Sweden's Folk University

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This paper provides an historical overview of the Swedish university extension movement. It traces its origins, evolution and current operation and places it in the context of Sweden's overall adult education system. Like Australia, the movement took its inspiration from the early Oxford and Cambridge university extension model, but today operates as a national education association with the extra-mural departments of Sweden's five universities participating as autonomous members.

The Swedish term for non-formal adult education (folkbildning) is much more defined than the English one. It literally means 'forming people' and the state has never shied away from the idea that well formed, educated people will resist any erosion of their civic and human rights. Today the Swedish government spends around A$500 million on non-formal adult education, an enormous sum compared with Australia's miserly contribution to this sector. This money is granted on the understanding that it will not be used to offer courses that lead to qualifications. Such courses exist but are run by another adult education system called komvux, an abbreviation for municipal adult education. Since the 1960s, communes or municipalities have provided face-to-face classes for adults who wish to work towards a school leaving certificate. Over 200,000 part- and full-time students used this system in 1997. Those who cannot attend physically can enrol in two national schools for adults which provide distance learning packages. The annual enrolment in these courses is around 12,000 students. Municipalities are also obliged to provide Swedish tuition for newly arrived migrants and special education for mentally handicapped adults.

There is a long history behind this enviable and well-funded adult education sector. Last century, groups of well-to-do farmers were given a new role to play in municipal politics and believed it was important to educate their children so that their power under the new constitution would be effective. They also saw Sweden's agricultural sector threatened by forced emigration and backward farming methods. For these reasons, they paid for the construction of residential
Schools that could provide a practical education during the long, idle winter. These have evolved into the folk high school system. Today a variety of groups control the schools (half are owned by counties and municipalities) but all receive annual subsidies from the government.

Study associations, and the learning circles they organise, also go back to last century. Most began as lobby or special interest groups that felt the government was ignoring their constituents. The temperance movement is a good example. It formed its own adult education association late last century and encouraged people to meet and study together in an effort to stop the spread of alcoholism which was ruining both rural and urban poor. Labour leaders also made use of study circles to inform and organise workers. They were so successful that the political party which evolved, the Social Democrats, has dominated Swedish politics throughout the twentieth century.

Another association that has its roots in the nineteenth century is the folk university study association. The folk university (which prefers to use its Swedish name, *folkuniversitet*) has a long association with Sweden's universities although today it is largely independent of them. It has a central board which deals with the government and channels grant money to its five autonomous branches, each of them connected historically to the extra-mural departments of Sweden's five national universities (Lund, Uppsala, Gothenburg, Stockholm and Umeå). *Folkuniversitet* has its origins in the Swedish universities but today it also carries out other activities including running its own folk high school which specialises in language courses. It is funded along with the other ten adult education associations mentioned above.

Sweden's adult education infrastructure has grown and survived because of the commitment of the popular movements and their leaders. Last century, conservative Swedish governments often worked against such organisations but since early this century the government has recognised their importance in building a strong democratic society. As Sweden gradually disowned its imperial past, it witnessed a growth in new forms of imperialism, particularly to the east of its borders. The ambitions of the Russian Tsars had been curtailed by the Japanese in 1904 but, after 1917, the new communist 'Tsars' seemed to expand the borders of their soviet union at will. The Swedish government, which has been controlled by the Social Democrats, believed a strong and active democracy would function as a bulwark against communist infiltration and saw adult education as a means of building such a defence.

There are competing claims as to whether the various forms of adult education present in Sweden today were home grown or imported. The Americans claim they started study circles and the Danes undoubtedly were the first to build 'folk high schools'. The debate has interest for the historian but I prefer to see how ideas were adapted and implemented rather than to argue about their origin. As communication systems improved last century, ideas and systems spread more quickly. For example, Nikolai Grundtvig, the father of the Scandinavian folk high schools, picked up a number of ideas from his three trips to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1829-31. He was impressed by the Cambridge system of tutorials and after-class contact between teachers and students. He also liked the idea of residential colleges and his own 'schools of life' were partly inspired by them. Sweden's folk university can trace its origins to another British model - the university extension program (Alexandersson & Karlsson 1982).

