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## Discourses on quality in Swedish adult education

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### Abstract

*Swedish municipal adult education has many providers. The overall responsibility for this service still lies with the municipalities, entailing the enactment of national policy with respect to providers. This study puts focus on the discursive enactment of policy concerning quality in adult education. Five discourses on quality are identified through interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students, namely that quality is about formal demands and processes, that it is a matter of student focus, that it is about teachers' competence and working conditions, that it is about teaching, and that quality depends on the student group. School leaders focus on formal and organisational aspects of quality, while teachers and students focus on actual processes in the classroom, connecting to their own work and lives. Compared to national policy, the local discourses are limited mainly to studying, teaching, organisation, and short-term outcomes, while long-term aims in national policy are less prominent.*

**Keywords:** municipal adult education, policy enactment, quality, Sweden

### Introduction

Adult learning and the provision of high-quality adult education, contributing to economic, social, and personal development, is promoted in European education policy (Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2015; cf. Milana & Mikulec, 2023). In Sweden, municipal adult education (MAE) is an extensive activity, with more students than for all upper secondary schools combined. In recent decades, MAE has undergone an extensive process of marketisation, and today a large part of adult education is run by private education providers who are publicly procured. The development is an example of the 'Nordic path' towards privatisation and marketisation of education, with neoliberal reforms of the welfare systems, identified by Verger et al.

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(2017). This Nordic path is similar to the state structural reforms guided by neoliberal ideas that have taken place in the UK. A different path to privatisation is, e.g., the historical private-public partnerships with influence from religious and other ideological interests, and a high level of privatisation of education, in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain (Verger et al., 2017). Regardless of such developments, ‘quality’ is still a central concern in adult education (e.g., Armstrong, 2007; Boshier, 2006; Egetenmeyer & K pplinger, 2011; Mark, 2004; Mo ina, 2014; Mufic, 2022b). This article provides examples of how quality is discussed and enacted in Swedish MAE. Here, the municipality might run adult education by itself or hire private providers, but it is still the municipality’s responsibility to ensure that the education provided follows national guidelines (Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019; Holmqvist et al., 2021). The municipality’s responsibility covers both cost and quality, with quality being scrutinised by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. The number of external providers means that quality control is very important for municipalities to ensure that providers maintain sufficient quality. In some municipalities, the large number of providers also creates competition between schools, in which case it is important for schools to be able to demonstrate high quality to attract students to their programmes. However, a key question when talking about quality is what the concept refers to.

Quality in adult education can mean many things, in connection to economic, social, and individual ends (Boshier, 2006). Boshier discusses how policy often puts focus on standards and outcomes rather than on the quality of the process of education, where the perspectives of students and teachers are particularly important to understand the meaning of quality. Mufic and Fejes (2022) conducted a policy analysis of what is included in the concept of quality in MAE. They show how flexibility and individualisation emerge as two important factors in measuring and reporting quality. These factors are also seen as the solution to many quality problems. However, it is unclear what is included in the factors of flexibility and individualisation, how these factors are interpreted and enacted by different actors, and what else is included in the concept of quality in MAE.

The focus of this study is on quality in MAE, but not quality as defined by national policy and the Schools Inspectorate. Instead, this study focuses on the discourses of quality expressed by actors in the practice of adult education – school leaders, teachers, and students (cf. Armstrong, 2007; Boshier, 2006; Mark, 2004). Previous research by e.g. Bjursell et al. (2015) and Bjursell (2016) shows that the marketisation of adult education means that school leaders often spend a lot of time on various quality control systems that are introduced as control mechanisms to measure the quality of different providers. Andersson and Muhrman (2022a) have conducted a survey of all municipalities in Sweden who run MAE, showing that these control systems often focus on quantitative factors such as throughput and grades. Less attention is paid to qualitative quality factors, which require visits to providers when fulfilment is assessed.

The aim of this article is to analyse what discourses on quality in adult education are expressed by school leaders, teachers, and students, and how these discourses can be understood as discursive enactments of the national policy discourses on quality in MAE. The findings will conclude in a discussion concerning the differences in interpretation and translation of adult education policy by these actors in MAE, and what this could mean for quality and quality management in the enactment of adult education.

