

## The PLA Policy Situation in Sweden

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### Abstract

This article describes the origins of and changes in Swedish prior learning assessment (PLA/*validering*) policies since the mid-1990s. The article argues that a key event in this history, the Adult Education Initiative of 1996, was implemented in direct response to significant changes in the Swedish labor market, and that PLA, a “process of structured assessment,” then was called on as a way to recognize unacknowledged work skills. The main course for Swedish PLA has been to lift the educational levels of the low-educated unemployed, thus opening up educational paths that previously did not exist for this and other groups. But during these years, other purposes have been stressed, for example during the recession around 2008 and 2012 where PLA was lifted up as a tool to enhance labor market transitions, and in 2015 during the great migration from especially Syria, it was seen as a way of assessing and recognizing foreign acquired knowledge and skills in order to both integrate newcomers and fill vacancies in trades that lacked skills. The article shows that over the last two decades, both the focus and strength of PLA discussions and implementation in Sweden have varied. In the recent 2015 National Delegation for Validation, for example, the government renewed its interest in PLA policy as a means of making knowledge and skills visible. The question of whether this promise can be realized is taken up throughout the article.

### Introduction

The prior learning assessment (PLA) concept is labeled *validering* in Swedish (compared, for example, with the French, *validation*), which refers to accrediting something in order to make its value visible (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Andersson, Fejes, & Ahn, 2004). In this essay, I will use PLA as a translation of *validering*, but sometimes also as a substitute for RPL, the recognition of prior learning. The discussion of PLA on a policy level arrived rather late in Sweden compared to other countries, even Nordic countries such as Finland and Norway (Björnavåld, 2000). While for many years Sweden had different PLA-like phenomena within both the school system and the labor market, it wasn't until the middle of the 1990s that what we now generally regard as PLA was implemented primarily within the adult education system (see Andersson, Fejes, & Ahn, 2004; Andersson & Fejes, 2011). Due to major structural changes in the labor market in the early 1990s, many adults faced unemployment, and the government initiated the Adult Education Initiative in 1996 in order to lift the educational level of these large groups of low-educated unemployed. PLA was introduced as a way of enhancing the educational paths for these groups and transforming “real” competence into “formal” competence (Andersson, Fejes, & Ahn, 2004). The Swedish official definition of PLA was:

PLA is a process of a structured assessment, valuing, documentation and recognition of knowledge and competences that an individual has gained, irrespective of how they have been acquired. (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2003, p. 23)

This definition stressed that the result of the assessment process should lead to an explicit recognition. These thoughts were much in line with the debate in the Swedish education field. In Sweden, education and

training are highly school-based and the PLA policies have also been closely connected to the field of education (Björnavåld, 2000). For example, in the annual government state budget documents, PLA is hardly mentioned except in the sections on Education and Research, and on just a few occasions in the Labor Market and Working Life parts of the budget documents (Berglund, 2017, Regeringskansliet, 2016). Since the introduction of PLA policies in 1996, both focus and strength of the discussions have varied. The most recent change in PLA policy came when, in 2015, the government reinstalled the National Delegation for Validation that directly called for action on PLA. In this article, I would like to discuss changes in Swedish PLA policies and their implications.

### **Assessment from a Critical Perspective**

Andersson (2006) pointed out that, in its explicit intention, PLA most often is *summative*. This means that PLA processes focus on the result of the recognition of knowledge and skills already acquired by the individual. Andersson stressed that the challenging part of PLA is that *informal* learning now can be given the same status as *formal* learning. He also discussed the *transformative* aspects of PLA, which compared to the summative, can change the individual in both matters of understanding and motivation in connection to his or her own competence. Ellström (1997) also discussed different aspects of competence and mentioned motivation as an ingredient in competence. This means that competence should not only be looked upon as a static phenomenon but rather as something that is changing. Therefore, a vital aspect of skill can be not only to know something or to know how to do something, but also can be the willingness or preparedness to develop one's knowledge and skills. Of course, this also is an interesting dimension of skill for any future employer.

Andersson (2006) also described other aspects of PLA, *convergent* and *divergent* assessment. In short, convergent assessment aims to control *if* a person has certain knowledge or skills, often in relationship to specific preset criteria. When we talk about divergent assessment, we mean that there is a more open-ended approach to the assessment process that involves an investigation of what a person knows or can do in a more exploratory sense. Andersson meant that these descriptions of knowledge or skills should be looked upon as ideal types or methodological tools rather than as descriptions taken directly from reality. Still, they can be useful in discussing various PLA system approaches.

What has been described as *Procrustean* PLA has also highlighted aspects of a convergent type of assessment (Harris, 1999). The image comes from the bandit from Greek mythology, Procrustes, who had the idea that everybody could fit in his bed, and therefore stretched the legs of those too short and cut off those too tall. It can be argued that much of Swedish PLA policy has focused on varieties of convergent assessments, often with upper secondary school curricula or demands in the content of various professions within different trades used as evaluative criteria. But there are also examples in Sweden of divergent PLA systems where knowledge and skills of individuals have been assessed in a more open-ended way. For example, there are the practices of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) assessing the experiences of their staff, or the assessment of skills of those involved in different municipality-led motivational projects directed to youth.

