



Folkbildningsrådet

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*Ministry of Education, Research and Culture*

*103 33 Stockholm*

## **Statement regarding the European Commission's proposal for a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)**

### **1. Fundamental points of departure concerning liberal adult education and validation of participation in liberal adult education activities**

The position the Swedish National Council of Adult Education takes on the Commission's proposal for a common European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) is based on liberal adult education's specific role in society and what this role entails in relation to issues surrounding the validation of non-formal and informal education in the activities conducted at folk high schools and study associations.

#### ***1.1 The characteristics of liberal adult education***

Liberal adult education in the form of folk high schools and study associations constitutes an independent system parallel to the formal educational system. The support for liberal adult education on the part of the State is based on it having a different role than formal education and is warranted primarily by the activities strengthening and developing democracy and broadening cultural interest in society. The levelling out of educational gaps shall be prioritised. Liberal adult education activities are expected to have an ideological profile through their basis in popular movements and association activities.

Liberal adult education differs from formal education in organisation, objectives, view of knowledge, pedagogy, ways of working and contents,

even if some of the differences have decreased in stride with the formal school system's reformation.

Its diversity of educational forms, course offering and participants, it being free and voluntary, lacking central curricula and being profiled according to the principals' ideologies and the needs in civil society are characteristic of liberal adult education. Leadership training for one's own organisation is an important activity in many of the liberal adult education organisations. The objectives are considerably broader than in formal education.

Liberal adult education is focused on experientially based learning with active exchange of experiences, ideas, values and observations between the participants. Liberal adult education prefers to work in the study circle format or in small study groups in folk high schools. Great importance in knowledge development is attached to group processes. This pedagogical model means that liberal adult education, which constitutes a structure within non-formal learning in Sweden, in a unique way in the study situation ties into and consciously takes advantage of the informal learning that the participants bring with them.

### ***1.2 Validation within liberal adult education***

Validation or evaluation generally exists as a part of a pedagogical process in both folk high schools and study associations.

In the folk high school, validation for the purpose of qualifying for and being accepted to university studies is formalised through the National Agency for Higher Education's regulations on the folk high school's right to provide basic and individual qualification, and to make assessments of studies. The qualification is certified by the folk high school itself in the form of knowledge "equivalent" to the core subjects of upper-secondary school. The study assessment is a unique method to collectively validate study skills and social competence. The validation made at the folk high schools in the form of study assessment in qualifying activities is widely accepted. The study assessment is a holistic assessment made over a long period of time and is based on the collaboration of multiple judges, which contributes to this acceptance.

There is currently no validation for the rest of folk high school activities, which are almost as extensive. Included in these activities is a large and varied course offering within several areas of training, some of which have a vocational focus. There is a need to validate this competence and legitimise its value. At the same time, there are obvious difficulties in adapting liberal adult education to standardised forms of validation because of its diversity, the tie to profiled principals and the special learning process with a focus on participant control and personal development in a group process.

The extensive study circle activities in Sweden (approx. 300 000 circles annually) largely take place without the participants requesting documentary evidence of what they have learned. Rather, the circles

constitute a kind of “free zone” where one is not judged and does not have to chase after measurable results. Study circle activities have objectives that do not focus on the validation of knowledge and no validation towards marks is therefore done. The democratic goal is the foundation. There is however qualified certification within certain areas in the study association’s activities, including commissioned training. Several validation projects are ongoing.

### ***1.3 Problems and possibilities of validation in liberal adult education***

There are numerous, complicated measurement and method problems. The problems of incorporating liberal adult education into a standardized system of assessment are of both a fundamental and a practical nature. Here there are issues surrounding the operationalisation and translation of “soft values” into formal competence. What measurement instruments should be used to measure formative training, attitudes, values, personal development, increased social involvement etc.? How can organisational and association experience be validated? What models are appropriate in situations where liberal adult education for ideological reasons does not want to evaluate individuals or measure knowledge? In addition to this, there are questions of who pays for validation. These are examples of the problems that should be further considered.