## MAE in Sweden

Swedish MAE is an extensive educational operation with 372,000 students in 2022, or 7 percent of Sweden’s population aged 20-64 (Swedish National Agency of Education

[SNAE], 2023). At MAE one can study courses in theoretical subjects, corresponding to courses in compulsory and upper secondary school, vocational courses corresponding to upper secondary school, and courses in Swedish for immigrants (SFI). Teaching is organised in the form of separate courses, typically equivalent to five weeks' full-time studies. Vocational courses are however possible to combine in cohesive training programmes ('course packages') for a defined vocation. Adults are eligible to participate in MAE from the year they turn 20, if they are judged to meet the conditions necessary to pass the course. The municipality must give all applicants the opportunity to study courses at the basic level (corresponding to compulsory school) and courses at the upper secondary level that give access to university studies, but there is no requirement to admit everyone who applies for other general or vocational courses. If there are more applicants than places for the latter courses, those who are considered to have the greatest need for the training will be given priority (SFS 2011:1108). There is no cost to study at MAE and students can apply for public student assistance for their livelihood during their studies.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been an intensive market exposure of MAE, which means that many external, private actors, mainly for-profit providers, have established themselves in this education market. The municipalities can choose how they want to organise adult education, but most municipalities procure external providers to some extent, with the argument that this is necessary to achieve the requirements for a wide range of courses and flexibility (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a; Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019; Muhrman & Andersson, 2022). In 2022, 51 percent of MAE was organised by publicly funded, independent institutions, mainly owned by private companies (SNAE, 2023). It should be noted that this procurement does not necessarily mean a 'quasi-marketisation' in the way that characterises the development with voucher systems in the UK and for independent schools in Swedish compulsory and upper-secondary school (cf. Lewis, 2017). I.e., in MAE, the municipality procure the provision, and this might result in only one provider of a certain course and if so no choice or 'customer role' for the adult student, but there are also municipalities that have more providers and options to choose between (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a). And, regardless of provider, the municipality is always responsible for the quality and accessibility of adult education for its denizens.

## Policy enactment in Swedish MAE

This article is part of a larger study where we investigate the organisation of adult education in marketised MAE with a focus on the enactment of national policy. Here, we have particularly chosen to focus on how different actors (school leaders, teachers, students) describe quality in relation to adult education by answering the question of what they think characterises 'good' adult education.

Ball et al. (2012) and Braun et al. (2010) describe how almost all policies contain a measure of freedom that gives smaller or larger room for interpretation. Policy enactment is about how policy is interpreted and reinterpreted by different actors within an institution and within the degrees of freedom that exist. Within the school, there are many actors at different levels who interpret and translate policy relating to the school's activities, ranging from politicians to principals, school leaders and teachers. The interpretation of policy is also affected by societal influences, as well as local historical traditions that may be embedded in institutions. According to Ball et al. (2012), one consequence of this is that policy can be given completely different interpretations in different institutions and contexts, and that the relationships that exist with society as well as the local culture can both hinder and enable actions taken to interpret policy. Sometimes policies can be both contradictory and unclear, with a large scope for

interpretation, which means that interpreting policies in the local context risks being messy and incomplete. Policy enactment includes three interweaved aspects – a material, an interpretive, and a discursive aspect (Ball et al., 2012). In this study, focus is placed on how policy is interpreted and expressed in certain discourses on quality, while material aspects could be present as examples given by different actors.

Furthermore, Ball et al. (2012) have ascertained that there are certain policy discourses that express what, for example, ‘good’ teaching is, as well as discourses that define schooling. Two central policy discourses that have been identified in Swedish adult education are individualisation and flexibility – however, the master discourses that define Swedish adult education concern employability, skills supply, integration, and perhaps most of all marketisation (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a, 2022b; Muhrman & Andersson, 2022). In this article, however, policy enactment is examined with a focus on descriptions that can be related to quality in marketised adult education. To conduct this analysis, we need to review how quality is visible in the policy for Swedish MAE.

## Quality in adult education policy

The overarching policies that regulate Swedish MAE are the Education Act (SFS 2010:800), the Adult Education Regulation (SFS 2011:1108), the curriculum for adult education (SNAE, 2017) and syllabi for different courses (SNAE, 2022) (the latter are equivalent to those in compulsory and upper secondary school). In the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, ch. 4, § 2-8), it is stipulated that the principals in adult education must conduct quality management by systematically and continuously following up, analysing, and developing education in relation to the national goals. It is important to note that it is always the municipality that has the overall responsibility for quality control and quality management, even if external providers are engaged to conduct education. The overall aims of MAE are formulated in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, ch. 20, § 2) and stipulate that:

- adults must be supported and stimulated in their learning,
- adults must be given the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills to strengthen their position in working and social life and to promote their personal development,
- adult education must provide a good basis for the students’ further education, and
- it must form a basis for the national and regional competence supply for working life.

The Education Act (SFS 2010:800, ch. 20, § 2) also stipulates that ‘the starting point for the education of an individual student must be the student’s needs and life conditions’. Further, the Adult Education Regulation (SFS 2011:1108) and the national curriculum (SNAE, 2017) state that education should run continuously, throughout the year, that the supply of courses should be flexible in terms of study pace and distance course options, and that there should be continuous admission.