The traditional view of PLA processes is that so-called "experience" has to be transformed into knowledge, and most often what is deemed to be that knowledge must conform to the academic field. Elana Michelson (2006) problematized this traditional view of the relationship between experience and knowledge, and pointed out that experience is often too quickly separated from the context in which it was produced. Similar problematizing of PLA approaches were identified by Tara Fenwick (2006) when she described PLA practices as something that "distort everyday experience in the process of tearing it from changing social contexts that give it meaning, assessing and dividing it into visible/invisible knowledge categories." She continued: "Human learning is thus colonized by the recogniser's gaze, which is rarely identified" (p. 288).

The traditional approach also seeks to make experience transferable, and, in a sense, more transparent and understandable. Still, Michelson (2006) argued that PLA often can become part of the knowledge stratification game, and that such a system is difficult to change. Within the PLA field, there are important questions to be asked about the complications of “tearing” away experience from its social context, but the transferability issue seems nevertheless to be the main interest of the stakeholders of PLA processes.

A review of the Swedish PLA policy field makes clear that the intriguing questions may lie in between interests and realities. The legitimacy question of PLA processes is, of course, a very important issue within the Swedish PLA field, not only from a democratic perspective, but, as per Michelson (2006), as PLA is connected to systems of social stratification. Thus, if knowledge and skills acquired in the workplace are deemed equivalent to those gained through formal education, there has to be some legitimation, some guarantee, of this recognition. And there also is the question of the usability of PLA within the labor market. In what ways and to what degree are the results of PLA assessment processes demanded by the labor market itself and used on the job? In an article by Alexandru Panican (2017), the challenges of these kinds of questions were taken on directly. Panican investigated different trade organizations within Swedish trade and commerce regarding their view of skills and PLA systems. Those Panican researched expressed appreciation for PLA in general and saw PLA processes as an effective way to visualize knowledge and skills that are most often useful for the labor market. His research also showed that PLA methods that are mainly grounded in specific trade criteria can be risky because the employer could be forced to employ those with the “right” assessed skill and exclude those with other kinds of skills. Thus, for example, Panican (2017) wrote about generic skills as both trade-specific skills and “soft” skills, and defined soft skills as an ability to take initiative, social skills and an ability to analyze, responsibility, perseverance and independence. These soft skills have, according to Panican, sometimes been discussed in connection with employability. His study showed that when trade organizations put these soft skills up against formal education, there was sometimes an overestimation of the transferability of formal education. These results also showed that an employee’s interest and motivation sometimes can be more relevant for an employer than a future employee’s formal education.

Some of Panican’s (2017) interviewees also pointed out that PLA systems used could not always pinpoint all relevant skills asked for by the employer. Thus, for example, Berglund & Andersson (2012) showed in their study of workplace PLA that organizations in many ways so visualize the skills of their employees, but also try to hide them due to the risk of losing employees to competing companies or having to pay more for the skills actually used by employees in raised salaries. Their study also showed that skills often are informally assessed, but seldom documented. In effect, the logic of workplace assessment processes leans on the usability of the skills rather than on issues of legitimacy, transferability and standardization.

### Review of Swedish PLA Policies

Year	Event
1994	The government declares a new type of education.
1996	Year of Lifelong Learning declared in the European Union.
1997	Adult Education Initiative begins.
2004	The National Delegation for Validation starts.
2008	Final report of the National Delegation for Validation.
2009	Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education formed.
2015	The National Delegation for Validation II begins.

In a 1994 report about future education requirements, the Ministry of Education declared that Sweden has a long tradition of systematic education for both youths and adults, but “now the demands for knowledge have tightened” (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, p. 35). The report especially stressed that the future labor market will be “significantly different” and “constantly changing,” and the changing speed will only increase. The report also emphasized that there is a readiness within the Swedish educational system for these future challenges. According to the report, another important change would be that the focus upon formal education can no longer be taken for granted, and that practical experience, informally acquired skills and knowledge, and a combination of these different resources will be required by a future labor market (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, p. 35; Berglund, 2010). This idea of a new labor market with new demands of knowledge and skills came to shape the Swedish education and labor market policy work thereafter. In this particular discourse about labor markets, PLA then became a significant tool. This tool was envisioned as both lifting the educational level of mainly unemployed people, and facilitating the assessment and recognition of specific knowledge and skills that could meet the demands of the labor market. The European Union declared 1996 the “Year of Lifelong Learning” (Commission of the European Communities, 1995). In the discussions that followed, thoughts about a new kind of educational system were raised, along with questions about different roles and responsibilities among the actors within the educational system (Colardyn, 1997). All of this was intended to secure the objective of a European Union characterized by sustainable financial growth and social cohesion. In Sweden, a major project called Kunskapslyftet (Adult Education Initiative) was launched in July 1997 according to this strategy, and began as an initiative that would last five years. The aim was to cut 50 percent of the unemployment rate before the year 2000 by giving mainly adult unemployed, but also those employed, the opportunity to raise their educational level. The government distributed 5.4 billion SEK (roughly 600 million USD) to the Swedish municipalities. Within the first 18 months, about 150,000 people started on an upper secondary school level; the initiative was evaluated as highly successful. During the time of the Adult Education Initiative, PLA came to be a common method within the adult education system administered by the Swedish municipalities. From a survey in the year 2000, two out of three municipalities worked with different forms of PLA (just some years later, the share of municipalities with some form of PLA work increased to 90 percent). Most of the municipalities had by then developed local models of PLA, mostly in accordance with criteria from the upper secondary school curriculum. The PLA processes involved both Swedish natives as well as immigrants. It was then common to assess municipality employees, such as kindergarten workers and health care assistants (SOU, 2001; Andersson, Fejes, & Hult, 2002; Andersson, Hult, & Fejes, 2002; Andersson, Osman, & Hult, 2006; Lundgren, 2005).

