



International Society for Comparative Adult Education

## ISCAE's Mission, History, and Understanding of "Comparative Adult Education"

Jost Reischmann

1. The Beginnings of ISCAE .....	1
2. The Founder: Alexander Charters, Syracuse, USA .....	3
3. The meaning of "international comparative" .....	4
4. A difficult chapter: International research and volunteering in an international society .....	6
5. Perspectives .....	7

ISCAE can best be described as a network of about 120 persons in 30 countries. Members meet at international conferences where they anyway participate. There are no statutes, and no accounting or membership fees. And depending of the vocational workload of the volunteers it gets sometimes for a while quiet around ISCAE.

Nevertheless: those who know the international scene of our subject and field will find many well-known names on the [members hip-list of ISCAE](#). The insiders will recognize many names from research works, publications, and conferences. Many colleagues who are working in the field of international and comparative adult education have been added for various reasons and occasions to the mailing list of ISCAE, thus becoming a "member". Perhaps this mailing list is, beside the direct meetings, the most important treasure of ISCAE: It allows immediate access to persons, institutions, and information in many countries. Information about adult education in Alaska? No problem, send a fax to Gretchen Bersch, University of Alaska. A short visit to Ljubljana, Slovenia? Just call: Ana Krajnc or Zoran Jelenc will be glad to present their work. One of my students was recovering from examination stress in Australia. I gave her the address of Roger Morris: "Yesterday he invited me to attend his class" she tells me on a postcard. So the terms "network", "worldwide person-to-person contacts", and "international research exchange" may best characterize the work of ISCAE. And the term "beginnings", because we can find in the development and status of ISCAE steps and processes that are typical for the origin of a society.

### 1. The Beginnings of ISCAE

Similar to other adult education initiatives the name of one person symbolizes the beginning: Alexander N. Charters, professor and vice-

president for continuing education, now Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University, New York, gave birth to the idea of this society and developed it over more than three decades. Later we will refer more to this founder of ISCAE. Here, first, are some activities which shall be reported of the development of this society.

1960: at the first world conference of the World Council for Comparative Education in Ottawa, Alexander N. Charters and Roby Kidd, a reputable Canadian scholar of adult education organized a working group and presented papers about international and comparative adult education.

- 1966: the legendary Exeter-conference took place in New Hampshire; the "Exeter-papers" were published by the Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education (SUPCE), and are still today an important historical document.
- 1970: Alexander Charters organized a series of meetings about comparative Adult Education at the World Council of Comparative and International Education in Montreal. He published the papers together with Beverly Cassara, University of the District of Columbia.
- 1992: Colin Titmus, Great Britain, expert in international and comparative adult education and author of leading publications in this field, chaired a working group of members of this society at the VIII World Council of Comparative Education Societies in Prague.

Until this year the society had been using the name "Committee for Study and Research in Comparative Adult Education (CSRCAE)". Alexander Charters, then more than 70 years old, urged the members to convey the responsibility for the society to younger scholars. At the 1992 annual conference of the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education in Anaheim/Los Angeles Jost Reischmann, University of Bamberg, Germany was elected for president and Marcie Boucouvalas, University of Virginia, USA for secretary. On the same occasion the society was renamed as the "International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE)".

The first conference initiated and organized by ISCAE took place in 1995 in Bamberg, Germany (M. Charters 1996). Altogether 31 members from 14 countries attended the conference. The central focus of this conference was the discussion of methods, problems and pitfalls of international comparative research. The second conference was held 1998 in Radovljica, Slovenia; it was attended by 35 members from 16 countries. The third conference took place 2002 in St. Louis, USA, and the fourth in 2006 in Bamberg, Germany. The intention is to plan conferences every three to four years, in different countries and continents.

There are different types of papers that should be presented to this conference: Scholarship, as we know, is an incremental process. Articles which appear in journals or books are the end product of a long process. At conferences, the papers delivered are usually ones which focus on findings once research is already completed or nearing completion. This type of presentation, in which research is fairly complete, is welcome to the ISCAE-conferences. In order to expand the scope, in addition to completed research

also research in progress is welcome, as well as research-ideas that provide feedback and critique, and scholarly think-pieces to stimulate dialogue. But presentations have to be "internationally comparative", meaning that two or more countries are included in the research.

The first ISCAE-handbook, bringing together papers from the ISCAE conferences in Bamberg, Germany 1995, and Radovljica, Slovenia 1998, was published in 1999.

The second ISCAE-handbook, bringing together papers from the ISCAE conferences in St. Louis, USA 2002, and Bamberg, Germany 2006, was published in 2008.