In the 1860s, Oxford began to hold lectures for ordinary people in different parts of the country. Not long after, Cambridge also took up the idea. The topics for these lectures generally coincided with subjects that a lecturer taught at university. These included history, literature, the classics...
and to a lesser extent the natural sciences. As local interest in the lectures grew, more practical topics were also included. Australia, like Sweden, copied the university extension movement and the mechanics institutes that can be found in so many Australian towns were favoured locations for the delivery of such lectures.

In 1880 a movement, universitetsvidgningen, (which translates literally as 'university extension or expansion'), was established in Sweden. One of the best examples of this fledging movement was Verdandi, an organisation established in 1882. Verdandi was "characterised by liberal political ideas which at the time were considered quite radical and controversial" (Alexandersson & Karlsson 1982: 14). Other such organisations sprang up at Lund and Uppsala, Sweden’s two oldest universities. They represented a variety of world views and were driven by students and lecturers who were committed to popularising ideas and information that they believed in. Some were conservative in ideology (Föreningen Heimal, 1891), while others drew their inspiration from the workers’ movement (Den Yngre Gubben or DYG at Lund in 1896 and Laboremus, 1902).

Sweden at the turn of the century was in a state of flux. Over the previous quarter century, a third of its entire population (close to one million people) had emigrated, driven out of their homeland by famine and an overbearing class structure that seemed impossible to break. Church and State combined to maintain the status quo and, as in Australia, the government was prepared to use troops against striking workers. Wiser heads in the conservative movement acknowledged the demise of the old order but hoped education would lead to directed change rather than revolution. In this troubled climate, both conservative and radical forces tried to win the minds as well as the hearts of the people.

Study circles increased in number, some enlightened industrialists provided libraries and meeting space for their workers, and the ‘local lecture’ began to compete with the more spontaneous phenomenon of soap box orators. The most successful lecture series were those organised by groups committed to the university extension movement. In Lund, where Sweden’s second oldest university was located, the first central bureau for marketing ‘extension lectures’ was formed in 1898. Soon after, two more were started. Both were called folkbildningsförbund or ‘adult education alliance’ and operated in Stockholm and West Sweden. Their aim was to develop a national lecture circuit and supply university lecturers for the advertised topics.

Compared with Norway, the university authorities in Sweden were slow to embrace the university extension idea. Oslo University’s student association set up an extension program in 1864 and in time this was incorporated into the university’s overall program. Today the Norwegian folk university is responsible for about a third of that country’s adult education programs. Although groups motivated by the extension ideal operated in the older Swedish universities, it was not until the foundation of Gothenburg University in 1891 that the notion of bringing the university to the people became an integral part of university business. Summer schools, particularly for teachers, began to operate at Gothenburg from 1893 on.

In 1917 the predecessor of the present folk university was set up. An article in Dagens Nyheter on 28 March 1917 announced that, for some years past, prominent thinkers had called for a folk university that would bridge the gap between academic and popular education and explain in plain language the latest findings of university research. "The folk university", they argued, "would provide a home base for all those who long for intellectual and spiritual development, help equip men and woman for social, communal and political involvement and
reinforce the good work of established adult education groups..." (Dagens Nyheter, 28 March 1917). The new organisation offered a balance between the universities' emphasis on objective, scientific learning and the folk high schools' commitment to the development of the whole person. Many well known people donated money to the organisation and this built up over time. Today the 'foundation' still exists and, along with the student union and councils of the five universities, supplies delegates to the folkuniversitet's board of management. Government money was tight in the post-war period and the foundation's finances not large enough to build the 'folk universities' that they had envisaged, so the original aims of the organisation were never fully realised. It continued to exist, however, and is recognised today as the predecessor of the current folkuniversitet.