### **The First National Delegation for PLA**

In January 1, 2004, the government began the first National Delegation for Validation. This decision can be seen as a continuation of the fact that PLA had become a frequently used method within the adult education system that is run by the Swedish municipalities. Due to enormous structural changes within the labor market during the 1990s noted earlier, many people became unemployed and needed transitional support, often as additional or new education or work training opportunities. As part of this support, PLA was used to speed up education activities and/or to enhance employment chances. The National Delegation for Validation also was given the task of mapping the extent of PLA activities in Sweden as well as describing different PLA methods in depth. The earlier formulated Swedish definition of PLA can be seen as a starting point for the mapping of PLA activities.

In its final report, the National Delegation for Validation proposed that PLA processes, in general, could be differently designed and have different objectives, since various actors from different sectors of the society had overseen them (Valideringsdelegationen, 2008). However, since the majority of Swedish PLA activities were administered and run by the public sector (such as by municipalities or authorities), the issues of

quality, legitimacy and equality were self-evident interests for the delegation. Besides the objective of designing a future national strategy for PLA, the delegation also worked with mapping the central parts of the PLA process and, in detail, discussed how to deal with the central interests of the democratic state.

This idea of democratic values expressed in Swedish policies also has been a significant part of EU policy, especially connected to education (Valideringsdelegationen, 2008; Council of Europe, 2006). That is, the expectation of higher education is not only that it leads to employability, but in some ways that it also contributes to an understanding of, willingness to embrace, and preparedness in democratic values such as human rights, human values, tolerance, etc. – values thought of as the foundational building blocks for social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2011). The outlined directives to the National Delegation for Validation can be interpreted in line with these ideas. Legitimacy, equality and quality must, from a state perspective, permeate the PLA activities in order to consolidate the very basis for social cohesion, and in the long run, financial growth.

The report of the National Delegation for Validation also emphasized that the matter of *quality* is essential for the outcome of PLA processes. As described earlier, PLA processes and their criteria for evaluation have in general in Sweden, but not everywhere, been derived from either the upper secondary school curriculum or the defined knowledge and skill requirements of different trades. The quality of PLA processes is, of course, an interest for both the state and the labor market, as well as for the individual, but the delegation stressed that it must be the main responsibility of the state to support this development.

The issue of *legitimacy* also was discussed, and the report suggested that the content of labor market-related PLA processes should have a strong connection to the standardized knowledge and skill requirements of the trade in question. The logic here is that the assessment results could constitute a full degree and the need to be recognized by the labor market. Thus, the report stipulated that PLA activities that are limited to a *local* context and its specific criteria also should be fully declared as such. So too, in order to have a high level of legitimacy, PLA systems related to the formal education system should be constructed with close connections to the criteria of the particular course in question. The main message from the National Delegation for Validation was that each PLA process should fully declare the legitimacy of its result.

The challenge within the Swedish PLA field is that different PLA systems have emerged in Sweden, and some have been built upon locally or trade-related criteria with little or limited currency outside the local and sometimes regional context. This practice has been both a blessing and a curse. The pros are foremost that local and regional PLA systems already have been developed. This is often because they are more manageable from an organizational perspective and can be implemented on short notice. The cons are that the range of these PLA systems is more limited, and, too, that the assessment criteria and results might not be properly understood outside the context of the particular local or regional system for which they were developed. The main issue that the delegation wanted to avoid is that people go through PLA processes without understanding the legitimacy and scope of their results.

An additional interest of the delegation was the question of *equality*. The delegation especially stressed the importance of equality in terms of an equivalent PLA process, regardless of where in Sweden or by whom the PLA was arranged and performed. The National Delegation for Validation has divided the general PLA process as a method containing: 1) a general mapping of knowledge and skills; 2) a deeper mapping of knowledge and skills; 3) a knowledge and skills assessment for certificates; and 4) a knowledge and skills assessment for grades or licenses. The delegation wanted to ensure that each of the previously mentioned parts should be designed so that the validated person was given the same treatment regardless of place or evaluator.

