

# A School for the Future

- the ideas underlying  
the reform of upper-secondary  
education in Sweden



*Skolverket*



## Foreword

This booklet, *A School for the Future*, forms part of the continuous work carried out by the National Agency for Education to reform the upper-secondary school education in Sweden. The text provides comments on the documents establishing national objectives on their interrelation and the relationship between national documents and local curriculum work.

The aim of the booklet is to shed light on the background and motives of the reform and to stimulate discussion and support current efforts at school level.

What role do changes in the surrounding world play in the reformed curriculum?

What is the content of the curriculum, and how do this relate to the subject syllabuses?

What do we mean by the word "knowledge", and how can we assess different qualities of knowledge?

What is meant by local freedom?

These are some of the issues dealt with in the text.

The booklet is first and foremost intended for school principals and teachers but it may also serve as a basis for discussions among students and parents about the backgrounds and motives behind reformed upper-secondary education.

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## Local Freedom

The new national curriculum for upper-secondary education in Sweden (Lpf-94) provides the staff of individual schools with greater freedom of action and a significantly increased level of influence over their own work. Decisions as to the concrete form, content and organisation of teaching are to be made at school level. At the same time, this new freedom implies new challenges.

The biggest challenge facing those who work in upper-secondary education is perhaps not to ensure that the content and form of teaching reflect the continually changing nature of contemporary reality, nor does it lie in being able to view the work of schools from a value-based perspective or being able to change one's approach to what knowledge is or what the most suitable working methods are; rather, the biggest challenge is to base one's thinking on a different foundation, to think of objectives in the form of knowledge and skills, to leave the security represented by directives that establish what should be learnt. All upper secondary schools are to provide a comparable level of education, but they are no longer required to do this in the same way as each other.

The expression "local freedom" as used in the heading refers to the areas in which the staff of individual schools have been given considerable influence and power of decision-making. This freedom of man?uvre concerns a) the way the objectives laid down in the curriculum and the subject syllabuses are translated into practice, and b) the organisation of the school. The national curriculum is given the shape of a local work schedule.

Developments in society place new demands on school education. Political, economic, social and technological changes result in rapid and radical change in the conditions prevailing on the labour market. There are many jobs and areas of further education for which young people, if they are to be able to gain access to them, need to be equipped with a greater breadth and depth of knowledge and skills. New kinds of competence are required, in both old and new areas of work. All aspects of life are increasingly internationalised, and the possibility of contacts with other countries and cultures has increased dramatically thanks to developments in communications. The changes undergone by contemporary society therefore have considerable practical implications for the work of teaching.

It is in order to ensure that these implications reach practical, classroom expression that the reform of upper-secondary education has established a school system that is managed in terms of objectives. Responsibility for and influence over the choice of subject matter, working methods and organisation has been transferred from national to local level. Within the framework of

objectives laid down in the national curriculum and subject syllabuses room for manoeuvre has been left for each school to make its own decisions. The fact that the objectives have an open character encourages active participation; and in order to ensure higher quality teaching and greater efficiency and flexibility of organisation the responsibility for applying the objectives in everyday practice has been devolved onto those who work in the individual schools.

Increased influence and participation imply at the same time increased responsibility and readiness to meet changes. In an educational approach where the content and form of teaching are based on the students' questions, where knowledge and skills are to be conceived as inter-related wholes, and where students are to be trained to take greater responsibility for their own learning, the roles of the different actors in school life differ from what they previously were.

## **Background**

With the new curriculum, the new syllabuses and the new grading system, upper-secondary school education in Sweden has been given a root-and-branch overhaul. The concepts of knowledge, learning and the assessment of students' performance have gained new implications. The transition from a nationally regulated system to a system where the state establishes the objectives and leaves it to school staff to decide how to achieve them, pre-supposes the adoption of a new way of thinking. Why were these changes made, and what do they imply? The following looks at a number of the factors which underlie and explain the reasons for the reforms in upper-secondary education.