It was the Great Depression of the late twenties and early thirties that gave new impetus to the university extension movement. Once again, the idea of 'implanting democracy' was a driving force. Totalitarian ideas thrived in the harsh economic climate that followed the collapse of the world stock market. A strong leader, unimpeaded by parliamentarians and bureaucrats, became an increasingly attractive political model and there was no shortage of megalomaniacs willing to act the Nietzchian superhero. In Germany, society seemed to be fulfilling Nietzsche's dream: the evolution of the "great man" through discipline and "the annihilation of millions of the bungled and botched" (Russell 1946).

In Sweden, proponents of the university extension movement saw the opportunity to reach out to those Nietzsche despised, to counter the anti-intellectualism that was characteristic of fascism and to give unemployed workers the opportunity to use their enforced idleness more productively. Union leaders, social democrats and, in particular, student activists believed that popular lectures that interpreted recent advances in knowledge would inform the public, strengthen democracy and lay the groundwork for an economic recovery based on a well-educated workforce.

In 1933, humanity students at Stockholm University formed an association to train speakers and study circle leaders for groups that were interested in contemporary issues, not least the economic and social condition of Sweden and the rise of European fascism. At Uppsala in 1935, another group of students set up a 'study leader organisation' and a few years later similar organisations were founded at Gothenburg and Lund universities. They saw their role as similar to the nineteenth century 'lecture bureaus' that had organised talks by university staff. A few of these still existed (the Central Bureau at Lund, for example) and, together with the Stockholm and West Sweden student study associations mentioned above, provided a critical mass for the next major development in the history of the folk university. The folk university foundation, which had been founded in 1917, supported the student groups by providing courses for study leaders.

Student associations gradually began to run courses as well as providing speakers and study circle leaders. By 1942, there was enough extra-mural activity occurring to revitalise the folk university ideal. Torgny Segerstedt, Iwan Bolin and Orjan Lindberget, all prominent in university extension work, helped set up a federation to coordinate the various groups. They retained the name 'folk university' and under Segerstedt's presidency raised the profile of the organisation. In 1947, the government decided to support adult education associations financially and Segerstedt and his colleagues saw the advantage of locking into this arrangement. Their federation was renamed Studieförbundet Folkuniversitet which brought it into line with other studieförbund or study organisations and entitled it to funding. Instead of a cooperative run by volunteers with
access to university facilities, it became part of the adult education sector with its own government funding.

Longer established study associations still provided the bulk of adult education in Sweden but the folk university was by now a significant player. Most of the extra-mural work was carried out by student organisations until the 1960s. Interested staff gave their services and the universities supported the work by providing facilities and some administrative support. With funding came increased capacity and responsibility. The work of organising extra-mural courses became too much for staff and student volunteers and, in 1961, Stockholm University agreed that a foundation was a better way to organise things. The university, the student union and the folk university study association acted as a board of directors for the new foundation which employed paid administrators. Its function remained the same - to provide extra-mural courses, visiting speakers and study circle leaders, and to popularise research through pamphlets and lectures. The foundation became, in effect, the extra-mural department of the university, offering non-degree courses both on- and off-campus. The other Swedish universities followed Stockholm's lead. Over the years these foundations have become more and more independent of the universities so that the use of the term extra-mural is somewhat misleading. Each of them has representatives on the board which manages the folkuniversitet study association.

This development set the folkuniversitet apart from other adult education associations. Although the folkuniversitet study organisation received funds as an umbrella organisation, its main work was now done in partnership with each student union and university council. Like the other associations, it had a long developmental history but it lacked their sharp focus and clearly defined ideology. They were highly centralised, whereas the folk university was composed of quite independent foundations. As well as its folk high school, it set up language centres in other countries and supported organisations such as the university for the third age and a popular science society, both of which contained hundreds of members in the early 1980s.