Another important question in the Swedish debate about PLA has been about who has the financial responsibility for the PLA process itself. In its final report of 2008, the National Delegation for Validation proposed that PLA activities within the realm of adult education administered by municipalities should be financed in the same way as ordinary adult education. When authorities like the Swedish Public Employment Service and the Social Insurance Agency initiate PLA processes, it is appropriate, according to the delegation, that they also take on the financial responsibility for those processes. The same holds true when an employer wants to use PLA processes for competency development for his or her employees: that the employer take on the cost of these processes. The simple logic can be formulated as: “The one who starts it, pays!”

### **The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise**

In their response to the final report of the National Delegation for Validation, the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, an association of about 50 different employers’ federations and business organizations and 60,000 companies, offered some remarks about PLA processes in Sweden. They approved of much of what was suggested, such as the importance of the development of a more “systematized PLA” and that different “PLA systems are characterized by a high legitimacy on the labor market as well as within the education system.” At the same time, however, they were eager to stress that “PLA never can become an end in itself” (Svenskt Näringsliv, 2008, p. 1). This may be understood as a reflection on labor market logic, for, as the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise also wrote: “The core of the assessment of a person’s real competence should always be in relation to a given purpose” (p. 3). For the confederation, it was important that PLA must always concern the individual in relationship to the labor market, which is another way of focusing on employability. Importantly, in relation to the above discussion of who should be financing PLA, their remarks reflected their strong hesitation to acknowledge PLA as a legal right for the individual employee. This can be interpreted as a sharp marker from their side that they only want to pay for things for which they have use.

### **Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education**

In its final report, the National Delegation for Validation also suggested that when its work had been completed, the responsibility for the development work necessary for PLA that the delegation began should be given to an official authority within the activity field of the Ministry of Education. This also became a reality in 2009 when the new Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education was formed (Myndigheten för Yrkeshögskolan, 2009). Its area of responsibility then was higher adult education in Sweden. Its task was to ensure that the range of educational opportunities, including PLA options, matched the needs of the current labor market. When the work of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education began, it also was given the operational responsibility for the national coordination of PLA, work that the National Delegation for Validation had started. The main goal for the work of a national structure for PLA was to enhance society’s use of PLA (Valideringsinfo, n.d.).

The operational work of the agency was mainly to map different PLA activities by various Swedish authorities, municipalities, organizations and private sector actors, such as trade organizations, companies and consultant firms. In a report from 2010, the agency described and summarized the Swedish landscape of PLA as mainly performed within four different areas (Myndigheten för Yrkeshögskolan, 2010). First, there were PLA models mainly designed as trade models (*branschmodell*). At that time, there were roughly 25 different models developed by different trade organizations, for example, different associations of construction workers, plumbers, electricians, industry, care workers, etc. All in all, 140 different work roles were concluded in these PLA models. These models aimed at assessing individuals’ knowledge and skills regarding different trade criteria in order to enhance the chances for people to become employed. These models were not frequently used, though the Swedish Public Employment Service procured PLA mainly from five trade areas, and, most often, within the health care sector.

The second area of PLA, as mentioned earlier, was adult education, which was run by the municipalities where most PLA processes take place. The validated persons are most often validated toward upper secondary school curriculum criteria, but the municipality also can procure branch model PLA.

A third area of PLA was PLA within higher vocational education. The goal of PLA in this area is both for qualification (to have the right to become a student in a certain course) and recognition (to have knowledge or skills assessed and graded). The challenge in this area was to develop and launch branch PLA models in more trades.

A fourth area covered PLA activities within university education. A report by the former Högskoleverket (2009) (currently the Swedish Council for Higher Education) stated that PLA activities for qualification and recognition are scarcely prioritized in higher education. Representatives from different academic institutions argued that PLA processes often were both time and resource consuming activities, and therefore, not frequently initiated. Despite this, PLA processes are initiated within higher education and, due to high immigration rates, a state project has begun to structure and speed up these processes.

The report from the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education also stated that “many different agents share the responsibility for PLA,” which means “a clear and pronounced division of both the responsibility and the roles between all agents is necessary in order to create a sustainable national structure for PLA” (Myndigheten för Yrkeshögskolan, 2010). This could be seen as encompassing the most complex part of the coordinating role of the agency. There were, and still are, many PLA initiatives taken by a wide spectrum of actors in Sweden, and it was clearly noted that the agency cannot have control in the development of all these PLA systems and models. The agency was most interested in the development of more PLA methods directly connected to the criteria of different trades. This was generally thought to be essential in enhancing the transfer between unemployment and employment. At the same time, the agency wanted to ensure that all of these new PLA systems and models have national legitimacy and, as mentioned earlier, are built upon democratic values. This, however, has not always been the case. Whether this can be controlled or steered remains a key question.

