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## Adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to draw on the research and scholarly literature to explore the changing discourses and perspectives concerning adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime. The focus of the analysis is a Nordic context. The dominant employability regime maintains a technical-rational perspective on learning and employability. Education is predominantly regarded as an instrumental preparation for the labour market. The future demands of the labour market are largely unknown, however, and vocational and professional training may not provide sufficient preparation for the increasing complexities of work. Theoretical discussions have been dominated by an alleged mismatch between individual competence and the qualifications that are required in the world of work. There is no consensus regarding how the gap should be described, explained, or bridged. New demands on educational design have emerged, and ideas related to liberal education and 'bildung' have been reinserted into the political agenda, offering general preparation for a wider array of challenges.*

**Keywords:** adult education; Nordic welfare regime; employability; competence; labour market

### Introduction

The labour market has undergone major structural changes in recent decades and is currently characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability (Beck, 2008; Sennett, 1998). This trend has been driven by technological innovation, increased demand for efficiency, increased international competition, and new ways of organising work. To ensure economic prosperity, governments strive to increase the employability of the workforce. From an organisational perspective, it is important to secure the long-term provision of labour and to seek relevant competence (i.e., knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to survive

in the continuously evolving world of work. Employers strive to recruit and develop knowledgeable and well-prepared employees to meet these demands and to increase efficiency and productivity. The competition among organisations for the most competent workers is intensifying, and the competition among workers for the most attractive positions in the labour market is becoming increasingly fierce (Nilsson & Ellström, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Many organisations have downsized and outsourced numerous functions. Project-based work and temporary employment become increasingly common (Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2003; Knight & Yorke, 2004).

The professional development of workers has become increasingly individualised (Garsten & Jakobsson, 2004; Nyström, 2010). The process of individualisation often has been assumed to create greater freedom for individuals, who have increased opportunities to choose and to break free from ascribed roles in different contexts, such as working life. These opportunities to shape one's life trajectory also make people more dependent on educational success (Brown, 2003). To be competitive in the labour market and secure income and social status, among other things, individuals must continuously invest in, develop, manage, and market their employability to employers in an increasingly competitive labour market (Clarke, 2008). Thus, because career changes are becoming more common, career paths have increasingly begun to resemble a series of individual projects. In some parts of the labour market—in Sweden, for example—there has been a shift from workers with lifetime employment to workers with a wide variety of jobs throughout their working life (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Nyström, Dahlgren & Dahlgren, 2008). This development has led to new conditions and labour market demands.

The demands of working life vary across sectors, industries, and organisations, and they vary among different types of jobs or positions within organisations (Harvey, 2005). Compared with highly specialised professional work, unskilled work places entirely different demands on employees. Although it is not possible to identify a common set of competences that employers require from today's professionals, certain types of competence tend to reappear in studies about the requirements of the workplace (Behrenz, 2001; Hesketh, 2000; Pool & Sewell, 2007).

Highly specialised technical competence is becoming obsolete at an increasingly rapid pace and is decreasing in importance for individuals who are interested in obtaining and retaining a job. Rather, labour market demands are associated with a broader range of general competence and personal characteristics (Tomlinson, 2008). Employees are expected to be flexible, capable of orienting themselves quickly within new contexts, and able to continually learn and develop throughout their professional careers (Nyström et al., 2008). Workers must be able to establish an overview of the broader set of tasks within an organisation, work in multidisciplinary contexts, and possess the ability to collaborate and communicate with others. The demands of the labour market include the ability to perform the duties of a job, but there is also a moral dimension, which includes integrity and the ability to understand and respect the rules, values, and norms that explicitly and implicitly exist within an organisation. This moral dimension is a prerequisite for decoding and interpreting different contexts and conforming to a particular organisational culture. Employers expect their employees to be hardworking, dedicated, and loyal. Employees must create strategies, invest time, energy, and other resources that are necessary to exploit opportunities, and avoid obstacles in their organisations (Nilsson, 2010a, 2010b; Pool & Sewell, 2007; Smith, 2010).

Employable individuals are educated, qualified, independent, flexible, adaptable, creative, and innovative entrepreneurs who take initiative. This type of employee is also mobile. Because such individuals are willing and able to change jobs frequently, organisations must develop strategies to attract and retain employable workers. Individuals must continuously invest in and manage their employability, principally by investing in formal education. However, employability is a complex and relational concept, and not all individuals have the same opportunities to develop various aspects of their employability. Depending on factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, different groups in society receive differing benefits from formal education with regard to employability (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Nyström, 2010).