### **Trials Prior to the Reform**

The proposals regarding change in upper-secondary education elucidated in the report "Growing with Knowledge" from 1990/91 took form as a result of an extensive trial programme that covered both academic and vocational upper-secondary programmes.

One series of trials was called the "FS Programme", and centred on optional school education (i.e. education carried on after reaching the minimum school-leaving age). About half of all the country's upper-secondary schools took part, resulting in up to 1000 projects a year dealing with such questions as the organisation of studies, interior working environment, work experience, and the cross-over from upper-secondary to adult education. One of the guiding thoughts was that the FS trials should lead to reforms that were initiated at "grass-roots" level. These trials triggered a great deal of thinking on the subject of reform, and underlined above all the need for a radical overhaul leading to much greater local influence and responsibility.

In 1984 a working party was appointed to take a close look at the vocational programmes at upper-secondary level. These trials, which came to be known as the ÖGY trials, addressed such questions as training at the work-place, the teaching of general school subjects, and the adoption of an approach based on study-modules, and evolved into an important precursor of the reform programme that is the subject of this booklet. The trials met with considerable interest - at times as many as a fifth of all students on vocational programmes were involved - and those schools that took part had clear advantages in implementing the new reform programme compared with those schools that were not involved. The FS and ÖGY trials, together with other activities, laid a lot of the ground for the work of reforming upper-secondary school education.

## **School and Society**

One reason why school education changes is what happens in the world at large. The content and volume of knowledge is strongly affected in a society that is undergoing change at an ever-increasing pace. A world where political and economic processes are both complicated and fast-moving places increased demands on people's level of knowledge and their ability to communicate. Working life requires people with flexibility and new kinds of competence; and a labour market in constant change creates a need for schools to be flexible in the content and objectives of their teaching. Established professions disappear, new ones take their place. The boundaries between different professions are erased, and the distinction between blue-collar and white-collar employees is fading from view. The role of schools is to meet the requirements that exist with regard to both basic and high-level knowledge and skills, with regard to different combinations of professionally applicable competence, and with regard to communication skills.

The expansion in trade between different countries and increased levels of migration create a need for better language skills and a greater understanding of other people's politics, conditions of life, culture and religion. Environmental issues can no longer be seen as a matter for each country separately - rather they call for decisions to be made across national boundaries. Technological development in general is explosive in nature, and we are only beginning to understand the possibilities that can be opened up by information technology.

All these kinds of change mean that decision-making structures in the education system need to be flexible and capable of moving quickly. A greater amount of decision-making must be carried out by the staff of individual schools. The reform of upper-secondary education, with its use of nationally established objectives, is a part of the general decentralisation that has been occurring in Swedish society. The new curriculum and syllabuses, with their focusing on objectives and results, establish what the work of schools is to be about. The responsibility for organising and carrying out the work - for example by choosing the subject matter to be studied and the working methods to be adopted - lies to a large extent with teachers and students. This means that within the framework established by the national objectives, all those who work at school are able to involve themselves in influencing the content and form of what is taught, and are at the same time responsible for ensuring that the work gets done. The conditions prevailing locally play a considerable role in determining how the national objectives are concretised and applied.

A third reason for the changes in school education is the increased length of time for which young people go to school, and the fact that nearly all young people stay on to follow a programme of upper-secondary education. What this

implies is that, to an even higher degree, young people's personal and social development takes place in school. In other words, schools have greater responsibility with regard to their socialising function. Not only are there higher demands on what students are taught while at school; at the same time the question of how values and norms can be integrated into teaching is given greater urgency.

All in all, there is much to explain why thorough-going change in upper-secondary education was deemed necessary; the education provided by schools must take account of the demands and expectations of the rest of society, and also of the tasks schools are asked to perform.

### **Everyone Needs Upper-Secondary Education**

The vast majority of young people, having completed compulsory school education (i.e. having reached age 16), go on to some form of upper-secondary education. Changes in the knowledge and skills required in working life, together with increased opportunities for shaping their own programmes of studies, may lead to an even greater number of students choosing to stay on at upper-secondary school to further their education.

