

# Higher Education and the concept of Life Long Learning in Sweden

Martin Johansson,  
Email: [martin.johansson@pedag.umu.se](mailto:martin.johansson@pedag.umu.se)

## 1 . The concept of life-long learning

My starting point is that, in every country, there is an ongoing work to make Higher Education (HE) more valuable for the nation and the people. Measures are taken in order to change and improve the content and forms of education, research, economy, recruitment to higher education, examination forms, etc. Such measures have been given different names. However, since the middle of the 1990's the concept of Life long learning ( L.L.L.) has been frequently used. It is a label for a package of measures for making the educational sector, Higher Education included, more in terms with national and global changes.

In the following I will make some short comments on the concept of L.L.L. and its relation to higher education in Sweden. My lecture is mainly based on two sources: 1) Swedish Universities and University Colleges: Annual Report 2002. 2) Askling, B., Christiansson, U. and Foss-Fridlitzius, Rita, *Livslångt lärande som idé och praktik i högskolan. (The Idea and practice of Lifelong Learning in Higher Education)*. Swedish Universities and University College. Report 2001:1. The first mentioned a report is a statistical and verbal description from the authorities of higher education in Sweden. The second is an interesting report from a research project.

According to OECD (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1996 ), the aim of L.L.L. are manifold, for example:

- Strengthening the foundations for learning throughout life, by improving access to early childhood education, particularly for disadvantaged children, revitalising schools and supporting the growth of other formal and non-formal learning arrangements.
- Promote coherent links between learning and work by establishing more flexible relations between education and working life. In particular, the initial transitions between the two must be more flexible and easy, and the instruments for assessing and recognising the skills and competencies of individuals, acquired by formal as well as non-formal education, must be improved.
- Reconsider the roles and responsibilities of all partners, including governments, providing opportunities for learning.
- Create incentives for individuals, employers and those who provide education and training to invest more in long life learning and to deliver value for moment.

(OECD, 1996, p 21. Quoted in Askling, et. al. (2001)

Two broad dimensions of L.L.L. are embedded in such overall statements:

- 1) A life long dimension (to make it possible for individuals to learn from cradle to grave).
- 2) A life wide dimension ( to make it possible for individuals to learn from and in different learning environments).

The life long dimension means, for example, that universities and colleges shall strive to give everyone wanting to study there access to higher education. This is regarded as a democratic right and a matter of social justice. Thus, the goal is to achieve equal opportunities in education at all levels of the education system.

The life wide dimension means that the universities cooperate with other parts of the society. Such a cooperation could include joint work between different universities or between universities and companies with regard to courses and research and development (R&D)

activities. Programmes for the exchange of students and teachers between universities in different countries are also part of this dimension.

Why do OECD and other organisations like, for example, UNESCO and EU emphasize the concept of L.L.L. in these times? Well, in my view life long learning is a way of handling the neo-liberal tendency of increasing globalisation and marketisation of the economy as well as the simultaneous changes of qualification demands and value systems. The competition on the global market has become even harder, creating winners and losers. Therefore it is important both in companies and in the public sector to keep an open mind to knowledge and values. Fast changes have made the world more risky and insecure, but also created new possibilities both for nations and individuals. Some changes have already occurred, and in the future more changes will be intensified, e.g. an increased cooperation between companies and universities, a more flexible relation between employees and employers, an increased transfer of working places and careers both within and between different nations.

In this neo-liberal world, the market and the national states will be more integrated. The national state will also be weaker in most countries. Decentralisation of decisions will be more common in many societal sectors. Such tendencies are already very manifest in Sweden, and for the Swedes this is a radical change indeed, as historically the Swedish state and the public sector have been very strong. In this new situation individuals are expected to be creative and shape their own future as citizens and not just be governed by the State.

What kind of knowledge is required to handle the situation? Well, traditional authorities (e.g. the state, teachers, researchers, and parents) cannot tell for sure what kind of knowledge will be important in the future. In such a world you have to be a FLEXIBLE PERSONALITY prepared to constantly reconsider your way of life. As for the universities TEACHING is not any longer the key word. Instead more stress is put on LEARNING and the single student's special requirements.