In recent years, this issue has arisen with the increasing dominance of instrumental perspectives of education in discussions and public policy debates, concerned primarily with measurement and relative comparisons of educational outcomes. One concept used to measure educational outcomes is employability, which concerns individuals' ability to obtain and perform the tasks related to a job. From the perspective of employers and policy makers, it concerns the supply of competence to the labour market. Adult learning and education is emphasised as important to increase the employability of individuals. There are still significant uncertainties regarding what is important for individual employability, especially in the relation between education and the labour market (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Nilsson & Ellström, 2012). It is important to reconnect with the central question of the purpose of education (Biesta, 2009) and the substance of knowledge (Young, 2009). Nevertheless, few studies have investigated the changing relationship between education and work that can constitute an alternative framework for the dominant human capital discourse and the technical-rational perspective of learning on which education policies are generally premised (Knight & Yorke, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to draw on the research and scholarly literature to explore the changing discourses and perspectives concerning adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime.

These discourses and perspectives depend on the context because there are different kinds of relations among state, market, and family that also have implications for how education is organised. In this paper, we draw on Esping-Andersen's (1990) theoretical work on welfare regimes in order to analyse how these discourses and perspectives are emphasised concerning employability. Esping-Andersen (1990) describes three distinct welfare regimes. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, a liberal welfare regime is dominant, in which the market and the belief in individual choice play a central role. The state and collective solutions are distrusted, which results in, for example, means-tested assistance, modest social insurance plans, and less public support for education. In countries such as France, Germany, and Italy, with old corporatist traditions and where the church traditionally has been strong, the market-led solutions are less dominant. In this continental model, the state enters when the solutions created by the family are exhausted. In the third type of welfare regime, the dualism between state and market and between middle and working class is less prominent. The social-democratic or Nordic welfare state regime does not pursue equity of minimal needs as the other types do, but a demanding equity standard requiring a more universal solidarity (Rubenson, 2006a).

The importance of the local context has not been problematized sufficiently in conventional studies of educational participation (Rees, Fevre, Furlong & Gorard, 2006). In this paper, we will draw upon a more general discussion with specific examples from the Nordic welfare state, specifically Sweden. There is not a Nordic adult education model and one institutional make-up in the Nordic countries because the content of

adult education is diverse (Rubenson, 2006a). However, there are some distinct common values and basic assumptions that traditionally have characterised the way in which adult education is organised in the Nordic countries. In Nordic adult education, the participation rate is high, the relative level of public funding is high, the proportion of public education providers is high, the proportion of personal-interest education is high, and there is a strong public support for disadvantaged groups (Laginder, Nordvall & Crowther, 2013; Rubenson, 2006a). Traditionally, there has been a strong link between adult education and labour market policies. For example, the labour unions have been engaged in the development of research-based policy documents on adult education and have been trying to influence public policy on the national level. At the same time, the unions have been active on the local level, organising study circles for the members, which is one of the reasons for the relatively high participation rates among blue-collar workers in adult education and training in Sweden (Rubenson, 2006a).

In the following sections we will analyse research and scholarly literature to explore the changing discourses and perspectives about adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime. First, the employability regime is scrutinized from individual, organisational, and societal perspectives. In order to increase the employability of individuals, education is put forward as one of the most important aspects. The analysis continues with different perspectives on education, drawing on examples from the Nordic countries. Third, we continue with how education has been transformed and what are the challenges for the educational system. Thereafter, we analyse the mis(match) between education and work, which is a key issue concerning employability. We end with a concluding section, where we draw together the discourses and perspectives.

## **The employability regime**

Since the early 1900s, there have been different perspectives on employability and different perceptions of what employability entails, all of which reflect changing labour market demands. Today, employability is a central concept in the educational and labour market strategies of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (European Commission, 2010; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2000; OECD, 1998). Employability is central to the European Employment Strategy, defined in the Presidency Conclusions at the European Council Meeting on Employment (Luxembourg, 20–21 November 1997). It constitutes one of the four lines of policy to be followed by the Member States with regard to employment, among them developing entrepreneurship, encouraging adaptability in businesses and of the employees, and strengthening policies for equal opportunities.

Employability has been studied from societal, organisational, and individual perspectives, all of which focus on different groups (unemployed and employed individuals) to identify potential employability aspects (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). From an organisational perspective, the meaning of employability has changed from primarily referring to a person's health and age to focusing on how individual competence is compatible with employer demands. The notion of employability includes various forms of general and specific competence (van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006). Employability is associated often with an individual's preparedness for work, capacity to manage work and retain his or her job, continued career development, and potential for mobility in the labour market, including the ability to obtain work after

a period of illness or unemployment. Thus, on an individual level, employability refers to an individual's assets in the form of competence and qualifications as well as how this competence is marketed and ultimately implemented (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Knight & Yorke, 2004).