Despite fundamental objections of principle and obvious measurement and method problems, in many cases there is a need to make visible the unique competence that participation in liberal adult education activities entails. Validation could provide higher status to liberal adult education by describing the actual competence that participation provides. In which case it is not primarily about comparing liberal adult education to the formal system, but the focal point lies rather on describing the value of liberal adult education based on its own merits. Standardised models based on the formal educational system are not the way forward when it comes to validation within liberal adult education.

Liberal adult education must develop its own models to validate knowledge and skills acquired through liberal adult education. This way the diversity and complexity of the liberal adult education competence can be done justice. These models must be flexible, open and tailored to the individual. This provides greater validity, but collides with the demand for reliability. Thus validation of liberal adult education has the general aim of making the all of the individual’s competence visible.

Liberal adult education’s efforts for validation are closely tied to the processes that precede validation, perhaps mainly to contribute to the citizen’s desire for lifelong learning and to be trained in self-reflection, i.e. to lay the foundation for self-validation.

There are currently several validation projects ongoing within liberal adult education. The experiences from these projects should be utilised in the work both on a national and a European level to create models where non-formal and informal learning is evaluated and validated.

In many countries in Europe the equivalents of the Swedish liberal adult education activities have weak official recognition and thereby little opportunity to assert their distinctive character in the countries' treatment of EQF. Sweden and other Scandinavian countries that have a long tradition of non-formal learning can play an active role in finding forms for the validation of the distinctive knowledge and competence created and developed in contexts other than the public school system.

## **2. Views on the European Commission's proposal for a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)**

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, in principle, looks positively on the efforts to increase the citizen's ability to move across borders in the area of education and in the labour markets of Europe. It is important that proposals of measures aimed at increased comparability with regard to qualifications receive a broad and comprehensive review in the EU member states and that the views that arise are taken advantage of in continued dialogue with concerned parties both in the respective country and on the European level.

The European Commission's proposal on a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning builds on the learning outcomes being able to be described in knowledge, skills and personal and professional competence. The latter category includes a) autonomy and responsibility, b) learning competence, c) communication and social competence, and d) professional and vocational competence.

The idea is that these learning outcomes can be related to

- formal education
- non-formal learning
- informal learning

The proposal is based on an eight-level qualifications structure, to which the national qualification system is proposed to relate, to be able to achieve comparability.

### ***2.1 Non-formal and informal learning***

A basis for the proposal is that lifelong learning only takes place to a limited extent within formal educational systems and that it is therefore necessary to take into consideration the learning that takes place in both non-formal and informal contexts. The proposal can be seen as an upgrade of the learning that takes place outside of the formal educational system. Likewise, personal and vocational results are given increased importance. In the justification of the proposal, the Commission points out the problem in there existing a tendency to view non-formal and informal learning as inferior for formal qualifications in the educational system (p.9 of English version).

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education shares the view that there is reason to emphasize the importance of non-formal and informal learning both from an individual and social perspective. Likewise, it is important to establish the significance of the learning situation supporting the development of characteristics such as independence, communication and social skills.

Non-formal and informal learning are of fundamental significance to the development of an active citizenship. It contributes to strengthening leadership and membership in associations and societies, i.e. to strengthening the organisations of civil society and thereby a democratic infrastructure among the citizens. Learning in non-formal and informal contexts also provides the opportunity of personal development, which through e.g. increased self-esteem, greater self-awareness and broadened perspectives provides positive effects to both the individual and to society in general. Non-formal and informal learning are also of importance to the citizen's ability to face changes and new demands in vocational life as well as combating unemployment and exclusion.

