

School to Work Transition, Labour Market Flexibility and Lifelong Learning in the Swedish Context

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Swedish policies and practices in lifelong learning in the context of labour market flexibility and employability. Any observer of the development of current policy language will find an increasing use of new buzzwords with a seemingly high level of policy power. Some of these words like flexibility (nowadays mixed with security to ‘flexicurity’ by the EU Economic and Social Committee), innovative, mobile or adaptable are frequently used to provide rhetorical force in public policies in the EU countries. Labour market flexibility, employability and lifelong learning belong to the same family. The concept of lifelong learning is also now being used as a catalyst in almost all policy fields.

The paper starts with some observations regarding the changing notions of school to work transitions. New skill demands and their connection to the concept of lifelong learning and the increasing flexibility of the labour market are then outlined.

The main section of the paper presents some current Swedish initiatives on enhancing lifelong learning at various levels of the learning society; for example, the reform of adult education in the 1990s (Adult Education Initiative; *Kunskapslyftet*), the idea of individual learning accounts, workplace learning as part of industrial relations, current reforms of upper secondary education and finally attempts to validate and recognize the educational background and vocational skills of immigrants.

In a broader sense, the challenge of lifelong learning in Sweden, as well as in other European countries, implies a balance between vocationally and educationally oriented programmes at upper secondary level, interaction between generic skills and specialization, and also an environment for tacit knowledge, judgement and experience that cannot be expressed and made visible in the same way as explanatory and factual knowledge.

2 Redefining traditional school to work paradigms

The pattern of transition from school to work has been transformed as part of the educational evolution in modern societies. Early vocational schooling was part of the guild system and the apprenticeship model. For many years, pupils completing compulsory school could get a job on the open labour market. Nowadays upper secondary education tends to be the common entrance ticket to youth employment. Tomorrow’s educational objective in Sweden anticipates that 50% of an age cohort should continue to higher education at the age of 25 years.

Thus, some students of the 1990s and onwards into the 21 century will stay in the educational 'quarantine' for almost twenty years until the age of 25 followed by the accompanying problems of finding a job. This development reflects a paradox of lifelong learning society characterized by a permanently prolonged formal education with earlier school-start and postponed school-graduation opportunities. The general policy view in Sweden tends to focus educational upgrading as a means of preparing for a future labour market with a number of job-shifts and growing uncertainty. The search for more generic knowledge and skills – in Sweden reflected through the system of core subjects in upper secondary education – also has its price if the connection between school and work does not function in practice.

The gap between education and work can be described in an epistemological dimension. One major aspect concerns the world of concepts, theories and ideas in education and work. A simplified or superficial approach is to connect school-knowledge with theory and work with practical skills and specific context-bound knowledge. Another way of understanding the gap is to talk about different knowledge settings characterised by various concepts, intellectual tools, assumptions and practical solutions.

Another common comprehension is that school knowledge is organised in and around school subjects, and that work is organised settings for the application of school knowledge, occupational skills and practical intelligence. It is the presumption of this author that the gap between education and work cannot be resolved simply by making school knowledge more similar to work or everyday experience. The challenge lies in developing a dynamic interface between school-knowledge, experience-based knowledge and practical applications at work.

Educational policy makers in Sweden are trying to solve or resolve this dilemma by various efforts to develop new lighter forms of the traditional apprenticeship model and the dual system as integrated parts of a more comprehensive model of upper secondary education. The disadvantage of a more traditional apprenticeship model is of course, that it can be a preparation for a vocation that is decreasing in numbers or being totally redefined. Furthermore, it has some restrictions and limitations with respect to further education and equality of opportunity. The integrated or general model, on the other hand, might loosen the connection with work, and be excessively future oriented and fail to take account of the fact that most occupations do not disappear overnight.

Thus, the context for bridging the gap between education and work is shifting over time, between and within countries. In the pre-industrial society with its guild system, there was a close connection between the apprentice and the master depending on the specific cultural, economic and social context as well as the fact that the trainee was prepared for a specific lifetime occupation. In an industrialised context, this preparation has increasingly been taken over by vocational schools or by internal learning platforms within larger corporations. Still, the distributive model was built on the premise that pupils were allocated to occupations by social determinants and vocational heritage in combination with personal interest and talent.

The new interface between school and work can, for the younger generation, be labelled as an 'accordion phenomenon' with a longer period of socialisation, with variations in the

opportunities available for absorbing a work ethos and work values as well as with a weaker work connection for many youngsters. Another impact of this situation is the need to illuminate and articulate a new interface between education policies, labour market policies and social policies. Some of the questions to be discussed in a lifelong learning perspective are; from school to work, from learner to master, from work to retraining, from unemployment to work, from family back to paid work, from work reduction to retirement and the new pathways to post-retirement work.

Thus, employability and lifelong learning has a much broader connotation than a direct relation between education and employment. In the long run, employability is a necessary but not sufficient skill requirement for lifelong learning and adaptation to new qualification needs.

