



# The world's highest participation rate in adult education?

## *The case of Sweden*

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### Zusammenfassung

Schweden hat eine der höchsten Teilnahmequoten an der Erwachsenenbildung weltweit. Um die Bedingungen für solche Quoten nachvollziehbar zu machen, beschreibt der vorliegende Artikel das schwedische System der Erwachsenenbildung, seine Komponenten, seine Hauptfunktionen und Regelungen. Die Beschreibung umfasst die Geschichte und den gegenwärtigen Stand der formalen kommunalen Erwachsenenbildung sowie der nicht-formalen Volksbildung in Volkshochschulen und Studienverbänden. Unsere Hauptfrage lautet: Wie lässt sich eine so hohe Teilnahmequote an der Erwachsenenbildung in Schweden erklären? Die wichtigsten Erklärungen sind die lange Tradition der organisierten Erwachsenenbildung in Schweden, die enge Verbindung zwischen dem Staat und den Akteur\*innen der Zivilgesellschaft, der hohe Ehrgeiz des Staates sowie Gesetze und Vorschriften, die die Teilnahme von Erwachsenen erleichtern.

**Stichworte:** Erwachsenenbildungssystem; Schweden; kommunale Erwachsenenbildung; Volkshochschulen; Studienverbände

### Summary

Sweden has among the highest participation rates in adult education worldwide. To provide understanding of the conditions for such rates, the present article describes the Swedish adult education system, its components, its main functions and regulations. The description covers the history and the present state of formal municipal adult education as well as non-formal popular adult education in folk high schools and study associations. Our main question is: how can we explain such high participation rates in adult education in Sweden? The main explanations presented are the long tradition of organised adult education in Sweden, the strong connection between the

state and actors in civil society, the high ambition of the State, and laws and regulations that make it easier for adults to participate.

**Keywords:** Adult Education System; Sweden; Municipal Adult Education; Folk High Schools; Study Associations

## 1 Introduction

Sweden has developed an extensive system for adult education. In comparison to other countries, Sweden has one of the highest participation rates among adults in different forms of formal and non-formal educational activities (Desjardin & Rubenson, 2013). Looking at EU statistics, we can see how Sweden had the highest participation in education and training in 2020, with 28.8 Percent of the Swedish population aged 25 to 64 participating in adult education and training activities in the last 4 weeks, while in Germany, the participation rate was only 7.7 Percent (Eurostat, 2021). To provide understanding of the conditions for the extensive participation in education and training in Sweden, the aim of this article is to describe the Swedish adult education system, its components, its main functions and regulations. Our main question is: how can we explain such high participation rates in adult education in Sweden?

On a general level, the high participation in Swedish adult education could be explained by the quite generous regulations creating conditions for adults to attend educational activities. The regulations include amongst others the right to take a leave from work to attend adult and higher education, the right for student support as well as student loan, the right to participate in adult and higher education for free, and the right to have child care for one's children when attending studies (Fejes et al., 2020).

The Swedish system for adult education consists of several institutions: Municipal adult education (MAE), folk high schools (FHS), study associations, higher vocational education and higher education. Adding to this, there are also activities for learning in work life, often carried out by the labour market actors themselves. In this article, the focus is directed at the first three mentioned institutions. MAE provides formal education on compulsory and upper secondary level, FHS provide courses partly equivalent to courses on upper secondary school level as well as courses of a more non-formal character, and study associations provide non-formal education through study circles within a range of areas. We will begin our elaboration with the latter popular education institutions, as these are the bases for the emergence of formal adult education.