On a societal level, the current governing discourse in the OECD countries is characterised by a relatively narrow perspective on the relationship among education, employability, and the labour market (Brown & Tannock, 2009; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Labour market policies and educational strategies, as well as organisational recruitment, training, and competence development policies, are generally based on a market-driven technical-rational approach to matching supply and demand for labour at the societal, organisational, and individual levels. This approach can be traced to a human capital perspective (Becker, 1964). Investing in one's human capital, primarily through formal education, is expected to increase one's productivity in a proportional manner. Formal education thus becomes a proxy for the productive capacity of an individual. Human capital theory is based on some central assumptions: (1) individuals strive to maximise their material well-being, (2) individuals have complete knowledge of the market conditions, and (3) individuals use this knowledge as a basis for rational action to reach their goals (Rees et al., 2006).

This approach has encountered criticism during the past half century. From a consensus perspective, employability can be viewed as a driving force for social evolution. From a conflict perspective, however, employability can be regarded as a means of legitimising inequalities. It has been pointed out in sociological theory that individual choices are governed not only by material motivations or preferences, but an individual may pursue goals other than maximizing material well-being, such as self-development, self-esteem, investing in job-related education and training in order to increase the intrinsic pleasure achieved from doing a better job, and may be ignorant about job vacancies and competition. Also, individual behaviour in the market is dependent on social relations and embedded in social systems (Rees et al., 2006). Not all adults have the same opportunities and access to formal education or certain positions in the labour market. There is also a difference in who the adult learners are, their motivation for learning, and what activities they engage in (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Moreover, investments in formal education may have limited effects on productivity and economic growth (Livingstone, 2010; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Wolf, 2002). There has been a trend in, for example, the Nordic countries, where responsibility for investing in employability and career development has been transferred from the state to organisations and to individual workers. Increased individual employability is often associated with career progression, intra- and inter-organisational job mobility, and boundary-less careers (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). There is an on-going debate, however, regarding the extent to which careers are boundary-less and subject to individual agency and the extent to which career opportunities and choices are constrained and shaped by contextual or structural factors. Individuals are socialised into certain structures that shape their preferences and their perceptions of possible options from which to choose. From a critical perspective, the shift towards individual agency is associated with social and economic inequalities and the marginalisation of less privileged groups in society (Pang, Chua & Chu, 2008). Rees and colleagues (2006) argue for 'the possibility of analysing individual behaviour with respect to learning opportunities not in terms of some universal economic rationality, but rather of alternative rationalities which are socially constituted' (p. 928). At the same time it is important not to overstate the influence of socialisation on behalf of individual choice (Rees et al., 2006). Individuals are capable of making an autonomous

choice within set parameters in a specific context subject to processes of social exclusion and integration. Therefore, it is important to problematize that not all adult learners have the same opportunities for education and training (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Individual employability includes nearly all aspects that are relevant to an individual's ability to obtain a job and perform the tasks associated with the job. Research has shown that formal education and competence are central to an individual's employability; however, other aspects, such as gender, ethnicity, personal qualities, health and work ability, also affect an individual's potential to obtain a job and perform the tasks that the job demands (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Nilsson & Ekberg, 2012; Nyström, 2010; Smith, 2010).

To conclude, the employability concept has primarily been framed by the perspectives of policy makers and employers, who focus on the supply aspect of competence in the labour market (Brown, 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). There are also numerous accounts of the labour market demand requirements of successful employee performance (Hesketh, 2000; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Pool & Sewell, 2007). In policy debates and research, less focus is placed on the demand side of the labour market, which is increasingly beyond the control of governments, (Brown, 2003) and the process of matching competence to qualifications required in the workplace (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) in, for example, recruitment processes (Keep & James, 2010). Employability is related to context, however, and it is associated with the supply of individual competence as well as with labour market demands, organisational structures, and professional demands (Clarke, 2008; Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

## **Perspectives on education**

In this section we will discuss different perspectives on education. In the literature, it is stressed that the principal means of securing a supply of skilled labour equipped to handle the complex and changing labour market involve increased investments in learning and education (Brown et al., 2003; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Livingstone, 2010). Education is primarily regarded as a means of educating, training, socialising, and qualifying individuals in relation to labour market demands. For example, education increases the human capital or employability of students upon graduation (Teichler, 2000). A narrow functionalist or instrumental perspective on education, which focuses on the concept of human capital and the employability of individuals, has begun to usurp the view that, for example, dominated in the Nordic welfare state in past decades (Filander, 2012). Education is regarded primarily as an investment and sometimes as a production factor. An instrumental and technical-rational view of education has resulted in increasing demands for education curricula to adapt to the demands and the logic of the market (Gaskell & Rubenson, 2004; Brown et al., 2003).

