Adult education in Sweden in the wake of marketisation

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this study is to describe and analyse how municipal adult education (MAE) in Sweden is enacted at the intersection of course organisation, student selection and course content. For this analysis, the data consist of a nationwide survey sent to Swedish municipalities, interviews with school leaders from 20 municipalities and in-depth interviews with school leaders from six municipalities. The findings show that the supply of MAE courses is clearly governed by policies concerning what municipalities are obliged to offer according to the Education Act, but in many other ways, MAE policies offer a high degree of freedom for interpretation and translation. On a general level, MAE is organised in three different ways: school-based education, apprenticeships and distance education. However, the courses included are enacted in different ways in different municipalities. How the courses are enacted is governed by factors such as using external education companies, resources, the number of students and collaboration with working life. The selection of MAE courses has a clear labour market focus, where employers’ needs for labour are set higher than students’ wishes and needs. A central aspect of this focus is labour market integration of migrants.

KEYWORDS
Marketisation; adult education; municipality; organisation; enactment; course content

Introduction
There is an ongoing process of marketisation of public education, which is taking place to different extents and in different ways around the world (Verger et al. 2017). This process of marketisation and privatisation can be both exogenous and endogenous (Ball and Youdell 2008). That is, marketisation includes measures such as the procurement of private, external providers, as well as internal processes whereby public institutions are managed in a more business-like way (Lundahl et al. 2013). This marketisation is extensive in Sweden, with a high number of publicly funded, independent schools owned by private companies as part of the school system. The level of marketisation is high within adult education, with about 50% being organised by external providers, as compared to 15% in 1997 when the process of more extensive
marketisation took off. There are also high levels of internal marketisation, in terms of quality assurance work, and competition with other providers or organisers, including public, municipal-owned organisers (Andersson and Muhrman submitted).

In Sweden, there are national policies concerning formal adult education which are enacted at the local level within the framework of municipal adult education (MAE). Thus, adult education is a municipal responsibility with a high level of decentralisation and devolution. The focus of this article is on the enactment of the market orientation in adult education, in terms of the organisation and content of courses, and of student selection. This market orientation could be directed towards the labour market, concerning whether and how knowledge content and students with demands in this market are prioritised. However, there is also a direct market orientation in the Swedish adult education system concerning how content and organisation are directed towards the demands of students, and how adult education is enacted through procurement where municipalities decide which courses to buy from external providers. The courses in this system have content that are defined in a national curriculum. That is, the local enactment of content takes place through the choice of which courses to offer the students.

Another aspect of this is whether and how students are selected if the demand for study places is higher than the supply. There is a policy (see below) governing these prioritisations. This policy has shifted towards a labour market orientation, but still leaves municipalities with a high degree of freedom. Therefore, it is of interest to analyse whether and how students’ demands are fulfilled, and how students’ demands are connected to labour market demands.

**Aim and research questions**

Swedish adult education is thus characterised by extensive marketisation as well as decentralisation and devolution. The aim of this study is to describe and analyse how municipal adult education in Sweden is enacted in local practice in the wake of marketisation. The following questions guide the study:

- How is the organisation of the courses established?
- How are students selected?
- How are the courses offered in adult education selected?
- How is adult education enacted at the intersection of course organisation, student selection and course content?

**The context: Swedish municipal adult education**

The focus of this study is Swedish MAE, including general and vocational courses corresponding to the curricula for compulsory and upper secondary school, and courses in Swedish for immigrants (SFI). MAE is governed by the Education Act (2010) and an Adult Education Regulation (2011) and has its own national curriculum (Swedish National Agency of Education 2017). The Education Act states the broad aim of MAE, which should support learning and personal development in order to strengthen the
student’s position within society as well as in working life. MAE should also prepare the student for further and higher education. Not least, a recently added aim states that MAE should provide a basis for skills supply in the national and regional labour markets.

There are no tuition fees. Instead, there is a system of grants and loans for students to support themselves. The municipalities are obliged to offer courses at basic (compulsory school) and upper secondary school levels, as well as SFI. Anyone who lacks knowledge corresponding to the compulsory school level, and who meets the conditions to pass the courses, has the legal right to study at this level. The same is true for SFI and immigrants who lack basic knowledge of the Swedish language. At the upper secondary level, the legal right is restricted to courses that give eligibility for higher education or higher vocational education, as part of a policy to widen access for ‘non-traditional’ students (cf. Thunborg and Bron 2019). In addition to these courses, the municipality should also strive to offer other upper secondary level courses, including vocational education, corresponding to needs and demands. If demand is higher than supply, the priority in selection should be given to applicants with the least prior education. (From July 2021, this priority is changed to those with the greatest need for education.) It should also be noted that municipalities can cooperate in terms of adult education, and a municipality can thus fulfil the obligations by offering MAE participation in another municipality (Education Act 2010, chapter 20).