In the curriculum, as in the Education Act, overall goals for adult education are described, but also more detailed goals for three different areas: ‘Knowledge’, ‘Education choices – work and social life’, and ‘Assessment and grades’. Even in the curriculum, the importance of individualisation is highlighted with reference to the fact that the target group is heterogeneous, with individuals who live under very different conditions and different goals with their education. According to the curriculum, adult education must also be flexible with different working methods, course length, and content, so that it can

be adapted to the needs of the individual. It must also be possible to combine studies with work.

Quality as a concept is only mentioned in the curriculum in relation to the fact that cooperation with other educational institutions such as folk high schools, schools for higher vocational education and universities, as well as cooperation with labour market partners and society, is necessary for quality in education. It is also mentioned that the students must have access to and the conditions to use teaching materials with good quality.

It is stipulated in the curriculum that both the teachers and the school leaders for MAE have a professional responsibility to qualitatively develop educational activities and that this requires constant follow-up, evaluation of the activities, and testing of new methods. However, the principal has the overall responsibility for the pedagogical work, and the responsibility for conducting development and follow-up in relation to the national goals set out in the curriculum and the Education Act (SFS 2010:800). Bjursell et al. (2015) point out that Swedish adult education has long-standing traditions – despite this fact, adult education is constantly changing to adapt to societal needs. There are national guidelines that the municipalities must adhere to – one such guideline is that quality management must be carried out, but there is also room for interpretation in the policy which means that there are different targets that can be emphasised by different municipalities, as well as similar divergence between the municipal and the national level.

The responsibility for assessing the quality of MAE lies, as mentioned previously, with the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. But since quality is largely left undefined in the national policy, Mufic (2022a) shows that the inspectorate is forced to enact policy through their own interpretations, and through creating their own guidelines for what quality is within MAE. Even though the importance of high quality in education is often mentioned, Mufic and Fejes (2022) show that there is often no clear definition of what quality means, and that it is common for policy documents to rather focus on describing what is missing or what is not quality. Mufic's (2022a) study also shows that the Schools Inspectorate's interpretation of quality becomes very determinative for school operations, and that there is uncertainty in how to work and deal with other definitions of quality than those available in the Inspectorate's quality reports. Andersson and Muhrman (2022a) show that quality is often measured via statistics which, for example, relate to throughput or student achievement of goals. But Mufic (2022b, 2023) argues that quality in MAE is more than what can be captured in numbers – it is also about what students and school staff involved in the education system describe as quality, which is in the focus of this article.

## Previous research

In this article, we are studying what characterises high-quality or 'good' adult education. The focus is put on the interpretation of what quality is and the enactment of these interpretations in local quality discourses. An important part of this process concerns what teachers and students see as quality in teaching adults. There are some studies dealing with various aspects of teaching adults (e.g., Choy & Wärvik, 2018). However, there are not as many studies on the organisation of adult education on an overall level, or studies of how adult education policy is enacted in local practices.

As was described above, present-day Swedish adult education is strongly characterised by marketisation, with procurement and external private providers. It can be seen in previous research that marketisation is not a new phenomenon (Hake, 2016). Other studies show that the marketisation of education is also a global phenomenon. For

example, Mikulec and Krašovec (2016) show how marketisation in Slovenian adult education policy is related to policy on a European level. There are some studies focusing on the marketisation of Swedish MAE in general (e.g., Bjursell, 2016; Bjursell et al., 2015; Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019; Fejes et al., 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2021), but only a few studies concern policy analysis in relation to marketisation (Fejes & Olesen, 2016). Nor are there many studies of quality in adult education. In an earlier part of the current research project (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a), we provided an overview of how municipalities in Sweden combine internal and external MAE providers. The results showed that marketised Swedish adult education is complex, with diverse procurement and many short-term contracts, which leads to difficulties in controlling quality of courses outsourced to many providers as well as working with long-term quality development. The study also showed the importance of quality control systems when hiring external providers, and that those systems are often extremely resource-intensive in administrative terms (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a).

Fejes and Holmqvist (2019) point out that quality assurance systems have become important because of the marketisation of adult education with procurement by external providers. Their results also reveal that policy enactment at the local, municipal level strongly influences the outcomes of controls on MAE. In turn, Bjursell (2016) and Rönnerberg (2012) describe a tension between desirable levels of market freedom and its consequence regarding the need for administrative control and quality assurance that is often seen in marketised education systems. Bjursell et al. (2015) and Bjursell (2016) studied quality in MAE from the perspective of school leaders, and Bjursell (2016) identified different metaphors in school leaders' discourses regarding adult education, with the most common understandings identifying education as learning, as a market, and as administration.