### **The New National Delegation for Validation**

In November 2015, the Swedish government decided to further accentuate the importance of PLA by reinitiating the National Delegation for Validation (Valideringsdelegationen, 2008) (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2015). Its goal was to propose a national strategy for PLA. The delegation was commissioned to work on various tasks, one of which was to ensure a consensus around the *meaning* and *function* of PLA to be established within the education system and among labor market agents. Other tasks that the delegation was given were to monitor and analyze the extent and results of different PLA activities in Sweden. The delegation also would be working toward the dissemination of knowledge about “best practices” regarding PLA activities and processes, and see that this knowledge reached different players within the PLA field. Lastly, the delegation undertook the task to propose to the government initiatives for changes regarding PLA in education and work life and to provide proposals for new legislation within this field. The National Delegation for Validation is expected to provide its final report in December 2019.

As an argument for this initiative, the former minister of upper secondary school and adult education and training, Aida Hadzialic, emphasized in 2015 the need to work for changes within the labor market regarding issues such as high work unemployment rates and a shortage of staff in welfare and other work market sectors (Regeringskansliet, 2016). She also noted that: “... there are quite many qualified people that are not working with jobs which they are educated for,” and continued: “A well-functioning system of PLA is

important in changing this situation” (Regeringskansliet, 2016, para. 3). In a debate article of November 2016, the Minister of Employment and Integration Ylva Johansson, and the present Minister of Upper Secondary School and Adult Education and Training Anna Ekström, also pointed out that the shortage of skills in various labor market sectors is now blatant, and that new state funds were directed to the Swedish municipalities to invest for this purpose (Johansson & Ekström, 2016). Further, they stressed that 300,000 people are now looking for jobs but at the same time, about 100,000 jobs are still not filled. In their conclusion, Johansson and Ekström argued that there is a major mismatch problem that needs to be solved. It was in this context that one of the strategic solutions they proposed was to give special focus to PLA and to suggest a fast track for newcomers to more rapidly get a job. One conclusion that can be drawn from these two government statements is that in contrast to the former National Delegation for Validation, this time there was a much greater focus on immigrants and on the waste of much of their knowledge and skills due to often bureaucratic systems and an overall lack of support.<sup>1</sup>

### **Public Interest in PLA**

This essay is not mainly focusing upon what political motives might lie behind different policy initiatives during the years, but it could nevertheless be of interest to draw some of the main lines of political changes during the previously described period of time, 1994-2017.

During this period, Sweden has shifted governments several times. For more than 30 years after the World War II, the Social Democrats (Tage Erlander and Olof Palme served as prime ministers) led the country (Landguiden Sverige, 2017). Their stable position in government has in general been explained by the fact that Swedish industry was unharmed by the war, which led to enormous economic growth and welfare expansion. In 1970, international competition challenged Swedish industry. In the middle of the 70s, Sweden’s relatively high tax rates were heavily criticized by both the opposition and parts of the cultural establishment. The Social Democrats lost in the 1976 election to three right-leaning parties, the Moderate Party, the Centre Party and the Liberal Party. In 1982, The Social Democrats with Olof Palme as prime minister returned to the government until Palme’s assassination in 1986.

The Social Democrats were in government until 1991 when the right-wing parties with a minority position came into government. Due to all-time high unemployment, economic recession and a bank crisis, the right-wing parties once again lost and the Social Democrats took the lead again in 1994. PLA had its starting point during this period of recession, since many became unemployed and PLA could be used as an important tool for attending to and visualizing the knowledge and skills of these groups. The Social Democrats then stayed in government until 2006 when a right-wing alliance of four parties took over (with the addition of the Christian Democratic Party). They were in government for two election periods, and in 2014 the Social Democrats, in a minority-led government, were back in government, this time together with the Green Party.

The unemployment rates have been a major political issue in Sweden, and it seems that every government has felt obligated to show itself strong on this point. For example, in 2006 when the right-wing parties in an alliance came to the government, the largest party, the Moderate Party, talked in their election campaign about a new labor market and even promoted themselves as the new “Labor Party.” In general, there is a major difference in the view of labor between the left parties, (the Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Green Party) and the right-wing parties (mainly the Moderate Party, the Centre Party, The Liberals and the Christian Democrats), especially regarding how they interpreted the often used and discussed Swedish concept *work strategy (arbetslinjen)* (Junestav, 2004). In short, the work strategy can be explained as follows: Every adult, according to his or her ability, should support himself or herself through work. In short, a leftist understanding of this work strategy has most often focused upon the aspect of *the right to work*, while the

right parties more stressed *the responsibility to work*. Both standpoints presume a labor market that offers work opportunities, but the left stand has been more closely connected to the responsibility of the state to provide and facilitate these work opportunities, while the stand of the right has more explicitly stressed the freedom and responsibility of the individual to become employable and employed (Junestav, 2004). In light of both the present history of PLA policies in Sweden and the different political views on work strategy, it seems natural to understand that the changes in policy also have some bearing on these different views.

