

Folk High Schools and Youth Unemployment

Introductory Background

The problems that young people face today in the labour market appear more alarming. The unemployment of young people in Sweden amount to approximately 25 percent. Unemployment for the youth of today is three times higher than it is for people over 25 years of age. This development has been significantly negative since the early 1990's. Young people have generally suffered more severely by the difficulties in the labour market than the middle-aged or the more mature age groups.

Research clearly shows that unemployment at a young age causes long-term negative effects that accompany individuals for the rest of their lives. We also know that a high level of unemployment contributes to increased divisions between social classes, and that it tends to encourage turbid and antidemocratic political forces. The public welfare requires a high occupational level, especially when looking from the perspective of the unfavourable demographic development.

At the same time, we are aware that both establishment and integration questions are, to a great extent, a matter of education. The most efficient protection for unemployment is education. The educational system is one of our most valuable redistributive political tools. Upon using this system correctly, it will enable: increased level of individual freedom, reduced division between social classes, and increased financial growth.

With this in mind, it is alarming that such a large number of young people in Sweden do not manage to complete their upper secondary school education. The fact that more than 20 percent of young Swedish people are not able to complete their studies at upper secondary school level is something that needs to be addressed very seriously. This means that we will have a large number of young people, and young adults, who will be extremely socially vulnerable.

Everything points to the fact, that the upper secondary school needs a supplement. Such supplements are already available today, however they are not utilised to their full potential. The report underlines the importance of folk high schools. Folk high schools in Sweden have played a key role in society and they continue to do so for the less favoured groups – particularly in regards to young people. However, the importance of folk high schools could become even more significant. We need more diversity, a more extensive freedom of choice, and less streamlining in the educational system, if we are going to be able to face the threats of the growing social and educational divisions.

The Folk High School – a Dynamic and Attractive Form of Education

The folk high school has a long tradition in Sweden. The first folk high schools were established approximately 140 years ago. The development of this type of school can be explained by a number of factors.

There was a need for supplementary education in addition to the inadequate education that was available at that time in elementary schools and, in addition, there was a need for an

alternative to the elitist influenced education that was available in secondary grammar schools. Financial and technical progress in agriculture contributed to an increased interest in supplementary education and the demand for education subsequently grew larger among the rural population.

From the beginning the folk high school's distinctive function was emphasised in comparison to other types of education. Folk high schools represented an alternative pedagogy and a different ambition for education. Populist educational ideas were mediated, which were especially inspired from Denmark, and the contemporary schools' one-sided direction of homework studies and memorised learning were questioned. The emphasis was instead put on the significance of civil culture and the importance of stimulating pupils' thirst for knowledge, that is, a basis for continuous learning and a further commitment to society. The folk high school represented a more modern ideal in relation to the existing academically aimed institutes, which were divided into various subjects' status groups; smart status groups versus less smart status groups, depending on the level of difficulty to gain admittance to these particular groups. The folk high school's more modern approach made available an increased knowledge about social conditions in society and natural science was regarded as enriching for the individual as well as productive to society on the whole.

Looking from a historical perspective, it is evident that folk high schools have an important position in present-day Sweden. Folk high schools defend their importance as a pedagogical alternative to other forms of education. The schools offer shorter courses, consisting of a few days to longer courses that stretch to one or, often, two years. The number of pupils on the longer courses is five times higher today than in comparison to the number of pupils at the beginning of the 1930's. In comparison to the late 1960's, the number of pupils today is twice as many on the longer courses. During the 1990's there was an expansion of folk high school education, in light of new political economic conditions, which resulted in a state drive for adult education identified as *Kunskapslyftet* (between the years of 1997-2002). Many new schools were developed, primarily due to the fact that local folk high school branches and folk high schools without boarding school facilities were hived off from older and more recognised schools. The success of folk high schools would not have been possible had the schools not shown such a high level of adaptability. Every era has its own demands and is characterised by its particular social conditions and thus generate specific educational requirements. The forms of education that are not able to meet these constant changes and new educational needs, do not survive in the long run. They lose their appeal.