Critics characterised the link between its parent association and the universities as a marriage of convenience that had been arranged with the help of government funding, but the government had no doubt of the folkuniversitet's pedigree as a study association. Its particular role was formally recognised in the mid-1970s when legislation was introduced to regulate the funding and operation of all Swedish education. The law relating to universities included an obligation on their part to publicise, in popular form, the results of research and to pass on to ordinary people the benefits of other forms of scholarship (Alexandersson & Karlsson 1982: 201). The folkuniversitet took a leading role in this, but more and more as an independent study foundation and less as extra-mural departments tied to the universities. This work was coordinated by Peter Hammarberg, who held the post of director of studies for the folk university during the 1960s and 1970s.

There are a number of ways in which the folkuniversitet has interpreted the government requirement to popularise university research. Through its autonomous members, it organised 'open days' on the various campuses, sponsored seminars on recent research, and continued to run study circles staffed by university personnel. In 1980 Uppsala started Sweden's first university of the third age, an organisation that helps open up the university to older people who audit lectures out of interest rather than to obtain a degree. About the same time, the folkuniversitet pushed for the inclusion of new courses in the universities - courses concerned, for example, with peace and environmental studies. During
the debate on the use of nuclear power plants in Sweden, the folk university was commissioned to prepare material, based on university research, which could be used in country-wide study circles.

It also continued to provide staff development courses for university academics as well as enabling trainee teachers to gain experience by acting as study circle leaders in some of its programs. Another course (in which I was involved as a tutor in 1992) focused on presentation skills for university researchers, especially those required to report findings at international and national conferences. In the decade from the mid-sixties to mid-seventies, the folkuniversitet was a driving force behind evening and summer courses for older university students. In 1971 nearly 2,000 people enrolled in university summer courses, all of which led to a degree. Their results were usually much better than those of full-time day students, a phenomenon partly explained by the greater degree of motivation and application of more mature students.

The summer schools had an interesting side effect. The age and experience of the participants, their willingness to question and challenge lecturers and their desire to incorporate real life experiences into theoretical subjects helped lecturers rethink their mode of delivery. Lecturers, who taught on summer schools and were willing to reflect and act on their experience, often developed into much more effective lecturers. Evening programs and summer courses are still a part of university course delivery but, in tighter economic times, the universities seem to be concentrating once more on what they see as core business - tertiary education for younger students who come direct from high school.

Today the folkuniversitet is an integral part of Sweden’s adult education system and has built a formidable reputation as a key provider in language learning. Again there is an historical reason for this. All the universities had departments that concentrated on specific languages and some of their research touched on language acquisition. Academics and students who were responsible for reviving the folk university ideal in the 1930s also emphasized the role of language in disseminating research findings in international settings. With the help of the British Council, the folk university set up English language study circles that used British learning material and native speakers as study leaders. These study circles were so successful that the folk university formed three language centres - the French centre (1942), the British centre (1954) and the German centre (1956). Study circle leaders could only be employed for two years to make sure that teachers were kept in touch with their own culture and language.

As early as 1946, the folkuniversitet arranged language study tours (to Cambridge, Paris, Grenoble and Lausanne) so that students could practise their target language in an authentic setting. In the thirty years that followed, about 100,000 people undertook these language tours. By the mid-seventies, other companies were active in the field and many young people arranged their own travel experience, often with the intention of improving a second language. Nevertheless, the folkuniversitet remained a key provider and today language teaching makes up over fifty percent of all its courses. Many of the courses lead to qualifications such as the Cambridge English Language Certificates.

In the post-war period, Sweden has become a destination for both migrant workers and refugees. As in Australia, the government saw advantages in developing the Swedish language skills of these new immigrants and provided free language instruction. The folkuniversitet became one of the more important providers of this service. It also deliberately set out to become a leader in international languages and, in the 1960s, set up a folk high school at Visingso that
concentrated on language courses. The philosophy behind this move was that the culture and society of another country can be best accessed through language study and actual experience. Most of the long courses include a term in the target country, often at one of the folkuniversitet's own international centres.