Egetenmeyer and Käßlinger (2011) argue that it is important to understand that what is considered high quality education can be seen differently depending on what interests the involved actors have in relation to education – a politician probably raises different criteria for what constitutes 'good' education than what a school principal or a municipal denizen does. According to Egetenmeyer and Käßlinger, different interests in education and different interpretations of quality can lead to tensions and contradictions. This relative character of quality, with definitions made based on different interests and values, is also pointed out by Možina (2014). There are some studies where different perspectives on quality in adult education are identified. For example, Mark (2004) shows how quality can be viewed in many ways, and he promotes a stakeholder perspective on quality in adult education to capture different perspectives. Mark describes how managers often were concerned with financial issues, teachers with their own teaching practices, and students with the relationships to their teachers. Boshier (2006) studied the perspectives of students and teachers. He shows how both these categories emphasise the central role of the teacher. I.e., for both, the teacher is more important even if they also see the role of the students for quality in education. In addition to this, teachers see the professional and administrative support and the physical environment of the school as particularly important, while the social context is more important for the students. Armstrong (2007) concludes that the interpersonal skills of teachers and their encounters with the students are particularly important for students' experience of quality. Managers agree with this, but they do not show the same detailed understanding of the interpersonal relationships, which emphasises the importance of including the student voice in quality discussions.

When Swedish MAE is outsourced to external providers, quality criteria are stipulated in the agreements that must be followed by the providers. Mufic (2022a),

however, shows that there can be problems when quality criteria are moved ‘from one context to another context’, and when a standard is set with respect to various quality indicators that must be achieved, without these being anchored among market actors. According to Mufic, teachers can begin to question and actively oppose rules that are set if they believe that these are not favourable to students. It is then relevant to question whose quality it is that is actually stipulated.

According to Fejes et al. (2016), one of the aims of introducing the market system in adult education was that competition between many providers would presumably lead to the introduction of new pedagogical approaches and the attainment of higher quality. However, instead of following the quality systems and guidelines that were introduced, the teachers resisted by ignoring or reshaping the system in a way that they claimed to guarantee quality for the students. Mufic and Fejes (2022) also describe that quality in market-oriented adult education often focuses on things that are easy to measure, such as throughput or goal achievement, and that this can lead to self-fulfilling pursuit of fulfilling the criteria rather than a focus on developing pedagogical work. In policies for adult education, individualisation and flexibility are strongly emphasised and are something that, among other things, is measured by the Schools Inspectorate (Mufic, 2022a). Henning Loeb and Lumsden Wass (2014) claim that the focus on measuring these factors in quality evaluations, however, can give almost the opposite effect, since focus on individualisation and flexibility can entail conditional and instrumental measurement that does not consider the individual students’ life circumstances and thus becomes difficult to use for quality-improving purposes.

It seems to be important that quality management really takes into account individual life conditions. Masdonati et al. (2017) show in their study that those who participate in adult education are heterogeneous concerning life paths and experiences, which makes it important to adapt teaching to the individual.

In summary, previous research shows that the concept of quality is not clearly defined in relation to adult education, but that, despite this, there are extensive quality evaluations in the market-exposed Swedish system with procurement and many external providers. It is also evident that high quality can be seen to have different meanings depending on who in the adult education system one asks. However, there is little research on what quality can be considered to be in relation to the policy pertaining to the market-exposed adult education system. Therefore, our study can contribute new knowledge.

## Method

This article is part of a larger study of policy enactment in Swedish MAE. Here, the focus is put on policy enactment of quality in MAE by analysing school leaders’, teachers’, and students’ descriptions of what they consider to be high quality in adult education or, in simpler terms, ‘good’ adult education.

This analysis is based on interviews with 17 school leaders, 40 teachers, and 41 students from six municipalities. Most school leaders and teachers have been interviewed individually, while most student interviews have taken place in groups, but all three categories include both individual interviews and group interviews, depending on what has suited the interviewees best. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some interviews have also taken place digitally, while most interviews that took place before and after the pandemic were done physically.

The interviews were based on three different interview guides, adapted to each category (school leaders, teachers, and students). The questions referred to many different aspects of MAE, some of which have been about quality management. One question pertained



specifically to what the interviewees considered ‘good’ or high-quality adult education. It is mainly the responses to this question that form the basis of the analysis in this article, but also responses to other questions touching on aspects of ‘good’ adult education have been included.

All interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model for thematic analysis includes six steps that involve finding initial codes in the data that can be categorised and combined into themes that capture phenomena in relation to the study’s purpose and questions. The interviews were analysed together to find both common themes and themes that differ between the categories. The answers may differ to some extent between the participants within a group (school leaders, teachers, students), but the focus here was not on intra-group analysis, but on finding common themes within each group in order to make a comparison between the groups. Quotations from the interviews are used in the results to illustrate examples from the themes we found in the analysis. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the quotations have been translated into English.