The Adult Education Regulation (2011) states that education should run continuously, throughout the year. Teaching is organised as separate courses, but vocational courses are also combined in shorter, cohesive training programmes (‘course packages’) for a defined vocation. A course is typically equivalent to five weeks’ full-time studies. The supply of courses should be flexible, in terms of study pace, distance course options and continuous admission. It is possible to contract not only other municipalities but also external, private providers to organise all or part of MAE offerings. The private providers are typically large training companies that offer their services across Sweden, but there are also smaller, local companies and a few non-profit organisations (folk high schools and study associations) that are hired as providers. Still, it is each municipality that is responsible for the quality, and quality assurance, in all its MAE, regardless of who organises the course.

Since 2009, there has also been a national initiative, Yrkesvux (‘Vocational Adult’), for regional cooperation in vocational adult education. The initiative includes subsidies paid to municipalities that organise such education together, and this policy (Regional Vocational Adult Education Regulation 2016) also states that local employers should be involved and that the aim should be to fulfil the labour market’s demand for skills. Another requirement is the organisation of course packages, where a few courses are combined to match the demand for skills. The packages should include at least 15% workplace-based learning, and there is also the option of apprenticeship training where at least 70% must be workplace-based. A specific requirement concerns selection, where priority should be given not only to those with little prior education but also to those with a weak position in the labour market.

Swedish MAE is extensive. In 2020, 7% of the adult population aged 20–64 years studied MAE, that is, 400,000 students, who took one or more courses at compulsory
school level, upper secondary level and/or SFI. 75,000 of them studied at compulsory school level, 243,000 studied at upper secondary level and 137,000 studied SFI, giving an overlap of students studying more than one type of MAE course during one year. 107,000 of the upper-secondary level students studied one or more vocational courses. 60% of all students were women, and the majority had a foreign background. Besides SFI, 95% of the students at the compulsory school level and 46% at the upper secondary level were foreign-born (Swedish National Agency of Education 2021). In 2019, before the pandemic situation resulted in a temporary adjustment, 15% of the students at the compulsory level and 38% at the upper secondary level studied distance courses, representing an increase in recent years (Swedish National Agency of Education 2020).

The development of marketised adult education

Research into the marketisation of adult education has mainly been conceptual or concerned with policy analysis (Fejes and Olesen 2016). Empirical studies of the consequences in adult education practices are however sparse. Fejes and Olesen (2016) highlight two issues of particular interest for further research, which will also be the focus of the present study: the practice of adult education provision, and access to and availability of adult education.

The marketisation of adult education is not a new phenomenon. Hake (2016) illustrates this in a historical analysis of the development of a ‘post-initial training market’ in the Netherlands. Nor is it a local or national development, but rather a global one. In the present study, our delimitation is to study the enactment of national policy in local adult education practice, even if the global level is of interest. For example, Mikulec and Krašovec (2016) show how marketisation in Slovenian adult education policy is related to policy at European level, and Mikulec (2018) describes this European policy as instrumental and technological, with a focus on vocational rather than liberal adult education. It should also be noted that the marketisation of formal adult education in Sweden thus far does not include the system for funding. As mentioned there are no tuition fees, and adult education is not questioned as a publicly funded ‘public good’ (cf. Mayo 2018). This could be compared to the example from British Columbia described by Walker and Smythe (2020), who analyse developments when free adult education is questioned and fees are introduced through discourses of ‘deservedness’ and ‘financial necessity’.

A central concern in a marketised but publicly funded system is the tension between a decentralised market and the need for administrative measures for public control and quality assurance (Rönnberg 2011, 2012, Bjursell et al. 2015, Bjursell 2016). Wärwick (2013) studied the effects of a quality assurance scheme that was introduced by an external VET provider in Swedish MAE. The scheme included the standardisation of educational content and assessment, and governed teachers’ work, but it also influenced how teachers were able to use their own vocational ideas and adapt teaching to students’ special needs. The findings of Fejes et al. (2016) also indicate that principals and students mainly conform to the demands that emerge from marketisation, while teachers show resistance to these demands to a greater degree. Colliander (2019)
describes how SFI teachers experienced job insecurity and stress in a system featuring outsourcing, short contracts and streamlining of courses.

