

Teachers in the folk school system require no formal qualifications. Many have university degrees and may have substantial teaching qualifications or experience in other educational institutions such as secondary schools or universities but none is required by legislation governing the institutions. The minimum teaching salary for a folk school teacher is equivalent to the starting salary of a teacher in a mainstream school. Beyond that School Boards may pay what is necessary to attract the teacher they seek.

The main attributes required of a teacher are possession of a skill in line with the particular school's curriculum, willingness to negotiate syllabus with each new cohort of students, and enthusiasm for the teaching enterprise. Classes need not follow a standard timetable. Folk schools, being residential, may have classes extending beyond midnight if the occasion demands. It is not uncommon for tradespeople, craftspeople, professionals or even politicians to commit to occasional teaching stints in a folk school to syncopate and embellish their workaday careers.

Principals are selected by each folk school's board in an open market. They may be in their twenties without previous educational experience, they may be career folk school principals or they may have distinguished themselves in one or other line of achievement. They tend to be hired on limited term contracts, perhaps renewable by mutual consent. The work of a principal is demanding and even the

very successful often seek no more than one or two contract renewals. One serendipitous outcome for Danish society is that the community has scattered through it people who have been principals and who understand the educational process, who know how to operationalise it, and who contribute to a high level of intelligent political and industrial discussion and debate.

Students enter a folk school for various reasons. For some sections of Danish society it is the “natural” thing to do between secondary school and university, much like the Australian gap year experience or the surfing safari or the trip to Bali. The folk school stint is used to help clarify career or other goals and to allow some unpressured maturing to occur. For some families there is an intergenerational attachment to certain folk schools. Others decide to enrol following a crisis or trauma of some kind – bereavement, personal illness, unexpected unemployment, divorce or empty nest. These students tend of course to be older, raising the average age of the folk school student to about 23 years. (Four folk schools cater specifically for senior citizens over 55 years of age.) A month or two in a folk school can help the person with changed status clarify who they are and can offer new goals and social and other skills to allow them to get on with their changed lives.

Some professions such as nursing or law enforcement tend to favour applicants with a folk school background because of their maturity and confidence and grounding in Danish social heritage and aspirations.

What lessons do the folk schools offer to Australian educators? The first Danish folk schools were a response to socio-political issues of their time, in the first half of the nineteenth century. Astute educators and enlightened politicians have redefined and adapted that initial response to maintain its currency through successive and massive changes in Danish society. The fact that they remain in rudimentary form outside Scandinavia, even in countries such as the USA that borrowed the concept early in its history, warns us that there is something about the folk schools as a whole that is quintessentially Nordic. In fact, even in Sweden and Finland the folk schools have

developmental trajectories quite different to those in Denmark and Norway. Any attempt to adopt the folk school concept in a country like Australia, if it were somehow to succeed, would create an oddity, a creature of educational and cultural incongruity. Given population relativities, one simply cannot imagine 500 such institutions scattered across the Australian educational landscape, accepting annual enrolments of over 300,000 mostly young adults.

That the system of Danish folk schools provides no nationwide model for our mimicking does not make them irrelevant to Australian educators, however. As a system, they serve to remind us that what is, is not all that is conceivable. For an important component of education systems in any country, they serve as a “light on the hill”, expanding notions of what is educationally possible. They remind Australians in particular that state- or nation wide, centralised systems are not the only or necessarily the best way to conduct all of our educational business and that localised control has much to be desired.

They also serve as incubators for new ideas of teaching and learning. There is much to be learned from the experience of enthusiastic amateur teachers who are given resources (by the state) and encouragement (by their principals) to try to impart their knowledge and skills in ways that engage and inspire their voluntary students. Like some of our home grown experiments, such as the Boys From the Bush Project, “outside the square” schemes developed by those with fires in the belly and unencumbered by established educational reputations or invasive audit practices, provide sturdy platforms for questioning line of sight bureaucrats and others devoted to maintaining the doctrines and dogmas of current orthodoxies.

### **About the Author**

*John Collins became interested in the Nordic folk high school first in 1978. He has taught in a Danish school and visited folk schools in other Scandinavian countries. A recent visit to Denmark reignited his admiration for the system, its administrators and teachers.*

**Contact details**

*John Collins*

*Farm 202*

*Canal Road*

*Merungle Hill NSW 2705*

*Fax: 02 6951 2616*