3 New skill demands, lifelong learning and labour market flexibility

When the structural transformation of the labour market intensified, a growing number of employees had to be retrained to meet the needs of the new and expanding sectors of the labour market. The epoch of a single occupation for life for all education experience was over. Employment training and retraining schemes became an important tool of modern labour market policies.

The skill demands of the labour market are changing so quickly now that it is even more important to move from passive policy of administrating unemployment to an active policy of equipping people to compete for jobs. In a country like Sweden, more than 90% of vacancies require skills and qualifications.

The pace of change is remarkable.

Expert tells us that by 2005, 80% of the technology we are using now will have gone. In its place, there will be new and better technology. The information and communication technologies are entering the work-place, and revolutionising daily life, even more quickly.

Some years have passed since Allan Larsson, the former Director General for Employment, made his statement in which he shares some of the most common beliefs of modern working life. One of the core issues concerns the continuous increase of skill demands. Another presumption concerns the high level of job turnover and change rate. A third common conception related to the increasing level of temporary work contracts often labelled as the contingent work force. Another trend often discussed is work intensification as a characteristic feature of modern work.

Current research and long-term studies of the Swedish labour market questions some of these beliefs (cf. Grande et al. 2001, 2004 and SOU 2001). Skill requirements are not expanding in the pace and speed often mentioned in most occupations. The major change tends to be of a structural character by a decrease of low skilled jobs and a growth of medium- and high skilled jobs, while the changes within occupations have not been so striking. The level of job turnover has been high in Sweden during the last decade due to restructuring, down-sizing

and a high level of unemployment. The proportion of temporary jobs has increased but not in a dramatic way if viewed over a longer period of time. During the last few years, however, there have been evident changes. The level of work intensification has expanded in most jobs and particularly in the public service and caring sector. In summary, these studies by the Swedish scholars raise the need for a more critical debate of ideals and realities in the changing conditions on the labour market and on the work-place.

There is a dynamic relationship between lifelong learning and labour market flexibility and employment contracts. The concept of labour market flexibility (LMF) is usually seen as a function of, and an arena for, social dialogue about the labour market. There is also a genuine industrial relations perspective embedded in the concept of LMF. Crucial institutional mechanisms are the balance between state regulation, negotiations and agreements between social partners, and local unregulated praxis. The pro and cons of various forms of labour market flexibility patterns are usually assessed and valued in different ways between employers and unions.

Corporate values highlight productivity, market expansion and high levels of profits, while unions tend to look more at acceptable wage levels, secure employment conditions and a good working environment. Wage setting, deregulation, relocation and temporary employment contracts are fields for testing the level of flexibility of the labour force. Current criticism of the buzzword 'flexibility' often points to the fact that the word is used in a management context and with a limited interest in what can be regarded as flexibility, as viewed from the employees' perspectives and needs. The need for a concept of mutual flexibility still awaits a satisfactory balance between employee and employers interests.

If we view labour market flexibility more from an operational setting at corporate or firm level, it is common to talk about various forms of flexibility such as functional flexibility, skills flexibility, numerical flexibility, flexible working patterns and wage flexibility. In practice, the flexibility of an employee depends on his or her level of mobility. Functional flexibility is often combined with or stimulated by a flexible organisation of the work-place and a readiness of employees to move between different tasks or meet new skill demands. Numerical flexibility implies that the employer can adjust the number of employees to current needs. Flexible working patterns are another form of often used method of flexibilisation. The concept of mobility, as such, incorporates geographical mobility (even of a transnational nature), occupational mobility on the external labour market, and occupational mobility and career change at work.

Numerical flexibility is often used in the context of temporary job contracts, a situation that is not always beneficial for work environment, salary, job security and learning options. Working hour flexibility could be developed to a mutual agreement with a win-win situation where both employees and employers see the benefits. In practice, however, part time work also tends to be related to underemployment and low level of control and influence. Generic flexibility is built on the assumption that the employee has a competence profile and job-

related experience portfolio that also comprises general knowledge and skills to be used in new working settings.

A recent Swedish study shows that employers tend to use a more diverse tool-box and do not give as high attention to the so-called constraining impact of the job-security act as is sometimes indicated in media debate and national politics. First, there is a strong variation between different sectors, industry, finance and care. The need for flexible employment contracts was stronger in the industrial sector than in finance and care sectors. Job-rotation and over-time were often used for flexibility as well. In all three sectors, recruitment, skill gaps and time needed to master an occupation were regarded as major problems (FAS, 2004, Gronlund, 2003 and 2004). There are also some results showing that conditions for a healthy and developmental workplace is more difficult to reach in temporary employment than in more stable and enduring forms of employment. Less control, increasing economic constraints and economic problems influences the stress-level and lead to a higher risk of sickness absence. The role of temporary employment as a bridge to enduring job-security depends on the employment contract; the best results was for sixth months of introductory employment, then for project-employment and least for temporary workers (Aronsson 2004). This result also corresponds with a study reported by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation.

