

Apprenticeship in decay? Sweden 1940 – 1965¹

Anders Nilsson

Introduction

The development of vocational education and training (VET) in Sweden from the early 1940's to the early 1960's is something of a paradox. Already in the interwar years, strong and stable labour market organisations had developed in the form of a strong trade union organisation, the Landsorganisationen or LO, as well as a powerful employers' federation, or SAF. In vocational training research it is well-established that the existence of such strong organisations tends to coincide with a VET system that is dominated by apprenticeship training (McCoshan et al. 2008). In fact, the Swedish VET system was clearly heading in such a direction in the 1940s' but according to the established historiography the development took a completely new turn during the 1950s' (Olofsson & Wadensjö 2011; see also Marklund 1983). In this paper, that interpretation is challenged. Based on preliminary findings from an on-going research project it is suggested that apprenticeship-based vocational education and training continued to play a significant role until the end of the 1960s'. The story ends here. The subsequent development, after the reformation of the VET system in 1971, is not put in question. There can be little doubt that by that time, apprenticeship was dispatched into a very marginal role and full-time school-based vocational education became completely dominant.

Background

Vocational training in Sweden was for a long time based on apprenticeship in a regulated guild system, similar to the structure in other countries in the pre-industrial era (De Munck et al. 2007). In the middle of the nineteenth century, a wave of liberal reforms swept over Europe and in this process guilds and apprenticeship regulations were abolished. In Sweden, these reforms were introduced in 1846 and 1864. But even though the regulations disappeared, the practice of letting young men work for low wages for a number of years during which they learned how to perform various tasks continued to exist. To become a skilled worker, very few alternatives existed but this was not a satisfying situation. In several countries, apprenticeship was re-regulated around the turn of the century. Even though this regulation was not entrusted to the old guilds but rather some 'modern' organisation such as the Chamber of Commerce, the measure was taken chiefly to ensure the supply of skilled labour in the handicraft sector. In a few countries, including Germany, several branches of manufacturing industry also became included in the apprenticeship legislation (Thelen 2004).

In Sweden, too, attempts were made to re-introduce apprenticeship legislation in this period, but these attempts failed (Nilsson 2008). Instead, the labour market parties negotiated collective agreements concerning various aspects of apprenticeship. Already by 1900 a large number of such agreements existed and in the early 1920s' it was estimated that about 40,000 young people were employed as apprentices in accordance with collective agreements (SOU 1924:41). Basically, these agreements covered the employment relation but very little was said about the training part in them. As a consequence, the quality of training could vary enormously between different firms. The vocational schools that existed, the so called apprentices' schools, were constructed as a supplement to the training that young people received in the work place. The vocational schools were considered inadequate, however, by prospective pupils and by most employers (Hedman 2001). By the late 1930s', SAF and LO jointly came to the conclusion that the quality of VET was so low that strong

¹ I am indebted to Mats Olsson and Fay Lundh Nilsson for valuable discussions. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the *Svenska Historikermötet* in Gothenburg, May 2011 and I am grateful to the participants in the session on Educational History for comments and suggestions. Funding from the Swedish Research Council (grant no. 721-2009-4672) is gratefully acknowledged.

measures had to be taken (Olofsson 2005).

The organisational changes of the 1940s' – apprenticeship-based training under the supervision of the labour market parties

The labour market parties – LO and SAF – conducted their work on a broad basis. Among other things, they argued that vocational issues had received too little attention in the governing agency, the National Board of Education. Within a few years, they managed to ensure strong political support and a special agency with responsibility for vocational education, the National Board for Vocational Education and training, became a separate unit in 1944. In this Board, the labour market parties were well represented. Later that year, the Labour Market Vocational Council was set up. The council was a joint body where LO and SAF had equal representation. The main tasks for the council was to make vocational training more efficient and better known among young people (Olofsson 1997). Soon afterwards similar councils were organised in different branches of industry and these were entrusted with several tasks. In particular, they were to organise apprenticeship training in a coherent way by closing collective agreements. The committees were also involved in a number of recruitment campaigns with the purpose to increase young peoples' interest in vocational training (Lundahl 1997).

After the organisational changes in the mid-1940s', the institutional setting for a 'dual model' was prepared. In essence, a tri-partite system had been created with the trade unions, the employers' federation, and the state as more or less equal partners. The 'driving force' in that arrangement was undoubtedly the labour market parties. They were in agreement that 'the best and cheapest vocational training was achieved in the work place, supplemented with theoretical education in public or private vocational schools' (Yrkesutbildningskommittén 1944, my translation).