Adult and continuing education is often defined as 'activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception, define them as adults' (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 8). This learning can be formal, non-formal, and informal. This article focuses on the formal learning because it is emphasised as one important aspect when it comes to increasing adults' employability (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Formal learning among adults occurs, for example, in adult education, in higher education, and in work-related activities. In the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), it was reported that 69% of those who had participated in some form of adult education and training had received funding from their employer. In the Nordic countries, the corresponding share was 73%. Adult

education also incorporates popular adult education, for example, second-chance education, study circles, folk high schools, and study associations. Study circles and adult education associated with labour unions traditionally have been regarded as a fundament for ensuring that the workers have knowledge and opportunities for participating in civil society and in securing a democratic development. The highly institutionalised popular adult education system in Sweden has been a counter-hegemonic strategy of the labour movement and a way to focus on the individual members' awareness, motivation, and commitment to work for social change and justice (Rubenson, 2006a). In Sweden, popular education has an important role as an educational provider, with a unique level of participation (Laginder et al., 2013). These educational practices are supporting individuals' possibilities for influencing their position in life and participation in the development of society. Popular adult education in Sweden has three roles, as (1) an agency of popular movements, (2) an adult educator, and (3) a supporter of culture (Rubenson, 2006a).

In the past decades there has been a trend towards increased pressure from market liberal ideas on adult education policy and the transfer of public funds to private sector providers (Rubenson, 2006a). In Sweden, this development has influenced higher education, adult education, continuing education, and popular education in different ways, but a common denominator has been a more instrumental approach and labour market adaptation (Brown et al., 2003; Gustavsson, 2013; Rubenson, 2006a). The participants or students are increasingly expected to be prepared for continuing education and, in the end, for becoming productive contributors to the labour market. Rubenson (2006a, p. 945) argues that the 'collective ethos is further being eroded by the shift in the Nordic countries from a concern about adult education to a preoccupation with lifelong learning which naturally puts the focus on the individual.' For example, since 1997, popular education has pointed out the unemployed as a prioritised group in order to increase their qualifications, activity in society, and self-esteem (Mustel, 2004).

Education can be understood from various perspectives. Educational systems and educational institutions have different philosophical roots (Gustavsson, 2013). Some of the first educational institutions focused on scholastic vocational preparation. During the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century, the perspectives of the educational institutions widened. Education began to promote the development of hard materialistic values through technological innovation based on the empirically oriented sciences and the philosophy of nature. Moreover, education began to develop and incorporate softer values that addressed highly abstract ontological and epistemological theories related to the spiritual and political arena and that were intended to affect the norms of individual action. Concepts such as liberty and equality were central. Educational institutions also began to incorporate human liberation, critical enlightenment, and the notion of 'bildung.' This perspective may be traced to rationalists such as Descartes and Kant, but it is primarily associated with Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1767–1835) ideas that he developed when he worked with the reformation of the Prussian educational system. The educational tradition in Sweden, for example, traditionally has been influenced strongly by this Humboldtian tradition (Bron & Schemmann, 2003; Gustavsson, 2013; Liedman, 2002). From this perspective, education is expected to develop and enrich individuals without considering primarily the direct use-value of education (that is, the benefit of education in relation to the specific demands of the labour market). The incentive for learning should be based on people's own initiatives, activities, and experiences (Gustavsson, 2013). Educational design focuses on individual open learning, emancipation, interdisciplinarity, inclusion of philosophical issues, and the development of critical thinking, and reflecting thinking subjects (Bron & Schemmann, 2003). The

central idea is that popular education creates knowledgeable subjects who develop their potential and their intellect by speaking, writing, and thinking more competently. From this perspective, direct vocational preparation for the demands of working life is considered a secondary outcome or an unintentional by-product (Gustavsson, 2013; Liedman, 2002). In Sweden, this perspective or pedagogical tradition has been dominant in the development of the educational system, not least adult education. Adult education and training policies in the Nordic countries in the last decades have been strongly influenced by a human capital thinking and a notion of knowledge as a commodity, for example in the adult education initiative in Sweden (Gustavsson, 2013; Rubenson, 2013, 2006a). Adult and popular education is increasingly focused on instrumental labour market preparation. There is a conception that although education does not create jobs, more education leads to better opportunities to handle new demands and increases the individual's chance of obtaining qualified work. Adult education has been regarded as a way to compensate for imbalances in the labour market and to assist unemployed or underemployed workers to enhance their employability (Rubenson, 2006a). The ideas of 'bildung', humanism, and democratic values are becoming marginalised in both Europe and Sweden (Gustavsson, 2013).