Table 1: **In-service training first half of the year 2000 for employees with different employment contracts (Source: LO 2000a)**

| Employment contract | In-service training participation (in %) | Time for IST as part of total working time (in %) |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Tenure position | 46 | 2.8 |
| Vacancies | 39 | 1.7 |
| Object/ Project-employees | 33 | 2.7 |
| 'Just-in-time employees' | 14 | 1.8 |

Table 1 illustrates results from a study by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) on learning options for individuals with different employment contracts. The conclusion to be drawn from this table is that not all temporary job-contracts restrict access to in-service training and life long learning. People working in high-status temporary work as project work have a much higher level of learning access than the just in time-employees. In general however, access to adult learning at the work-place has a considerable social bias. Another observation from the Swedish context relates to dramatic changes in the provision of in-service training organised and paid for by the employer. Studies initiated by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO shows that the educational gap has increased between different kinds of employees in Sweden (cf. LO 2000a and 2001). If we assess in-service

training as time of training as part of total working time, a blue collar worker will on average have 1.6% in-service training time while white collar workers have 3.7% and professionals with academic background 4.7%. According to SCB (2004), although options of in-service training have increased for employees in Sweden during last years, there are still enduring gaps.

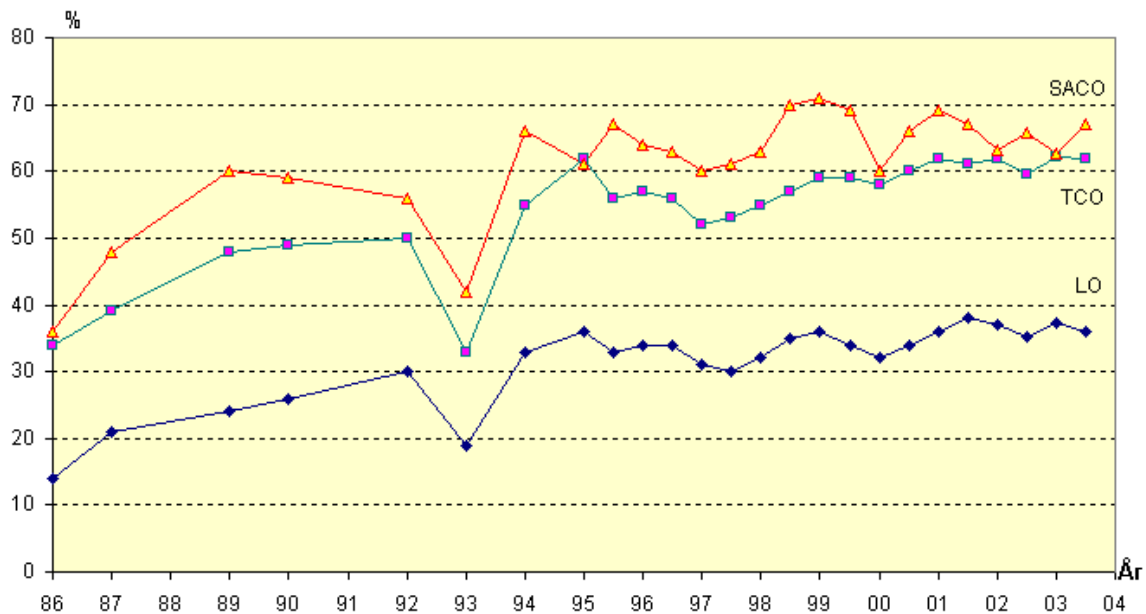


Figure 1: Participation bi-annually in in-service training by trade union membership 1986-2003 (SACO=Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, TCO=white collar workers; Swedish association of Professional Employees and LO=Swedish Trade Union Confederation. (Source: SCB (2004) www.scb.se)

4 Lifelong learning in Sweden between traditions and modernity

4.1 The formation of modern adult education

Although the concept of lifelong learning has been increasingly popular in various policy quarters, its roots go far back in history. Adult schooling traditions in Sweden emanate from the mid-19th century and popular literacy tradition goes back to the end of the 18th century. The pioneer institutions were Workers Institutes and education circles, followed by folkhigh schools (residential colleges for adults) from 1868 and onwards, and finally study circles emanating from the start of the 20th century. Broadly speaking, Swedish adult education development can be described in three periods. The first period, mentioned above, has strong roots in and driving forces emanating from popular movements aiming at self-education in a more collective sense. This period lasted until the late 1960s. The second period is characterised by stronger state intervention in the infrastructure of municipal and curriculum-based adult education. The basic institutional structure for formal adult education was set up in the

1970s. It comprised various supply and demand oriented measures such as a new law on educational leave of absence, the introduction of municipal adult education, new forms of study finance and a policy of recognising work experience in higher education.