Carlson and Jacobsson (2019) discuss the market orientation in SFI. They identify the development of a more labour market orientation or ‘work orientation’ in the curriculum, where more attention is paid to ‘occupational language’ and making students employable, thereby relegating the democratic and civic functions of adult education to the background. A study of SFI with such a work orientation by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (2018) shows how this labour market-oriented approach is positive for students’ language learning and motivation. Language education is combined with vocational education, which also improves the labour market integration. Key factors are that the application in practice makes language learning more meaningful, and that learning vocational language in an authentic context contributes to the development of vocational identity and networks. That is, language learning and vocational learning are combined in workshops at school, as well as during study visits and workplace-based learning in working life. This requires cooperation with employers and between vocational teachers and teachers in Swedish and requires SFI teachers to be knowledgeable within the vocational areas in question (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth 2018).

This article particularly concerns the enactment of Swedish MAE policy in local practice. Fejes and Holmqvist (2019) describe several consequences of how this policy has resulted in widespread marketisation through procurement. The municipality’s quality assurance system plays a central role. Short contracts for procured external providers could create instability and result in stress among staff. The procurement system not only involves outsourcing but also makes providers and teachers replaceable commodities in a market. From a teacher’s perspective, this flexible system results in uncertainty and a perceived lack of autonomy, leading to difficulties in planning to teach (Holmqvist 2020). Holmqvist et al. (2021) also show how different types of policy enactment at the local level influence the outcomes of marketisation. A municipality that outsources all MAE can keep control of its provision, for example through a focus on quality rather than the price during procurement. On the other hand, in a municipality where ‘only’ half of MAE is outsourced, there is still more freedom and competition between organisers, both private and public.

In an earlier part of the present research project (Andersson and Muhrman, submitted), we provided an overview of how municipalities in Sweden combine internal and external organisers within MAE and choose different types of procurement of externally provided courses. We also identified a student focus in quality assurance, expressed in measures such as surveys and analyses of statistics on outcomes. Municipal administrators’ experience of quality problems among organisers meant that some municipalities considered the alternative of expanding their internal provision of courses. We could also see a labour market focus in the prioritisation of certain vocational packages. However, in order to understand the local enactment of adult education in greater detail, we will now go further in our analysis of how MAE practice is established through the prioritisation of certain courses, course organisation and student selection.
Policy enactment

In this article, we continue to analyse policy enactment (Braun et al. 2010, Ball et al. 2012) in Swedish adult education (Holmqvist et al. 2021). From our perspective, the connection between education policy and practice is not seen as a rational process of implementation. Rather, it is seen as a complex process of enactment which includes the interpretation and translation of policy into local practice (Ball et al. 2012), or, as Maguire et al. (2015) put it:

Policy is not ‘done’ at one point in time, it is always a process of ‘becoming’. It is reviewed and revised as well as sometimes dispensed with or sometimes simply just forgotten. There will be multiple subjectivities and positions that will shape how policies are understood, and differences will occur in enactments over time and in different spatial contexts. Enactment then is messy, incomplete and a form of interpretation and intersubjectivity in action. (Maguire et al. 2015, p. 487)

This complex process involves multiple actors in the local contexts of schools and authorities, where policies are interpreted and translated according to the local conditions in certain ways. For example, multiple policies might be contradictory, which means that the enactment in a local school context must be messy and incomplete, and less prescriptive, general policies might include a high degree of freedom in the way they are translated and enacted locally. Still, there are certain policy discourses that express what ‘good’ teaching, teachers, students, etc. are, which governs their enactment (Ball et al. 2012). In our case, the national policies do not prescribe exactly how MAE should be enacted. Instead, the policies have certain degrees of freedom, and local actors within the municipalities interpret the policies and translate them into their own models of organising adult education. For example, the policy discourse of MAE defines the student that should be targeted as the one with the least prior education but who still meets the conditions to pass the course, and this has to be enacted in the selection of students. Ball et al. (2012) also identified some ‘master’ discourses that define schooling, which in their case were learning, curriculum and behaviour. That is, the latter discourse defines student behaviour as a central concern in school.

Methods

This article is part of a larger study of policy enactment, examining the organisation of MAE in Sweden from political decisions, via procurement or authorisation procedures, work with quality assurance, admission and student selection, to how all this affects adult students, teachers’ work and the classroom situation. Here, the focus is on how adult education is enacted through the selection of courses, the way courses are organised, and the selection of students.

Data for this article consist of three parts. Firstly, a nationwide survey was distributed to adult education representatives in all Swedish municipalities (290), with 164 responses representing 201 municipalities (69%). (Some municipalities have a common organisation for MAE, and here one response represents more than one municipality.) Secondly, qualitative interviews have been conducted with MAE representatives in a sample of 20 municipalities, which were selected based on information from the first step and from official statistics on Swedish municipalities, to obtain a sample covering
different types of the municipality as well as different ways of organising MAE. Thirdly, a more extensive study has been conducted in six of these municipalities, which in this article are represented by in-depth, qualitative interviews with school leaders and principals.