## 2 A short history of popular education in Sweden

Sweden has a long history of institutionalised adult education, since the mid-1800s and the emergence of popular education initiatives. Such initiatives included the

emergence of FHS (the first school created in 1868), study circles (first circle created in 1902), public libraries, distance education and public lectures. All of these practices aimed to educate the broader layers of the population (Larsson 2013), although, at the beginning, FHS were organised to allow the (rich landowning) farmers' sons to learn the trade in order to take over the management of the farms in the future. By the turn into the 20<sup>th</sup> century the developments of popular education became closely related to the evolution of social movements and the struggle for democracy (see e. g. Gustavsson 2013). One of the hallmarks of these developments has often been considered to be the creation of the study circles, of which the first emerged in 1902. Study circles were based on the participants' own activity and experiences. These experiences in combination with books and literature were the starting point for discussions. The study circle leader was included as a member of the group, and thus the role differed from that of a traditional teacher. These notions of experience, the books and the leader, were the basis for the idea of collective learning among the participants, i. e. free and voluntary self-bildung. In order to get stable funding, study circles soon became institutionalised in study associations. The first study association, which is still active today, was created in 1912—the workers' educational association (Gustavsson, 2013).

Turning back to the FHS, these were organised and 'owned' by the county councils, where farmers, at that time, were in the majority. FHS quickly became popular and in the year 1900 there were 29 FHS in Sweden. These schools were mainly located in the countryside, where education opportunities were scarce (Larsson 2013). During the late 1800s and into the early 1900s, calls for widening access to FHS were made, parallel to the development of social movements, and workers started to enter these institutions. This was not without controversy, but was rather a fight between the landowning class and the working class; i. e. when workers entered, FHS participated in breaking class barriers.

Social movements, at this time, started to create their own FHS, to provide education for their members and functionaries. Yet it was not until the early 1930s that workers formed the majority of the participants in FHS. FHS became the first opportunity for the working class to gain education beyond elementary school. Close relations emerged between members of the parliament and FHS, as a large number of those in the government, especially members of the Social Democratic party, which held governmental power during most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had been educated here. As the target group of the FHS gradually widened to include the working class, a greater number of women started to enter FHS. From nearly being totally absent in FHS during the late 1800s, women became the majority of students in the 1930s (Larsson 2013).

### **The relation between the State and popular education institutions**

As outlined above, there has historically been, and still are, close relations between the state and popular education institutions. The state has funded popular education, at the same time as popular education has been 'free and voluntary'. Such relations be-

tween the state and civil society organisations are part of the corporatist Swedish model (Micheletti 1995; Premfors 2000) where relations between the state and civil society organisations were construed as important for developing a more democratic society. The idea was that decisions thus would be more embedded in broad layers of the population, at the same time as high levels of participation in the activities of such organisations would contribute to the democratic fostering of the population (Dahlstedt 2009; Edquist 2009). These close relationships between the state and popular education are still quite strong, with strong support for popular education across political party lines. Although, the Swedish democrats, an extreme right-wing party which has grown in popularity during the 2010s, make calls for extreme cuts in State funding for popular education.

The total sum of State funding for 2021 was 4.4 billion SEK (Regeringskansliet, 2020). Such funding has since the early 1990s been distributed through the Swedish national council of adult education, which is a non-profit association with certain authoritative tasks delegated by the government. Members of the council are the organisations representing the study associations and the FHS (see e.g. [www.folkbildningsradet.se](http://www.folkbildningsradet.se)). Approximately half of the State funding is divided among the study associations, and half of the funding among the folk high schools.

Even though popular education is 'free and voluntary', where study associations and FHS can decide for themselves what kinds of courses and activities they wish to deliver, and how to deliver them, they still have to adapt to the aims of the state concerning funding for popular education to receive such funding. Such aims are however quite broadly defined in terms of giving 'everyone the possibility, together with others, to increase their knowledge and 'bildung' for personal development and participation in society' (SFS 2015: 218). Among the more specific aims is that popular education should support activities that contribute to the strengthening and development of democracy, increase people's influence on their life situation, create engagement to participate in the development of society, and close the educational gaps between individuals and groups in society. The aim of popular education is thus quite broadly formulated in relation to issues of social justice, democracy, citizenship and society in general. Each year, the Swedish national council of adult education reports back to the government how they fulfil these aims. The council has also the task to continuously evaluate the activities of FHS and study associations, with the support of external experts, from academia as well as from the practice of popular education.

