

Folkbildning in Sweden

Swedish folkbildning is the collective name for the activities conducted by the country's folk high schools and study associations in the form of courses, study circles and cultural activities. Folkbildning is a part of the liberal non-formal educational system. Every year, several million Swedes participate in folkbildning activities.

Folkbildning – for lifelong learning

People want to learn and develop in many different contexts in all phases of life. Swedish folkbildning meets this need – and thereby contributes to societal development and growth. But folkbildning also has an intrinsic value because well-informed and active citizens constitute the core of democracy.

Folkbildning is open to everyone in society. In folkbildning, everyone participates on equal terms, but based on different conditions.

People seek knowledge and development through folkbildning for various reasons. All of these reasons are meaningful – regardless of whether it is a question of personal development, increasing the chances of finding a new job, or simply a desire to learn.

In study associations and folk high schools, opportunities of lifelong learning are provided through a rich offering of courses and educational programmes – everything from study circles where a small group meets a few times in their leisure time, up to multi-year, full-time courses of study at folk high schools.

Concept of folkbildning

Folkbildning grew forth at the beginning of the last century in a Sweden where the level of education was low and large groups of the population were excluded from higher education. Folkbildning became the answer to people's longing for knowledge and desire to influence societal development.

Folkbildning is still borne by the idea of a society with small educational rifts. There are always people, who for various reasons need alternatives to the formal educational system. Here, folk high schools and study associations have their most important mission, based on the fundamental right of all citizens to knowledge and development.

Folkbildning is a part of the liberal non-formal education sector and is free from detailed national control. This freedom, like the strong ties to the non-profit sector, makes folkbildning a force of societal change.

The ideas of folkbildning are noticeable not least in its practical activities, through dynamic interaction with the participants. Folkbildning has the following characteristics:

- It is always voluntary for the individual to participate in folkbildning.
- The participants have considerable opportunities to influence the content of the activities.

- Folkbildning is characterised by an environment in which learning and social interaction go hand in hand. The circumstances and experiences of every participant are taken into account.
- Folkbildning contributes to strengthening civil society through close co-operation with volunteer organisations, associations and various types of networks.

10 study associations

In Sweden there are currently 10 study associations to which the Swedish National Council of Adult Education distributes grants. The study associations have different profiles and emphases in their activities. There are close connections between the study associations and the Swedish popular movements, such as disabled, immigrant or environmental organisations. The study associations are located throughout Sweden.

The study circle is the most important form of study in the study associations. In the study circle, a small group meets to learn together based on a plan of study and with a study circle leader. There are study circles in hundreds of different subjects. Some have a more theoretical emphasis, such as language, history and studies in current social issues. Others are more practically oriented, such as dance, woodworking, instrumental music and so forth.

The study associations are also Sweden's largest arranger of cultural events. By arranging cultural events and lectures, the study associations contribute to a rich cultural life throughout the country.

150 folk high schools

Sweden's current 150 folk high schools are spread throughout the country. Folk high schools offer courses for adults from the age of 18. Many folk high schools are run by popular movements, such as organisations within the workers', temperance or Free Church movements. Others are operated by county councils or regions. The schools have different profiles and emphases in their activities. The folk high schools are not guided by national curricula, but instead are free to shape their activities on their own.

The length of the courses varies from a few days up to several years. The long-term courses are generally 1-3 years, some of which can provide knowledge equivalent to upper secondary school and thereby also qualify participants for university studies. Many long-term courses have a special emphasis – music, media, keep-fit measures, tourism and so forth. A few are vocational, such as the youth recreation leader and journalist training programmes. Short courses are offered in a number of different subjects and emphases.

Tuition at folk high schools is characterised by process-oriented pedagogy, in which active participation by the students is emphasized, such as in the form of theme and project work in small groups. Many adults apply to folk high schools and therefore considerable weight is placed on taking advantage of their previous experiences and using their needs as a basis of tuition.

Many folk high schools are boarding schools, which allow students to live at the school during the course. Tuition is free-of-charge and students can apply for financial aid for their studies.

Public support for folkbildning

Swedish folkbildning is largely financed through funding grants from the state, county councils and municipalities. There is a broad political consensus that the state should provide economic support to folkbildning.

The Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) has established overall objectives for the activities. They can be summarised such that the activities of folkbildning shall:

- strengthen and develop democracy,
- make it possible for people to influence their life situation and create participative involvement in societal development,
- bridge educational gaps and raise the level of education and cultural awareness in society,
- broaden the interest for and increase participation in cultural life.

Based on these objectives, the study associations and folk high schools are free to shape the goals of the activities on their own.

In 2006, a unanimous Riksdag decided on the folkbildning policy of the future. Seven activity areas were emphasized as motives for state support of folk high schools and study associations. This applies to efforts to protect society's common fundamental values, the challenges of a multicultural society and the demographic challenge of increasing numbers of elderly, and where the possibilities of life-long learning must be maintained. Furthermore, the importance of cultural activities is emphasized, as well as the significance of reaching people with disabilities. Lastly, support for folkbildning is motivated by the meaningful efforts in public health and for sustainable development and global justice, pursued in the study associations and folk high schools.

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education has been charged by the Government and Riksdag of Sweden to distribute the national grants to folk high schools and study associations. Furthermore, the council shall follow up and evaluate the activities of folkbildning.

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education has three members, all of which have close ties to study associations and folk high schools. These are:

- The Swedish National Federation of Study Associations – an interest association for the study associations.
- The Interest Organisation of Popular Movement Folk High Schools, RIO – which gathers the folk high schools operated by popular movements and other organisations.
- The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SKL – which represents the folk high schools operated by county councils and regions.

Current figures on folkbildning (2008)

Every year, the study associations arrange:

- Approximately 285,000 study circles with a total of almost 2 million participants
- Approximately 250,000 cultural programmes with more than 15 million participants

Every term, the folk high schools have:

- Approximately 26,500 participants in extended courses
- Approximately 80,000 participants in short courses

Public grants to folk high schools and study associations in 2008:

- From the state: approximately EUR 328,565,000
- From county councils: approximately EUR 82,496,000
- From municipalities: approximately EUR 42,517,000

Links

More information is available on the Internet:

- The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, with information about folkbildning in general, including information in English and other languages:
www.folkbildning.se
- The Information Service of the Folk high (FIN), with information about the courses offered by all folk high schools and links to their websites:
www.folkhogskola.nu
- The Folkbildning Net, a common digital conference and e-mail system for all of folkbildning, which is used for flexible learning:
www.folkbildning.net
- The Folkbildning Net's pedagogical resources, with links to websites, articles, study materials, project descriptions, multimedia, etc. within life-long learning:
www.resurs.folkbildning.net.
- The Swedish National Federation of Study Associations, an interest association for the study associations, with links to the respective study associations:
www.studieforbunden.se
- The Interest Organisation of Popular movement Folk High Schools (RIO) which represents the folk high schools operated by popular movements and other organisations.
www.rorelsefolkhogskolor.se
- The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL), operators' association for the folk high schools operated by county councils or regions:
www.skl.se