One of the key missions for folk high schools in the past decades have been to provide supplementary education for young adults and middle-aged people who have not been able to complete their nine-year compulsory school education, or who have not been successful in acquiring an upper secondary school education. The folk high school's, so-called, general courses have provided opportunities for a higher civil education and this has deepened commitment to society. This type of education has also provided a platform for those pupils who have been interested in continuing their studies at college and university level. Apart from the general courses there have always been advanced and vocationally-oriented courses available for, e.g. future recreation leaders and journalists. Admission for education to the previously mentioned professions requires, more often than not, a completed upper secondary school education.

The folk high schools' ability to develop new activities that fit nicely in line with the schools' historical role, to prioritise less privileged groups of society, is a fact that is evident in many

areas. An example of this is the extensive achievement in education intended for the groups of people with functional disabilities. This is where folk high schools play a significant role. The number of participating pupils with different kinds of functional disabilities on the longer courses has increased from 2380 to 5040 during the ten year period between the school years of 1997/98 to 2007/08. This in its turn means that the number of pupils with functional disabilities on the longer general and advanced courses has increased from 12 percent to just less than 19 percent, of the total number of pupils attending these longer courses. Another example relates to pupils with immigrant backgrounds on longer courses. Pupils with immigrant backgrounds were underrepresented for a long time on longer courses and made up approximately 7 percent of the total number of pupils in 1997. In the school year of 2007/08, the number of pupils with immigrant backgrounds had increased to approximately 15 percent.¹ This increase has been particularly noticeable on general courses where pupils with immigrant backgrounds now make up roughly 30 percent of participants. In other words, it is the general courses that are primarily intended for people who need to supplement their nine-year compulsory school and upper secondary school education. The participants on these courses usually come from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, in comparison to participants attending advanced courses.

Folk High Schools and the Self Sufficiency Difficulties Faced by Young Adults

The report consequently places emphasis on an important feature of folk high schools' present and future goals, namely the role that these schools can play for young people who have problems completing their upper secondary school education and who, because of this, face greater difficulties providing for themselves both educationally and financially. The difficulties facing this group have grown over time and will most likely increase further. Today, nearly all pupils move on from nine-year compulsory school education to upper secondary school education, but 25 percent of the total number of pupils do not pass their GCE at Advanced level and, in addition to this, roughly 40 percent of the total number of pupils do not attain good enough grades at their GCE at Advanced level to be able to move on to college or university. The new types of examinations that will be introduced in upper secondary school, starting autumn 2011, will most probably expose problems with the throughput even further.² The pupils who do not manage to complete their upper secondary school education are, according to experience, overrepresented in the areas of unemployment and social welfare dependency. The responsibility to support these groups of young people and young adults is all too unclear in Sweden. The municipality has not taken sufficient responsibility, according to the so-called municipal follow-up and informational responsibility agreement, despite the fact that this agreement was made more stringent a few years earlier and jobcentres have not had much to offer young people who dropout from upper secondary school. The question is, what role folk high schools would be able to play and what do we know about the effects of the courses that folk high schools have available today? To begin with it is debatable whether these problems with throughput are equally large in folk high schools as they are in upper secondary schools. There is naturally reason to suspect that

¹ SCB. *Statistics Sweden*. Education and research. Participants with foreign backgrounds attending longer folk high school courses according to course type and course direction. Terms 1997/1 (Spring term) - 2006/2 (Autumn term). <http://www.ssd.scb.se/databaser/makro/Produkt.asp?produktid=UF0510&lang=1>.

² The Swedish upper secondary school education of today does not have a final examination like, for example, the British General Certificate of Education GCE at Advanced level. But this will however change in connection with a larger reform of the Swedish upper secondary school system, which will be implemented as of autumn 2011.

the problem is significant considering that folk high schools, especially with general courses in mind, recruit pupils from less favoured social environments. The Swedish National Council of Adult Education reports continuously to the government the study results of the folk high schools' various educations. In the school year of 2007/08, the number of dropouts on the longer courses amounted to 13 percent. This rate of interruption can be compared to the corresponding number in upper secondary schools that exceeds 20 percent, and has done so since the 1990's.³ The rate of interruption is consequently lower than the percentage in upper secondary school. This result must be looked at favourably, especially considering that many of the courses relate to individuals who come from less privileged social backgrounds and also due to the fact that the pupils are older. These factors indicate that the alternatives to studying are more accommodating (this does not only involve gainful employment, but also e.g. parental leave, military service etc.).