This period culminated in the Adult Education Initiative from the late 1990s and the experiment on advanced vocational education started at virtually the same time. During the early 1990s, another period started emerging in the form of stronger market influence illustrated by a more diversified provision of learning opportunities, new private mandators as well as new forms of distance teaching and e-learning. Furthermore, new policy developments in lifelong learning cannot be discussed without reference to Sweden's membership in the European Union. Policies of lifelong and lifewide learning were developed in Sweden many years before it turned in to a major policy profile of the European Union. Thus, the development of popular adult education in Sweden now brings three centuries together by the development of reading circles, study circles and folk high schools.

The aim of promoting recurrent education has been a central value in modern Swedish educational reforms. The expression lifelong education has not only been used to characterise adult education, but rather to spell out the lifelong learning potential of youth education. The reforms in upper secondary education, designed in the late 1980s and implemented during the 1990s, have been supported by the idea of lifelong learning. In fact, one could say that content, quality and outcome of upper secondary schooling forms a basis for lifelong learning and an entrance ticket to the learning society. The recent policy orientation takes one step further by trying to build bridges between the formal infrastructure of adult and lifelong education and learning environments, learning centres and recognition prior and informal learning.

The objectives, educational design and outcome of systems of upper secondary schooling have a fundamental impact on an individual's employability, life chances and further learning routes. The Swedish system, with its focus on common core subjects for all pupils, aims at a combined support of both further learning routes and occupational options (cf. Abrahamsson 1999). Lifelong learning is an activity that comprises learning in various forms from formal and non-formal settings to informal learning in an everyday context.

The early 1990s can be characterised by a significant shift in education values and ideas in Sweden. The role of working life orientation and preparation is redefined in the new national curriculum for the compulsory school, for the upper secondary school and for municipal adult education. More attention is paid to the quality of subject content and academic preparation at the expense of working life orientation.

4.2 Current adult education provision

Adult education in Sweden comprises a number of different actors or organisers with various objectives, target groups and forms of teaching and learning. It is, of course, difficult to formulate general indicators of access and educational attainment due to the wide variation of factors such as content, length and function. Table 2 below gives a broad picture of the

volume of adult education and in-service training but does not include other forms of on the job-learning not included. An interesting feature of this table is that women are in a majority in most forms of adult learning. The most common provision is study circles, which has about the same enrolment as in-service training organised and paid for by the employer. Municipal adult education, formal education usually at upper secondary level, also forms an important tool in adult education in Sweden.

Table 2: **Different organisers of education for adults** (Source: **Statistics Sweden 1998**)

| | Number of participants, during a week in autumn 1998 | Proportion of females (in %) 1998 |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| Adult Education Associations | 2 815 679 | 57 |
| Folk high school (191 290 according to FBR) | 104 530 | 60 |
| Municipal Adult Education | 237 510 | 68 |
| Municipal education for adults with learning disabilities | 4 137 | 44 |
| Swedish Tuition for Immigrants (Sfi) | 20 460 | 61 |
| SSV (distance education) | 111 862 | 66 |
| Labour market training/ | 41 899 | 46 |
| University colleges and universities (undergraduate education) | 305 581 | 58 |

Sweden has a growing number of education enterprises. These corporations offer not only education, but also consultancy and information technology services. There are also educational institutions providing education for manual workers. Education companies are also very much concerned with the training of senior executives. Education companies, however, account for a relatively small share of the total volume of corporate educational activities. Various surveys have indicated that only a third of this volume is provided by external educational organisations. The major part of in-service training is both supplied and paid for by the employer. The annual cost of in-service training in Sweden has been assessed at SEK 43 billion or somewhat more than 5 billion EUROS.

A more recent study on adult enrolment in various forms of learning has been published by SCB (2003). Statistic Sweden (2003) has described the general adult education participation level in Sweden. From autumn 2001 to autumn 2002, individuals with post-secondary education participated in study programmes, courses, study circles, and so forth to a greater extent than individuals with a lower level of education, that is upper secondary education or lower secondary education. During the same period, the interest in education among the latter, who did not participate in any study programme, was so low that there was little chance of a balanced participation in education between groups with differing educational backgrounds. Women had a higher level of participation than men regardless of previous education.

In terms of age, participation was highest among the younger individuals in the survey, i.e. those aged between 20 and 24. The participation rate declined gradually for each age group and was lowest among the oldest age group, those aged 65-74. Every other individual who participated in a study programme, course or study circle, and so forth from autumn 2001 to autumn 2002 were interested in following more study programmes than they were able to. This proportion was the same for both men and women. A quarter of those who did not participate in any studies were interested in taking part. In this group, the proportions were also the same for men and women.

Statistics Sweden (2003) has also tried to map the level of informal learning. Four methods for informal studying, that is, not teacher-led studies, were examined. From autumn 2001 to autumn 2002, six out of ten individuals studied by themselves by reading specialist literature. Fifty percent visited trade fairs or exhibitions with the intention of improving their knowledge or skills. Four out of ten individuals studied using computers, the Internet or a CD-Rom. Two out of ten used radio, TV or educational radio. Women and men both used the same methods in roughly the same amounts.

