

# Popular Universities In Europe As A Tool For Civic Engagement And Social Inclusion: Origins, Importance And The Case Of Valencia

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## 1. Introduction: Why Popular Universities Matter Today

This short communication aims to provide an overview of the role and mission of Popular Universities in Europe through their presence in the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), a NGO with 120 member organisations in 43 countries<sup>2</sup>, representing more than 60 million learners Europe-wide, which is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. Its mission is to promote adult learning and education (ALE) as a human right and a catalyst for positive societal change in Europe across three key domains: (1) literacy and basic skills; (2) continuing education and vocational training; and (3) liberal, popular, and community education, including citizenship skills. (European Association for the Education of Adults, n.d.-a, p. 4)

One of the key pillars supporting this third domain, and a central organization affiliated with the EAEA, is the global umbrella network of Popular Universities, represented in Italy by the Confederazione Nazionale delle Università Popolari Italiane (CNUPI), and in Spain by the Federación Española de Universidades Populares (FEUP).

These institutions have had a transformative impact across Europe since their origins in the 19th and early 20th centuries and continue to play a vital role in advancing lifelong learning in many member countries. They have undoubtedly been – and still are – one of the most politically and socially significant popular education projects in the history of Europe, present in many countries although under different names.

## 2. Historical Origins and Educational Philosophy

It is generally accepted that their origins can be traced back to Denmark, the United Kingdom, and France, with Denmark likely being the place where it all began (Montes & Montero-Pedrerá, 2016), albeit under a different name: folkehøjskole (Folk High Schools).

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<sup>2</sup> Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, Republic of North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, ([EAEA.Our Members](#), n.d.)

These are also present in the EAEA through countries like Sweden, Norway, Estonia, Hungary, and, of course, Denmark, or as Volkshochschulen in Germany and Austria.

All these institutions have served as catalysts of progress since their inception due to their aim to provide spaces where individuals could learn to live fully and meaningfully in society, with an emphasis on personal development, self-expression, and a strong connection to the community.

Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, the father of the Danish folkehøjskole (Ohrem, 2021), envisioned schools as spaces where individuals could engage in lifelong learning, democratic participation, and cultural understanding through living, experiential learning. This model set a path followed directly or indirectly by many other Popular Universities around the world, including the Popular University of Valencia, which was also founded with the aim of becoming a school of citizenship.

### 3. The Case of Spain: The Popular University of Valencia

In the prologue to the digitized edition of the 24 inaugural lectures that opened the 1902–1903 academic year in Valencia—the year of its foundation—we read:

The Popular University of Valencia, promoted by writer Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, was rooted in the desire to make culture accessible... (and) Its foundation was based on fostering critical thinking and participatory democracy, cultivating an informed, politically active citizenry. (Conferencias de la Universidad Popular de Valencia. Prólogo, 1904, translated by the author)

On the other hand, in an article from the Valencian newspaper *El Pueblo*, published on Sunday, January 11, 1903, Blasco Ibáñez said:

In our republican club, the same things are done as in all societies in Spain. People chat, joke, play lawful games, and dance many nights of the year... But such manifestations of activity are not enough to justify the life and prestige of a democratic association. Today, the goddess of the world is science: it alone can open the future to humanity, now free from the burden of old concerns that once weighed it down... Thinking about this, the idea arose in me... to found in Valencia a Popular University like those that have long existed in the United States and in England: like the one in Paris, under the direction of the eminent Anatole France, and to which Émile Zola lent his protection. (*El Pueblo*, 1903, translated by the author)

### 4. From University Settlements to Neighborhood Centers

The Popular Universities, which had already existed in the United States and England at that time and that have in many cases since evolved into Community or Neighborhood Centers, were originally known as University Settlements. These organizations are still represented today within the EAEA, particularly through France and the Euromed Federation of Socio-Cultural and Neighborhood Centers. This federation unites national and local organizations from 17 Euro-Mediterranean countries, all of which are part of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers (IFS) to actively address the social, economic, cultural, educational, and environmental needs of their communities.