In today's society the focus is on a wide range, and to a certain extent new kinds, of competence. In addition to fundamental knowledge and skills creativity, responsibility, flexibility, and communicative and social skills are examples of abilities and aptitudes required in working, social and private life.

The task of schools is not only to lay a foundation for future studies and professional life. Schools have also to provide a solid all-round education out of which can grow an understanding of our cultural heritage and of democratic values; young people should be helped in their personal development and equipped to face the future.

### **Breadth and Individual Character**

Giving greater breadth to upper-secondary education means creating the conditions which can enable all students on all study programmes to attain a good level of basic knowledge in different subject areas. This basic competence is to function as a foundation for continued study or other functions in the society of the future. This explains why all students on all programmes take the core subjects: whatever programme they are following, the aim is for all students to achieve the same objectives, qualitatively and quantitatively, in those courses which all upper-secondary students study. However, although all schools are required to ensure that all students attain the same kind of knowledge, the content and working methods of the teaching may vary



depending on the type of programme the particular students are following. The core subjects entail new demands that schools have to meet. The fact that all students, irrespective of the programme they are following, now have to study subjects having the same objectives as regards level of knowledge to be attained is stimulating unprecedented amounts of discussion among teachers on questions such as choice of subject matter and working methods. Some of the approaches being tried are slower pace of study, adaptation of working methods, greater co-ordination, and a clearer reflection, in the content of core subjects, of the programme being followed by the students in question.

With all these different points of departure there is an increased need for new thinking on educational methods, co-ordination and the exchange of ideas between teachers, and organisational flexibility. Consequently, there must be enough room for local solutions which take into account the conditions applying to the individual school - such as composition of student groups, size and composition of staff, school premises, and the school's links with higher education and employers.

One of the aims of upper-secondary education is to enable students to choose their education in accordance with their needs and wishes. The core subjects provide a common grounding which all students receive; students then select programme-specific foundation courses and options, i.e. they can direct their studies towards the specialised knowledge that corresponds to their future interests and needs.

This more module-based approach to upper-secondary education paves the way for greater freedom of choice, as students can choose subjects that do not fall under the jurisdiction of the programme they are following. Exactly what the different programmes and combinations look like is a function of the local situation. Moreover, the harmonisation of courses at upper-secondary level and in the national adult education programme means that it will be easier for students to supplement and refresh their knowledge at a later stage.

### **The Necessity of Continuity and Co-Ordination**

The fact that almost all young people go on from compulsory schooling to follow three-year programmes at upper-secondary school must not lead to a lowering of standards - indeed, the aim is rather to raise the level of students' competence. This implies that the content and organisation of teaching must be adapted to meet the students' needs.

If the hoped-for effects are to be achieved in upper-secondary education, then there must be good links between the different stages of school education

(junior, lower-secondary and upper-secondary), so that as the child progresses through his/her school career he/she can continually build on the knowledge already gained. This can be facilitated if staff throughout the school system share a common view as to what knowledge and learning are about.

In addition to this, there is a need for continuity in relationship to higher education. It is still a commonly held viewpoint that each stage of studies should create a product which can lock directly into future phases. If we are to achieve the goal of raising the level of both ambition and competence then the different stages of education must start feeling greater responsibility towards each other in matters concerning students' knowledge and learning.

## **Management by Objectives**

When school education was governed by a detailed system of regulations, the content and methods of teaching were to a large extent determined at the national level. Rules and regulations formulated centrally were used to determine how subjects should be taught at the local level, in each and every school. This kind of management requires the central governing authority to be able to predict what changes society will undergo. In an increasingly complex and unpredictable society such an approach to management is no longer practicable.

To make it easier to develop and apply more flexible solutions the management of the school system has to a considerable extent been deregulated, which means that a large degree of responsibility has been transferred to those who work in the individual schools. By dint of their professionalism and their familiarity with local conditions school staff can be expected to be able to provide the best solutions.