The organisational changes were implemented around 1945, which meant that the development during the following years coincided with the post World War II economic boom. There was a bent-up demand for consumer goods in Sweden and a huge need to rebuild the war-stricken countries in Europe. Sweden was one of the few countries whose production apparatus was intact (due to the neutral position throughout the war) and its manufacturing industry tried to respond to the demand for its products. As a consequence there was a constant high demand for all kinds of labour, skilled and un-skilled alike. In addition, these years were characterised by a low number of young people. The combination of high demand for labour and small youth cohorts implied that the relative wage of young people increased during these years. Between 1944 and 1949 the hourly wage in manufacturing industry for young people (under the age of 18) rose from 44% to 52% of the wage for an adult male (see Figure 1).

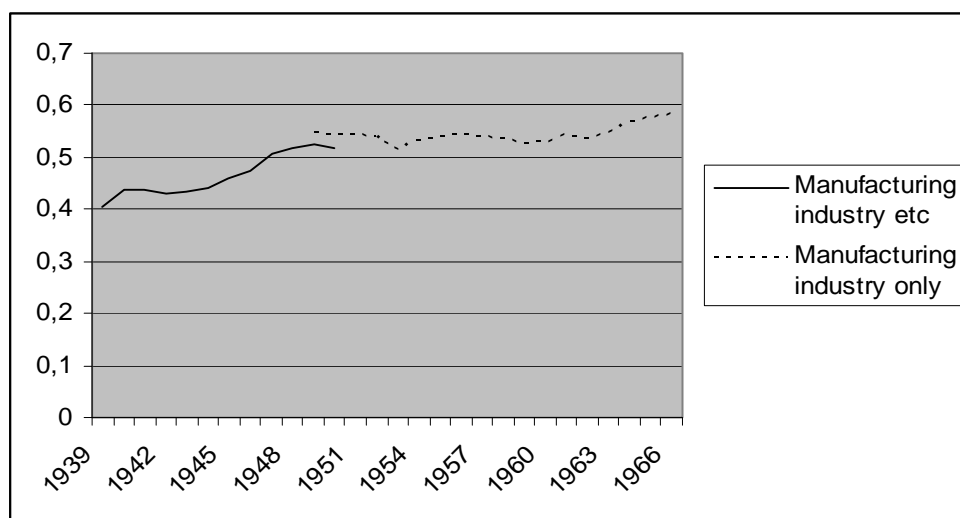


Figure 1. Young people's relative wage in manufacturing industry 1939-1966 (1939-1950 the series also include the handicraft sector and transports).

Source: Statistical Yearbook for Sweden 1950, 1952, 1959.

From the early 1950s', however, labour demand started to change due to changes in the structural composition of the Swedish economy. Capital-intensive, export-oriented production, such as shipbuilding replaced labour intensive production targeting the home market, such as textiles. In addition, large investments were made in infrastructure which, among other things, stimulated the production of cars, trucks, and buses. In relative terms, the demand for non-skilled and low-skilled labour declined whereas the demand for skilled labour increased. It is apparent from Figure 1 that the relative wage for young labour stagnated throughout the 1950s'. A similar development is discernible for the relative wage of women in manufacturing industry (Svensson 1995). In both cases (young vs. older workers and women vs. men) it was a question of relative inexperienced workers whose relative wage stagnated. This is a clear sign that the relative demand for these groups declined.

How, then, was vocational education and training affected by the changes in the labour market and by the attempts of the labour market parties to strengthen the VET system? One conspicuous development was the marked increase in the number of part-time students that rose from 44,000 in 1944 to 75,000 in 1950 (see Figure 2). This development is even more impressive considering that the number of young people was actually diminishing during those years. This seems to be an outcome of the strong demand for labour. Part-time vocational education did not in itself train people to become skilled labour, but it provided them with some competence that was useful in the labour market. It was in many cases obviously sufficient to take a few part-time courses to gain employment. Under these circumstances it is not very surprising that young people's interest in more advanced, i.e. apprenticeship-based, training was declining. Taking part in such training implied spending 3-4 years as an apprentice with substantially lower wages than young (but not trained) workers. As a result, and in spite of the recruitment efforts made by the vocational councils, the number of apprentices fell from about 20,000 in 1941 to about 15,000 in 1950 (SOU 1954:11).

From the early 1950s' this was seen as a growing problem. From various quarters demands were put forward to improve vocational education and training in order to secure the supply of skilled labour. The political response was the VET Reform Act of 1955.