We have handled all data confidentially and have been careful to ensure that it is not possible to trace the quotations or empirical descriptions in the article to individual persons or municipalities. To ensure this, all information in the quotations that can be traced to individual municipalities or individual persons has been removed.

## Findings

In the analysis of the interviews, we have identified five different discourses that express ideas of what quality in adult education is about, and that could be understood as local interpretations and translations of the national policy discourses.

### *Discourses on quality expressed in adult education*

Quality...

- ... is about formal demands and processes
- ... is a matter of student focus
- ... is about teachers’ competence and working conditions
- ... is about teaching
- ... depends on the student group

The ideas of quality that are expressed by school leaders, teachers, and students are similar but also somewhat different. Firstly, the foci of the different discourses are presented, and secondly, the similarities and differences between the three groups of interviewees are presented and discussed.

Quality is about formal demands and processes

The first discourse puts focus on formal demands and processes concerning quality. These aspects of quality relate both to national and local policies and regulations. There are demands concerning certain ideals and outcomes to strive for, as well as processes of quality management that are identified as important to establish in the local organisation of services. There are also local demands, e.g., concerning the providers’ or municipality’s economic situations, that stem from conditions of procurement and contracting of external providers that are translated into this discourse.

The ideals and outcomes to strive for are often expressed in terms of grading and throughput of students. Grading is seen in statistics on throughput and outcomes, but it is often put forward that the grading process should also be characterised by valid, reliable, and legally secure assessments. Here, the school leaders have more focus on throughput, but are also expressing the importance of legally secure assessments. Teachers and students are more focussed on the goal that grades should be valid and reliable and really reflect the students' knowledge, and routines to prevent cheating are also described as a sign of quality.

After all, we are a politically controlled organisation. The politicians want SFI to go faster and have better throughput. [...] But then it is more connected to the big mission. It's not kind of linked to the quality of teaching in that way, I would say. Rather, it's more structural, more organisational. Then they can step in and say: 'Hey, now you have to man up here and deliver.' (School leader)

Then I think a good quality thing is that all schools should be forced to have written tests for each course, instead of other solutions, [...] because it shouldn't be so that students can slip through the education without learning anything. (Teacher)

And that they have some kind of control that we get everything we need so that there is no one who kind of sits and writes straight out of a book. (Student)

Another formal demand that is central in this discourse is flexibility. Study opportunities are required to be flexible, to meet students' needs, and this is related to how MAE is organised and the conditions for contracting different providers.

[...] these education providers, they are actually quite superb at being flexible [...] the number of students goes up and down, and still be able to conduct a good teaching with very few students. [...] So they are very good at it, that just the flexibility for the individual. (School leader)

However, such a flexible organisation with multiple providers could also mean quality problems for the validity of assessments:

But the problem is now that we are 15 different providers. [...] We can try here, but we have no idea what our competitors... what requirements they set or do not set in order to set passing grades or high grades for their students. Because we have no insight into it. And that's a big shortcoming! (Teacher)

The formal processes concern the organised quality management, which also involves students via e.g. student surveys. This should be performed according to certain routines and be documented to fulfil the quality requirements.

Yes, we have an annual cycle. It's quality-wise. We work from an annual cycle so that we know when to follow up. [...] Quality reports. [...] It's an annual cycle we also follow when it comes to quality. [...] Think we work with quality all day. [...] Complaint handling, case management. (School leader)

These examples indicate how the quality management could become primarily connected to material 'tools' and local formal demands. However, there are also expressions of quality where the formal demands are referred to in terms of the national policy expressed in syllabi and curriculum:

I think it is very important to safeguard the quality of adult education in the way that you really have syllabi and curriculum in mind all the time, because I personally feel that adult

education has become very much like a market issue, what is the customer looking for?  
(Teacher)

Students' progress should be monitored on a regular basis according to the individual study plan of each student. How follow-up work is done, concerning both students' progress and teachers' work, is described as crucial for quality by school leaders:

Thus, a success factor for education is of course follow-up, to constantly follow up, that... that the teacher follows up with his student: 'How's it going? Where are you going? How does it work in relation to that?', so, formatively watch, all the while following the student. That the school leader follows the teacher and sees: 'Are we on the same track in... in as well... on this unit?', and so on. The follow-up is really important in throughout the organisation. And if the student gets follow-up, then they will not drop out to the same extent. It will get better quality. (School leader)

On a more general level, there are also ISO certificates that education providers can use to ensure the quality of their organisation. However, this does not seem to be widespread and is only 'vaguely' mentioned by one of the school leaders interviewed.