The question is what do we know about the pupils after they leave their folk high school studies? *Statistics Sweden (SCB - The Swedish government body that is responsible for collecting statistical information about various aspects of Swedish society)*, has made a follow-up survey of pupils who have studied longer courses at folk high schools in the school year of 2002/2003.⁴ The survey questions were mainly intended for former folk high school pupils' studies, during three allocated weeks of 2006. Approximately one third of the total number of pupils took part in the survey. Only pupils who had completed their studies took part in the follow-up survey.

25 percent of the former folk high school pupils attending general courses studied at college or university in 2006. Approximately 40 percent had attended college after completing their studies at folk high schools. Of the pupils who studied general courses, roughly 35 percent were actively studying during the specific survey weeks in 2006. 30 percent studied at college or university level. In addition to this, over 50 percent of the pupils were gainfully employed and approximately 10 percent were unemployed at some time during these three specific weeks.

Among the pupils on advanced courses, employment circumstances showed a different result. A larger number of pupils were gainfully employed during the specific survey weeks in 2006. Of the pupils on advanced courses, at upper secondary level, there was also a somewhat higher number who studied at college or university, just under 40 percent. The differences in comparison to participants doing general courses are not surprising. The pupils who study advanced courses have, as previously mentioned, stronger socio-economic backgrounds than pupils studying general courses. This in its turn should suggest that a larger number of pupils are also gainfully employed and studying after completing their folk high school education.

The follow-up survey points towards relatively successful results for pupils in regards to how they progress in the labour market and in the educational system, especially when considering the pupils' pattern of recruitment and social backgrounds amongst those studying at folk high schools.

³ Report 322 2008. *Studieavbrott och stödinsatser i gymnasieskolan. En kunskapssammanställning (Interruption of Studies and Support Efforts in Upper Secondary School. A Compilation of Knowledge)*. The National Swedish Agency for Education. Stockholm 2008.

⁴ Official Statistics of Sweden. Statistical messages. UF 38 SM 0601. *Folkhögskoleuppföljning 2006. Enkätundersökning bland personer som avslutade långa kurser i folkhögskolan läsåret 2002/03. (Folk High School Follow-up, 2006. Follow-up Survey for Pupils who Completed Longer Courses at Folk High Schools in the School Year of 2002/03)*.

Support Conditions for Former Folk High School Pupils

When looking closely at information regarding individuals between the ages of 20 and 24, who have studied at folk high schools between the years of 2002-2006, similar positive results are brought to light. The report introduces a brand new assessment which is based on registered information, i.e. a follow-up of all individuals who have studied at folk high schools during these specific years (2002-2006). Unfortunately the statistics do not show the distinction between people who studied general courses in contrast to people who studied advanced courses. The table below demonstrates the main source of income for pupils one year after completing their folk high schools studies.

The main source of income for pupils one year after completing their folk high school studies, between the years of 2002-2006. All participants on longer courses in the 20-24 age bracket. Results in percentages.

	<i>Born in Sweden</i>	<i>Second generation immigrants</i>	<i>Born abroad</i>
Income from gainful employment	64	63	60
Study related income (loans, grants)	22	20	28
Job seeker's allowance	5	6	4
Social benefits	1	3	5
Other incomes	8	8	3

Source: Longitudinal integration database for health insurance and labour market studies (LISA). *Statistics Sweden* (SCB). Other income can be anything from statutory maternity pay, (SMP & SPP), statutory sick pay to military service pay.