The demand for more individuals to be more educated has increased, and the labour force is better educated now than in the past. It is unclear, however, whether the actual requirements of the workplace have increased correspondingly (Livingstone, 2010). From an instrumental perspective, more education increases the formal and/or actual competence of students. Education may have use-value in the labour market by increasing the productive capabilities of graduates in different ways. However, education may not always be capable of directly preparing individuals for the specific tasks that they will encounter in professional practice (Helms Jørgensen, 2004; Nilsson, 2010b). Adult education and training can be viewed as a means of preparing individuals to cope with challenges by contributing to an individual's ability to develop and change jobs.

Formal education increases an individual's likelihood of obtaining a job, but it does not provide a guarantee that his or her actual competence has increased. The credentials and diplomas that are gained from education programmes also have a symbolic function and a labour market exchange-value that is used for sorting and selecting potential employees. Education is central to the allocation of individuals to various positions in the labour market and in society. Thus, education may lead to the reproduction of inequalities (Collins, 1979; Brown & Tannock, 2009; Gaskell & Rubenson, 2004). Overall, from these instrumental perspectives, educational design is expected to consider primarily the labour market that awaits participants or students upon graduation. However, this goal is not an easy undertaking (Hesketh, 2000). Education programmes have different focuses, prerequisites, and impacts. Individuals have different personal motives and goals for their education. The purpose of popular education or liberal arts courses is likely to differ from courses in specialised professional or vocational programmes, both in terms of the students' personal motives and the teachers' views about how these courses should be planned and executed.

There are alternative ways of understanding knowledge and learning that are different from these instrumental perspectives. Many studies have adopted a sociocultural perspective to show that the knowledge gained in formal education needs to be recontextualised in the context of working life and professional practice (Köpsén & Nyström, 2012; Nyström, 2009).

This section has discussed different perspectives on education with a special focus on the Nordic countries. Today, the instrumental perspective has been dominant,

emphasising an increased educational level to enhance employability and marginalising the ideas of 'bildung', humanism, and democratic values. The next section will continue to analyse the changes and transformation of the educational systems.

## Education in transformation

In recent decades, the Anglo-Saxon model, which governs higher education in North America, has strongly influenced curriculum reform in the Nordic countries. From this perspective, instrumental labour market adaption and vocational preparation are key factors. Business-oriented professional management influences the governance of educational institutions, and competitive models are being strengthened. Demands for efficiency, relevance, accountability, and the employability of graduates are increasing (Rubenson, 2006a, 2006b).

Credentials and formal diplomas have become more important and have come to be regarded as the currency of opportunity (Brown, 2003). With the expansion of and a broader access to education, there has been an increased competition for all kinds of positions where formal diplomas are relevant to the entry requirements (Brown, 2003; Collins, 1979). Increased access also means increased expectations to participate, and absolute performance is not enough because the individual's opportunity/employability depends on the opportunities/employability of others or, in other words, the market value of the credentials depends on the credentials of others. Brown (2003) refers to this as the opportunity trap and argues that

as opportunities for education increase, they are proving harder to cash in. . . For societies, this means that what can be offered to the winners cannot be offered to the population as a whole. There are simply not enough good jobs to go around (pp. 149-150).

The entry requirements to the labour market are raised and in order for individuals to remain competitive, they need to increase their individual employability by engaging in education and securing diplomas that certify their individual educational achievements. However, the bar is being raised and education is becoming a tick in one of the boxes of qualifications (Tomlinson, 2008). There are indications that education is decreasing in relative importance for the allocation of individuals to different positions on the labour market. Strategies for closure and exclusion, in the neo-Weberian vocabulary, are becoming more central. The power of credentials as a sorting and selection mechanism is increased by exclusion and decreased by inclusion. If the value of credentials is weakened, other selection criteria will be used for entry to the labour market (Brown, 2003), such as other forms of personal capital (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) or social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). This is sometimes referred to as over-education.

This utilitarian view of education indicates that the purpose of education is associated only with the labour market and economic returns. Education may have other values, and learning may be an end in itself (Brown, 2003). Education may also lead to a transformation of working life, and this leads to challenges for the educational system (Baker, 2009).

## Challenges for the educational system

The literature emphasises that the educational systems are challenged from different perspectives and discourses. Within technical-rational discourse, investments in educational activities are associated with an increase in individual employability, which is attributed to an increase in the formal qualifications and/or actual competence of individuals (Dafou, 2009). The purpose and impact of different educational programmes vary, but professional and vocational education programmes are often implicitly associated with individual changes. These programmes also are assumed to improve an individual's ability to perform tasks with greater efficiency or perform more complicated tasks. However, less focus is placed on exactly how an individual has changed or how the substance of the learning is related to increased productive capacity (Livingstone, 2010).