Today, it seems as though we are back at square one when the new National Delegation for Validation restarted in 2015. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education lost its initial responsibility for the national coordination of PLA. This was once again handed over to the new National Delegation for Validation. The delegation was directed to work with roughly the same issues as had the former delegation and the agency. This might be seen by the new government as a somewhat negative assessment of the agency's work with PLA, or perhaps a judgment that the agency was not sharp enough in focusing and developing the PLA issue. This new delegation will close its work in 2019, and, in the meantime, will regularly report to the Ministry of Education and Research as well as the Ministry of Employment.

### **A Brief Analysis of the Role of PLA in Sweden**

The focus of Swedish PLA policies has varied over the years. The bottom line has always stressed PLA as an important tool in providing and enhancing labor market competence. However, the explicit objectives have changed from raising the general educational level of Swedish citizens, to the integration of immigrants, to adjustment in times of major changes at the labor market, to the professionalization of public sector occupations and others. In the realization of all these objectives, many actors with various agendas and methods from both the public and private sectors have been involved. In this part of the essay, I would like to discuss some aspects of both the tensions and possibilities that these PLA policies and activities create. This is primarily important in understanding the crossroads of the order given to the National Delegation for Validation to ensure that PLA activities throughout Sweden were performed in line with democratic values *and* the often pragmatic approach to many PLA initiatives. This will be discussed from what can be seen as three characteristic perspectives of the PLA policy situation in Sweden: *institutionalization*, *individualization* and *privatization*.

#### **Institutionalization**

Institutionalizing traits in the PLA policy field in Sweden have been most obvious in the goals given to the National Delegation for Validation and the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. These have all been about securing basic democratic interests, primarily for the subject of PLA, such as equality, quality, legitimacy, transparency, accessibility and transferability, etc. This can all be regarded as part of a formal education logic; that is, it is a major responsibility of public sector agents to work for and strive toward these goals. However, in a sense, the introduction of lifelong learning made all this impossible. From now on, all learning, whether formal, informal or nonformal, is expected to be considered important (Colardyn & Bjørnavåld, 2004). This means that the formal education system no longer can be seen as having the exclusive right to develop and assess knowledge and skills. Knowledge and skills are developed *everywhere*, and assessment activities often have only pragmatic aims with no intention of legitimacy or transferability. PLA thus comes in as the major gathering and collecting tool, like a magic vacuum cleaner, created to absorb and value all types of knowledge and skills, "irrespective of how they have been acquired" (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2003, p. 23).

Early on, the Ministry of Education expressed a concern for this situation of varied education and PLA processes:

There is a worry that basic democratic values may be pushed to the sideline when the formal education system no longer has the same dominating role. (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2001, p. 14)

It seems that the current official PLA policy, also expressed and supported by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, rests on agreement with and praise for the democratic objectives and the goal of reaching a national structure for PLA. On the other hand, which has been noted earlier, there are many locally developed PLA methods and processes in progress that sometimes lack national-based legitimacy and transferability. It seems that the official PLA challenge lies between the two issues described previously that, perhaps, can be formulated as: How can PLA assessment of informal knowledge and skills be given the same status as formal education *and* how can the results of PLA processes in practice be of interest and “employed” by the labor market? The Panican (2017) study seems to show that formal education (in all its glory), is not always of interest to the employer, not even formal education – like PLA results. Berglund & Andersson (2012) also showed that employers are not always interested in documents and recognition in the traditional way, but are more focused on the practical use of knowledge and skills within the business.

In a local example from my hometown of Piteå, Sweden, the municipality wanted to lift the educational and competence level of child care workers employed at the public nurseries. These child care workers have an upper secondary school education and their professional role is *barnskötare* (child care worker). The official professional role of child care workers with a university education in Sweden is *förskollärare* (nursery school teacher). The municipality wanted to enhance the level of these child care workers through both different courses in child care and with the PLA of earlier achieved competence within their work. The problem emerged when the municipality wanted to treat them as nursery school teachers, and the Swedish National Agency for Education refused to let them do that, meaning that, from the agency’s point of view, these child care workers did not fulfill the knowledge and competence criteria connected to that professional role. Thus, the former child care workers found themselves stuck between professional roles because their new competence level was not recognized by anyone other than their own current employer. The consequences mean that they still are child care workers (*barnskötare*) outside their own local context. The municipality tried to solve the situation by inventing a third function, nurse school pedagogue, but the real problem remained. This example shows the difficult and sometimes unrewarding situations when knowledge and competence are being assessed without full accordance with the formal education system.

There is a scale of different purposes of PLA that is expressed and practiced in Sweden. At one end, there is the status of *employability*, and at the other end, there is the *direct use* of the assessed knowledge and skills in a working-life situation. This is explicitly expressed by the industry and commerce sector, as it continues to stress that the purpose of PLA and its outcomes should always be seen in close connection to the demands of the labor market. This line of thought is not as clearly expressed by the public sector where the concept of “employability” is more often used. This is, of course, a matter of interest and finances, or, as identified earlier: Who is expected to pay for what?