The quantitative data from the survey are used in this article to provide descriptive statistics concerning different ways of organising adult education. The qualitative data consisting of recorded interviews have been transcribed and analysed thematically (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006). Quotations from the interviews are used to illustrate the qualitative findings. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the selected quotations have been translated into English.

The survey covers a large proportion of municipalities in Sweden that conduct adult education, which gives a relatively high degree of reliability. However, there is always a risk that questions will be misinterpreted. To avoid this, the survey was sent to a sample of test recipients who were asked to answer the questions and comment on things they felt were unclear. During the 20 interviews in the second step, we also provided feedback to the survey respondents and thus had the opportunity to assess the validity of the survey and give the respondents the opportunity to develop answers in the survey that were unclear or that indicated misunderstandings.

The survey is not anonymous regarding which municipality the answers come from. However, the anonymity of the individuals within the municipality who answered the survey has been ensured. We have handled all data confidentially and have been careful to ensure that it should not be possible to trace the empirical examples in the article to individual municipalities. The interviews were also dealt with confidentially, and we have anonymised the respondents and have not reported which municipalities are included in the 20 selected for interviews and the six selected for extensive studies.

**Findings**

As described above, municipal adult education (MAE) in Sweden is offered in several different forms by the public as well as external providers. Most students study theoretical courses at basic and upper secondary levels and/or SFI. MAE also offers courses or short programmes (course packages) within most of the vocations taught on VET programmes at upper secondary school. There are school-based as well as distance-based courses, and in VET also the option of apprenticeships. The municipalities are obliged to offer parts of the courses to anyone who meets the conditions to pass, while other courses are optional to offer, and in the latter case, priority should be given to those with the least prior education.

This article concerns how the various forms of adult education are organised and which challenges are encountered in the marketised MAE. The following sections present the findings from surveys and interviews with school leaders focussing on two main themes: how flexibility is enacted in the organisation of courses, and how MAE is enacted through the selection and prioritisation of students and contents in admission and in local curricula.
Flexibility in organisation of courses

There is a great deal of devolution and flexibility regarding the organisation of the courses and programmes within MAE, which allows for different solutions both in different municipalities and between individual students. It is possible for adults to study both on site at school and remotely, or as an apprentice at a workplace. In some cases, only one of these forms is offered for a specific course or programme, while in other cases students can choose between the different forms.

Flexibility through distance education

Distance education is a common translation and enactment of flexibility within MAE, and it is offered in some form by virtually all municipalities. Often, students can choose to study vocational and theoretical courses as well as SFI remotely. 72% of the municipalities that responded to the survey offer vocational education remotely, 89% offer theoretical courses at the upper secondary level, 43% offer SFI courses, and 54% offer theoretical courses at the basic level. The main arguments for distance education are to be able to offer a wider range of courses and to ensure greater flexibility and accessibility for the individual. Distance education with external organisers often has a larger catchment area, which makes it possible for municipalities to offer students courses that would not have been possible to arrange otherwise due to applicant numbers being too low.

Due to marketisation and the option to hire external organisers of distance education, who can give the same course to students from many municipalities, most municipalities can offer virtually all courses in theoretical subjects. In smaller municipalities, for example, it is common for courses in science subjects such as biology, chemistry, and physics to be offered only remotely. However, it is also common for distance learning to be available as an option to increase the number of places on courses with many applicants. For example, many municipalities offer distance courses in VET programmes for assistant nurses. Thanks to the fact that many municipalities use external distance organisers, there is often also more than one organiser available for a course or an entire programme, which means that there are good opportunities for students to get a place on any course or programme they want in MAE.

One advantage of studying remotely which is promoted is that it provides greater flexibility with, for example, the opportunity for students to combine work with studies and thus potentially avoid taking out student loans. Distance education also means that students are not prevented from studying a course or programme due to long distances and travel, which is important in those municipalities that are large in area but sparsely populated. There is also considered to be a need for SFI courses via distance learning because this gives people who find it difficult to leave home – for example, because of parenting responsibilities or work – the opportunity to study SFI. Furthermore, distance education is, in some cases, described as a suitable alternative for students who have a social phobia, anxiety, a neuropsychiatric disorder or a functional variation that makes it difficult for them to be among people or commute. In this way, school leaders describe how distance education means that MAE is made available to a broader group of people.
Quality problems in distance education

Despite the benefits of flexibility and individualised accessibility, several school leaders in MAE also highlight problems that make them dissuade many students from choosing distance education. Alternatively, they try to create educational solutions that are something in between distance and on-site studies. These ‘flexible programmes’ allow students to decide to what extent they want to study remotely or take part in on-site training for a course. In addition, the courses included in the flexible programmes often start several times per semester and students can choose at which pace they want to take the courses.