It is therefore regrettable that the proposal does not define and discuss the concepts of non-formal and informal learning in greater detail and the factors that are included in personal and vocational competence in relation to the proposal that has been put forward. One could have used the member country Sweden as a resource by virtue of our long tradition of non-formal and informal learning. One limits oneself in section 6.2 to referring to the ongoing development work that takes place in most European countries on validation of non-formal and informal learning, and the common European principles for identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning that the (Education) Council and the Commission agreed upon in May 2004. These principles are, as the Commission also points out, formulated on a general level and only constitute general guidelines for future development of systems and methods for validation on a European level. In the Council's conclusions, it was established that an experimental process is currently ongoing where different approaches are tried and that stimulation should be provided to increase experiential exchange, among others.

### ***2.2 Need for continued efforts on validation of non-formal and informal learning on the national and European level***

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education considers it important for work on testing principles, approaches and methods surrounding validation of non-formal and informal learning continues and is deepened. In 2005, a report was prepared within the framework of the Validation Delegation that maps existing validation activities within study associations and folk high schools. Thereafter, a project commissioned by the Validation Delegation has been started within the folk high schools and study associations with the aim of developing the continued validation efforts in liberal adult education.

Contacts that the Swedish National Council of Adult Education has with organisations in other European countries within the framework of membership in the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) indicate that processes are also ongoing in other European countries concerning the development of content and methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and that much of the work is still in its infancy. In the judgement of the Swedish National Council of Adult Education conditions do not currently exist to support a proposal of the present level of detail when fundamental questions of principle and method concerning validation of non-formal and informal learning have not been given the elucidation and treatment needed in the various countries.

The European working group on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, which was appointed within the work programme *Implementation of Education & Training 2010*, has indicated a number of problems in this context at the same time that it has indicated the need for greater comparability between different countries, different educational arenas and different levels. This concerns the conflict between standardisation and voluntary participation from many different educational arenas, which excludes top-down regulation. Common criteria for validation should also not conflict with already established criteria. The working group has established that one must tailor validation instruments to the target group and field of activity in question. The solution may not be to establish common rules, but rather common objectives for what one wants to achieve. The general aim should then be to make the individual's entire competence visible. The Swedish National Council of Adult Education is of the opinion that the working group's reasoning and conclusions lead to a need for increased participation from the actors within non-formal learning on the national and European level.

In light of this, the Swedish National Council of Adult Education rejects the proposal for a common European framework based on the current documentation, considering the issue's complexity and the problems of principle and method that validation of non-formal and informal learning entails in relation to the proposed eight-level structure.

In addition to the previously mentioned objections, there are other strong fundamental and factual objections to the system of reference levels on which the proposal is based. Here it may suffice for example to point to the alleged linear correlation, which according to the model exists between the progression of knowledge and skills on the one hand and personal characteristics such as communication skills and social competence on the other. This expresses a knowledge and human view that is foreign to Swedish liberal adult education and which is counter to the ambitions on relevancy and credibility that are necessary to achieve support for a framework proposal.

In the current situation where there is no coherent approach on the national or European level surrounding the evaluation of non-formal and informal learning, the conditions do not exist to establish a common level-based qualification system if consideration is to be taken of all forms of non-formal and informal learning. The general principles on the evaluation of non-formal and informal learning that the Commission and the Council have approved do not form a sufficient basis for a positive decision on the present model for a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with the formulation it has received.

Efforts should instead be increased over the next few years, both on the national and European level, to create a long-term basis for the validation of non-formal and informal learning through project work, method development, experiential exchange etc. Conditions will then also be created to establish a sustainable system for validation that grows forth in a dialogue with concerned parties.

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education shares the conclusion of the Council and the Commission that it is important to stimulate the experiential exchange on the European level surrounding validation of non-formal and informal learning to make it possible to develop common European principles on this. A natural common arena for such work among European organisations active within liberal adult education and adult education is the *European Association for Education of Adults* (EAEA) with its 115 member organisations from 38 countries. In the same way that Swedish liberal adult education itself needs to refine policies and methods on validation, EAEA can be given a corresponding role in the joint work on validation in non-formal European liberal adult education and adult education.