### **Individualization**

Another interesting trait of the Swedish PLA policy field concerns the notion of individualization. Many have discussed the shift in policies toward the responsibility of the individual for education and employability (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007; Sparrhoff & Fejes, 2009; Uggla, 2007). Uggla (2007) wrote:

We are actually doomed to lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is one line in an absolutely necessary and forced adjustment to the strategies of an advanced liberal society in handling the challenges of globalization [author’s translation]. (p. 177)

This shift toward emphasis on the responsibility of the individual can be seen as a notion of a more intense

connection between economic growth and competitiveness, *and* education and the development of skills. The risk of not being competitive enough is often stressed in European and Swedish policy texts, a responsibility for the state as well as the individual (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2001). Another aspect of the consequences of lifelong learning and PLA is the financial responsibility of PLA. In short, Swedish policy texts often point out that the initiating part of the PLA process also is the financing part. Whichever part – municipality, the adult education system, the Swedish Public Employment Service, or private sector companies – the initiating part is seen as responsible for financing. This highlights both views of the objectives for lifelong learning and PLA. Can the individual have her or his knowledge and skills assessed regardless of objective? The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise says “no” to this question and stresses that the PLA processes should be designed to meet the demands of the labor market. They mean that the main purpose of the PLA process is that the individual becomes employed.

In practice, Swedish PLA processes have not exclusively been designed and initiated to meet the demands and requirements of the labor market. In short, PLA processes in Sweden can be divided into three major categories regarding purpose and outcome. First, there is PLA with the purpose of enhancing or shortening an educational trajectory, which Berglund (2010) labeled as *education*. This form is the most common purpose and is mainly done within the adult education system run by municipalities. Second, there are PLA processes with the purpose of the individual becoming employable, and/or becoming employed, labeled as *qualification* (Berglund, 2010). This form has been used, but not as much as the first one. The third purpose of a PLA process would be to empower the individual, labeled as *motivation* (Berglund, 2010). This has been quite common within different municipality PLA projects directed to clusters of individuals with special needs, like coming “back to life,” having a brand new start, starting to see oneself from a new perspective, or as a way of empowering the individual to be able to make decisions that develop that individual’s own life. In different supportive activities, often run by municipalities or nongovernmental organizations, PLA has played a significant part in the visualization of the knowledge, skills and experiences that the individual owns.

One can say that there is a discrepancy between Swedish PLA policies and some of these different purposes of PLA processes that highlights the questions about limitations for PLA. Something that has to be considered is that Sweden has a long history of popular adult education or mass education (*folkbildning*).<sup>2</sup> The *folkbildning* tradition is well in line with the lifelong learning concept, and leads to two notions of the uniqueness of the prerequisites of the overall Swedish education field. One is that, at least as an ideal, people have many opportunities to learn throughout their lives (this can generally be both quite easy and quite inexpensive). The other is that a shift of professional trajectory is seen as something quite normal. This is sometimes expressed as getting a second chance, with the purpose of starting a new professional career. It is obvious that education and PLA in a Swedish context naturally have a clear focus upon entry into and establishment in the labor market, something that is explicitly expressed in the PLA policy documents. However, there also seem to be other aspects, such as competence development, competence awareness, etc., that are using PLA processes but do not have this clear and overt association with labor market entry.

The National Delegation for Validation seems aware of the challenge that PLA activities in Sweden with different initiators do not always share the same purposes and methods. Nevertheless, the delegation seems obliged to stick to their order to guard democratic values. The question of equality, legitimacy and quality are important aspects from a state perspective, but from a labor market perspective, there seems to be other factors that are more important, such as that which has been previously emphasized, a close connection between PLA orientations and contents, *and* labor market demands and employment. In practice, this can mean that aspects of equality, quality and even legitimacy are sometimes being ignored or toned down. From the perspective of the individual, PLA can of course have quite different purposes and be equally important,

something that depends upon the situation and the ambitions of both the initiator and the individual. Nevertheless, the democratic aspects of PLA processes must be regarded as highly important but, at the same time, in a dynamic knowledge and skill assessment society, cannot always be treated as binding.

Another aspect of the individualization of assessment of lifelong learning and PLA concerns the general stratification and class division of people vis-à-vis educational and labor market transitional success. The individualization of PLA, understood as the responsibility of the individual to become employable, is not to be regarded as a game of equal prerequisites and opportunities (Walther, du Bois-Reymond, & Biggart, 2006; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Sparrhoff & Fejes, 2009). That is one of the reasons Swedish PLA policy stresses democratic values and practices in order to both create and maintain a more equal PLA field, especially for the lower socioeconomic strata of the population. This also is quite transparent in policy documents surrounding the activities of the new National Delegation for Validation and their focus upon immigrants and the challenge not to waste their skills due to bureaucratic obstacles, but instead to develop faster ways of assessing and qualifying them. This responsibility has especially been given to universities and other agents within higher education.