This short description reveals quite typical elements of the emergence of an organization. At the beginning we find the interests of individuals. Conferences and other meetings then prove to be - in the beginning often more or less by chance - a concentration place for sharing such individual interests, leading to contacts and the awareness of common interests. Then it is important that the engaged persons focus on and become identified with these topics: as a person ("... is present at all related meetings"), by his/her topics ("... always presents within the same topic field"), and in offering an organized form (i.e. a journal, a yearbook, or by founding a society).

## **2. The Founder: Alexander Charters, Syracuse, USA**

"Alexander Charters has been in the forefront of international adult education for many years": this is the estimate of the editor of the reputable "International Perspectives on Adult and Continuing Education"-series of Routledge-Publisher, Peter Jarvis (1989). "Alex N. Charters' contribution to the field of adult education amply deserve to become part of its global history", Siddiqui summarized and evaluated at the International Conference on the History of Adult Education 1996 in Jena/Germany (in: Friedenthal-Haase 1998).

Alexander Charters started his practical work in the 1930s, following a family tradition. His aunt Jessie was the first female in the West of the USA to receive a Ph.D., and offered the first graduate program in Adult Education at Ohio State University. Charters' significant work in international comparative adult education was developed at Syracuse University, New York. Beginning as assistant-Dean of University College in 1948, he rose through the ranks to become Dean in 1952 and vice president for continuing education in 1964 - the first Vice President for Adult Education in an American university. He retired in 1983, but has remained active in University life and the field of adult and continuing education. He served in substantial positions at this university, participated actively at all important seminars, meetings, and conferences; he knows, and is known by, all key-persons in the field, has supplied grants for more than a million dollars to his university, and traveled to more than 40 countries to exchange his expertise in adult education. He also deals perfectly with all the acronyms which are even to the experts not always understandable: NUEA (National University of the Education of Adults), CAEO (Coalition of Adult

Education Organizations), ICUAE (International Congress of University Adult Education) or CREA (Clearinghouse of Resources for Educators of Adults).

During his tenure at Syracuse University, Alex Charters helped to establish what is today one of the largest compilations of English-language materials in the field of adult and continuing education. The collections occupy 900 feet of shelf space and contain more than fifty groups of personal papers and organization records, print- and non-print material (audio- and video-tapes, hundreds of photos) that document the history and development of adult education: for example, records from the Adult Education Association from 1924 on, Malcolm Knowles' Papers from 1930 on, and even ISCAE-files are collected there. To honor the efforts of Alexander Charters and his wife Margaret, the collections were renamed in October 1998 as the Alexander N. Charters Library of Resources for Educators of Adults.

If one asks for the characteristics of such a founder-personality, what always comes to mind are his humility, hospitality, and his open approach to more and less important persons. I can imagine his amused-doubting smile when reading these lines: "Had you nothing more important to write about?" These characteristics open doors, especially in the international context. And this may be one of the most rewarding aspects of working internationally: that most people in this field are easy to deal with, and enriching by their fantasy.

### **3. The meaning of "international comparative"**

There exist many international organizations in adult education (field of practice) and andragogy (scientific approach), and national associations also have task forces or divisions to deal with international topics. For example, the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education has an "International Task Force". What are the specifics of ISCAE?

The title of the society describes the specifics with which ISCAE wants to deal: with International Comparative Adult Education. But this does not finally clarify the specifics, because "international comparative" is a denomination that can be interpreted either broadly or narrowly.

Knowledge about the education of adults in other countries can be gained from various sources:

A first source, mostly evaluated as "pre-scientific", comprises "travelers tales", the reports we get from international travelers. Such reports are mainly delivered by traveling writers or vacationists, but also by scholars who attend a conference abroad and have to report to their funding agency - and publish this report at the same time in a journal. If these descriptions are more systematic, they are labeled "*traveller's reports*", or - if they are less systematic, "*traveller's tales*".

These types of international documents are mostly characterized as "subjective-impressionistic". Their value is evaluated as ambivalent: Critically it is argued that, because of the random observation and the

subjective description, it is not clear how reliable and how representative the descriptions are. On the other hand the plea is made that especially in this subjective focus of eye-witnesses there might be strength from these type of reports. In the framework of a new appreciation of qualitative research these reports may get a new interest.