EAEA already actively works with the issue, as late as November 2005 in the form of two seminars in connection with the General Assembly. The Swedish National Council of Adult Education proposes that EAEA in consultation with the Commission be given special opportunities to tentatively develop experiential exchange, methods, policy and some project activities on common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Researchers and evaluators should be tied to such an effort.

Through the member organisations this process surrounding common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning within EAEA is tied to the discussion and trial activities that are underway in parallel on a national level. The results of the work would be summarised in the form of a recommendation to the Commission.

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education proposes that the Commission and EAEA arrange a joint European conference on validation of non-formal and informal learning, tentatively in the autumn of 2006 under Finnish chairmanship.

### 3. Summary views

The following is a brief summary of the views of the Swedish National Council of Adult Education.

About liberal adult education and validation:

- From a social perspective it is of great value that all competences be made visible and recognised. From an individual perspective, it is an issue of justice that participants in liberal adult education also be given the possibility of counting the knowledge and competence they have acquired. But if one is to do liberal adult education justice, it should not be guided into an externally framed, standardised form of validation that does not take its uniqueness and special characteristics into account.
- Liberal adult education must participate in the development of forms for the validation of knowledge acquired from non-formal learning. Liberal adult education's own representatives shall be responsible for a validation structure being built and for the training of the validators.
- Liberal adult education is aimed at experientially based and process-focused learning with active exchange of experiences, ideas, values and observations between the participants. Models for validation may not influence the character of liberal adult education in these regards.
- Validation in liberal adult education should primarily apply to the validation of actual competence and not have the upper-secondary school's course requirements as a basis. Liberal adult education shall on its own merits be recognised as an important educational arena, which provides knowledge and skills significant to both social and personal development, and which often – particularly in the folk high schools – can constitute a basis for continued studies, even if this is not the primary goal.
- Based on our national experience, Sweden should illustrate on the European level the value and public welfare of state-supported non-formal learning based on confidence in the citizens' development. The issue of what opportunities exist for the citizens to participate in non-formal learning that contributes to increased self-esteem and awareness of one's own resources is also important from a validation perspective.
- There are areas within liberal adult education, above all in the study circle activities, that are not suited to validation. Many of those who come to liberal adult education want to experience a free zone within the academic world where one is not assessed and graded. There is acceptance for this on the part of the State.

On the proposal for a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF):

- The importance of non-formal and informal learning to lifelong learning from both an individual and social perspective needs to be clarified, as does the importance of the development of

characteristics such as independence, communication skills and social skills in the learning environments in question.

- On the basis of the present document, the Swedish National Council of Adult Education rejects the proposal for a common European framework. The proposal does not take into account the complexity and the fundamental and methodological problems that validation of non-formal and informal learning entails in relation to the proposed eight-level qualifications structure.
- The Swedish National Council of Adult Education proposes instead that efforts should be increased over the next few years, both on the national and European level, to create a long-term basis for the validation of non-formal and informal learning through project work, method development and experiential exchange etc. Sweden and other Scandinavian countries can, in light of these countries' long-term and extensive liberal adult education activities, have an active role in finding forms for the validation of the distinctive knowledge and competence created and developed in contexts other than the public school system. Conditions will then also be created to establish a sustainable system for validation that grows forth in a dialogue with concerned parties. The Swedish National Council of Adult Education intends to continue the development work together with folk high schools and study associations initiated within the Validation Delegation.
- The Swedish National Council of Adult Education shares the conclusion of the Council and the Commission that it is important to stimulate the experiential exchange on the European level surrounding validation of non-formal and informal learning to make it possible to develop common European principles on this.
- In accordance with this, the Swedish National Council of Adult Education proposes that the *European Association for Education of Adults* (EAEA) in consultation with the Commission be given special opportunities to tentatively develop experiential exchange, methods, policy and some project activities to create a foundation for common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Swedish National Council of Adult Education proposes that the Commission and EAEA arrange a joint European conference on validation of non-formal and informal learning, tentatively in the autumn of 2006 under Finnish chairmanship.

On behalf of the Swedish National Council of Adult Education

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