The problems mentioned with distance education are often about inadequate quality. The remote students are typically described as having weaker results and a higher proportion of dropouts. The school leaders believe that students with previous study failures risk failing again, and therefore believe that courses that are completely remote are only suitable for those students who are both highly motivated and ‘study strong’ students. In SFI, several school leaders say that they only allow students to take distance courses if there is a special need for this, as students who have studied SFI remotely often have poorer knowledge outcomes.

Distance education is also described by some school leaders as a way of pushing prices. In other words, marketisation leads to more students per teacher and poorer quality teaching. For example, science courses where laboratory elements are an important part are given fully remotely with ‘home labs’ that cannot be considered to correspond to the central content and meet the goals of the courses. There are also problems with conducting examinations and inaccurate assessment and grading, and these problems risk becoming an obstacle for students. As one principal says:

Those who have studied distance courses have such poor knowledge, even though they have good grades, that they cannot continue with further education.

To deal with cheating in tests and grading, school leaders believe that it is important to set high standards when external providers are hired for distance education. In addition to requirements for school-based laboratory work and access to teacher-led workshops for students, several municipalities require all distance students to take on-site tests (national tests in the available subjects), which must form the basis for grading.

Several school leaders in MAE also describe how a growing number of students choose distance education for the ‘wrong’ reason. These students think it is easier to study remotely because they ‘have heard’ that there are lower requirements and that it is easy to get good grades. One principal explains:

The benefits of distance are for people who want to combine studies with work and who have a clear goal for doing this, and are used to studying and have the discipline to study, these students do well. Those we see a challenge with are a growing group who do not want to leave their home and choose to study remotely for a slightly wrong reason and these students do not succeed well in the distance system.

Reluctance to apprenticeships

In addition to school-based and in some cases distance-based vocational education, virtually all municipalities extend flexibility by offering vocational education via apprenticeship programmes. In many municipalities, students can choose whether they want
to study vocational education as a school-based programme or as an apprenticeship programme. However, some municipalities mainly offer apprenticeship programmes in more ‘unusual’ vocations for which the municipality lacks vocational teachers and/or the equipment required for school-based training. As mentioned, there are also national government subsidies that the municipalities can apply for to be able to offer vocational education in the form of apprenticeship programmes. However, unlike in the ‘normal’ Yrkesvux initiative with its lower amount of workplace-based learning, many municipalities find it difficult to attract apprentices, which is partly explained by the fact that Sweden no longer has an apprenticeship tradition and that many students prefer to be in the social environment at school where they can meet other students. School leaders also say that it is often difficult to find apprenticeship placements for students. Several municipalities have had these problems to enact the policy initiative concerning apprenticeships and have therefore been forced to pay back all or part of this national subsidy. Thus, in this respect, there is a lack of marketisation in terms of cooperation with the labour market, which is unwilling or unable to offer placements.

Selection and prioritisation of students and contents

Adult education is enacted not only in the way courses are organised but also through the selection and admission of students, and the prioritisations of courses to offer in addition to what all municipalities are obliged to provide.

Selection of students

As previously mentioned, the policy prescribes certain prioritisations concerning the admission of adult students. Flexibility is a requirement, including continuous admission to courses. Several of the municipalities have arranged flexible solutions for admission adapted in line with supply and demand. Continuous admission in some cases means that students can apply for a course today and start tomorrow. In many municipalities, students can choose between several different organisers. Of those that do not only have a municipal organiser, 69% answered that the same course is available with several organisers. Of those where the same course is available with several organisers, 60% answered that students are free to choose between the organisers. The others have different alternatives where the enactment of flexibility in terms of freedom of choice can vary from course to course. If the students do not get a place according to their wishes, it is most common that they can apply again during the next round of applications. Otherwise, they are offered a place with another organiser or in another municipality.

Selection for vocational education. For certain courses, the municipalities are – as mentioned – obliged to offer a place. In recent years, however, most municipalities have had relatively good finances within MAE, and the obligations in policy have been translated into an enactment where the supply is broader than required. It is only for certain vocational course packages that there are sometimes more applicants than places, and a selection process is needed. For those who already have an upper secondary education and want to change professions, competition for places may limit the
possibility to get a place in vocational MAE, as those who have the lowest level of education, are furthest from the labour market and have the highest needs must be given priority. However, the relatively strong financial position means that in many municipalities there are good opportunities even for those who already have more education (even at the university level) to study almost any courses or programmes they want to. Some municipalities say, however, that labour market demand may determine whether a student should be offered a place.