At the scientific level, five different types of international-comparative research are identified:

1. During the 1970s and 1980s mainly *country-reports* were presented. "Adult Education in the Republic of..." is a typical title of this type of report. These papers tried to describe the system of adult and continuing education in one particular country. They could be written by an author of this country or by a person from outside. Some of these reports were, and are, rather impressionistic. Others followed a well developed outline and structure.
2. During and after the 1980s we find an increasing number of *program-reports*. These describe foreign adult education programs, institutions, and organizations. Examples of this type can be found in the publications of Charters/Hilton (1989) or the case studies collected by Knox (1989 - see the description in Reischmann/Bron/Jelenc 1999). Included in this type (sometimes presented in a separate category) are the *topic-oriented studies* or the *problem approach*: a certain topic or problem is discussed in the context of a nation.
3. Country reports as well as topic-oriented studies and the problem approach focus more on "international", less on "comparative". Because only one country or program is presented, no comparable object is available. Especially when an author presents his own country or program it is difficult to refer to another national system. If, for example, a German author describes a German program for a publication in English: should parallels be drawn to the English, Scottish, US-American, Canadian or Australian systems? If country-reports or program-reports are collected in a reader or textbook, the readers have to draw the comparative conclusions themselves.
4. A third type is *juxtaposition*. Data from two or more countries are presented. These reports show: In country A we can observe a, in country B we find b. A series of statistical reports represent this type. But no explicit comparison - where are the similarities, what are the differences? - is given. An example of this type in Germany is the international volume of the Handbuch der Erwachsenenbildung (Handbook of Adult Education 1978), edited by Franz Pöggeler, or Peter Jarvis' "Perspectives on Adult Education and Training in Europe" (1992). This juxtaposition can also be topic- or problem-oriented when a topic is presented in a series of contributions from various countries: In Pöggeler's "The State and Adult Education" (1990) a series of articles deal with the role of the state in individual countries.
5. The *comparison* goes one step further: It reports from two or more countries, and an explicit comparison is offered which attempts to make

the similarities and differences understandable. ISCAE uses here mostly the definition of its founding father: "A study in comparative international adult education ... must include one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries or regions. Comparative study is not the mere placing side by side of data ... such juxtaposition is only the prerequisite for comparison. At the next stage one attempts to identify the similarities and differences between the aspects under study ... The real value of comparative study emerges only from ... the attempt to understand why the differences and similarities occur and what their significance is for adult education in the countries under examination ..." (Charters/Hilton 1989, p. 3). This for example can be found in the final chapter of Charters/Hilton (1989).

Finally *field- and method-reflections* are seen as part of international comparative adult education: reflections about the methods, strategies, and concepts of international comparison, and summarizing reports about developments in the international comparative field on a material or meta level.

ISCAE tries to promote a narrow focus of its specific task: The focus of ISCAE is type 4 and 5 (comparison and field-/method-reflections). ISCAE tries to develop, support, and share standards of the methodology of international comparison that might help researchers towards a better understanding of comparison and more sound, reliable, and economic ways of comparing internationally. That means that ISCAE especially invites those researchers that are interested in doing comparative work: researching one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries.

There are many other national and international organizations where reports of interesting travels, "Adult Education in the Republic of X" or "The Interesting Program or Idea Y in Country Z", can be presented - this should not be a topic at ISCAE-meetings. But the "should" and "tries" indicates that the reality sometimes is different. The problem, how to define and interpret the term "international comparative" showed up at both ISCAE-conferences. Although the above definition of comparison was cited in the "Call for Papers", country- and program reports were presented as well. Should we reject the papers of colleagues who travelled half way around the world and needed an accepted paper to get funding for attending the conference? That is also something which can be learned in the international field: to avoid seeing things too narrowly.

#### **4. A difficult chapter: International research and volunteering in an international society**

It certainly is challenging to get a wider view of our world through an international orientation. But there are many handicaps that make this work difficult. Just to name three of them:

A first handicap is language: international communication takes place in English. For the majority of the world this is a foreign language. Communicating, even more, publishing in this foreign language takes many

times more effort than doing research in the native context: In discussions the native English speakers are always faster; in publishing the secretaries are often not trained to write English. For publication always a native speaker has to be found for proofreading. Institutions, laws, political or cultural background are often so different that it is very difficult to find an appropriate translation. The English literature often is not available, and it makes no sense to refer to the knowledge and experience of non-English research literature, because it does not exist for the international readership. That means that people from non-English countries lose their whole theory, methodology, and content research background when working in the international context.

Another handicap is the reliable attendance at central international meetings. Person-to-person-contacts are absolutely necessary in this field. To enter this field and to stay in its network is nearly impossible without traveling and being visible. This means a high investment of time, energy and money. And this investment has to be made also in times when no comparative project is carried out and no extra project money is available. This makes it difficult especially for young scholars to come into the field of international comparative adult education or to stay in it when a comparative project is finished.