It is difficult in a short article to encompass all the activities of one of Sweden's more unusual study associations. The folkuniversitet has often taken the initiative and filled an educational need that was not recognised by the state until a decade or so later. In 1953, for example, it set up an adult evening school to help adults who wanted to complete their school leaving certificate and gain entry to university. Because study associations were not supposed to involve themselves with formal education, no funds were provided. In 1967, the state recognised that adults who failed to complete their secondary schooling deserved a second chance and so the municipal adult education system, that I described above, was born. The folkuniversitet, having seen a need fulfilled, was prepared to bow out and leave the work to the municipalities.

The folkuniversitet, because of its more international focus, also led the way in setting up a secretarial school for people interested in working overseas or for foreign companies. The school was begun in 1963, and students were able to gain experience working for companies in England, Germany and Switzerland. Another initiative was the formation of academies to train people in the arts. The Stockholm branch of the folkuniversitet opened a ballet academy and later a school of fine arts. In the seventies, Lund, Gothenburg and Uppsala did the same. Today the folk university's aesthetic programs, offered either as long courses at the above mentioned schools or in short study circle courses, are second only to its language training. The numbers attending courses are quite staggering and a comparison of the 1982/3 and 1995/6 figures shows no decline in interest. In the earlier period, 298,675 people participated in the folkuniversitet's cultural programs and 61,600 in the language courses alone (Folkuniversitet, 1997: 19-20). Thirteen years later, the numbers were 448,679 for cultural activities and 48,938 for languages. There are many more private and international companies competing for language students in Sweden today and one can see the effect of this in the lower numbers of folkuniversitet language students in recent years. Overall, the number of hours offered in registered, subsidised courses by the folk university has risen from 790,205 in 1982/3 to 1,179,296 in 1995/6.

Australian adult education has been characterised as a 'Cinderella' sector bullied by its richer sister sectors (higher education and vocational education and training). These also exist in Sweden and funding for them compares favourably with their Australian counterparts. It is only in adult education that the gap is so glaring and the logic behind the funding so different. Swedish governments have for a long time now been persuaded by social as well as economic arguments in its provision of a subsidised, well-organised and accessible system of non-formal adult education. It has valued 'Cinderella' for her intrinsic worth rather than for how she can be used to improve the palace finances. In periods of high structural unemployment, Sweden is prepared to provide opportunities that may not lead to jobs but which might alleviate some of the tedium of joblessness. Inherent in this thinking is the idea that a people accustomed to courses of self-improvement will be more ready to take on work as it becomes available or, in the event of continued high unemployment, accept a completely new definition of work. In either case educated, literate people, who have the capacity to learn, will advantage Sweden in an increasingly competitive world market.

Australia has a long and important history of its own when it comes to university extension
programs. Unlike Sweden we have, for various reasons, allowed these programs to evolve in a fragmented way. Lack of government assistance has not helped their survival. In contrast, Sweden's folkuniversitet received approximately A$20 million in government grants in 1997. For the 911,714 taxpayers who attended folkuniversitet courses during that period, it was money well spent. The government grants enabled the folkuniversitet to coordinate the activities of its five autonomous branches and provide an administrative home for like-minded groups, such as the university of the third age. Its ideology has been based on the importance of learning itself rather than learning for a particular end. It has helped achieve this by bringing the university to the people. It has also acted as a catalyst providing a service, without funding, until the need is clearly established and the government prepared to pay for it.

ENDNOTES

i The Social Democrats, in coalition with other socialist parties, held power on and off in the period 1920-32 and then in their own right from 1932-76 (except briefly in 1936) and 1982-91 and 1994-98. Britannica, Macropaedia, vol. 28, p.327.

ii Information on the Swedish folkuniversitet is drawn from a number of sources, mainly written in Swedish. I wish to particularly acknowledge the work of Olaf Alexanderson and Jan-Sture Karlsson, Det svenska Folkuniversitet: idéer och arbete, Studieförbundet Folkuniversitet, Stockholm, 1982. Much of the detail about the folk university system is taken from this source.

iii Gothenburg was a högskola, or university college, rather than a national university until the 1960s.

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Dagens Nyheter, 28 March 1917.


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