**Who has the conditions to pass?** One key point and challenge when it comes to the enactment of admission and selection for MAE is how to interpret the criterion that the selection should be based on whether the student ‘is judged to have the conditions to pass the education’. Selection could therefore be carried out based on who is considered to have the best conditions for completing the course. One principal explains:

> We are rarely forced to select; those who want it usually get their education. For us, it is not this assessment we make, but the students’ conditions for passing the studies, it controls a lot. You should have the opportunity to attend courses where you can succeed.

MAE was previously mainly a way to supplement upper secondary school grades for further studies at university, but school leaders see that they now have a much larger mix of students with different pre-conditions. For example, one principal says:

> That we have an ever-increasing group of students who have a great need for various forms of support and adaptations. The target group has definitely changed in recent years, this applies to both students with neuropsychiatric diagnoses and negative experiences of previous schooling.

The conditions for completing their education also involve students’ attitudes towards their studies. Some principals believe that the situation in MAE with individual adaptations in terms of both study pace and form of study, for example, school-based or distance education, can sometimes be too flexible. This situation risks leading to students not taking their studies seriously, dropping out or not obtaining pass grades in their studies, and also risks them not being prepared for the demands of working life, such as arriving on time. Principals also say that many students are not willing to commute to study at MAE, which can be a problem when several municipalities in a region come together to conduct adult education and then base certain specialisations or courses in a certain municipality that students from other municipalities are expected to commute to. If the courses are not perceived by students to be sufficiently ‘accessible’, the principals fear that there is a risk of the thresholds being too high for certain students, for example, those who come from families or communities without a tradition of studying. Thus, the selection process also becomes a matter of lowering thresholds to avoid deselection of education among potential students.

**Transitions from upper secondary school.** In addition to this, school leaders emphasise the importance of a good transition between upper secondary school and MAE for students who need supplementary education in MAE. Here they see a certain danger in having too much flexibility, while at the same time highlighting this as something unique that they want to protect. One principal says:
It is very important that we phase in upper secondary school, that we get regulations and laws that are adapted to it, while also being able to maintain our uniqueness because the success factor with adult education is precisely the flexibility and individual adaptation, we must defend this, it must not be the case that we are just an extended upper secondary school, because then I think, then we will not succeed as well as we do today with our students.

The difficulty thus involves safeguarding the flexibility that opens MAE to a wide range of individuals with diverse needs and conditions for studies, while the quality of education is kept at a high level and students really see the value of MAE and take their studies seriously.

**Selection of courses – prioritisation of contents**

As described, the municipalities must offer everyone who meets the conditions to complete the studies the opportunity to study courses at the basic level and at the upper secondary level, giving eligibility for higher education, and SFI courses. Thus, decentralisation and devolution are enacted in the local curricula where different municipalities are selecting which courses in the national curriculum to offer in addition to the obligations. Specific subject and vocational contents are prioritised through the selection of courses to offer. And, not the least, such selection of courses also means prioritisation of those students who are interested in the courses that are offered.

Theoretical courses at basic and upper secondary levels are a main part of MAE. However, even though there are many students in MAE, the selection of courses must often be done in consideration of demand and admission and ways of organising a course. As mentioned, it can be a challenge to get large enough groups of students in certain theoretical subjects to be able to teach them in school-based courses. By outsourcing courses to external providers that organise distance education, the municipalities can meet the requirement concerning courses they are obliged to offer, but they often have too few students to offer a complete range of courses in person. Other theoretical courses at the upper secondary level are not available in some municipalities, neither school-based nor via distance learning. Students will then not have access to a complete range of theoretical courses at the upper secondary level.

Vocational education and training are becoming more and more central in the curriculum. As mentioned, MAE has a long tradition of primarily being an educational path to supplement previous education to give eligibility for further studies. In recent years, however, MAE has gained an increasingly clear labour market perspective, with several government subsidies for investments in vocational education, which means that a growing proportion of students in MAE now study vocational courses or different vocational course packages within the Yrkesvux initiative, which are composed of courses adapted to the necessary basic skills for different vocations.

Which vocational courses and programmes are prioritised is largely governed by the needs of the local labour market. Here, devolution means an enactment based on interpretations and translations of local needs rather than a national policy. To identify the demand for labour, there is extensive cooperation and contact with the employment service, industry and labour market councils, among others. In several municipalities, political decisions have also been made about which programmes should be prioritised, and it is often a matter of educating to provide the municipal services with labour in
areas such as elderly care and childcare, where ‘there is great pressure from the municipality as an employer’. There are often many applicants for these courses and programmes, not least from migrants, which educational leaders in MAE believe is because many people know that these programmes lead to jobs.