Of course international comparative projects have much higher costs and a lot more problems than research done in one country (see the vivid description in the contribution of Blais in the ISCAE-textbook edited by Reischmann/Bron/Jelenc 1999). A foreign partner has to be found and has to be convinced to join a project. Many details have to be clarified before and during the research process and at the end for the publication, needing continuing exchange. In most cases one partner has an extra load of translation, when the other partner does not speak his language. It is difficult to find foundations that are willing to support international projects. National foundations are often not interested in paying the costs of the foreign partner. Even when one researcher is able to travel to two or more countries and thus avoids the handicap of co-authorship comparative research means a high money-, time-, and effort-investment. Regarding the outcome of these investments for the career of a scholar, it is often more beneficial to work at the national level. Funding and supporting agencies should do more not only to assist international comparative research projects but also to encourage the possibility of bringing young scholars into this field. Also, ways should be found to support volunteering in international societies.

## **5. Perspectives**

International-comparative adult education is basically justified on the grounds of two central arguments (for a more differentiated portrayal see Knoll in Reischmann/Bron/Jelenc 1999): On a practical level "borrowing" is expected - that we learn from foreign experiences to adapt successful experiences for our own practical work and to avoid mistakes. On a

theoretical level it is expected that the international-comparative perspective helps to overcome ethnocentric blindness - that we learn, irritated by observations in a foreign context, to better perceive and understand our own field and system.

Certainly cultural differences limit the transfer from one country to another. Comparative research - by helping to understand the differences/similarities and their significance for adult education - clarifies the possibilities and limits of understanding and borrowing. Both are indispensable in a world where in many countries experiences in the various fields of adult education are gained and needed.

The technical development in very few years has definitely made international communication much easier: Fax, and even more, E-mail have speeded up this exchange significantly. While for the 1995 ISCAE-conference E-mail could be used in perhaps 10 percent of the exchanges this increased to more than 80 percent at the 1998 conference. The ISCAE-report of these two conferences (Reischman/Bron/Jelenc 1999) with editors in three countries and more than twenty authors could only be prepared in the given time with the help of E-mail. But technology is only one part of international exchange. ISCAE offers a person at the other end of the telephone- or E-mail-line. And it offers a chance not only to maintain virtual contact but also to have face-to-face-contact. ISCAE wants to serve international comparison

- by supplying a network of contacts to other comparatists,
- by fostering exchange through conferences, and
- by documenting and sharing the developments and standards in publications.

Persons interested in international comparative adult education are invited to join ISCAE.

## References

- Charters, Alexander N., Ronald J. Hilton (ed.) (1989): Landmarks in International Adult Education. A Comparative Analysis. Routledge, London.
- Charters, Margaret A. (1996): International Expert Seminar: Methods of Comparative Andragogy. In: ISCAE-Communication. No. 16, pp. 2-4, Bamberg.
- Friedenthal-Haase, Martha (ed.) (1998): Personality and Biography of Adult Education. Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Adult Education. Lang, Frankfurt
- Jarvis, Peter (1989): Editor's Note. In: Alexander N. Charters and Ronald Hilton (ed.) (1989): Landmarks in International Adult Education. Routledge, London.
- Jarvis, Peter (ed.) (1992): Perspectives on Adult Education and Training in Europe. Krieger, Malabar, Fl.
- Knoll, Joachim (1991): Zum gegenwärtigen Stand der vergleichenden Erwachsenenbildungsforschung. In: Friedenthal-Haase, Martha, Jost Reischmann, Hans Tietgens, Norbert Vogel, Norbert: Erwachsenenbildung im Kontext, pp. 60-74. Klinkhardt, Bad Heilbrunn.



- Knox, Alan B. (ed.) (1989): World Perspective Case Descriptions on Educational Programs for Adults. ERIC Document Reproduction Service, Alexandria, VA.
- Pöggeler, Franz (ed.) (1990): The State and Adult Education. Lang, Frankfurt.
- Reischmann, Jost (1988): Adult Education in West Germany in Case Studies. Lang, Frankfurt, New York.
- Reischmann, Jost/ Bron Michal jr/ Jelenc, Zoran (ed.) (1999): Comparative Adult Education 1998. The Contribution of ISCAE to an Emerging Field of Study. Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, Ljubljana Slovenia.
- Reischmann, Jost & Bron, Michal Jr (2008) (Eds.): Comparative Adult Education 2008: Experiences and Examples. A Publication of the International Society for Comparative Adult Education ISCAE. Frankfurt, New York: Peter Lang Publishers. 282 pages; ISBN 978-3-631-58235-0.
- Siddiqui, Dilnawaz A. (1996): Contributions of Alexander N. Charters to the Field of Adult Education. Paper presented at the VI International Conference on the History of Adult Education: Personality and Biography. Friedrich-Schiller-Universität. Jena.

*Reischmann, Jost: ISCAE - International Society for Comparative Adult Education. At: <http://www.ISCAE.org>. Version September, 2009.*