It is difficult for professional and vocational education programmes to promote direct preparation for the labour market. Vocational and professional education and job-related training are expected to prepare students for an unknown future based on current knowledge. However, it is not always easy to predict the future challenges for graduates (Billett, 2011). In general, highly specialised theoretical knowledge is increasingly becoming outdated, and thus it is often deemed less relevant. Jobs are learned in the workplace. The specialised vocational competence that is required to manage work tasks in many organisations is linked to the workplace and the specifics of professional practice (for a more elaborated discussion see, e.g., Billett, 2011; Streeck, 2012).

The focus of many vocational education programmes appears to have generally shifted towards a generalist competence, which refers to competence that supports further development and lifelong learning in the world of work, which is also focused in a 'bildung' perspective (Nilsson, 2010a). There has been an increased focus in professional and vocational education on how to define, develop, teach, and assess generalist competence, which transcends discipline-specific competence (Bowden & Marton, 2004; Nilsson, 2010a). Such competence includes learning abilities, socio-communicative skills, leadership skills, critical thinking, reflexivity, flexibility, self-efficacy, creativity, initiative, working capacity, awareness of quality aspects, problem solving, and analytical abilities. Thus, to prepare adult learners for increased complexity and specialisation in the world of work, educational activities must focus on the development of generalist meta-competence and general enlightenment of the students in educational design (Nilsson, 2010b). Today, being employable is often primarily associated with being a generally knowledgeable and educated person who is able to adapt easily and learn specific procedures (Bowden & Marton, 2004).

A problem is that the opportunity gap leads to a diploma disease characterised by increased pressure of attaining high grades and diplomas and that the focus of the education becomes acquisitive rather than inquisitive. Acquisitive learning has come to define the purpose of education. Participants and students focus not on learning and developing knowledge for its own sake or for learning to do a work task, but in order to pass examinations (Brown, 2003).

Educational experiences are largely cumulative and progressive. This means, for example, that education is not accessible for individuals lacking certain basic credentials. Learning opportunities and access to education are not equally distributed, and the governing structures vary with the local context (Rees et al., 2006). For example, although the level of public support for adult education and training is not related to participation rates, public support is highly related to the participation rates among those least likely to enrol (Rubenson, 2006a).

This section has explored the challenges for the educational system. These challenges concern the issue of education for what and for whom and the relationship between education and work. This relationship is often problematized on the basis of theory and practice, competence, and qualifications. Some scholars argue that there is a gap or mismatch between education and work.

### **The (mis)match between education and work**

Many studies have shown that there is a mismatch between education and the world of work (Livingstone, 2010; Nilsson, 2010b). Formal educational job-entry requirements have increased since the Second World War, but the actual requirements to perform such jobs may not have increased to the same extent. Numerous studies observe an inflation of formal educational requirements and a gap between worker capabilities and formal job requirements (Tomlinson, 2008; Livingstone, 2010). There are concerns that the rapid expansion of education has led to underemployment and an opportunity trap (Brown, 2003). Furthermore, individuals require an increasingly long period of time to become productive in their jobs. Several studies have suggested that employers, workers, and students believe that professional education programmes supply inadequate preparation for working life (Hesketh, 2000; Livingstone, 2010).

Educational policy governing adult education is connected to labour market policy and characterised by economic market models. The discussion of the official discourse has been dominated by an alleged mismatch or gap between individual competence and the qualifications that are required in the world of work. However, there is no consensus regarding how this gap should be described, explained, or bridged (Nilsson, 2010b). Professional and vocational training and development may be excessively narrow and may not prepare individuals sufficiently for the increasing complexities of the world of work. Professional and vocational education are characterised by different rationales than the world of work is. Furthermore, there are problems associated with transferring knowledge between contexts. Knowledge that is obtained in formal education must be re-situated or re-contextualised within professional practices (Helms Jørgensen, 2004; Köpsén & Nyström, 2012; Nilsson, 2010b). When attempting to bridge the gap between education and work, one must consider both the supply and demand sides and the processes in which the competence of the workers is matched to the requirements of the jobs.