The VET Reform Act of 1955

The Reform Act of 1955 was based on the proposals put forward by the Government Public Inquiry Yrkesutbildningen (SOU 1954:11). The decision was strongly influenced by young people's diminishing demand for apprenticeship training as well as the increasing demand for skilled labour discussed above. The strong commitment by the labour market parties (and the political impossibility to institute apprentice legislation) in combination with increased State grants to part-time courses in vocational schools was assumed to strengthen firm-based training. With better access to vocational courses it was believed that more young people would be interested in seeking an apprenticeship based on collective agreements. Furthermore, to increase the number of apprentices in the handicraft sector, existing subsidies to craft masters who undertook to train apprentices were raised considerably (SOU 1954:11). This part of the reform had been demanded for a long time by the Handicraft Organisation and was greeted with much applause from those quarters (Forsell 1973).

The really new, and as it turned out almost revolutionary, part of the reform was to increase the State grants to full-time courses in vocational schools. There were several reasons for this part. The most important was the perceived need to train a large number of young people to meet the demand from the labour market. In the analysis that preceded the Reform Act it was pointed out that not only skilled but also semi-skilled workers needed vocational training, and that firms did not use the apprenticeship system for this purpose. Here, it was argued, full-time vocational courses of one or two years' duration were suitable. It could also attract young people who wanted to enter the labour market soon after leaving comprehensive school. Furthermore, the

two-year courses could be supplemented with subsequent firm-based training, possibly in an apprenticeship context, to turn young people into skilled workers. Several firms had declared that they could not employ young people without previous training, since the machinery was expensive and complicated (SOU 1954:11).

The Reform Act must also be understood in relation to other reforms in the schooling system. Mandatory schooling was being expanded from 7 to 9 years' duration. In 1955, this was still on a trial basis since there was disagreement on the details of the future comprehensive school. The main direction, a comprehensive school comprising 9 years was however undisputed. This meant that future VET students would be better prepared when they started their vocational training, in particular since the final year could be vocationally preparatory.

The traditional interpretation of the 1955 Reform

The most obvious effect of the reform was a very large expansion of full-time courses in vocational schools – and an even more impressive increase in the number of students. The Public Inquiry had forecasted that the number of students would increase gradually to about 55,000 in 1970. That number, however, was reached already in 1960 and in 1970, the actual number was 82,000 (see Figure 2). That unexpected and exceptional success for full-time courses has completely dominated the interpretation of the subsequent development. In 1963, a new Government Public Inquiry was appointed and the proposals from this Inquiry transformed the Swedish VET system completely in the beginning of the 1970s'. Initial vocational education became completely school-based and was integrated with the theoretical (or academic) programmes into a comprehensive upper secondary school (gymnasieskolan). In this perspective, it is tempting to interpret the development from 1955 to 1970 as a period when the apprenticeship-based vocational training definitively went into decay. Such an interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that one of the labour market parties, the trade union, supported the proposals made by the 1963 Public Inquiry. In particular, the trade union supported the idea that vocational education and training should have a broad scope since that would allow young people to seek employment in many different occupations. They were also in favour of the idea that vocational education should be similar to other forms of secondary education, which in reality meant that vocational education would become more theoretical (Olofsson 1997). These ideas were not easy to reconcile with the notion of apprenticeship-based vocational training.

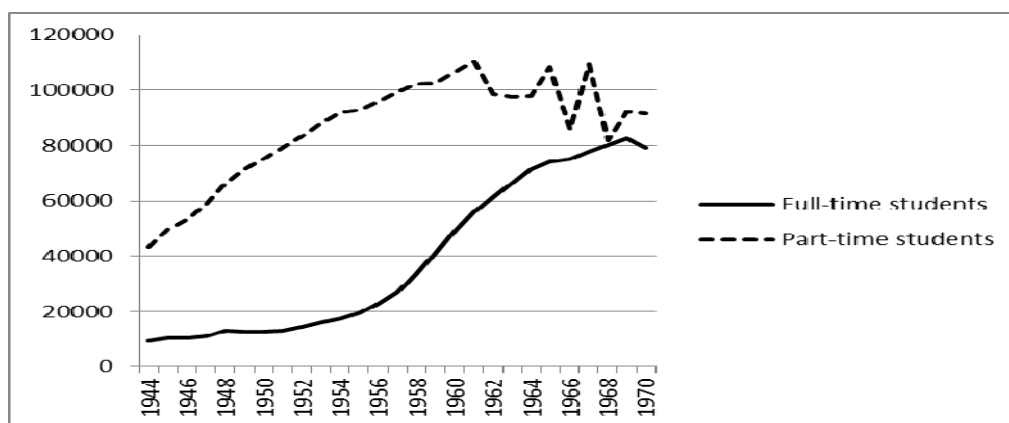


Figure 2. Number of students in vocational training at the secondary level 1944-1970. Full-time and part-time students.