If this rough description is accurate, the concept of L.L.L. can be regarded as the answer to the demands of the changing world from national educational systems. According to Askling et. al. (2001), OECD seems to be more interested in the life-wide than in the life-long dimension of L.L.L. But changes along both these dimensions will be a real challenge for the universities: they are requested to provide a large variety of study courses and new ways of structuring knowledge. Such requirements could be difficult to fulfil.

## 2. The Swedish situation /Some general comments

During the last four decades higher education in Sweden has struggled with fundamental issues like ;

1. making Swedish people and Sweden as a country more qualified for a more competitive world.
2. meeting the demands of a constantly changing labour market. Today, it is said, knowledge and skills required for different jobs must be constantly updated. Some jobs disappear but new jobs appear on the labour market. The universities are one of many places where this updating of knowledge and skills are supposed to take place.
3. reducing the unemployment rate and other negative effects of economical depressions. Instead of being unemployed, adult people study at universities in order to improve their opportunities to get a good job later on, when the economy changes for the better.
4. serving not only a talented elite of the people but also other groups. For political reasons this issue has been much emphasized: How could higher education contribute to social justice in the Swedish society?

The aims of the reforms of higher education in, for example, 1968, 1977 and 1993 were to solve these problems. However, it should be noted that the educational system as a whole have been struggling to solve these sort of questions. Education was regarded as one of the most important means of reducing social, economical and cultural differences between different groups of people: workers and middle class people, men and women, ethnic groups but also between young people and adults. L.L.L. may also be regarded in such a perspective.

As a rule, the average education level of the young generation is higher compared to older generations. The compulsory school reform of 1962 meant that every child attended school for at least 9 years, whilst many parents had only six years of schooling. In the 1970s the state supported those who wanted to raise their educational level to the same level as the nine year compulsory school. When the enrolment to upper secondary school increased, new educational gaps between young and adults were created. Therefore the state has sponsored adults wanting to get an upper secondary education. Thereby, some of them also became qualified for higher education.

In the next section we will turn to the present situation.

### 3. Higher Education in contemporary Sweden

#### (1) Focus at undergraduate programmes

In connection with the reform of 1977 practically all forms of post upper-secondary education were brought together and labelled "Higher Education". Today many new colleges are also established, and old colleges are upgraded to universities. (Totally there are 11 universities and 40 university colleges in Sweden) Thus: a college or a university in every city seems to be the political goal. There are many reasons for this, but one has to do with L.L.L. Adults, who may be married and have children and are well established in a local community, shall not be forced to move if they want to enter into higher education.

This policy is part of an ideology of social justice: aiming at reducing educational gaps between different groups in general, and also between generations. Both male and female workers, worn out by heavy work, can also get state support for higher education studies in order to qualify for other professions.

In order to give adults access to higher education, qualifications required for HE has been changed. For example, a certain proportion of student shall be recruited among people more than 25 years old with at least 4 years' experiences of working life. The message is: You are never too old for university studies. This idea was launched in the reform of 1977, and it is still prominent in higher education policy.

The proportion of adults in higher education is one measure of the Swedish situation for L.L.L. Totally the proportion of older students (25-60 ages) in undergraduate programmes is high in an international perspective. Another more complex quantitative measure of L.L.L. is the proportion of so called traditional versus non traditional students.

(Annual Report, 2002, 21-22).

A traditional student can be defined as:

- having begun studies in higher education before the age of 25
- not studying part-time.
- not having interrupted studies in higher education for more than three complete terms.

A non-traditional student fulfil at least one of the following three criteria:

- He/she has interrupted his/her studies for at least one period of considerable duration
- He/she has begun studies in higher education at the age of 25 or later
- He/she is studying part-time

Measurements following these criteria show that 54.1 percent of the female students and 43.3 percent of the male students were non-traditional during the autumn semester, 2001. The proportional increase since 1995 is larger for women than for men (49.9 % and 42.9 % respectively, autumn 1995).

The Reform of 1977 put forward the importance of measures to make higher education a more equal and democratic institution in the Swedish society. Inequalities between people of different ages and social classes were focused. Measures for an economically support based on study results have made it easier for students from lower social classes to choose higher education studies as an alternative. There are no fees for such studies and

there are loans to get for those who want to.