Firstly, we are ISO qualified, what is it called ISO, what is it called, ISO qualified, is that it? ... Certified, so yes, there was the word, I lost it. Aa. And it's also a stamp of quality because then we are continuously inspected all the time in all systems and so on. (School leader)

### Quality is a matter of student focus

The second discourse puts focus on the students, from an organisational perspective. Central ideas here concern how adult education is organised based on students' needs, life conditions, and life situations, but also the learning outcomes and the output for students.

Firstly, it must be easily accessible, that is, easy to apply. You must have flexibility and that's where distance learning comes in as well, that you should be able to adapt your lesson times, I think is important for an adult. [...] I usually say that I get the students' time here, so then I have to deliver something too so that they do not go here in vain. (Teacher)

The students are in focus through individualisation enacted on an organisational level, with a broad supply of courses that are flexible and broadly available, adapted to students' needs. The actual outcomes of studying, in terms of grades and outputs such as admission to university or employment, are also encompassed in this discourse. Fair treatment and assessment are other central aspects of the student focus. It should be noted that here the flexibility and fair assessment are not primarily formal matters, as in the previous discourse, but something that concerns the opportunities and treatment of individual students.

So I think quality should be to be fair to all students whether they go to that teacher or the other. That they receive the same amount of help, that is, assessment or the assignments should be based on the course syllabi. That you do not choose, it must be something that is 'a school for everyone'. Everyone, regardless of which adult education provider you go to, you should have the same conditions. (Teacher)

A factor that is also visible in this discourse is resources – sufficient resources must be available for these aspects of quality to be realised. The following quotations from a

school leader and a student illustrate central aspects of the student focus, individual adaptations and support that in turn will require resources to be implemented.

[...] you have to have that student mindset as well, based on the individual as well and what is good for the individual. That with extra adaptations and things, that are a really important part of adult education because a lot of people who come here, yes there is a huge breadth of our students, they have a foreign background, maybe weak in language or they have gone to Swedish school but have failed all the time when, huh, maybe have some diagnosis, dyslexia or something else then. (School leader)

[...] there must be counselling and such [support] available and support because I think that many of those who have ended up at MAE are, like, those who have had problems with school before, so then there must be available support so that they do not have the same problems again. (Student)

### Quality is about teachers' competence and working conditions

In the third discourse, the teachers are in focus. Here, quality is firstly about teachers' formal and actual competence, both for teaching and in the teaching subjects. Secondly, quality is about the conditions under which teachers can utilise, maintain, and develop their competence. This includes working conditions with a reasonable workload, and conditions for continuing professional development, collegial exchange and cooperation, etc.

But I think what we have here is that we have licensed teachers basically only. We have no unauthorised substitutes, but all are experienced teachers and we have more training than is really required! For example, Kim who has a doctorate, we have many senior lecturers and we have many teachers with PhDs. [...] that does not have to say anything about teaching in and of itself. But I think we have teachers who have a foundation in their knowledge plus we have long experience. I believe that we have a humble attitude to what we do and that we are sensitive to the students we have. I think that's what you hear when we talk to the students, they feel that here at our school there are such good teachers – they often say that, and I think that is the good quality of our adult education. (Teacher)

To conduct good teaching, you should also need to have, but trained teachers, but also trained teachers are not enough. [...] So that there must also be a good team behind as support. (Teacher)

There are some differences in how this discourse is expressed by the different groups. The school leaders primarily emphasise formal competence, e.g. as it is 'materialised' in the form of a teaching certificate. They also highlight the provision of competence training as a quality assurance measure.

Then we have competence programmes for the staff. We have [NN], which sells company training programmes, and all teachers or all staff can take as many as they want and sign up for them. It is quality assurance. (School leader)

The focus of the teachers is rather put on how quality is attained through deep knowledge and a teacher collective where knowledge is shared. For students, teaching competence is central to quality, and that they meet teachers who are knowledgeable, communicative, and see them as individuals:

But you feel very vulnerable and therefore I think it is important that you as a teacher are very pedagogical and accommodating with the person who comes in. (Student)

I think mostly pedagogical teacher. The teacher must understand what we need and our pace, not just keep going. [...] That is, that they are engaged but also that yes, they can answer questions during the lesson and such. (Student)

### Quality is about teaching

The fourth discourse also concerns the teachers, but with a focus on their teaching. Thus, quality in this discourse is about how teaching is planned and realised. There are different aspects that are identified as central to quality in this discourse. One aspect which is touched upon is that enough time for teaching is required to be able to cover the course contents in a reasonable way. Further, interaction with students is viewed as important for quality, preferably in physical meetings in small groups rather than online.

I think it is fine as it is now, as well, that there are not so many people. The teacher has time for each student. I think it would be good if this was the case in all schools. (Student)

I think that adult education on site [...], beats distance learning every day of the week. [...] You have a context, you have a class, a classroom, and you can ask your teacher a lot more things. You get much more inspired, I think, when you sit together with a few others and study. (Teacher)

The interviewees often express the belief that there should be many work tasks to practice, and that feedback should be prompt and distinct. Teaching should be inclusive, insofar as all students are seen clearly by teachers, and there should be thoroughgoing individualisation that really starts from the level of the students.

