



EUROPEAN  
ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE EDUCATION  
OF ADULTS

# **Country Report on Adult Education in SWEDEN**

Helsinki, 2011



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## Introduction

This Report covers the situation of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning in Sweden. It is divided into two sections. The section *Policy and Politics* gives an overview of the key policy currently in force, and also outlines the main legislation or political situation in the country. *Structure and Providers* gives a more detailed look at the organizational structures, and also outlines the main adult education providers, mainly looking at non-formal and informal learning.

We want to thank our members for their contributions to this reflection on the adult education situation in Sweden as far as possible as of 2010/2011. Inevitably there will be new things emerging within the ever changing situation of adult education, but we believe the majority of the information provided will be relevant and useful for the foreseeable future. However, to keep the resource accurate and up to date we are open to suggestions to improve the texts. If you feel there is something you can add about your country please contact us via email at [eaea-info\[at\]eaea.org](mailto:eaea-info@eaea.org).



## Overview

Since the 1960s Sweden has ranked highly among European countries in terms of participation in adult education. This is largely related to the introduction of a **formal national adult education system**, the development of **labour market training** schemes and the **student welfare reforms** of the mid-1970s. The main policy overseeing the Swedish system for adult education is that it should be in principle open to all, and the only real limitation on access to adult education is that the student should be a resident in the country. The other main principle is that the system is voluntary, and relies on the **motivation of the student** to study for their own personal and social development. The national adult education system includes municipal adult education (basic education for adults, upper secondary education), education for adults with learning disabilities and Swedish tuition for immigrants (known as SFI). [1]

Sweden also has a strong history of a non-formal system of adult education, which falls under the umbrella term of **folkbildning**. The term 'folkbildning' is difficult to translate into English. It is sometimes translated as liberal or popular adult education. However the specific conceptual foundation of 'folkbildning' extends beyond the more formal term 'adult education'. The system is largely divided into two means of provision, **folk high schools** and study **associations** (for more detailed explanation of providers see 'Structure and Providers'); although there are at present considerably more folk high schools than study associations (150 folk high schools to 10 study associations in 2010).

The policy surrounding folkbildning is based on the idea that it should be available for everyone in society, but should primarily reach out to adults with little formal education. The policy is intended to create an **open climate of discussion**, respect for different mindsets and democratic approach with the aim of creating a low threshold for people wishing to join folkbildning's activities. Although the government provides financial support, folkbildning's organisations are free to shape their own activities based on their own overall objectives. This freedom is of central importance to understanding the role folkbildning wish to take in Swedish society, as it is seen that this **freedom from governmental control** and the strong ties to the non-profit sector can make folkbildning a force for societal change. [2]

## Politics and Law

As outlined above, as a basic rule the only requirement for participation in adult education in Sweden is that the student should be a resident of the country, i.e. in the case of immigrants that they have been granted a **residence permit** and are registered in a municipality. Eligibility requirements for publicly financed or



state supported adult education are regulated under the School Act or in ordinances issued by the Government. [3]

In the case of the system for non-formal education, or the **folkbildning**, the government provide **financial support** as the system is based on the belief that non formal adult education contributes to the **democratic development of society**. The conditions for the government grants to folkbildning are set out in the **Decree on Government Subsidies to Folkbildning**, most recently revised in 2007.

It outlines that government subsidies to folkbildning shall aim to: support activities that contribute to strengthening and developing democracy, contribute to creating participation of people in the development of society, contribute to bridging education gaps and raising the level of education in society, and contribute to broadening the interest and participation in cultural life. However, as stated previously, the support financially does not create real limitations of content for the providers, who are free to create their own programmes based on their own objectives and the needs of the students. [4]

On 23 March 2010, the Government presented the bill ‘**The new Education Act - for knowledge, choice and security**’ to the Riksdag. After the Riksdag has processed and approved the bill, the new Education Act is expected to apply as of the 1st July 2011. The bill proposes a greater emphasis on **knowledge in adult education** and changes in policy. The key issues are that adult education policy objectives will be introduced in all three types of school, i.e. **municipal adult education**, education for **adults with learning disabilities** and education in **Swedish for immigrants** (SFI). Also, that validation and individual study plans will be regulated in the Act for all three types of school, and lastly that the right to adult education at upper secondary level in order to achieve basic eligibility for higher education institutions will be introduced for pupils who have attended a vocational programme at upper secondary level. [5]