Other local factors that govern the prioritisation of vocational courses and programmes include access to existing training facilities and qualified teachers. MAE is sometimes used to fill empty places on upper secondary school programmes, so the opportunity to collaborate with upper secondary education is also a reason given for prioritising courses and programmes. If resources are already available within the municipality in the form of teacher competence and/or premises and equipment and it is not necessary to hire an external organiser, this is a reason to offer more training places on certain courses or programmes. However, even if the financial position of MAE is relatively strong, there could be an economic restriction in the local curricula beyond the internal provision. Many municipalities are more restrictive with vocational education that they cannot offer themselves, and students are sometimes denied a place on expensive programmes that are outside the municipality’s own provision, for example, programmes in agriculture and forestry.

Swedish for immigrants has made up a significant part of the MAE curriculum for several years, particularly due to the large number of migrants who came to Sweden during the mid and late 2010s. 40% of the municipalities that responded to the survey say that they have more than 300 students studying SFI. The municipalities have a legal requirement to offer all applicants a place on an SFI course. Several of the school leaders say that this has been difficult to cope with during the period when the demand was extremely high. As a result, most municipalities have been forced to hire external organisers for SFI courses, in addition to municipally run courses.

A problem with SFI described by school leaders is that there are ambiguities in the regulations for the courses, which result in different interpretations of the policy, reflected in different ways of arranging SFI. The municipalities have, for example, come up with different solutions for combining SFI with other courses, and here several school leaders express a certain degree of doubt about whether they really follow the regulations when describing their solutions. One municipality proposes, for example, that it should not be permitted to only study SFI, and that this should be combined with other courses. Students who have an academic educational background should primarily be offered to study SFI in combination with theoretical courses for admission to a university, while students who have a short educational background should primarily be offered to study SFI in combination with vocational courses.

**Discussion**

This study has addressed central questions concerning access to, and the availability and practice of, adult education in a marketised system (cf. Fejes and Olesen 2016). We have focussed on how courses are selected and organised, and how students are selected, in Swedish MAE.

According to the Ministry of Education’s policy, the preconditions and needs of students should be the starting point of adult education, with the aim of strengthening
students’ positions in working life and social life and contributing to personal development. This policy expresses a discourse whereby the individual student is the focus of adult education. In addition to this, the policy governs which courses must be offered and who should be prioritised when selecting students. There is also a policy of continuous admission during the year. But how are these policies interpreted, translated and enacted? As mentioned, the supply of courses in MAE is clearly governed by what the municipalities are obliged to offer according to the Education Act. However, the policy does not state how courses should be arranged, or by whom. Thus, courses could be organised by an internal provider or by an external company following procurement. Our study shows that the MAE policies offer a high degree of freedom for interpretation and translation, resulting in courses being enacted in different ways in different municipalities (cf. Andersson and Muhrman, submitted; Holmqvist et al. 2021). On a general level, MAE is organised in three different ways: school-based education, apprenticeships, and distance education. However, when we look at the ways of organising in greater detail, these three ways include several variations in terms of how courses are organised, which means that MAE is established in different ways in different municipalities. For example, there are different types of ‘flexible studies’, whereby students choose the extent to which they study at school or remotely. There are also different ways of organising apprenticeships, with some municipalities having developed various forms of cooperation with industry, based on employers’ needs and conditions. Different types of integrated courses aimed at immigrants combine SFI with vocational or theoretical courses (cf. Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth 2018). Thus, from a municipal perspective, having different providers organise courses results in diverse enactments of MAE. This might seem to contradict the experiences of standardisation (Warvik 2013) and streamlining (Colliander 2019). The latter involves measures taken by providers, typically the large training companies, who want to standardise their own teaching, but one provider could do this in a different way than another, resulting in more or less diversity within MAE as a whole.

Concerning courses that the municipalities are not obliged to offer, it is clear that the open policy invites other discourses to influence the enactment of supply and course content, in addition to what is stated in the Education Act concerning the needs and preconditions of students. Our study shows that many municipalities cooperate closely with representatives from working life and that labour market needs have a considerable influence on the supply of courses. A few school leaders mentioned that student demand could influence the supply, but the defined labour market needs clearly play a much greater role than the needs expressed by students. On a general level, national political decisions on subsidies for certain courses also govern the supply when subsidised courses are prioritised in the enactment. The national initiative targeting VET in MAE aimed to expand this area to meet the labour market’s need for trained labour, and since this initiative was taken in 2009, MAE has become more labour market-focused. There has been a shift in focus from courses and grades preparing for and giving admission to further education, towards VET that provides admission to the labour market.

