Introduction

The goal of adult education (vuxenutbildning [1]) is to help adults supplement their education in order to strengthen the individual’s position socially and in working life. Adult education has deep-rooted traditions in Sweden, and the country has the highest proportion of adults participating in education and training in Europe according to the 2015 European Commission Eurydice Report, Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening Access to Learning Opportunities [2]. The proportion of the adult population in Sweden without secondary education is relatively low, but Sweden also has the largest differences in literacy proficiency between foreign-born and native-born adults in Europe. Reducing educational inequality was one of the original purposes when adult education became formalised and remains crucial, along with the other two purposes: creating opportunities for individuals to supplement their schooling and providing the labour market with a well-educated workforce. The state and municipalities have the overall responsibility for providing the infrastructure for lifelong learning, and there are many forms of adult education in Sweden, both formal and non-formal.

Formal adult education

The formal education system for adults aims to give adults the opportunity to supplement their education in accordance with their individual needs. The legislation is rights-based and each adult over the age of 20 has the right to education equivalent to the compulsory school and the upper secondary school. The goal for the state education system for adults is to strengthen the learners’ position in the labour market and to strengthen their capacity to participate in cultural and political activities. The quality of education provided must be equal regardless of the type of school and its location.

Municipal adult education (kommunal vuxenutbildning, Komvux [3]) was set up in 1968 to provide adults aged 20 and above with skills at levels corresponding to compulsory school. Sweden has established a legal entitlement to basic adult education for all Swedish residents who are at least 20 years old and have not completed lower secondary education. Consequently, the legal framework obliges municipalities to ensure sufficient provision of basic adult education to meet learners' demands and needs. Each municipality is responsible for ensuring that municipal adult education is available but may commission other organisations to provide adult education. The curriculum for adult education programme (Läroplan för vuxenutbildningen [4]) from 2012 states that “Adult Education shall transmit knowledge and support students so that they can work and take an active role in the community. It also aims to facilitate continued studies.” Adult education provided by municipalities consists of three different forms of education:

- Municipal adult education at compulsory and upper secondary school levels
- Special education for adults (särskild utbildning för vuxna, särvux [5])
Swedish tuition for immigrants (svenskaundervisning för invandrare, sfi [5])

Labour market training (arbetsmarknadsutbildning [6]) is provided by the Swedish Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen [7]) and intended primarily for unemployed adults in need of retraining or further training and education. The parliament and the government have assigned the Swedish Public Employment Service the goal of focusing on people who are at some distance from the labour market and who, for example, have been unemployed for a longer period of time.

Non-formal adult education

For over a hundred years non-formal adult education has played an important part in Swedish society. Since the first study circle (studiecirkel [5]) started in late 1800, people have gathered to increase their knowledge together. The state has provided financial support to non-formal adult education since 1912. It is generally agreed that non-formal education should be run separately from the state but be financed by public funds. The importance of non-formal education to Swedish society is recognised by all political parties.

Liberal adult education (folkbildning [8]) is characterised by great freedom in setting its own objectives, while the government defines the purposes of the government grants. These are to help to enable people to influence their own lives and encourage commitment to participating in developments in society. This support is also aimed at helping to close education gaps, raise the standard of education in society, and broaden interest and increase participation in cultural life. Liberal adult education includes folk high schools (folkhöskolor [8]) and study associations (studieförbund [5]). The Swedish National Council of Adult Education (Folkbildningsrådet [9]) is responsible for distributing government grants to folk high schools and study associations.

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