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The Local Organisation of Vocational Adult Education in Sweden

Andersson, Per

per.andersson@liu.se, Linköping University, Sweden

Muhrman, Karolina

karolina.muhrman@liu.se, Linköping University, Sweden

Abstract

This study concerns vocational education and training (VET) on upper-secondary level within Swedish municipal adult education (MAE). The paper aims to show how such VET is organised locally and what the arguments are for different ways of organising. Furthermore, the aim is to analyse how national education policy is enacted in local vocational adult education. The data consist of documents presenting relevant national policies on adult education, particularly concerning VET, and semi-structured interviews with local politicians, heads of adult education, and educational counsellors. The findings show how VET for adults is organised in different ways and with different types of provider. Employability and integration are the main arguments for a focus on VET in MAE. Enactment of national policy is seen in the flexibility of provision of MAE, but also in focus on VET, and regional cooperation in developing VET for adults. The study concludes that the enactment of national policy initiatives on VET in MAE means a strengthening of the position of VET in the Swedish system of adult education arranged by local municipalities. However, the priority of a limited number of vocational sectors in MAE is questioned.

Keywords

adult education, vocational education and training, education policy, public school, private training provider

1 Introduction

This study concerns how vocational adult education on upper secondary level is organised in Sweden. Formal adult education on this level in Sweden has a national curriculum and includes vocational education and training (VET) as well as theoretical courses. The local municipality is responsible for organising such ‘municipal adult education’ (MAE) for its inhabitants. However, the courses and programmes are not necessarily provided but the municipality itself, but also by varying other organisations, typically private training companies, or other municipalities. In this study, we describe how upper secondary vocational adult education is organised in different ways, and what the arguments are for this in the municipal organisations.

The background is that there has been a strong development of marketisation of the Swedish educational system on primary and secondary level, including VET in adult education as well as in upper secondary school. In MAE, there is a widespread system of procurement and tendering. This has meant the development of a quasi-market where many municipalities



choose to make public procurements where they hire private providers to organise courses, instead of, or complementary to, courses organised by the municipality itself and its public provider. During the last few years, an alternative system of authorisation of providers has been introduced in some municipalities. It is the municipality that decides what system for private providers to apply, if any, and the conditions for procurement or authorisation. Furthermore, the municipalities have to treat all providers who are tendering, or applying for authorisation, equally, based on the stated conditions.

In 2019, there were 387,000 students in Swedish MAE (out of a total population of 10 million); 50% of the students on primary and secondary level were enrolled in courses organised by a non-public provider, and 38% of the students in Swedish for immigrants (Swedish National Agency of Education [SNAE], 2020a, 2020b). MAE is course based, which means that the students could study part-time or full-time, in one or more courses that are vocational or general, or targeted Swedish for immigrant courses. Our paper will answer the following research questions:

- How is vocational adult education organised in different ways in Swedish municipalities?
- What are the arguments for organising vocational adult education in different ways?
- How is national adult education policy enacted in the local VET practices?

2 Previous research

There are a few studies that focus on the topic of marketisation of Swedish vocational adult education (Andersson & Muhrman, 2019; Wärvik, 2013) and of MAE in general (e.g. Bjursell, 2016; Bjursell et al., 2015; Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019; Fejes et al., 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2020), but the knowledge of how VET within MAE is organised on the local level is limited.

Andersson and Muhrman (2019) presented an overview of the present state of vocational adult education concerning marketisation, with an extensive use of procurement and external, private providers. Marketisation has led to flexibility and good opportunities for adults to be admitted to VET, but also organisational problems with short-term contracts that make it difficult to plan, risk of over-establishment etc. Wärvik's (2013) study showed an example where a quality assurance scheme was introduced by a VET provider in MAE. The scheme meant standardization of educational content and assessment. It was governing teachers' work, but also resulted in tensions concerning how the teachers were able to keep to their own vocational ideas and to adapt teaching to the special needs of individual students.

Fejes and Holmqvist (2019) described a number of consequences of the marketisation through procurement in Swedish adult education in general. For example, the quality assurance system of the municipality becomes important. The short contracts could create instability, and stress among staff, when the conditions become different for teachers at public or private providers, for example with more students per teacher at private providers who have to compete for contracts through a low price. Holmqvist et al. (2020) also showed how the policy enactment on the local, municipal level strongly influence the outcomes of privatisation or marketisation of MAE. They compared two municipalities, where the one who outsources all MAE through procurement still can keep strong control of the provision, while there is more freedom and competition in a municipality where half of MAE is outsourced to private providers, but with weaker control, and the other half is still run by the public, municipal provider. This represents what is a common tension in marketised education systems – between a desirable freedom of the market, and the need for administrative control and quality assurance (Bjursell, 2016; Rönnerberg, 2012).

3 Methodology

In this study, we are analysing the policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012) in Swedish adult education with a focus on VET. The process of enactment includes the interpretation and translation of policy into local practice. The local context of vocational adult education is studied in six cases, i.e., a sample of six different Swedish municipalities. The cases were selected to represent different ways of organising MAE, a selection that was based on findings from the first parts of the larger research project, where a survey was distributed to all municipalities in Sweden and interviews were conducted with representatives of 20 municipalities (see e.g., Andersson & Muhrman, 2019). The selected cases are intended to provide a deeper understanding of how MAE is organised locally.

The data in the present study consist of documents and interviews. The documents that are collected include relevant national policies on MAE, particularly concerning VET. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local politicians, heads of adult education, and educational counsellors in the municipalities. The interviews were transcribed, and the data were analysed qualitatively.