These efforts to balance the recruitment of students from different social classes have been slightly positive but there is still a considerable social bias. The probability that a son or daughter of a well-off white collar family will proceed to higher education is six to seven times larger than that a person of working-class origin will do so. Higher Status programmes, linked to higher status and better paid professions, are also more social biased than other programmes. This situation shows that it is not only a matter of money to make higher education open for new groups, but also a matter of culture and habits in the families and in earlier education programmes in the schools.

Since 1977 these sort of equalizing measures have successively been focused on other issues than ages and social classes. First to the issue of equality between men and women and later also to the issue of ethnical diversity within higher education. In average, in 2001 proportion of women were 59 percent among new beginners in higher education, but there were differences between different kinds of study programmes. In shorter programmes the proportion of women are larger and in longer, more high status programme as economy in Stockholm's School of Economics and engineering there are a larger proportion of men. However, in medicine and law there are more women than men. Interesting to notice is that the proportion of women among all teaching and research staff in higher education has increased during the 90s. 37 percent of all teaching staff and 25 percent of all staff with a doctoral degree were women during the fiscal year 2001. However, still only 14 percent of the professors are women. With more women in these positions the possibilities to a more equal gender balance in the future are to be expected.

The proportion of beginner immigrant students in higher education is 13 percent. (Definition: Both parents born outside Sweden and visiting students excluded). That means that this group is just slightly underrepresented in higher education, as 14 percent of the Swedish population are immigrants with such a definition.

Universities and university colleges in Sweden have exchange programmes for students and staff with a lot of countries. In Sweden also more and more courses are taught in English. Visiting students and staff can choose such courses in most subjects.

## (2) Focus on special courses and forms of distribution

One aim of the reforms of higher education mentioned above, has thus been to give adult or non-traditional students access to traditional programs and courses at universities and colleges. However, other measures have been taken in order to attract new groups and to promote life long learning of adult people, namely:

- Distance education
- A basic year for technical-natural science
- Summer courses
- Two years courses for unemployed academics, mostly people with an academic degree from other countries
- Commissioned courses (e.g. courses bought by various kinds of companies).

**Distance education** is not a new phenomenon in Sweden. It started in 1968 for people who wanted to study at evenings, or in a slower pace than required by ordinary courses. Most of the students were adult. These courses were planned and taught in a way, rather similar to the courses run by the universities at campus. Therefore they were fairly easy to administer, but as a consequence they were not adjusted to adults, neither with regard to content nor didactics. Teachers were not prepared or urged to change their way of teaching.

During the 1990s the Swedish government has allocated much money to support distance education. To this end coordination of courses and cooperation between different universities has been encouraged. The development of didactical, pedagogical methods adjusted to adults has been supported. However, one major problem for distance education is the large number

of drop outs. Approximately only 50 percent of the students complete their studies. According to evaluation studies there are several reasons for this: Distance Education students are less motivated than campus students, didactics and learning conditions are not as good as for campus teaching. Furthermore, the financial system of higher education do not encouraged university departments to provide distance education courses. In Sweden university studies are free, and the departments receive a specific sum of money for each student from the state. Part of this is given in advance, but the rest of it is not received until the student has completed the course. Thus, due to the large drop out rate, distance education is a risky, and usually very bad, business for the departments. However, some universities have specialized in distance education, among others Umeå University and Linköping.

**The basic year for studies in technology and natural science** was introduced as a remedy to the difficulties to recruit students to this field. Since 1993 the recruitment to natural science has decreased dramatically, a fact which has caused many worries. Politicians are also concerned about the lack of female students in this area, as goal of the gender equality policy is to attain an equal distribution of the sexes in all sectors of society. The aim of the basic year is to prepare the students for university studies in technology and natural sciences, and it also serves as a complement to high school education for students who have not specialized in the sciences at high school.

**Summer courses** were introduced in the 1990s. In Sweden the summer holiday of higher education last for three month, from the beginning of June to the beginning of September. Thus, traditional students can choose to study instead, but one goal is also to attract non-traditional groups of students. For example, in education in service training for teachers are provided.