### **Privatization**

A third part of the PLA policy field in Sweden that can be observed is privatization. This is connected to aspects of individualization (as described earlier) and means that different lifelong (and life-wide) learning dimensions extend the educational field well beyond the formal education sphere. Both the number of private companies active within the educational field, as well as company-driven competence development in cooperation with universities and different forms of higher education, can be seen as examples of this. Even non-profit organizations and unions have their own PLA processes in order to identify and assess informal and not previously recognized knowledge and skills. Compared to the institutionalizing trait, this can be seen as an opposing movement that highlights aspects of fragmentation and differentiation of learning and PLA.

There is a wide range of PLA methods in practice in Sweden where the assessment criteria do not have a clear connection to upper secondary school criteria or officially standardized trade criteria. To mention a few: *Kravmärkt yrkesroll* (a qualified professional role) is a PLA method developed within the health and social care sector in different regions around Stockholm, Sweden (Föreningen Kravmärkt Yrkesroll Sverige, n.d.). The purpose of this method is to secure the knowledge and skills qualifications of the branch and, at the same time, to spread the branch-specific culture and skill criteria among the staff. Since it is not connected to the formal education system, the PLA method is not nationally spread and lacks national legitimacy. On the other hand, its legitimacy is directly built upon the criteria of this special trade (although not as I understand it, from a national perspective). Another company in the education and PLA field has also worked with alternative PLA methods and further developed the Open College Network method from Great Britain (Nordiskt Valideringsforum, n.d.). Its method specializes in validating the knowledge and skills of people in a local context with local entrepreneurs and experts as assessment validators. The strength of this system is the link to the local labor market and its understanding, definition, criteria and demands of the branch skills. The weaknesses are, of course, the geographical limits of the assessment and recognition of the same skills.

In one sense, the privatization trait within the PLA policy field in Sweden can be seen as an obstacle and truly a challenge to the National Delegation for Validation in developing a national structure for PLA methods and processes. The challenge is that many PLA methods lack national legitimacy, mainly due to their lack of connection to the formal education system. Other PLA methods that are done according to different trade criteria also lack national legitimacy due to the fact that they are not formally accepted by the trade organizations on a national level. Still other PLA methods, such as the ones done within unions, only have legitimacy within

the organization, but nevertheless provide an assessment and a certificate of a person's knowledge and skills.

There are, of course, other ways of looking at these different examples of PLA methods of varied origin, and one is to value them as dynamic ways in visualizing knowledge and skills, well correlated with the idea of life-long learning. The practical outcomes also have often led to opportunities for employability and of course, employment.

### Summary

PLA policies in Sweden focus mainly upon three things: first, that knowledge and skills should be assessed toward either formal education curricular criteria or the professional criteria formed by trade organizations; second, that PLA processes can guarantee standard democratic values, such as equality, quality, legitimacy, access, transparency, etc.; and third, that there is a clear match between the outcomes of PLA processes and the knowledge and skill demands of the labor market. Together, these three foci assume that PLA methods initiated and performed in a Swedish context should both have a short-term and a long-term effect on the workforce. In one sense, it seems that PLA is both considered as a way to lead people directly to new jobs and to strengthen their position in the labor market, and as a way to make people employable (in one sense or the other). This might sound like expressions of the same thing, but I do not believe it is. Policies are always a tricky business. PLA policies are a way of describing, and in a sense preparing, for a main route regarding the transition to work, for a good purpose. However, no one can foresee how people will make use of these prepared routes. The way the routes are explained in policy texts can be understood as general ambitions in presenting a main course of PLA methods that meet the criteria of formal education or of different trades.

On a general level, this guarantees the democratic call to create employability “*en masse*,” which, hopefully, can be used on the labor market. From another point of view, however, I don't think PLA policies can totally – nor should they – grasp the whole dynamic of PLA within the realm in which it is initiated and processed. PLA can serve many purposes, and sometimes at the same time. The bottom line is to make knowledge and skills visible.

In Sweden today, the challenge is to determine how policies and bureaucratic practices can be adjusted to make use of the skills of recent immigrants, and to really begin validating knowledge and skills at universities and other higher education faculties. These are, indeed, major challenges.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2016, 16 percent of Sweden's inhabitants were born abroad (1.6 million people). Roughly half of them are from a European country. Immigrants from Finland have since long been the largest group, followed by immigrants from Iraq and Poland. Due to the refugee crisis in Syria, Sweden had an all-time level of asylum seekers during 2014-2015. In 2015, roughly 160,000 people were seeking asylum, twice the number of those seeking asylum in 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Swedish *folkbildning* is the collective name for the activities conducted by the country's folk high schools and study associations in the form of courses, study circles and cultural activities. *Folkbildning* is a part of the liberal nonformal educational system. Every year, several million Swedes participate in *folkbildning* activities. The term *folkbildning* is difficult to translate into English. It is sometimes translated as liberal or popular adult education. However, the specific conceptual foundation of *folkbildning* extends beyond adult education, which is why *folkbildning* is used in this text as it is. The Swedish word *folkbildning* means people enlightenment (Folkbildningsrådets, 2010).

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