Concerning the methods involved in the survey, informal studying built upon previous education in length and level. The links between previous education and studying by radio and TV were not as evident as for the other three methods. This result points to the need for further reserach into the relation between formal, non-formal and informal learning.

4.3 The rise and fall of individual learning accounts in Sweden

In December 1999, the Government appointed a Commissioner to analyse and design a system of *individual learning accounts*. The Government, in its Budget Bill for year 2000, proposed that special funds be set aside to stimulate continuing individual competence development. The financial frame set out for individual competence development in the Bill amounted to SEK 1.35 billion for the year 2000 and thereafter SEK 1.15 billion annually.

The task for the Commissioner was to submit proposals on how budget funds set aside for individual competence development could be most effectively utilised. The Commissioner was required to present a system flexible enough to provide scope for limiting and expanding the financial frame in the future. The tasks of the Commissioner included the following:

- providing the most important proposals and existing models for a system of individual competence development as well as submitting a recommendation on how such a system could be structured and organised;
- producing an analysis based on the perspectives of effectiveness and growth as well as on redistribution policy;
- paying attention to the question of how the proposal could stimulate other agreements and insurance solutions on the labour market;

- indicating what the relationship should be between the proposal and the study support system and other public funding for education, in addition to the possible impact of the proposal on the supply and demand for education and the labour market, as well its impact on other forms of savings.

One of the major ideas behind individual learning accounts is that individuals should be better trained and prepared to navigate themselves through the lifelong learning society and ‘be able to steer their own competence development.’ By developing the relevant competence the individual's self-confidence in their ability to strengthen their position on the labour market would, it was hypothesised, be stronger, that is supporting or upgrading employability. The rationale from society’s point of view is that learning accounts – in combination with other measures – could mean more favourable conditions for increasing growth and reducing the costs of unemployment. The practical payment model for the individual is built on the principle of tax exemption.

Another important dimension of this idea is its connection to social partners and negotiations between employers and unions. It was the intention of the government that a system for individual competence development ‘can stimulate new collective bargaining solutions between trade unions and employers, direct agreements between wage-earners and employers, as well as for the competence development of the self-employed.’ (SOU 2001:53) According to the hidden rules of the Swedish labour market system, the state should not intervene too much in work-place learning.

The mission of renewal at the work-place in the promotion of new work organisations, new patterns of learning and a better utilisation of skills and competencies should be a challenge for social partners. Negotiations about learning time or redistribution of learning time should be as common as wage-setting policies, policies for flexible working hours or retirement schemes. Thus, the *individual learning account model* calls for a new lifelong learning contract with stronger involvement of all parties, the state and the municipality, the corporations and the market, and last but not least, the individual. The suggestion also focuses on the need for general competence up-grading, and more narrow and corporate-specific knowledge. The implementation of these ideas has, however, met strong resistance from some trade unions, arguing against the risk of increasing learning gaps in society. Recently the government decided to call off this experiment, thereby placing it in the archives of Swedish educational ideas.

4.4 Collective competence agreements between social partners

There is more or less a hidden rule in Sweden that the state and government should not intervene in the climate of competence and work-place learning developed by the social partners. Instead of law enforcement and anti-discriminatory legislation, the government strongly supports active work-place learning initiatives in conjunction with the social partners.

The Swedish Trade Union Federation has reviewed the presence of collective agreements on in-service training and competence development at work. Only four or five trade unions out of approximately twenty unions in the federation do not have collective agreements on competence development at work. The content of these agreements varies significantly. For some unions, the agreements stipulate that a certain time or volume of in-service training and work-place development should be provided. Other agreements focus on the equity dimension and equal access to work-place learning. The union in the retail sector has recognised the idea of learning accounts. The union for metal workers has also given a high priority to competence agreements and has also been active in the policy discussion on the connection between individual learning accounts, corporate training and the individual's own investments. Some unions have also given attention to the connection between competence development and the wage level. The Swedish Trade Union Federation (LO) is now promoting the idea of union representatives for competence development (*kompetensombud*) to support the competence development strategy at work and to inform, orient and stimulate members to take part more actively in work-place learning.

Sture Nordh, President of the Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO) and also a leading spokesman for a revitalised competence strategy has underlined the need for broad support for work related competence development in Sweden (Nordh 2000).

The social partners are in agreement about the crucial importance of knowledge development for growth, and also agree that the content of knowledge development should be determined in close co-operation between the partners at the local and central levels. Nevertheless, an individual company's investment in expensive training for its employees is, when all is said and done, an extremely uncertain investment. This is why companies are under-investing. The contribution made by the State is therefore vital in determining what resources can be allocated to training in the companies.

Broad and extensive investments in competence development in companies and administrations must now be made. It is time for less talk and more action, and without the bureaucracy and complications that risk killing off the interest of many companies.

Thus, the social partners play a crucial role in defining and implementing the new lifelong learning contract in Sweden.