## 5. Challenges: The Gap Between Popular and Formal Universities

### Today

The link among all these organizations mentioned—and many more affiliated to EAEA striving together to achieve a better Europe—is not new. It goes back to their beginnings and, of course, to formal universities with University Extension and the aim of democratizing knowledge being the germ of these institutions in some countries. However, at present, the historical connection between formal universities and Popular Universities has, in many cases, been weakened or lost altogether. Popular universities are often perceived as peripheral or unrelated to traditional academic institutions and broader European educational initiatives.

Given their significant contributions—past, present, and potential future—not only in Europe but across the globe under various names and forms, it is imperative to rekindle academic interest in them. These institutions deserve serious scholarly attention, particularly from researchers in the field of education. Re-establishing meaningful links between Popular Universities and their more established counterparts—the universities where we now pursue our doctoral studies—is not only appropriate but necessary.

## 6. A Call to Action for Doctoral Research

As Spanish doctor and politician Adolfo Gil y Morte said at the beginning of his lecture on the Means of Transmission of Contagious Diseases the year the Popular University of Valencia opened its doors:

The Popular University must spread culture everywhere; it must place you in a better position to defend yourselves in the struggle for existence, and it must make of you cultured individuals—educated individuals—people with a full understanding of your rights and an awareness of the duties those rights entail. (Conferencias de la Universidad Popular de Valencia, 6th Lecture, 1903, translated by the author)

This claim is more necessary than ever in 2025. In a Europe faced with demographic shifts, migration, climate change, and social polarization, the cultivation of informed, empowered citizens through lifelong learning is vital. And a way to achieve it is with us, researchers from different countries interested in creating a learning Europe where we all may benefit from the power and joy of lifelong learning, joining efforts to restore the visibility of Popular Universities in public policy, academic research, and civic life by means of conducting transnational comparative studies, evaluating the effectiveness of Popular University programs, connecting their objectives directly to several Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, n.d.; Nikolitsa Winter, 2021), including SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and documenting their impact on civic engagement and social inclusion.

The presence of publications on non-formal education is limited (Moreno Martínez & Sebastián Vicente, 2013), and particularly scarce is the number of academic articles that document studies related to the methodology or social impact of Popular Universities on popular culture and adult education with some notable exceptions such as López-Núñez and Lorenzo-Martín (2009); López Núñez, Lorenzo Martín, & Trujillo Torres, (2009); López Núñez &

Lorenzo Martín, (2010); Perea Rodríguez, (2023). There is a paradoxical gap between the breadth of training opportunities, the number of practitioners, users, and participants, the projects and activities carried out, and the lack of publications in both Spanish and international journals that reflect the research and innovation taking place within them (Elvias Carreras, 2022).

## 7. Conclusion: Learning, Democracy, and the Legacy of Popular Education

The enduring legacy of institutions such as Grundtvig's folk high schools in Denmark, Deherme's first Université Populaire in Paris, Toynbee Hall founded by the Barnetts in London, Hull House co-founded by Jane Addams in Chicago, the university extension work of Adolfo Posada in Oviedo or the Popular University of Valencia promoted by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez — alongside countless similar initiatives across Europe and other countries of the world—involved in the Popular University project in any of its multiple forms still resonates today, reminding us that education is not only a path to employment but a path to freedom, dignity, and democratic coexistence which deserves further study. Doctoral research in this area —whether focused on comparative historical studies of the Popular University movement across countries, the impact of non-formal adult education on civic engagement and democratic participation, transnational influences among educational reformers, the role of Popular Universities in promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning, the archival reconstruction of specific institutions and their programs, or the pedagogical approaches and their connection to the Sustainable Development Goals characteristic of these institutions— would not only fill the significant gap in the literature but also honor the legacy of those who believed in education as a tool for social justice and human development.

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