The wave of migration in the mid-2010s, particularly from Syria, has also resulted in policy decisions that have changed the content and focus of MAE. This includes a
sharper labour market focus and subsidies for VET, with the enactment of the initiative meaning that MAE has become more important as a route to labour market integration. In addition, there are local policies concerning VET. Rather than offering courses based on individual demands and work-life experiences, it is obvious that municipalities prioritise training in areas where there is a high internal demand for labour in municipal services, that is, elderly care and childcare. About two-thirds of all adult VET students within MAE in Sweden study these areas, and this training has become an important route into the labour market for migrants.

Policy decisions concerning the selection of courses also influence who the adult student is. How are students selected? Initiatives that result in an extensive supply of VET in elderly care and childcare, which attract more women than men, might be one reason why there are more female students in MAE. This could mean that adult education becomes a tool for labour market integration among women rather than among men.

Who the adult student is, is also enacted through the way courses are organised. According to the policy, grades are not an acceptable selection instrument. Instead, priority should be given to those with the shortest educational background (which will be rephrased as those with the greatest need), but the conditions for passing the course should also be considered. As mentioned, the high degree of freedom in interpreting this policy results in flexibility and many ways of organising courses to suit different student needs. This means that the required ‘conditions to pass the course’ could depend on how the course is organised. For example, distance education is common in all areas of MAE. Distance courses are said to be inclusive and suitable for students who experience problems participating in school-based courses. For the large number of migrant women studying VET courses in elderly care and healthcare, distance education is described as the only option for many of those with children that they need to or want to care for themselves. In these cases, the opportunity for distance education could be a precondition for labour market and social integration. However, even with this advantage of distance education, there are also reports of problems such as poor quality, low achievement and many drop-outs, and hiring external providers to organise distance courses is sometimes even seen as a measure to reduce costs.

Recently, knowledge of the Swedish language has become important in the discussion on the ‘conditions’ for studying a course – and subsequently being able to ‘do one’s job’. A policy on the required level of language skills has been introduced, which makes it more difficult to admit enough students even if the need for trained labour remains. One way to overcome this problem is through integrated courses that combine SFI with vocational education and where students focus on ‘occupational language’, which in turn means that other democratic and civic aspects of language education end up in the background (cf. Carlson and Jacobsson 2019).

Conclusion

To conclude, how MAE is enacted at the intersection of course organisation, student selection and course content is governed by national policies requiring a certain provision of courses and flexibility to meet students’ needs. Local interpretations and translations are resulting in municipal policies taking local conditions, resources and labour
market needs into account. The strong focus of local MAE on the labour market and integration seems to be in opposition to the policy concerning individual needs as a starting point and the aim of personal development. This raises many questions. Discourses about freedom of choice and individualisation are common in MAE, but what does the freedom of choice mean when political decisions rather than individual demands define the supply of courses? And are distance courses with low levels of achievement and high drop-out rates a sustainable way to enact individualisation? What about integrated courses, where language is restricted to occupational language? How are the ‘conditions’ to pass a course assessed – does this criterion prioritise a young person without children, someone with outstanding language skills or an applicant who expresses a high degree of motivation? And what are the alternative routes for those who are not deemed to meet the required ‘conditions’?

Individualisation and flexibility are two central discourses in the policy on adult education, where the individual is in focus. However, the ‘master discourses’ (Ball et al. 2012) that define Swedish adult education rather seem to be employability, skills supply (cf. Mikulec and Krašovec 2016), integration and marketisation. The discourses of employability, skills supply and integration include what has been defined as the needs of Swedish society and how adult education can contribute to solving national and local ‘problems’. The aim concerning skills supply has even been included in the formal policy expressed in the Education Act. Finally, the discourse of marketisation governs the Swedish school system – including MAE – on an overall level, and particularly in the enactment of procurement, quality assurance, etc. (Andersson and Muhrman submitted, Holmqvist et al. 2021). In the present study of the enactment of adult education in the wake of marketisation, this overall master discourse is primarily seen in the priority given to the labour market, with a focus on employability and skills supply, in the quality problems when external providers are hired to organise distance courses, and to some extent in the discourse of individualisation that reflects an idea of the individual student as a customer to be satisfied.

This study has analysed the enactment of adult education in a certain kind of marketised educational system. The marketisation of education is a global development, even if it is enacted in different ways (e.g. Ball and Youdell 2008, Verger et al. 2017). Our study of adult education in Sweden will hopefully provide insights that could enhance the understanding of how adult education is enacted in other countries, too, where other – but possibly similar – policies and discourses govern this enactment.

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