4.5 Background, objectives and impact of the Adult Education Initiative

School education in Sweden is governed by certain national-level policy documents, the most important of which are known as 'goal' documents (which lay down the goals school education is to achieve) and 'steering' documents' (by means of which education can be steered towards attaining those objectives). The goal documents for adult education are the Education Act, various ordinances, the curriculum, and course syllabuses (which include the criteria for awarding grades). At the local level, schools/colleges draw up their own timetable and work plans.

The curriculum which applies to all adult education is known as 'Lpf 94' (national curriculum for upper secondary and adult education). The curriculum lays down the value-base and tasks of adult education. There are certain specific targets which adult education is charged with working to achieve:

- to reduce discrepancies in the level of education and training between individuals, thus contributing to greater equality and social justice;
- to enable students to increase their ability to understand, assess and participate in cultural, social and political life, thus contributing to democratic development in society;
- to provide adults with training and education which equips them to carry out varying work tasks; the programme also aims to provide an input to the process of change in the conditions of working life, and to make a contribution to the attempt of attaining full employment, thus promoting development and progress in society;
- to meet the wishes expressed by individuals for expanded study and training opportunities, and make it possible for them to supplement the basic school education they had as children.

Adult students' knowledge is only to be supplemented to the extent that, when they have completed their programme of study, their knowledge is equivalent to that gained by young people on their courses. The goals in terms of the level of knowledge to be attained are the same for both adults and for young people, but the content, scope and areas to which emphasis is given do not have to be identical.

The Adult Education Initiative (AEI – in Swedish *Kunskapslyftet*) is a five-year programme of investment and development in adult education initiated by the Swedish government in July 1997. Across the country intensive work was carried out with the aim of ensuring that the hopes and expectations placed on the programme by those taking part in the education and training, by public authorities and by industry can be realised.

During the first year a special Adult Education Initiative Delegation (*Delegationen för Kunskapslyftet*) was charged with looking after the contacts between the state and the municipal authorities in matters concerning the programme. Since 1 July, 1998 this responsibility has rested with the National Agency for Education.

The 'Take-Off' has to be seen in a broader political context as a Swedish response to a European strategy towards unemployment and structural transformation. Instead of supporting a low-wage structure on the labour market, this policy gives high priority to the educational upgrading of the labour force. The purpose is not only to raise the employability of unemployed individuals, but also to support retention strategies at work and to help employees adapt better to meet new skill requirements and new production methods or business ideas. In short, one can also say that the AEI-mission aims at a more comprehensive policy relating to labour market developments, to the infrastructure of adult education and training as well as supporting a fairer distribution of wealth and economic growth. The Adult

Education Initiative can also be conceived as a crucial component in a policy of lifelong learning. The Ministers of Education of the OECD countries highlighted three cornerstones: a good standard of basic education as the foundation for lifelong learning; increased opportunities for switching between study and work throughout working life; and a clarification of the roles of, and the distribution of responsibility between, the different parties involved. If the goal of enabling individuals to continue furthering their education throughout working life is to be achieved, then this will have far-reaching consequences for the state.

The principal target-group has been and are unemployed adults lacking three years of upper-secondary school education. The aim is to enable people to acquire greater self-confidence, increase their employability and enable them to make use of opportunities for furthering their own development in their work. The programme is designed to assist participants in achieving the necessary qualifications and competence levels to study at a higher level and to lay the foundations for lifelong learning.

The responsibility for creating the conditions which can enable these objectives to be reached lies with the municipal authorities, which are charged with building up an infrastructure for learning that corresponds to the needs of the individual and society. The municipal authorities are charged with the task of implementing the Adult Education Initiative; the state contributes funding to their work in this regard to the tune of SEK 3 billion per year. In total, AEI comprises a hundred thousand adult students per year. The Adult Education Initiative was the major adult education reform during the 1990s.

The impact of the Adult Education Initiative has been subject to research and follow-up initiatives. It is obvious that the reform covered a major part of the adult population, although there is always the dynamics of social bias in most adult education reforms. ENCELL, the Swedish National Centre for Lifelong Learning has made a meta-analysis of the outcome of the Adult Education Initiative (Nordstrom & Bengtsson-Sanberg 2004). Their study is not primarily focussing on the economic, social and individual impact, but a more comprehensive approach. The implementation process has comprised various forms of collaborations and co-ordination between different organisations and actors. Thus, the impact of the reform is not only related to individual performance on the labour market, but also the organisational set-up and infrastructure of adult education as a whole.

The Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret 2003) has also investigated organisation and structure of adult learning today, and points at the need for a better co-ordination between state, municipal and labour market institutions and agencies. The government presented a bill to the Swedish Riksdag in 2001 (Govt.Bill 2000/01:72 Adult learning and development of adult education). This education bill comprises more support to the municipalities to develop adult education, more stress on informal learning, learning centres, validation and guidance. Lifelong learning and flexible learning contracts and contexts also reflect this new policy.

4.6 Reforming upper secondary schooling with new vocational profile

The design and organisation of initial vocational education and training (IVT) are under discussion in most countries. In some countries like Sweden, IVT is embedded in a comprehensive educational structure, while other countries such as Germany have the tradition of the dual system. In both systems, the balance between general subject knowledge and specialised vocation knowledge and skills is a major policy issue.