The principle of management by objectives means that the objectives established at national level are open, that they are subject to local, individual interpretation. The national documents establish what school education is to be directed towards, while decisions as to how the school is to be organised and what concrete subject matter is best suited to enabling students to fulfil the national objectives are made at the local level. The model of management by objectives now being applied in upper-secondary education in Sweden involves both the central authority and the people who are active at the local level in the work of formulating the objectives.

The question of what knowledge and skills schools should impart is no longer a straightforward matter. What young people learn these days comes from so many other sources as well that school staff cannot know what the total range of knowledge and skills is that children have at their command. A school system managed by objectives has as its function, therefore, to give concrete, local expression to the target levels of attainment enshrined in the subject syllabuses.

The focus of educational methodology is the student and what he/she wishes to learn. By means of applying an approach where teaching is oriented to take account of students' questions, and strives to give an all-round picture, to explain, support, stimulate, guide, accompany and assess, the central thrust of education is no longer to impart factual knowledge, but to take the needs of the students as the mainspring and criterium of what goes on in school.

### **School is not Value-Neutral**

In a society constantly subject to sudden and rapid change in all walks of life, political, economic, social, it becomes difficult to find relationships

characterised by continuity and durability. Compared to the family and other social networks, which are increasingly fragmented and short-lived, school can be seen as one of the few places where just about all young people can establish a rootedness that can last for several years. School can become the place where young people are able to find daily confirmation of their identity and worth, where they can be participants in a long-lasting community within which they can grow and develop.

The national curriculum mentions the values on which it and school education are based. Respect for human dignity, the freedom and integrity of the individual, equality between the sexes, care and concern for those who are suffering, inter-cultural openness, and a sense of personal responsibility are examples of the fundamental values which schools are to foster and represent. It is the duty of schools to uphold these values by ensuring that they are given practical expression and application in the work of the school.

Fundamental democratic values and human rights are to be upheld. If schools are to be successful in their socialising function then these ethical and existential issues must underpin and be given expression in all aspects of the school's work: its organisation, its educational methods, and in the overall attitudes that prevail. In what kinds of situations and places can norms and values be confronted? What kinds of working methods and approaches can strengthen students' understanding of each other and prevent the occurrence of bullying? How can the content of lessons be influenced? How can equality be achieved so that all students have the same chance of learning? Each school has the freedom which enables - and obliges - those who work there to interpret and concretise the objectives of the subject syllabuses in order that the basic values enshrined in the national curriculum are put into practical application.

## **Education and Knowledge**

Debate on educational methods and aims can sometimes give the impression that "a good education" is about a fixed set of items of knowledge which are to be imparted to the recipient, who then possesses them. In "Schools and Education" (Official Swedish Government Reports No. 1992:94), however, a more complex view on knowledge is put forward, according to which education, learning, has as its aim to enable people to assimilate knowledge, so that it is not a superficial accessory, but becomes part of their personality. This implies that a student does not study a subject simply in order to learn facts and concepts, but also in order to learn how to understand things, how to use concepts in particular ways. This viewpoint on what education is has consequences on what it is important for students to learn at school, and how they learn.

One of the tasks of schools is to transmit cultural heritage - the traditions, language and knowledge of previous generations - from one generation to the next, and to prepare students for living and working in the society of the future. In addition schools, together with the home, are to provide an environment in which young people can develop, and where they learn to take responsibility for others. Over a long period of time it was school that had the main responsibility for what young people learned. Through its role and its teaching school was vital if children and young people were to receive the knowledge which society felt it important that they should be provided with. The situation today is very different.

The main source of competition stems from the rapidly developing area of information technology. With computer technology and the explosive developments in the field of mass media learning has, for many young people, moved into the home. New technology permits a flow of information that is right up-to-date, and provides learning situations that strongly engage young people's interest and attention. For some young people the international perspective is a wide-open everyday reality - but not for all. While some people, via the Internet, are fully acquainted with global events, others lack even the most elementary knowledge of what is going on in their immediate vicinity. It is the task of schools to do all they can to reduce this discrepancy.

