

Developments: Lobbying for special grants for adult education

According to the Swedish National Council of Adult Education (SNCA) and Studieförbunden (Swedish Study Association) the situation of adult education has stayed the same in Sweden over the last year. The general national funding for adult education has not increased in a few years, which in fact means that it is decreasing due to inflation.

In recent years Sweden has seen a trend in which local and regional funding diminished or was suspended. The lack of funding has caused an ideological debate about citizens' rights to free education, culture and "bildung". Short term grants were issued as compensation, but they don't allow the associations to plan programmes with broad spectrum of educational activities and a sustained impact. EAEA members have lobbied for study associations and folk high schools to benefit from the support packages and for folk high schools to receive extra compensation due to their failing boarding. As a result of the lobbying, adult educators now also receive support packages that were previously only available for other sectors on the labor market.

Overall, major financial losses can only be noticed by those organisations dependent on other financing than grants (including course fees and income from boarding). Sweden is taking in a smaller number of asylum seekers which has resulted in decreased income from grants targeted at migrants.

Sweden takes the recommendations of the European Semester seriously

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) is in line with most of the Swedish national policies. Sweden has had policies for free education even before the launch of EPSR. The Swedish government also takes the recommendations of the European Semester seriously. One of the recommendations addresses the large numbers of Swedish youth who are neither studying nor working. Adult learning and education is seen as one of the answers to this challenge. The reports of the European Semester also mirror the experience of the SNCA.

SNCA is not aware of any new policies in regard to Upskilling Pathways but there are some that foster the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are many initiatives, theme days, networks and conferences on how adult education can play an active role in implementing the SDGs. In discussions about funding with the Swedish government, SNCA has raised adult learning and education as a tool to further the goals of the Agenda 2030.

Challenges: Equal digital participation in focus

As in other countries, COVID-19 pandemic has had a major influence. The pandemic has had economic effects for adult education providers when income from conferences and other activities has disappeared. In addition many adults have struggled to adapt to digital learning.

EAEAs members have engaged in active lobbying and answering questions from adult

learning providers in relation to the pandemic. The government has been understanding for the changes and adjustments in the work programme.

In the spring the Swedish Study Association made almost a complete move to digital learning, with the exception of courses that had to be cancelled, postponed or moved outdoors. The financial situation for some of the study associations was greatly affected because of the cancelled courses and no income from participant fees. This led to termination of contracts of educators and staff, especially part-time workers. During the summer some of the courses returned to the training facilities.

As a result of the corona crisis it has been proposed that vocational higher education be reinforced with new places, short courses and course packages, as well as various kinds of pilot projects so that more people can complete their qualification. It is proposed that folk high schools be expanded, with full financing from the central government. The study associations have received a special grant to develop more distance courses suited for people that have lost, or are at risk to lose, their jobs.

Facing digitalisation and economic recession

For the Swedish Study Association, digitalisation and the matter of equal digital participation have become increasingly important focus areas as a result of the pandemic and the work will continue next year. Increasing number of people losing their jobs and the economic recession will increase the importance of adult education.

For the Swedish National Council for Education, Agenda 2030 will be one of the focus areas, both as a strategic tool but also as an inspiration for practical activities and discussions. SNCA will also continue to advocate for more funding for folk high schools, higher salaries and more further education for the teachers.

The Swedish Study Association calls upon the government to increase the funding for

adult learning, with a focus on sustainable "folkbildning" and cultural activities, instead of short term projects with a narrow labor market focus. These initiatives will have a positive impact on the possibilities for lifelong learning, as well as the social trust and unity in Sweden.