Upper secondary education in Sweden is subject to a new reform. Already in the early 1970s an umbrella-organisation for traditional academically-oriented gymnasiums, vocational schools and practical schools was created. In the late 1980s, all two-year vocational programmes were prolonged to three years with the objective of giving general eligibility to higher education. In the new curriculum of 1991, all programmes in upper secondary schooling in Sweden share the same eight core subjects.

The mission of the task force was to modernise and renew upper secondary education in accordance with current and future changes in society and the labour market. It has to be considered that the ideological background in forming the suggestions for an organisational renewal of upper secondary education is a combination of vocational orientation or preparation, higher education transition and personal development; all being integrated in policies of lifelong learning. Thus the multi-function of a comprehensive model is more difficult to design and evaluate in relation to a binary model as represented by the German dual system.

The task force's final report was presented to the government at the end of December 2002. One of the report's recommendations suggests reducing the 17 programmes to 8 sectors.¹ The general mission of the task force 'Gymnasieutredningen 2000', has been to present a model of broader programmes giving to pupils a more general preparation both for an occupational career as well as further studies at higher education level.

The task force presented eight upper secondary education sectors in their final report:

- The service sector
- The individual and society sector
- The culture and communication sector
- The economy and social sector
- The construction and real estate sector
- The nature, science and society sector
- The technology and production sector
- The ICT and design sector

¹ Åtta vägar till kunskap – en ny struktur för gymnasieskolan (Eight ways to knowledge – towards a new structure of upper secondary schooling in Sweden). SOU 2002:120

The idea behind the suggestion was to make the system more comprehensive, easier to overview and understand from the students' point of view, and to decrease the number of study programmes by various forms of educational integration.

In April 2004, the government presented a bill to the Swedish Riksdag entitled *Kunskap och kvalitet – elva steg för utvecklingen av gymnasieskolan* (Knowledge and quality – eleven steps for improving upper secondary schooling; Govt.Bill 2003/4:140). Surprisingly for people that had been involved in the task force, the Minister for upper secondary education, Mr. Thomas Östros, did not consider the need for a structural and organisational renewal of Swedish upper secondary education by reducing the number of programmes and entrance doors to upper secondary schooling. Instead, the government made the choice to launch a general improvement programme for Swedish upper secondary education, paying special attention to vocational education. The focus of the bill was 'to give more emphasis to knowledge within a context, in-depth studies and coherence'. Furthermore, the minister underlined the need to counteract stress and reduce tactical choices and fragmentation.

Among the initiatives and measures being suggested were the introduction of an upper secondary school certificate, more attention to qualified project work, history as a new core subject, enhanced quality for vocational programmes ('All pupils will be given the opportunity of high quality learning at the work place, connected with the programme the pupil has chosen'), larger modules to give space for in-depths studies and quality assurance of local modules. Finally, a modern system of apprenticeship training will be introduced:

A new system of upper secondary apprenticeship training is proposed as an attractive and eligible alternative in upper secondary nationally oriented programmes. Upper secondary apprenticeship training will be designed as an interesting option for all pupils. Apprenticeship training will have the same knowledge targets as education taking place in schools and will give pupils good knowledge in the school's core subjects and programme specific subjects, so as to equip them well for both labour market and life in society.

If we consider the long-term development of Swedish educational reforms with regard to equity, vocational orientation and capacity for further studies at higher education level, it is obvious that this bill represents a stand-by or wait-and-see kind of reform. The idea of eight broader sectors, suggested by the task force, represented a further step on the comprehensive lane. The new bill to the Parliament can be seen as a modest move backwards (or 'progress' as seen from the vocationalists point of view) move in a VET-direction, although still keeping firm to the idea of a comprehensive model with the same core subjects for all pupils. Recently, the Parliament decided to accept the upper secondary school bill.

5 Concluding remarks and future developments

Policies for lifelong learning have to come down from the ‘clouds’ and have to be analysed in a more specific context with respect to specific skill gaps and possible social, economic and institutional measure to enhance skill upgrading, on-the-job training and lifelong learning for various groups. Traditional institutional, social and psychological barriers will not disappear merely because today we talk about lifelong learning instead of vocational training, adult education or skill formation.

Looking ahead, it is necessary to make forecasts about strategic issues for lifelong learning over the decades to come. It is not sufficient or even constructive to choose more of the same strategy by prolonging formal education with an earlier start to schooling and more years in educational ‘quarantine’. New education and skill requirements cannot always be translated into years of formal schooling. In order to reflect on the effort of analysing the new redistribution pattern, my observations are as follows:

- Educational expansion naturally leads to higher standards of education in the labour force, but, if we take into account the forthcoming demographic turbulence due to high levels of retirement, we could also foresee a high level of loss of competence.
- The polarisation and differentiation over the average level of education has to be analysed at a deeper level with special focus on new combinations of general and specialised competence, as well as a new pattern of interaction between formal schooling, tacit knowledge and IT-skills.
- Furthermore we can anticipate new groups lagging behind, such as refugees with low education and traumatic social experiences, new dropouts from youth education as well as adults with a low level of life-mobility or who are locked in to the same vocation over too long a period of time.
- Finally, it is necessary to focus on the growing educational needs besides, or in addition to, work. The major challenge lies in the lifelong and lifewide learning mission in a population with a higher proportion of elderly persons and in the new provision of learning tools and adventures over the Internet.

