

Non-formal adult education – Folkbildning

Sweden's non-formal adult education system is a resource for encouraging active citizenship and developing democracy. *Folkbildning* provides the country with its largest forum for people seeking personal development.

Non-formal adult education has a long tradition and broad-based support in Swedish society. Sweden has 9.3 million inhabitants and, each year some 2 million Swedes attend study circles organised by the ten study associations. Study circles clearly have wide appeal and play a large part in the daily life of many people in Sweden.

The study associations organise around 279,000 study circles a year. They also arrange around 314,500 cultural programmes, which attract more than 16.5 million visitors and participants. The same number of people going to the cinema in Sweden each year.

Each study association has its own unique profile and specialisation. This is important for maintaining the diversity that makes adult education such an influential force in society. Through their 372 member associations and co-operating organisations, study associations are a well-established part of Swedish association life and thus hold a prominent place in civil society.

As well as being hugely popular among the general public, *folkbildning* is also regarded as a priority by many politicians at national level. It is generally agreed that non-formal adult education should be separate from the state, but financed with public funds. The importance of *folkbildning* to Swedish society is generally recognised by all political parties.

SAEA the Swedish Adult Education Association *Folkbildningsförbundet* is an umbrella organisation for all study associations in Sweden.

Our task is to raise the status of study associations in society and improve the conditions in which they operate. Our work involves forming opinion in society and influencing decision-makers.

We are also a negotiation body for the study associations and enter into joint agreements.

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.

The result of increased knowledge, access to culture and individual cultural expression, is personal and social development.

A fundamental reason for public support for *folkbildning* is that it contributes to the democratic development of society. The conditions for the government grant to *folkbildning* are set out in the Decree on Government Subsidies to *Folkbildning* (1991:977), most recently revised in 2007.

Government subsidies to *folkbildning* shall aim to:

1. support activities that contribute to strengthening and developing democracy,
2. contribute to making it possible for people to influence their life situation and create participative involvement in societal development,
3. contribute to levelling educational gaps and raising the level of education and cultural awareness in society, and
4. contribute to broadening the interest for and increase participation in cultural life.

Sweden's adult study associations express their view of the non-formal adult education as follows:

Every year, almost half of Sweden's population meet in various forums to share knowledge, exchange views and discuss opinions.

The forum could be a course or a study circle, and the subject could be painting or Italian, botany or behavioural science. But the result is always the same: When people whose paths would not normally cross meet in this way, new ideas and new insights inevitably come to light. A kind of cross-fertilisation occurs, and this contributes not only to the development of those present, but also to the development of society as a whole. This mix is a crucial element of a successful democracy – and is therefore crucial for Sweden.

We've devoted more than 100 years to organising and developing non-formal adult education. We'd happily continue doing so for another 100 years.



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