### 3 Folk high schools today

The oldest FHS were, as already mentioned, created as early as 1868. Since then, new schools have continuously been created, while other schools have closed. There are still new schools emerging. New schools must apply for approval from the Swedish national council of adult education. In 2021, there were in total 154 FHS, spread across the country. 112 of these were owned by social movement organisations, while 42 were

owned by county councils (see [www.folkbildningsradet.se](http://www.folkbildningsradet.se)). Historically, many schools were organised as boarding-schools, although, especially since the 1990s, many of the schools organised themselves as daytime schools, without accommodation.

The state funding to FHS is provided for two different types of courses: short courses and long courses. The former could be courses lasting only a few days, while the latter are courses ranging from 15 days to several semesters. Long courses are also divided between those that provide eligibility to higher education (the basic course), and specialised courses, which include vocational courses, e. g. the youth recreational programme, as well as cultural courses, which could be vocational, e. g. music or theatre courses. The folk high schools are free to decide what courses to provide, and free to design their curriculum. However, the State has a demand that 15 Percent of the study places at folk high schools are designated for the basic course.

The number of unique individuals registered at the long courses at the FHS in 2020 was 57,000 (22,000 in the general course and 35,000 in the specialised courses). There were also 20000 individuals participating in the short course, which was a huge decline since before the Covid-19 pandemic. Usually there are around 50,000 individuals registered in the short courses each year (SCB 2021).

As FHS offers a range of courses, students have quite diverse backgrounds. Those who participate in the basic course are students who might have failed compulsory and/or upper secondary schooling. These students often have a working-class background, and a relatively high proportion of students on these courses have migrant background. Students on the specialised courses are quite diverse, depending on which of the courses they attend. If one focuses on the cultural courses only, students to a large extent have middle-class background, and very few have migrant background. Some of these courses could be seen as elite education. For instance, as Nylander (2014) points out, jazz education at FHS is a programme that students must attend to gain access to the jazz music elite in Sweden. Studying this programme at any of the two most prestigious FHS delivering these courses is even more prestigious than studying at the national music conservatory. Thus, FHS constitute a diverse form of adult education, with services including offering courses aimed at compensating for previous school failures or the lack of educational attainment, providing vocational courses, as well as providing elite education in the cultural sphere. Some students live at the school, others do not.

An important hallmark of FHS is the idea of providing a specific kind of pedagogy, quite different from the one found in the regular school system. Such pedagogy includes, on the one hand, the idea of the collective as a starting point for the development of the individual. Such pedagogy is based on the idea of free and non-coercive relationships between students and teachers (see e. g., Paldanius, 2014). Another feature is that FHS pedagogy starts with the individual's prior experience and takes this as a point of departure, bringing this into the pedagogical process. A much more explicit part of the FHS pedagogy is also its focus on relations, both among students and between students and teachers (Paldanius 2014). When compared to FHS in the other Nordic Countries, Swedish FHS are often considered more pragmatic and academi-

cally oriented (Lövgren & Nordvall 2017). Democracy, empowerment, and collective learning are concepts that can be historically traced as having an impact on the self-image and identity of Swedish FHS. This identity and view of FHS has its deep-seated roots in the Enlightenment, which distinguishes Swedish FHS from, for example, the more romantic self-image and identity of the Danish FHS (Lövgren & Nordvall 2017).

## 4 Study associations today

The study associations form the other main part of Swedish popular education. There are ten national study associations, which have more or less decentralised organisations across Sweden. Since the first study associations emerged in the early 1900s, a number of new associations have been organised, some of them have merged in reorganisation processes, resulting in the present number. There is one independent association, the Folk University, with five local, university-connected organisations (which are foundations) as members. The other associations have different social movement organisations as members. These member organisations are e. g., religious, political, or cultural organisations, trade unions, or other types of movement. In 2019, the study associations' share of the state funding was almost 2 billion SEK.