**Commissioned courses** are bought by companies for the in-service-training of the staff, and therefore they are illustrative of the marketisation of higher education. Furthermore, they constitute a break with the Swedish tradition not to charge any fees in higher education. For such reasons they have been criticized, and students have protested, worried that "good" teachers will prefer to run commissioned courses rather than ordinary courses and that, consequently, students on campus would get less qualified teachers.

#### 4. Conclusion

The reforms of 1968, 1977 and 1993 dealt with issues very much in accordance with the OECD-concept of L.L.L, launched in the 1990s. This concept includes a life-long dimension and a life-wide dimension. There is no clear-cut difference between these two dimensions, but this lecture has focused the life-long dimension and the undergraduate level of higher education. In that respect Sweden has made many efforts to recruit new groups of students to the universities. Older students attend "ordinary" programmes, the distributions of women and men, different social classes, and immigrant groups are more equal now than before. As for specific programmes and subjects, however, still much remains to be done in order to correct the biases of recruitment to higher education.

Among what is labelled as "special courses and forms for distribution" in this lecture, distance education and commissioned courses are of special interest.

Potentially, distance courses may reach student at many places, also remote ones, in Sweden and abroad, at companies and in special lecture rooms in city halls. But it has not been so easy to make this sort of courses popular, neither among students nor teachers. On the one hand it seems to be a cost-effective arrangement, but on the other hand it seems to be a rather impersonal medium with many drop-out students.

Also commissioned courses have the potentiality to become more common, as there are economical incentives for the universities to provide such courses paid by companies for their

employees. Universities could also benefit from these courses as they have to rely more on the market now than before. On the other hand, especially the Swedish student union have to be convinced that such courses have no negative effects on the quality of their ordinary programmes, and also that this sort of courses will not become a means of getting access to higher education by "paying you in."

In my opinion, these courses are most interesting in the Swedish perspective of life long learning. They represent a new element of higher education with the potentiality of further development. However, hard work must be done in order to adjust them to the needs of people both inside and outside the higher education system, e.g. students, staff, public sector institutions and companies of different kinds. Teachers must get enough time for the serious planning of such courses in cooperation both with individuals and groups of people. There are many ideological, practical and economical problems involved in such a task. However, the real challenge is to adjust the content and the learning situation to the UNESCO - L.L.L.-perspective, i.e. both to the life-long and the life-wide dimension of life long learning. In my view, part of this challenge is, firstly, to understand what a world characterized of an intensified globalisation and marketisation means in the perspectives of learners and, secondly, find ways to take such perspectives into consideration in the learning situation.

Actually, in the Swedish context the reform of 1993 was in accordance with the neo-liberal ideology of globalisation and marketisation. The result was a decentralised system of Higher Education steered by goals instead of detailed state rules. Competition between universities and university colleges increased. As a consequence, the variety of courses provided has increased. Students have become like customers, and as such they may benefit from the development, but it is also difficult for them to know which university and which courses to choose on the market. Anyhow, such a market ideology is in accordance with the L.L.L. perspective, as it provides more opportunities for individuals to satisfy their personal requirements of education. In a state perspective, however, this also causes much worry, as many students prefer courses not corresponding to national needs of qualifications. For example, too few students choose Natural Science subjects, and consequently in future Sweden there will be a lack of engineers and the like.

Further more, an increasing amount of private educational institutes, specialised in different areas, appears on the market. In a L.L.L. perspective this may be positive, but the universities have to make efforts to attract students.

Life long learning is also part of the transformation of universities from elitist exclusive institutions to mass institutions. But we do not have much knowledge about the new groups of students attending various forms of university courses. How well are they prepared for the society they live in and the future they will be working for? Will they be the flexible personalities needed in this neo-liberal world, and what kind of knowledge do they then prefer? Last, but not least, in what ways can the important goal of higher education to educate critically reflecting citizens be taken into consideration, i.e. citizens who do not uncritically accept prevalent social conditions and ongoing changes without asking the fundamental question whether the changes are for the good or for the worse? More research and evaluation studies on such issues are needed, both on separate courses and on courses mixed into different programmes.