Source: Promemorior från SCB, Elever i skolor för yrkesutbildning 1844-1970, (SCB 1984:2)

An alternative interpretation

It is possible, however, to interpret the development in a slightly different way. As Figure 2 shows, up to 1961 the expansion of full-time studies did not take place at the expense of part-time studies. During those years,

the number of part-time and full-time students increased simultaneously. During the 1960s', the number of part-time students exhibited a slightly declining trend but throughout the decade the part-timers exceeded the full-timers every year. Part-time vocational school was the traditional education route for young people who worked as apprentices in firms. From this perspective, it is possible that apprenticeship training, supplemented with part-time schooling, continued to be an option for a number of young people. How big that number was, however, we do not know. There is no published statistics of the number of apprentices under collective agreements. It is an important task to within the on-going research project to estimate the development of the number of apprentices between 1950 and 1970. Until such results emerge, we must settle for scattered pieces of information.

One indicator is the development of the number of apprentices in the handicraft sector. Around 1950, some 300 young people were employed as apprentices in that sector. The very substantial increase of the subsidy paid to a crafts master who took on an apprentice in 1955 (from 900 to 2,000 Swedish kronor for a three-year period) stimulated an increased recruitment in the sector. By 1964, some 1,150 apprentices were employed in the handicrafts and this figure continued to rise until 1969 (see Figure 3). It was only with the introduction of the new, integrated upper secondary school that the number of handicraft apprentices started to decline.

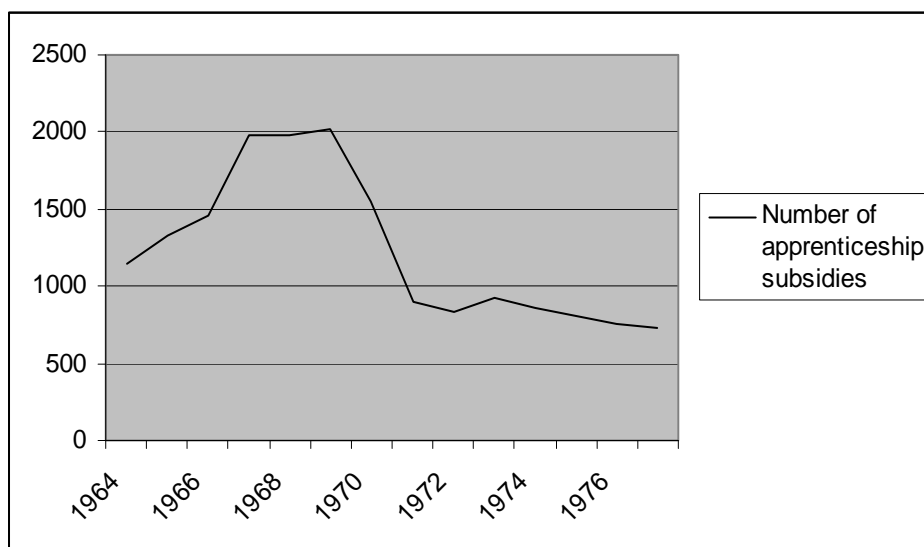


Figure 3. Number of apprentices in the handicraft sector, 1964-1977

Sources: SCB 1973:4, table 64 and SCB 1978, table 7.2

Judging from the development of the number of apprentices in the handicraft sector alone, it would be possible to argue that apprenticeship increased in popularity among young people after the Reform Act of 1955. Better access to education in vocational schools on a part-time basis may have induced a higher interest also to become an apprentice in manufacturing industry. Above all, it is likely that the demand for skilled labour during the 1950s' may have increased the popularity of apprenticeship among young people.

There is also some qualitative evidence that points in this direction. Full-time and part-time courses alike were constructed quite narrowly and targeted at a specific profession. Much of the training in schools consisted of performing actual work tasks and the resulted goods were sold at reduced prices. In many cases a carefully regulated apprenticeship period followed immediately after the school-based training (Larsson 2001). This implies that not only part-time but also full-time school-based vocational education was perceived as an integral part of a more extensive programme where the final practical training took place in a firm under an apprenticeship agreement. This situation is similar to VET systems in other countries (e.g. present-day

Norway) where school-based vocational education precedes an apprenticeship-based training period in a firm. The main, and crucial, difference with the Swedish system in the 1960s' was that it was not a formal system. This implies that the quality of vocational training varied enormously. In many cases, poor vocational education in school was followed by monotonous and very low-paid tasks in an apprentice position. In others, instruction in school could be of good quality and the apprenticeship period filled with learning. It is to a very large extent uncharted territory in Swedish educational history. In the on-going research project, it is a very important task to find indicators of the quality of vocational education and training that actually took place in this period.