The study circle, with the characteristics described above, is the central activity here. There are two main types of circles. Firstly, the study associations organise circles in different subjects, which are advertised, and anyone can register and participate. For many of these courses the participants pay a small fee. Secondly, a small group, private or from an organisation that is a member in or affiliated with the association, could initiate a study circle in a subject relevant to them. In this case, the study association supports the group or the organisation to organise the circle. These circles are thus to a large extent organised as learning opportunities for those who are active members and leaders in the organisations, as part of their internal development work.

The circles get funding for e. g. books and other study materials, and the circle leader might get an hourly wage, as long as certain conditions are fulfilled. The main requirements are that there should be at least three meetings and at least nine study hours in total and that there are 3–20 participants, including the leader. Thus, study circles are non-formal adult education taking place during leisure time. It should also be noted that the participants could be 13 years or older, which means that all study circles are not solely adult education. The other main activities organised by study associations, for which they could receive state funding, are the cultural events, e. g. concerts or theater plays, and they also have some degrees of freedom to organise other activities like weekend courses and workshops.

The state funded activities in these study associations are extensive. In 2019, they organised in total 266,600 study circles with 1.7 million participants. However, it is quite common with frequent participation – these participants were 624,000 individuals, which shows that many of them studied in more than one circle during a year. The same is true for cultural events. There were 375,000 such events during 2019, with

20 million participants (and Sweden has 10.4 Million inhabitants). In addition to this, the associations are free to organise other activities, where they like folk high schools sometimes e.g. deliver courses and programmes in MAE or in upper secondary school.

There are also certain conditions for each study association as an organisation to receive state funding via the national council. The association should e.g. have at least three member organisations and work with quality assurance in their activities. Finally, for all study associations, there is a national federation, which represents them in the Swedish national council of adult education ([www.folkbildningsradet.se](http://www.folkbildningsradet.se)).

## 5 The emergence of municipal adult education

As described above, popular education has a long history in Sweden, and FHS and study associations could be described mainly as institutions providing non-formal adult education. It was not until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that a formal adult education system emerged in Sweden. Such progress was mainly based on the need to increase the supply of trained labour. As Sweden was not actively involved in WW2, the industry was operating at full pace. The first step towards the creation of MAE was taken in 1953, when the government made it possible for study associations to organise evening courses for adults. These courses acted as preparation for adults to register for the exam of an upper secondary school degree. In 1968 MAE was created as a place for adults to study to get a qualification at compulsory and upper secondary school level. At first it took the form of evening classes, with students who were part of the 'reserve of talent', who were highly motivated, and an aptitude to study (Fejes 2006a, 2006b). But in 1971, partly due to political pressure from the Swedish Trade union confederation, MAE came to be directed firstly towards those who were furthest away from the labour market as well as those with the lowest level of education. These developments were soundly grounded in the dominant discourse of that time, using adult education as a means of reducing the knowledge gap. Further reforms in the 1970s made it a legal right to take leave from work to study, and opportunities for study loans were introduced. This made it possible to organise MAE as daytime studies, and MAE came to take a form that was very similar to upper secondary school in how it was designed (classes of students, daytime study etc.).

The 1980s had few adult education reforms, except for the creation of a separate curriculum for MAE which came to govern MAE until 1994 when it was replaced by the same curriculum that governed compulsory and upper secondary school. The 1990s became a platform for carrying out many reforms closely connected to discourses on new public management and marketisation. In the wake of the financial crisis both a conservative government as well as a social democratic government, decentralised the entire education system introducing management by objectives. Municipalities now came to be responsible to fund as well as organise education, including adult education. Market like solutions were introduced, which in relation to MAE came to

emerge in the shape of a procurement system. Municipalities started to procure some of their MAE courses from private education providers, FHS and study associations.