The information in the table above consequently shows that approximately 85 percent of pupils studying folk high school courses, during the years 2002-2006, supported themselves via gainful employment or study allowances one year after completing their studies. The fact that over 60 percent supported themselves, mainly via gainful employment, should be viewed as a high figure, especially taking into account pupils with immigrant backgrounds. The number of people who primarily supported themselves with help of jobseeker's allowance, unemployment benefits, social insurance benefits, or with social benefits, was low. These figures must yet again be viewed as favourable for individuals with immigrant backgrounds. It is also worth emphasising that this particular group has on the whole studied general courses. Compared to the former Swedish folk high school pupils, this group, as previously mentioned, also came from considerably less privileged home conditions. The number of former folk high school pupils with parents who had only completed their nine-year compulsory education, amounted to just over a quarter. This number, 25 percent, was the same for second generation immigrants and for those pupils who were born abroad. For Swedish folk high school pupils this number was lower, only 6 percent. A similar pattern emerges when examining parents' average annual income and places this in relation to the average for all families in Sweden. 74 percent of people in the second generation immigrant group had parents with an annual income below the average. Among the group of people who were born abroad, the correlating number was 82 percent and only 37 percent for Swedish pupils. It is important to stress that the percentage for Swedish pupils certainly could have been higher if we had been able to remove the number of pupils who studied advanced courses.

The high number of those gainfully employed and actively studying one year after completing their folk high school studies, shown in the table above, does not necessarily exclude the possibility that these individuals, during shorter periods of time, may have been unemployed and received some sort of unemployment benefits. The table simply shows the main income of the year in question. For that reason, it may be interesting to distinguish how many of the pupils did not receive any unemployment related benefits during the year after completing their folk high school studies. Regarding the second generation immigrant group, this particular percentage is made up of 55 percent, and for the group of people born abroad the percentage is 62 and, lastly, the Swedes with 68 percent. These numbers must be considered as high since transitioning from studying to more permanent employment typically takes time and is usually associated with shorter or longer periods of unemployment.

Conclusion: Very Positive Effects of Folk High School Education!

On the whole the follow-up surveys consequently suggest that a large number of pupils, who have attended folk high school education, in particular young people and young adults, are able to provide for themselves remarkably well. A large number move on to higher education even if higher education is not the primary objective. Furthermore, higher education is not a principal motive for folk high school studies, nor is it the goal for pupils studying general courses. This must be regarded positively, seeing that so many pupils, so soon after completing their studies are able to establish themselves in the labour market and provide for themselves via gainful employment. It is particularly important to emphasise this last-mentioned fact, in relation to general courses, since we know that the majority of pupils study general courses and that these are both Swedish pupils and pupils with immigrant backgrounds who come from socially less favoured backgrounds.

State support to folk high schools is supposed to go towards, among other things, hindering educational divisions and to facilitate lifelong education. Another goal is to reduce the effects of demographic development which means that the number of people of working age is decreasing in relation to the number of older adults and to people who are dependent on social benefits. Folk high schools already contribute, to a great extent, to hinder excluding tendencies among young people and people with a low education. Experience also shows, as previously described, that folk high schools' efforts are successful. This is, in all probability, due to folk high schools' alternative pedagogy and traditions, in particular when it comes to working with socially vulnerable individuals.

However, folk high schools should be able to expand their successful efforts in Sweden even further. The constant great difficulties with the high level of youth unemployment and the large number of young people, who do not complete their upper secondary education, show the necessity of more comprehensive supplementary efforts. The fact that jobcentres do not utilise the opportunities to work together with folk high schools to a greater extent, is something that is rather astounding. Although Sweden has recovered very well financially, everything suggests that the level of unemployment will continue to be high, especially for the youth and young adults with a low standard of education. The courses that jobcentres purchase from folk high schools today comprise of a limited number of participants.⁵

⁵ Unemployed young people with weak educational backgrounds have the opportunity to study a 3 month course at folk high school via a programme called *Jobbgarantin* (People between the ages of 16 and 24 who are registered at jobcentres and have been unemployed for at least 3 months are legible to participate in this programme. The programme offers, amongst other things, study guidance and job hunting activities which

This appears to be rather unreasonable especially as all assessments indicate that it is this group that does not have a completed upper secondary education, which is the most vulnerable group.

Folk high schools have, over the years, gained experience and contacts in relation to their activities which are aimed at the unemployed. This experience and social network need to be nurtured more efficiently than they are today.

subsequently can be combined with education or vocational training). This particular programme is the leading labour-market employment policy for young people in Sweden.