Concluding remarks

The turn-around of Swedish VET policy in the post World War II era has not been subject to much research. To the extent that it has been noticed at all, the standard interpretation is that it came about as a side-effect of the major reforms in the comprehensive school in the 1950's (Marklund 1983). It must also be said, that in the huge Government Public Inquiry Yrkesutbildningsberedningen (8 publications between 1966 and 1970) apprenticeship played a very minor role. This has probably contributed to the dominant opinion that apprenticeship was in decay long before it was reduced to be a very residual phenomenon in the upper secondary school after 1971. From this perspective, the transition from vocational schools in the 1950s' and 1960s' into broad vocational programmes with a substantial theoretical content in the 1970s' was rather smooth and free from conflict. If, however, the interpretation suggested in this paper can be further corroborated with more empirical evidence, the picture becomes more complex. To a lot of young people, and many firms, the change would have been quite drastic.

References

- Bert De Munck, Steven L. Kaplan & Hugo Soly, *Learning on the Shop Floor. Historical Perspectives on Apprenticeship*, (Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford 2007).
- Einar Forsell, *Promemoria angående hantverkets framtida yrkesutbildning*, utarbetad av Einar Forsell 1973 på uppdrag av SHIO:s centrala yrkesnämnd och presenterad vid SHIO:s 37:e kongress i Falun 1974.
- Claudia Goldin, & Lawrence Katz, *The race between education and technology*, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London England, 2008).
- Anders Hedman, *I nationens och det praktiska livets tjänst. Det svenska yrkesskolesystemets tillkomst och utveckling 1918 till 1940*, (Pedagogiska institutionen, Umeå universitet, 2001).
- Lars Larsson, *Industri- och hantverksutbildning under två sekel*, Årsböcker i svensk undervisningshistoria nr 194 (Uppsala 2001).
- Lisbeth Lundahl, *Efter svensk modell. LO, SAF och utbildningspolitiken 1944-90*, (Boréa förlag, Umeå 1997).
- Sixten Marklund, *Skolsverige 1950-1975, del 3, Från Visbykompromissen till SIA*, (Liber Utbildningsförlaget, Stockholm 1983).
- Andrew McCoshan, Anna Drozd, , Emmy Nelissen, & Anne-Mari Nevala, *Beyond the Maastricht Communiqué: developments in the opening up of VET pathways and the role of VET in labour market integration*, Consolidated Final Report, ECOTEC, (Priestley House, Birmingham 2008).
- Anders Nilsson, *Yrkesutbildningen i Sverige 1850-1910*, (Årsböcker i svensk undervisningshistoria 208, Uppsala 2008.)
- Jonas Olofsson, *Arbetsmarknadens Yrkesråd. Parterna och yrkesutbildningen 1930-1970*, (Meddelanden från Ekonomisk-historiska institutionen, nr 59, 1997).
- Jonas Olofsson, *Svensk yrkesutbildning. Vägval i internationell belysning*, (SNS Förlag, Stockholm 2005).
- Jonas Olofsson & Eskil Wadensjö, *Läringsutbildning*, (Pocketbiblioteket, SNS Förlag 2011).
- Lars Svensson, *Closing the Gender Gap: determinants of change in the female-to-male blue collar wage ratio in Swedish manufacturing*, (Skrifter utgivna av Ekonomisk-historiska föreningen, vol. LXXI, Lund 1995)

Apprenticeship in decay? Sweden 1940 – 1965

Anders Nilsson

Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve. The political economy of skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 2004).

Yrkesutbildningskommittén, *Betänkande med förslag till åtgärder för lärlingsutbildningens främjande*, avgivet av Arbetsmarknadsorganisationernas Yrkesutbildningskommitté, (Stockholm 1944).

Government Public Inquires and Publication from Statistics Sweden:

SOU 1924:41, *Utredning med förslag till lärlingslag i vissa yrken*, (Stockholm 1924).

SOU 1954:11, *Yrkesutbildningen, betänkande avgivet av 1952 års yrkesutbildningssakkunniga*, (Stockholm 1954).

SOU 1966:3, *Yrkesutbildningen, betänkande avgivet av 1963 års yrkesutbildningsberedning*, (Stockholm 1966).

SCB 1973:4 *Utbildningsstatistik 1960-1973, Promemorior från SCB 1973:4*.

SCB 1978 *Utbildningsstatistisk årsbok 1978, Sveriges offentliga statistik*, SCB, Stockholm.

SCB 1984:2 *Elever i skolor för yrkesutbildning 1844-1970, Promemorior från SCB 1984:2*.