One effect of this technological and mass-media explosion is that young people are left on their own to sort out and appraise an enormous flood of information. School and the home have lost control over what children and young people learn, and what they are capable of in this area. How can all this information be transformed into knowledge? One of the most important tasks of school teaching is therefore to provide students with guidance, so that separate items of knowledge can be integrated into a whole, and so that they learn to distinguish, analyse, think through and apply on the basis of the values which it is schools' duty to represent and uphold.

### **Knowledge and Learning**

In the National Curriculum Committee's report "Schools and Education" there is a discussion of knowledge as learning in relation to different standpoints and approaches of the last decades. This discussion is provided as background to the proposal that the definition of "knowledge" should be broadened to include things that are learned through experience. The concept of "knowledge through familiarity" emphasises the important role played by experience in the development of students' knowledge.

Taking this broadened view of knowledge, one can say that there are four forms of knowledge: facts, or information; understanding, or the creation of meaning; proficiency, or application; and familiarity, or judgement. There is no hierarchical order in which the different forms can be seen as being more or less developed than each other, or different in value.

Since school is not the only place where young people learn, and since there are many sources of and ways to obtain knowledge, knowledge can be seen as having different aspects and forms - so there is no fixed set of items of knowledge which it is schools' duty to impart; knowledge must be seen in relationship to the context from which it stems. It cannot be the task of schools to choose exactly what knowledge and skills should be provided.

A complex society places considerable demands on people's navigational ability, on their ability to understand and evaluate what is going on. In their private life, at work and as members of society they need to be able to appraise different issues and exert influence. Consequently, it is important that the values embodied in the national curriculum imbue the knowledge communicated with meaning, and that an attitude characterised by flexibility and creativity, by an ability to see the whole situation, and by interaction between individuals and groups and between different spheres of competence, is given a central role in school life.

### **Assessing Knowledge**

In the new grading system the performance level of each student is to be assessed in relation to how well the syllabus objectives have been achieved. Grades are awarded on a four-point scale running Non-Pass, Pass, Merit, and Distinction. The teacher of the subject awards the grade he/she thinks most fitting on the basis of his/her assessment of the student. The National Agency for Education has drawn up national criteria for the grades Pass and Merit in all nationally available subjects.

When the syllabus objectives for each subject are made visible and linked to the different grade criteria, then the limit beneath which a student receives the grade Non-Pass also becomes clear. Since one of the aims of the reforms of upper-secondary education is to raise the overall level of competence of students, the grade Non-Pass means that the student and the school have failed to reach the desired result; in this case it is the task of the school to provide support and take other measures in order to help the student attain a pass grade. It can be an emotionally difficult task for a teacher not to award a student a pass grade - but the ethical dilemma only becomes more difficult if the school does not bring to light insufficiencies, and is therefore unable to help the student improve his/her level of performance.

Since experience shows that grades to a large extent shape the content of teaching, it is vital that the grading criteria are openly explained to students. The criteria must also be fixed in relation to the basis on which the teaching builds, namely the objectives laid down in the different subject syllabuses. Giving an account of and then discussing the objectives of the subject syllabuses, and the levels of knowledge and proficiency to which the different grades correspond, is one way of granting students greater influence and opportunity to take responsibility. In addition to the benefits it has on the teaching of the subject, making students aware of the grading requirements and criteria is also in line with the democratic principles which are to permeate all of school education.

What the different criteria actually mean is to be expressed in a concrete manner, so that the students are clearly aware of what is expected of them. How can this kind of interpretation form the basis of a fair assessment? How are teachers to know how the levels are set at other schools? How clearly can the criteria be explained in writing without the documents establishing the national objectives becoming so prescriptive that they lose their openness?

Exchanges of views between teachers regarding a) the objectives laid down in the subject syllabuses, and b) how the performance levels in the criteria can be given concrete interpretation in practical reality, are then a pre-requisite if assessments are to be as fair as possible.

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