4 Findings

Our study shows that there is a clear labour market focus for MAE in Sweden. Many of the representatives of MAE we have interviewed describe how investments in and quality assurance of MAE take place from a labour-market perspective, where the focus is on offering education that corresponds to working life's needs for labour and make those who participate in education employable. In order to meet the need for educated workforce, there are several governmental initiatives relating to VET in MAE. Municipalities can, among other things, receive subsidies for conducting vocational education at upper secondary level within the so-called *Yrkesvux* (VocationalAdult). This was introduced in 2009 with the aim of increasing the supply of vocational education within MAE through regional cooperation between at least three municipalities and thereby counteracting a shortage of vocationally trained persons. An initiative with similar conditions and requirements for cooperation between municipalities is also available for apprenticeships at upper secondary level, called *Lärlingsvux* (ApprenticeAdult), which also aims to increase the supply of vocational education. The subsidies for *Yrkesvux* and *Lärlingsvux* can also be used to finance VET in combination with SFI (Swedish for immigrants) and SvA (Swedish as a second language). In addition to these initiatives, there is also an initiative that is specifically aimed at training professional truckdrivers and bus drivers, also this with requirements for cooperation between municipalities (SNAE, 2020c).

Vocational training within MAE is conducted either by internal provision or by the municipalities hiring external providers. The municipalities themselves can choose whether they want to offer VET as school-based training, apprenticeships, or distance education. Even for the school-based or distance-based VET there is a requirement that at least 15% of the time in training must consist of an internship at a workplace. Most municipalities do not have the opportunity to conduct VET in all areas by internal provision. Therefore, they either hire external organisers or buy study places from other municipalities. In these latter cases it can be difficult for the municipality to decide how VET is arranged. The reasons given for arranging vocational training in different ways are mainly about flexibility and accessibility, by offering VET at a distance it is possible to offer a wider range of training programmes, it also opens for people who have difficulties participating in an on-site training due to. e.g. work, long travelling time, or small children at home. Apprenticeship training is considered by many representatives of MAE to be a good alternative for VET that provides work experience and often leads to employment; however, many municipalities say that it is difficult to find apprenticeship placements, which is a reason why the number of apprenticeships often is very limited.

The governmental initiatives for VET affect the range of training programmes within MAE. Virtually all municipalities participating in our study take part of the subsidies available for VET in MAE. This means that they could offer more study places in VET than they would otherwise have had the opportunity to. In addition to the targeted subsidy for professional drivers, the municipalities are free to choose which training programmes they want to invest in. The results from our study show that many municipalities primarily invest in VET in professions where the municipality itself has a great need for labour, e.g. in elderly care and childcare. Many participants in these programmes are immigrants, who know that training in these areas often make it possible for them to be established in the labour market. This fits well with the need to promote the integration of immigrants in society, where employment to be able to earn a living is seen as crucial.

In order to shorten the time that students with an immigrant background spend on municipal adult education and improve their opportunities to establish themselves in the labour market, representatives of municipalities say that they for several years have worked for increasing the opportunity to combine SFI with VET. This has been noted as a successful method and now, as mentioned above, there is also the opportunity to apply for governmental subsidies to conduct VET in combination with SFI and SvA.

5 Discussion

Vocational adult education on upper-secondary level in Sweden is arranged in different ways by the local municipality, either by their own public providers, by contracting external, private providers via procurement or authorisation, or by cooperation with other municipalities. There are school-based and distance-based education, including placements, and apprenticeship training. The focus on VET in adult education is based in a strong labour-market perspective, where employability and (labour-market) integration of immigrants are central concerns. There are a number of targeted initiatives in national policy with subsidies that strengthen the position and expand the supply of VET in adult education, and also stimulate regional cooperation between municipalities.

The broad approach in MAE, including e.g. outsourcing to private providers and the combination of school- and distance-based courses, is also a way of enacting policy for MAE in general (cf. Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019; Holmqvist et al., 2020). Here, flexibility is a central keyword, with the intention to meet the needs of adults with different life situations – adults who are to become employable and integrated in society. However, there are organisational problems with this flexible approach, as described earlier (Andersson & Muhrman, 2019). The strong focus on provision of VET within certain vocational areas such as elderly care and childcare could also be discussed further. Should publicly funded VET for adults mainly prepare for these publicly funded labour-market sectors? What are the consequences of such prioritisation for broad employability among unemployed adults? There should be other sectors that also could benefit from newly trained adults in the labour force. But this prioritisation indicates that vocational adult education has a supplementary role in relationship to VET in upper secondary school, which has a broader offer of different programmes. That is, VET for adults is mainly offered in sectors where VET programmes do not attract enough young people. And is the labour-market integration of immigrants therethrough narrowed to a few vocational sectors? Offering training only in some sectors might result in a sort of sub-ordinate inclusion in the labour market. To understand such prioritisations, the influence of interplay between market forces and administrative control (Bjursell, 2016; Rönnerberg, 2012) in Swedish MAE should be analysed more in detail.

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Biographical notes

Per Andersson is a professor of education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at Linköping University, Sweden. His research interests focus on recognition of prior learning, professional development among teachers in vocational and adult education, and marketisation of adult education.

Karolina Muhrman is a senior lecturer of education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at Linköping University, Sweden. Her research interests focus on the teaching of mathematics in vocational education, and marketisation of adult education.