Such developments were further supported by means of the state initiated and funded Adult Education Initiative (AEI), carried out between 1997 and 2002. With this initiative, introduced by the Social democratic government, the state funded 100,000 study places per year in MAE (part of which was directed to FHS), targeting those who had the lowest level of education. The aim was to halve the unemployment rate by raising the level of education in the supply side of the workforce (Ministry of finance 1996). The initiative brought 15 Percent of the labour force into adult education and new providers were encouraged to offer adult education, as the idea was that competition between many providers would lead to new pedagogical approaches as well as higher quality of adult education and a reduction in costs (Lumsden Wass 2004; Fejes 2006a, b). A variety of providers would cater for better adaptation to the individual needs of the students. The market-like solutions could also be seen as a way to create tighter couplings between policy, management and the teaching practice than perhaps had existed before. Today, MAE in most Swedish municipalities is organised as franchises for the public sector. A transnational law, the Purchase Act, which is used to establish and maintain procurement processes, regulates the transactions. At the beginning of the AEI in 1997, 14.4 Percent of all students participated in courses delivered by a non-public provider. In 2020 the proportion had increased to over 50 Percent (SNAE 2021).

## 6 Municipal adult education today

MAE is divided into four parts: basic education equivalent to compulsory school; adult education on the upper secondary school level; Swedish for immigrants; and MAE for those in special need. Adult education on the upper secondary level includes both courses that provide eligibility to enter higher education, as well as vocational courses. Today, the number of participants in MAE exceeds the number of participants in Swedish upper secondary school. In total, there were, in 2020, 400,000 participants in MAE, which equals approximately 6 Percent of the Swedish *adult* population (SNAE 2021).

The basis for the governing of MAE is the school law, which regulates the duties and obligations of the municipalities to fund and organise MAE. The law stipulates who has a right to participate, and the selection criterias for admission (SFS 2010), as well as laying down the specific aims of MAE. Firstly, the aim of MAE is to help students who previously failed in their schooling and/or who do not have qualifications from compulsory and/or upper secondary school. Such a target group includes migrants as well as those who have previously been educated in the Swedish educational system. Secondly, adult education should shape individuals who can partake in life as active democratic citizens and, thirdly, MAE has the function of preparing students for the labour market. The labour market function of MAE has always been the strongest

one, but its importance has grown over time (Rubenson et al. 1999; Fejes et al. 2018). This could not the least be seen in the addition of a new aim in 2021, which states that MAE should cater for the competence needed for the regional labour market. The labour-market focus is also evident in the funding of MAE. This part of Swedish adult education is basically a municipal responsibility, which should be funded within the budget of each municipality. However, since 2009, there has been targeted state funding for vocational education, where the municipalities receive subsidies for part of the costs if they cooperate regionally to increase the share of vocational education within MAE.

The next level of governing documents is the curriculum, which since 2012 is a separate one for adult education. Here, the frames for organising MAE are stipulated (SNAE 2012) which includes ideas that MAE should be flexible and individualized in its organising to meet each individual's needs. Such ideas are put into practice using individual study plans. Students pick courses they need in order to realise their aims, e. g. in order to get a job. To be flexible in its organisation, the intake to courses in MAE are continuous during the year, and there are no summer breaks. There are possibilities for distance education, as well as for deciding the pace of studies for the individual courses.

As municipalities are responsible for MAE they are also responsible for the quality of MAE. To audit the quality of MAE, the Swedish school inspectorate (SSI), on behalf of the government, audits the municipalities. Such audits focus on questions if the municipalities are following the law and regulations. However, the SSI only audits each municipality, and not the individual schools. Thus, each municipality must organise a system for auditing the schools delivering the MAE courses on their behalf (Mufic & Fejes 2020).

## 7 Conclusion

How then can we explain the high participation rates in adult education in Sweden? Based on our elaboration in this article, we would summarise the answer to such a question in the following ways.

- The long tradition of organised adult education, not the least the tradition of popular education.
- The strong connection between the State and actors in civil society (the corporatist welfare state).
- High ambition of the State – i. e. large amount of state funding as well as political ambitions of equality and of providing a qualified labour force.
- Laws and regulations that make it easier for adults to participate, i. e. the right to take a leave from work, childcare, education is free, the right for a student loan etc.

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## Review

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