There is also a system in place which gives a right to a **leave of absence** from work for studying to everyone who has been employed for at least six consecutive months or a total of at least 12 months during the last two years. This is not absolute, and the employer has the right to postpone the leave, however the study can be of any nature (not only to improve skills in the current job), as long as it is not classed as a ‘hobby’. When the employee returns to work after leave of absence, they have the right to the same or equivalent working and employment conditions as before. [6]



## Future trends/key concerns/directions

A key new decision (2010) which will affect the folkbildning in future years is that folk high schools are now also able to run SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) Swedish language classes as well as the formal adult education system.

Another direction for the development of folkbildning is laid out in the recent publication ***Folkbildning of the future, its role and objectives***, which suggests that the overall mission for folkbildning in the future will be to **develop Swedish democracy**. The primary aim is that through their own activities, study associations and folk high schools shall be democratic role models - and also contribute to developing arenas and supporting the collective process, where the social interest and democratic involvement of people can be channelled. Some of the key areas this will focus on for the future are in public health and culture, information technology and pedagogical renewal as well as promoting vibrant **local communities, international solidarity** and **sustainable development**. To accomplish this there will be a focus for the future also on developing folkbildning as a key part of local communities, especially in larger cities in cooperation with civil society, industry and the public sector. [7]

## Structure overview

The non-formal adult education system broadly consists of folk high schools and study associations.

**Folkbildningsrådet** (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education) is a non-profit association with certain authoritative tasks delegated by the government and the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament). The Council distributes government grants to study associations and folk high schools, submits budgetary documentation and annual reports to the government and follows up and evaluates folkbildning activities. The Council also works with certain assignments from the members.

**The National Council of Adult Education** acts to determine who will be granted subsidies in accordance with government decree and distribute available funds between them. The National Council of Adult Education has three members: The Swedish National Federation of Study Associations, the Interest Organisation for Popular Movement Folk High Schools and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. [8]

**SAEA the Swedish Adult Education Associaton** (Folkbildningsförbundet) is an umbrella organisation for all study associations in Sweden. They work to raise the status of study associations and improve the conditions in which they



operate. They are also a negotiation body for the study associations and enter into joint agreements with them. [9]

The public education system for adults is made up of the Municipal adult education (**Komvux**), adult education for those with functional disabilities (Särvux) and Swedish tuition for immigrants (SFI). The first two correspond in principle to the levels in the public school system for young persons: compulsory school, compulsory schools for pupils with learning disabilities and the upper secondary school.

**Swedish Tuition for Immigrants** (SFI) aims to provide newly arrived adult immigrants with a basic knowledge of Swedish and of Swedish society. SFI is a right for those who lack such knowledge. The time spent studying varies between individuals, largely as a result of the wide variation in the time students take to achieve the goals. [10]

## Key Providers/Main institutions/Sources for Adult Education

### ‘Non-Formal’ Learning

Folkbildning, the Swedish system on non-formal education, comprise both study associations and folk high schools. The most common forms of folkbildning organised through the study associations are study circles and cultural programmes. They aim to increase knowledge, provide access to culture and individual cultural expression, and enhance personal and social development. [11]

- Folk high schools

It is characteristic of the education at folk high schools to work with thematic studies and project work, where the participants’ experience from work and social life is seen as a major asset. The folk high schools have courses on various levels with various emphases. The long-term courses last from 1-3 years. All tuition is free of charge and national student aid is available. General courses that can qualify for university studies are an important part of the activities and are offered at all folk high schools, however they also offer many special courses, such as those in music, media, craftsmanship, theatre, languages, preventative healthcare and tourism, where a large part of study time is devoted to the selected subject area. Some of these courses are vocational, for example training to become a youth recreation leader, drama pedagogue, or journalist. [12]