In order to compensate for competence loss due to increasing retirement and to meet new skills, it seems reasonable to recommend increasing the volume of adult and continuing education, as well as providing more options for lifelong learning. Furthermore, learning options at work have to be facilitated and expanded. A more fundamental problem is, however, the Swedish love and passion for supply-oriented measures and not enough recognition of the problem of increased demand and commitment to learning from the corporate sector or from individuals themselves.

Statistics and inquiry show that Sweden can be characterised as having a rather low level of mobility and weak learning incentives (Nutek 2000). During the implementation period of Swedish adult and higher education policies in the 1970s and 1980s, there were no strong

incentives for wage earners to embark on lifelong learning due to the existence of relatively high wage-levels and a postponed structural transformation of the economy. The unemployment shock in the early 1990s led to a fundamental transformation of the economy and a new spirit for adult learning. Still, the Government's policy is more on the supply side than on the demand side.

A lifelong learning society cannot only be built on a continuous expansion of formal education in huge compensation schemes for different generations. It must also promote skill utilisation at work and leisure as well as supporting the individual's own spirit of learning in a lifelong context. The need for a revitalisation of the pool of talents, to support the mission of anti-discrimination and to facilitate the learning environment at work, has recently been analysed in a policy study presented by the Ministry of Trade and Industrial Development (DS 2000, 49).

Although Sweden is taking a frontier position on the information highway, there are various risk-scenarios with increasing information gaps in society. The Swedish Trade Union Confederation published a study 'The use of Internet in the homes is steadily increasing' (LO 2000b). It showed that 57 % of the LO members have access to computers in their homes. In only five years, the number of LO members with access to computers in their homes has almost quadrupled. Internet access varied widely between the three major unions in Sweden; 41 % of LO members also have access to Internet which can be compared to 63 % of the TCO-members (white-collar workers) and 73 % of the SACO-members (academics).

The differences between the sexes are also great and the differences are still greater between the generations. For example, 55 % of LO men aged between 25 and 29 years have used the Internet during the last twelve months and 37 % of LO women. The information gap seems to increase with gender and age; internet use for the age group 50 - 64 years was 18 % for men and only 13 % for women. Of all employees in Sweden, about half the number (51 %) have used the Internet in their homes during the last twelve months.

Thus current and future knowledge gaps in society will no longer only be related to educational attainment levels, but also to the individual's capacity to utilise new information technology and to understand public pronouncements and the implications of the new knowledge economy. The knowledge environment and skills gap are, however, more complex than described above. It is now time to initiate a policy debate and analysis of the risk of a double skills gap and mis-match on the labour market. It is necessary to look into issues of parallel over-education and under-skilling on the labour market (Abrahamsson, et.al. 2004).

Finally, it is necessary to scrutinize the connotations of the concepts of flexible learning and flexible employment. Studies of flexible work contracts cover a wide range of control, influence and learning resources for the individual. Project work and pre-employment in-work periods are usually connected with better work environment, control and influence than if you belong to the contingent work-force with series of demand-driven temporary job-obligations. Strong social and economic conditions as well as high level-skills and specialization are prerequisites for a beneficial temporary work contract. The same goes for flexible

learning. Not all adults are efficient, self-directed learner with capacities to organize their own learning. Thus, there are both challenges and risks in launching the open learning metaphor with its stress on lifelong learning, learning centres and learning environments as well as new methods of recognizing prior learning and informal skills. It is necessary to define and develop a learner-friendly flexibility as well as an employee-friendly flexibility to promote lifelong learning.

The Swedish membership of the European Union forms a platform for comparative efforts and for bench-marking system characteristics and the impact of reform. A recent review of access and quality of the whole system of education has been published by the government (Ministry of Education 2003). It was not a surprise to find the Adult Education Initiative as one of the major activities in adult education and lifelong learning. In this context, it seems reasonable to end this overview by quoting the Swedish government's aspirations in the field of education and learning (a.a., page 52):

*In recent years, the Government has used the term **flexible learning** in the field of education and training. A rich choice of programmes should provide plenty of opportunity for individuals to obtain qualifications or supplement their education as they wish. Both adult secondary education and liberal adult education promote flexible learning and provide greater opportunity for learning based on the wishes and conditions of the individual. The uniform Swedish system, in which upper secondary school and higher education offer both more vocationally oriented and more theoretical programmes, also strives to provide both flexibility and the opportunity for individuals to change study path or specialisation without them having to 'start again' in a new form of education.*

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