One aspect that [...] is absolutely central, it is [...] how you treat the students. How do you look at them in relation to what you are doing and things like that. That we are actually here for them [...] first of all, get to the right level, that is the first thing. [...] Then they feel that they can and that they will succeed. (Teacher)

Finally, the teaching methods should be in alignment with the contents of the course, e.g., including laboratory work in science and examples from society in social sciences. This can be a problem in distance learning.

Then there are the challenges of distance learning. And it's exactly these practical elements, laboratory sessions. That you ensure that you maintain the quality that should actually exist around those elements. That's super important. (School leader)

These different aspects are also more or less part of how the different actors express what quality is about. The school leaders highlight formal aspects such as alignment with relevant teaching methods, which could be enacted e.g. through school-based rather than distance teaching. Teachers talk about interaction with students, time, individualisation, connections to society, and the actual planning and contents of teaching. The focus of the students is to be seen by teachers, to receive plenty of feedback on tasks, and to get opportunities to apply knowledge in practice rather than only having it mediated by teachers.

I think teachers would plan some practical projects [...] Making a presentation mostly about this practical. [...] I think it will be more efficient and better. [...] Because when you learn, you have to test and talk. Otherwise, you'll forget about it. (Student)

## Quality depends on the student group

In the fifth local discourse identified here, the focus is on the interaction between students. Thus, quality depends on the exchange between them. This exchange could improve the quality of education, but it could also be a factor that reduces quality when interaction does not work as expected. This discourse is mainly expressed by students, but also teachers talk about the value of student interaction for quality.

Cooperation between students improves quality when they can help and learn from each other.

And with group discussions it's pretty good. Some can speak good Swedish, some cannot. But we understand what they are talking about, and we can help and then we can move forward together. (Student)

However, interaction is also described as a potential disturbance that has a negative influence on quality. Students have experienced such disturbing interactions, which they describe in terms of lack of mutual respect and also as a consequence of different cultures among the students.

Because when we are in classrooms and are mixed from different countries, there is a bit of a culture clash because the one from one country can disturb others... Some groups and people speak too much in the classroom and then it becomes other languages while we try to read and write in Swedish. I find that very disturbing, it should be improved. (Student)

## *Comparison of discourses expressed by school leaders, teachers, and students*

These five discourses are identified in the groups of interviewees as wholes – school leaders, teachers, and students. Looking closer at these three different groups, we can identify somewhat different foci in what the groups express, depending on their different positions in adult education.

### School leaders

The focus of the school leaders is closely connected to the formal responsibilities that they and their organisations have in providing adult education. Firstly, there are formal demands and processes that school leaders are expected to follow, concerning quality management and output, which is reflected in their ways of describing quality. The demands on output, students passing their courses, are central for the school leaders, but they also describe valid and legally secure assessments as important for quality, not the least when it comes to routines to prevent cheating.

The connection between quality and teacher competence is mainly referred to in terms of the importance of formal competence and teaching certificates. However, school leaders also highlight the role of competence development and collegial learning, which are other parts of their responsibility. Furthermore, concerning teaching, the main focus of school leaders regarding quality pertains to whether formal demands of the curriculum and regarding different subjects are fulfilled, for example concerning laboratory work in science. They tend to identify some quality problems in distance teaching and point out that certain elements of the courses might require school-based teaching, which could be a reason for providing some courses internally instead of contracting external providers of distance courses.

## Teachers

The teachers express a quality focus that is closer to their teaching. The formal aspects of their quality ideas put focus on the learning outcomes of the students, and also pertain to whether assessments are valid and reliable. Actual teaching competence is more important for them than formal competence, including deep subject knowledge, but also the shared knowledge of the teacher collective. Particularly, the teachers express the importance of a student focus and of quality in teaching. Good teaching requires good working conditions for the teachers, which gives time for interaction with the students, individualisation, as well as connections to society.

## Students

The discourses of quality expressed by the students connect to their life situations and highlight the value of flexibility and freedom of choice. Actual teaching competence is also important, as they want to meet a teacher who is knowledgeable, communicative, and sees them. The relationship to the teacher is important for good teaching, which is signified by e.g. interaction and support, variation in methods, many work tasks and extensive feedback. Finally, the interaction and exchange in the student group, cooperating and helping each other, is a quality factor that particularly the students mention as important.