Unlike other educational institutions, folk high schools are not required to follow centrally established curricula. Each school is able to tailor its courses to suit its own target groups and respond to the needs of its students and community, which means there is range in courses available. The courses provided are often inter-disciplinary and project oriented, and aim to include the previous experiences of the students and allow students to influence the direction of the content. [13]

#### - Study Associations

Every study association has its own individual profile depending on the popular movements and other organisations that are members of the respective association, however the study circle is the most characteristic form of activity for the study associations to take. Study circles were established at the end of the 1800s as a way for people to access education on their own terms. The circles are small groups (usually fewer than 12 people) with a shared interest or wish to learn about a particular subject. The circles are able to apply for state funding, although they must consist of 3 people or more to qualify. They work on the principle that everyone in the group is able to participate on the same level, and rely on the individual motivation of every member. The subjects of study are entirely up to the group itself to decide, and therefore there is a vast range of subjects or interests available.

In addition to study circles, study associations are responsible for a broad range of cultural activities, filling a particularly important function in the municipalities without state cultural institutions. The associations, along with their principals, normally form part of a popular movement or NGO. Activities are based on participants' experience, needs and previous knowledge. [14]

### Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

**The Swedish National Council of Adult Education** is a non-profit association made up of three organisations: the Swedish Adult Education Association (Folkbildningsförbundet) the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, SKL) and the Interest Organisation for Popular Movement Adult Education Centres (Rörelsefolkhögskolornas Intresseorganisation, RIO).

The function of the Swedish National Council of Adult Education is to **implement the directives of the Swedish government** and parliament on behalf of its members in the distribution of state subsidies to the activities of the study associations and adult education centres. [15]



## Vocational Institutions and career-related training

### - Higher Vocational Education Courses

On 1 July 2009 the **National Agency for Higher Vocational Education** was established to develop and oversee a new form of publicly funded vocational education at post upper secondary level. The role of the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is to set up a common framework agreed on and followed by vocational education and training providers where content is based on the knowledge and experience of what is needed in working life.

Higher Vocational Education Courses, HVECs, cover a wide range of vocational areas, but namely focus on the **provision of advanced vocational education**, tailored to the needs of the labour market by integrating theoretical learning with vocational practice at the workplace.

HVECs are intended to serve the needs of **job seekers** and industries where competence and labour are in demand, therefore companies and the business sector are involved in the design of the courses and programmes from the start and content is jointly determined. There is an emphasis on course instructors and mentors who have worked for many years within their areas as expertise and who then bring this firsthand experience and contacts into the courses. HVECs last for at least six months and participant progress and outcomes are assessed and recognised by a certificate/diploma that validates their skills for employment. [16]

### - Labour market training

The main task of labour market training is the provision of vocational education for the **unemployed** in order to make it easier for them to obtain work. It is a labour market policy measure decided on by the national employment office in conjunction with participants. The major part is purely vocational education, but more general theoretical courses providing initial knowledge for vocational education are also arranged. [17]

## Universities

At the present time (2010), university level education (higher education) is free for all students in Swedish universities, although by 2011 it is expected that fees will be introduced for non-EU students. However, funding opportunities for living whilst studying and the admission rules are in favour of students over 25 years who have worked for some time or studied previously within municipal adult education institutions. [18]



**Folkuniversitetet** is an adult education association which offers a wide range of adult education courses throughout Sweden and in several European countries through links with universities. The organisation consists of five regional offices attached to the Universities of Stockholm, Uppsala, Göteborg, Lund and Umeå. Each region has a board of directors appointed by the local university. [19]

### e-learning

In 2002 the **Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning** initiated a **Digital Learning Materials** repository for teachers in adult education at upper secondary school level, called 'Course Hub' (Kursnavet). **Course Hub** started as part of the Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning, it was designed to enhance and stimulate flexible learning for municipal adult education. The aim of was to create a national portal that provides educational content and teaching plans to teachers, especially designed to build a database for digital learning objects and digital course materials and make it easier for teachers to access materials which help them work with digital and e-learning. The Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning has now been closed down by the government, and parts of its activities are now being undertaken by **Folkbildningsrådet** (Swedish National Council of Adult Education) with regards to folkbildning. [20]



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