It is possible to identify in the literature a disparity between the organisation of educational programmes and the manner in which work is organised, the way things are done, and the methods and tools that are used in the world of work (Billett, 2011; Helms Jørgensen, 2004). The Nilsson (2010b) study shows that higher education graduates have suggested the need for better preparation for the complexities and uncertainties of the working world. Working conditions in professional practice are characterised by problems that are not defined in advance. Additionally, knowledge is treated as relative, and interpretations vary between different contexts. Various parameters, such as deadlines, specifications, and budgetary restrictions, are unknown and constantly changing and thus require flexibility and adaptability. In the working world, professionals must identify problems, appropriate knowledge, and find solutions. In contrast, the rationale of professional education programmes in Sweden, for example, could be characterised by clearly structured assignments, predictability, convenient arrangements, fixed parameters, problems that are defined in advance, delimited tasks, uncertain outcomes, a complex interdependency on the work of others, financial and

political considerations, and often a focus on measurable results instead of processes (Nilsson, 2010b).

Increased complexity leads to the further division of labour, differentiation, and specialisation. The purpose and effects of different forms of education differ, and the demands of the labour market vary. The compatibility between what is learned in different forms of education, such as vocational education programmes and job-related training, and the demands that are encountered in professional practice differ according to professional areas and other specific characteristics of the labour market. For example, graduates of educational programmes in engineering and economics secure a wide variety of positions, and they are widely dispersed upon graduation throughout the labour market. Thus, such individuals encounter a wide variety of potential tasks and demands for which it is difficult for these professional education programmes to provide direct vocational preparation. Specialisation occurs primarily after graduation. The specifics of a job and an organisation must be learned in the workplace, such as tasks, routines, and vocational and professional language (Helms Jørgensen, 2004; Köpsén & Nyström, 2012). In contrast, for individuals who graduate from other professional programmes, such as medicine or law, the labour market is comparatively narrower. These graduates are relatively homogenous after graduation with regard to both vertical and horizontal dispersion in the labour market, and they encounter similar demands in their work. More direct vocational preparation and specialisation can occur in these educational programmes (Nilsson, 2010b; Nyström et al., 2008; Nyström, 2009; Statistics Sweden, 2010). However, some broader challenges are common for different education programmes.

The relationship between education and work can also be problematised from both the supply and demand perspectives. From a supply perspective, the focus is primarily on individual agency and formal learning. Educational institutions encounter challenges related to providing individuals with appropriate competence and preparing them for the demands of the labour market. From a demand perspective, the focus is on the requirements of specific jobs, organisations, and markets. For organisations, the primary challenges involve identifying future needs and developing valid methods of matching individuals with jobs (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). For example, the processes of selection, recruitment, training, and development within organisations are becoming more complicated. Generalist competence and non-formal employability aspects that are difficult to assess and validate have become increasingly important at the expense of hard technical specialist competence (Nilsson & Ellström, 2012; Tomlinson, 2008).

There are indications that the rapid expansion of the educational system, which currently leads to more graduates with university degrees, may result in an overall decreased emphasis on the merits of formal education. Currently, formal qualifications are not sufficient to secure a job. Previous employment history, health, work ability, as well as ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, and other less easily identifiable factors are also central to the education and employability of individuals (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe & Hall, 2007; Nilsson & Ekberg, 2012; Nyström, 2010; Tomlinson, 2008). Individuals who lack proper training, qualifications, or experience with skilled work may not have the same resources and opportunities to participate in activities in which they can develop and fully implement their employability. The employability of an individual according to a traditional understanding (that is, the possession of the proper education and training) does not necessarily indicate that he or she is considered worthy of employment. Opportunities for learning and development are often designed in a manner that places individuals who do not fit into the standardised employability discourse at a disadvantage. The traditional explanatory model of employability and the

critical means of obtaining and retaining a job appear to be less relevant to certain groups, such as those attempting to return to work after a prolonged absence (Labriola, 2008; Nilsson & Ekberg, 2012).

Broader access to education within the OECD, has been associated with increased opportunities for social and economic progress for many people, which is positive from the perspective of democratic equality. These ideas have ensured that education remains on the centre stage of the social and economic policy agenda. The increased importance of educational credentials is a sign of a tighter bond between education, jobs, and success, and more learning is associated with higher earnings. More learning is related to increased productive capacity and higher rewards, and it is also a fair and objective way of sorting and allocating individuals to different positions based on individual achievement (Brown, 2003). However, employability is related to individual socio-economic conditions and class (Kossek, 2000). The concept may be relevant only for those with specific human, social, and cultural capital. Formal and informal learning is not equally distributed in the working population (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). In the employability regime, some individuals encounter more barriers to participation than others.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have drawn on the research and scholarly literature to explore the changing discourses and perspectives concerning adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime. The discussion has focused on examples from the Nordic and Swedish contexts to exemplify how these changes influence adult education and learning. In the context of a recession and high unemployment, research on conditions for individual mobility among different social practices is even more relevant now than it was in the past. However, there are still significant uncertainties regarding what is important for individual employability, especially in the relation between education and the labour market.