## Concluding discussion

As we described initially, the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800) stipulates that MAE should put focus both on students' learning and on its outcomes in terms of knowledge, personal development, a strengthened position in social and working life, a basis for further education, and skills supply in the labour market. The national policy also has an emphasis on flexibility and individualisation to meet the needs of adult students, and the municipalities are responsible for quality in MAE. However, besides these general statements, the policy is rather unclear in what defines quality in adult education more exactly, which leaves a certain degree of freedom to the municipality, and to the Schools Inspectorate and its national quality assurance (Mufic, 2022a).

### *Policy vs. local ideas of quality*

From the five discourses of quality and how these are expressed by the different categories of interviewees, we can see how national policy is interpreted, translated, and enacted in various ways (cf. Armstrong, 2007; Boshier, 2006; Egetenmeyer & Käpplinger, 2011; Mark, 2004). The school leaders, on the one hand, focus particularly on the formal and organisational aspects of quality (cf. Bjursell et al., 2015). As representatives of the municipality and its providers, they are expected to fulfil the formal requirements and expectations, which is reflected in the ways they describe quality (cf. Mark, 2004). However, as Mufic and Fejes (2022) point out, such requirements could induce a focus on what is easy to measure rather than on more essential aspects of pedagogical development – what Boshier (2006) describes as a focus on standards and outcomes rather than on processes.

Teachers and students, on the other hand, have focus on the actual processes in the classroom, and on the connection of educational quality to their own work and lives. In their ways of expressing the quality discourses, the teachers criticise the formal, organisational ways of translating policy into practices such as continuous admittance,

flexibility with distance and short courses, and marketisation with a multitude of providers. These enactments could be seen as signs of quality according to policy, but according to what the teachers express, the influence of emphasising such performance inputs on the actual quality of teaching and students' learning is negative. Similar to what Fejes et al. (2016) and Mufic (2023) describe, the teachers rather promote quality connected to what is favourable to students. The students, however, are more positive towards flexibility in MAE. For them, flexibility means more options to combine studies with work and private life, which is a relevant aspect of quality for them. Still, the teachers and their teaching are central for quality education, according to themselves as well as the students (cf. Armstrong, 2007; Boshier, 2006; Mark, 2004). As noted above, the student group also is a factor that particularly the students themselves describe as important for quality in adult education. Such individual conditions are also important to consider in adult education with its heterogeneous student group (cf. Boshier, 2006; Masdonati et al., 2017).

What is notable in the findings from the interviews is that the expected long-term outcomes of adult education emphasised in policy are less prominent in the discourses on quality that were identified in the analysis. This concerns long-term outcomes such as further education opportunities, skills supply, and not the least inclusion in terms of students' subsequent position in social and working life. The focus is rather on the conditions for studying and teaching. This includes for example the way adult education is organised, how students are treated – especially the personal support they receive from teachers, and the short-term outcomes of knowledge and grades.

### *Policy enactment in local adult education practices*

This study puts focus on the – sometimes messy and incomplete – translations of national policy into local discourses with a focus on how ideas on quality are expressed. What could such discursive enactments mean for local adult education practices? Compared to the national policy discourses, the perspectives expressed here are more limited to studying and teaching, organisation, and short-term outcomes. What is then the role of long-term aims expressed in national policy in local practices? When certain parts of a national policy are less prominent in local discourses on quality, an interesting question for further investigation in different contexts is whether these long-term aims are still present in other ways within local policy enactment, or whether they actually are neglected in local practices. For example, in the Swedish case this question further concerns whether theoretical courses on the upper secondary level are preparing students for the actual demands posed in higher education, beyond the formal qualifications that are required for admission, and to what extent adult education actually promotes inclusion in social and working life. When it comes to vocational courses, the local enactment of skills supply is of interest. As discussed earlier (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022b), MAE tends to get a supplementary role in the skills supply, when courses preparing students for work in elderly care and childcare are dominating offerings. This makes MAE a 'buffer' that is filling gaps in the skills supply that upper secondary school cannot fill. In this context, such a rather narrow supply of courses could also result in subordinate labour market inclusion of migrants with few alternatives to choose between. Further investigations could identify similar 'messy' policy enactments in this and other national contexts.

The focus of this article is on teachers', students', and school leaders' own descriptions of what they consider to be quality or 'good' adult education. These descriptions have led to the themes we have presented in the findings. Of course, there



may be other hidden organisational practices associated with quality that were not reported to us by the interviewees. Further studies of the enactment of quality in adult education should analyse how prominent the enactment of policies' more general long-term aims is in local education practices, as compared to the role of short-term aims concerning e.g. students' learning and flexible study opportunities and the influence of local quality discourses overall. What is the role of formal demands for measurable outcomes, processes of quality management, teachers' competence and working conditions for teaching, the student group, and flexible study opportunities? And are there contradictions between central and local as well as long- and short-term quality discourses, or could all such discourses actually be integrated in local policy enactment?

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