Intensified political discourse on adult learning amid economic changes

The responses from EAEAs Swedish members, The Swedish Adult Education Association and the The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, indicate a slightly deteriorated funding situation compared to the previous year.

There have been important changes in the adult education funding landscape in 2022-2023 in Sweden.EAEA members report that grants for additional full-time participants at folk high schools initiated during the pandemic and continued into 2022 have been discontinued. Other one-time and limited grants outside of the main grant for folk high schools and study associations were also terminated. This shift, combined with a stagnation in the revaluation of the main grant over several years and the overarching inflation, has raised economic concerns in particular for the folk high schools but also for the study associations. In general, EAEA's Swedish members consider the funding from public sources to be inadequate on national and local level.

The previous government launched an ongoing special inquiry examining the entire structure for providing grants to study associations and folk high schools. While the directives for this inquiry are still pending, it adds an element of uncertainty. Moreover, a binding agreement between ruling and supporting political parties explicitly mentions an overhaul of adult education. One of the parties holds strong opinions on the current grant model, signalling potential policy changes.

Strategic shift in fund allocation

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education is responsible for handling the government grants to study associations and folk high schools, and they are in constant contact with government bodies, filing reports and giving updates on developments and needs.

A notable development is the government's plan to alter the partitioning of funds between folk high schools and study associations. The Swedish members report that this responsibility will shift from the Council to parliament and government, with the Council only allocating funds between the study associations and between the folk high schools, separately. This change has yet to be implemented.

The Council remains actively engaged in major projects funded by the European Social Fund. These projects focus on addressing the needs of Ukrainian refugees and disadvantaged groups seeking to enter the labour market.

Adult learning and education in Sweden has the following funding sources:

- Project funding
- Programme funding
- Operating grants/structural funding

Civil society engages actively in policy-making but learner perspectives are not well incorporated

The respondents have concerns on how effectively the current ALE policies address societal challenges, such as digital and green transitions. However, they strongly agree that ALE policies play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, democratic participation,

and overall well-being. They are neutral about whether policymakers consider ALE important and how well current ALE policies respond to labour market needs.

The Swedish members suggest there is room for improvement in incorporating learner perspectives in policy making, while civil society organisations already have an active role in policy dialogue. They support the current direction and focus of the EAEA concerning advocacy on European-level ALE policies. Additionally, they view the general goals of the European Education Area as desirable.

Looking ahead: Evolving adult education landscape

Amidst the ongoing political and public debate, the grant model inquiry, and the potential for substantial policy changes, the overall ALE situation in Sweden is evolving. In response, the Council continues to provide insight into the impact of ALE through comprehensive reports and statistics.

Looking ahead to 2023/2024, the Council maintains its core focus on activities promoting democracy, culture, and learning. Additionally, they are involved in two major European Social Fund projects targeting Ukrainian refugees and disadvantaged groups.