In this paper different relationships of perspectives of education in the employability and competence regime were discussed. Professional and vocational education is important for allocating people to different positions in the labour market and in society (Collins, 1979; Nilsson, 2010b). However, the role of education in relation to the world of work appears to be changing. The expectations of employers are inconsistent with the central discourse of education and labour market policies today. A technical-rational perspective on learning and individual employability seems to be dominant. In the Nordic countries, for example, there has been a strong influence by human capital thinking for the last decades, making adult and popular education increasingly focused on preparation for the labour market. One of the consequences is that the ideas of 'bildung', humanism, and democratic values are being marginalised (Gustavsson, 2013). However, the expectations of the market may be more consistent with the ideas of liberal education, which can offer general preparation for the wider array of challenges and work tasks that individuals encounter in the workplace. It is important to acknowledge the interaction between individual choice and constraining social structures and parameters. Individual choice may be rational, but it is not restricted to the relatively narrow assumptions of the pervasive human capital theory. Furthermore, it is important to connect clearly educational design to the prerequisites of specific professional practices and to focus on promoting generally enlightened and knowledgeable workers in terms of generalist competence. Labour market conditions

create demands that are related to the acquisition of specialised competence and personal characteristics and to generalist competences (Hesketh, 2000; Nilsson, 2010a; Pool & Sewell, 2007). Workers are expected to invest continuously in, develop, and manage their individual employability. Learning is associated not only with formal education and is not limited to pre-career concerns. There has been a shift from employment to employability and from lifelong employment to lifelong learning. Workers must be prepared for changing working conditions and continuous training and development. However, not all individuals have the same opportunities to enhance their employability. When employability is discussed, some forms of social and cultural capital are often ignored. Factors that are difficult to invest in and develop, such as personal characteristics, are also ignored, although they are key aspects of an individual's ability to obtain and retain employment. Some scholars indicate that methods that aim to enhance individual employability in some groups should be focused on strengthening social and cultural capital rather than on increased investments in formal education (Nilsson & Ekberg, 2012). It is possible that society currently might be undergoing a shift from a credential-based society (Collins, 1979) to a lifelong-learning society in which factors other than formal credentials or merits are gaining importance and becoming more influential in the allocation of people to different positions in the labour market and in society (Kariya, 2009).

The shifting relationship among adult education, employability, and the world of work that has been presented above could also be related to Rubenson's (2006b) notion of three generations of lifelong learning. For the first humanistic generation, which was associated with humanistic ideals, critical theories, democracy, and social equality, lifelong learning was viewed as a way to reduce gaps in society. The second generation of lifelong discourse was driven by an economist or neo-liberal agenda, which has become central in national education and labour market policies. Central to the discussion in this paper is that education has been regarded as a way to increase human capital, and individuals were expected to be flexible and to adjust to a society that was not responsible for shaping them. In the softer, third version of the economic generation of lifelong learning, issues of social cohesion and equality are reintroduced. The primary rationale of education and training is still associated with employability, and it is regarded as a way of increasing individual and societal prosperity (Rubenson, 2006b). In this new employability regime, secure employment is a thing of the past and there are increased demands for mobility, self-reliance, and individual agency. The acquisition of generalist meta-competence is central to being able to quickly adjust to new circumstances. The responsibility for the investment in lifelong learning is increasingly individualised, resulting in increased inequalities with regard to participation in adult learning, the labour market, and society. However, we emphasise a more optimistic interpretation of the third generation of the lifelong learning discourse because it can be interpreted as a shift towards learning outcomes similar to a more humanistic approach to lifelong learning. Learning to learn, critical reflection, and equality have been reinserted into the political agenda.

The current requirements of the labour market appear to be inconsistent with the technical-rational perspective on learning and the instrumental view of individual employability. In the third generation of lifelong learning, expectations of the labour market may be increasingly consistent with the traditional idea of liberal education as offering general preparation for a wide array of challenges in the workplace. It is essential to clearly connect educational design with a discussion of what the purpose and impact of adult learning and education is and what it normatively should be. An implication of the theoretical discussion above is that it is not only important to focus on

substance or content when planning, designing, conducting, and evaluating education; it is also imperative to clearly connect educational design to the prerequisites of the specific professional practice and to consider promoting the general enlightenment of participants and students. Furthermore, it is important to provide opportunities for reflection and to promote the development of meta-competences. In a sense, the foundation of employability as it relates to competence appears to significantly overlap with the fundamental ideas of liberal education based on a 'bildung' perspective.

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