Guarded transitions? Youth trajectories and school-to-work transition policies in Sweden

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In Sweden as in most other OECD countries, school-to-work transitions have become extended and uncertain endeavours. School dropout and youth unemployment rates are comparatively high, and the so-called yo–yo transitions are common. Although traditionally characterised as a prominent example of a social democratic welfare regime, Sweden has recently incorporated numerous neo-liberal ideas into its educational and youth policies. The responsibility for managing and implementing these policies has been extensively devolved to the country’s 290 municipalities. Moreover, young people are increasingly expected to take exclusive responsibility for forging their own careers, and to be self-governing, enterprising and proactive, both within the educational quasi-market and beyond. The aim of this article was to critically analyse current Swedish national school-to-work transition policies as well as the ways in which local strategies and measures are implemented and developed within individual municipalities given the relatively broad latitude available to them, and to provide some tentative explanations for Sweden’s problems with school dropout rates and youth unemployment.

Keywords: school-to-work transitions; dropout; youth policies; local policies; Sweden

Introduction and aim

Sweden has traditionally been regarded as a typical representative of a social democratic welfare regime, characterised by universalism, high-level economic transfers and social insurance. This welfare-state model presupposes full employment and a high degree of social solidarity (Esping-Andersen, 1996). However, following a short and intensive period of neo-liberal restructuring and ‘modernisation’ that began in the 1980s and whose effects started to become apparent in the 1990s, Sweden’s education and social welfare systems have become increasingly characterised by extensive marketisation and the decentralisation of responsibilities to local institutions and individuals (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Bunar, 2010; Lundahl, 2002, 2011b). Although the Swedish economy was comparatively unharmed by the recession that followed the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent Euro crisis, the 2000s have been a time of rapidly growing economic division within the country. Sweden thus has the most rapidly growing relative poverty rate of the OECD countries: the proportion of the population in poverty rose from 3.7% in 1995 (when the OECD average was 9.4%) to 9.1% in 2011 (OECD average: 11.1%) (OECD, 2013). Young Swedes have not fared well during this period as they are one of the groups for whom the economic conditions have become less favourable over the last few decades (cf. ‘Young Swedes between school and work’ section). Notably, the extensive restructuring of Swedish industry has significantly changed the preconditions for the
entrance of young people into the labour market (Olofsson, 2010). The Swedish municipalities play a significant role in facilitating young people’s school-to-work transitions, but a number of recent reports have painted a worrying picture of fragmentation and unreasonably large variation between the transition opportunities available in different municipalities and regions of the country. The political ambitions to support, guide and guard young people’s school transitions are high, but not always very successful – hence the title of the article.

The aim of this article was to critically analyse current Swedish national school-to-work transition policies as well as the ways in which local transition strategies and measures are implemented and developed within individual municipalities given the relatively broad latitude available to them, and to provide some tentative explanations for Sweden’s problems with school dropout rates and youth unemployment. The study on which the article is based was conducted as part of a larger research project entitled Unsafe transitions. School-to-work transitions of young people at risk in a longitudinal perspective, funded by the Swedish Research Council.

The article is disposed in the following way: initially the situation of Swedish youth in between upper secondary school and work is outlined and the theoretical framework, methods and empirical data used in the subsequent analysis are introduced. Sweden’s national educational and youth transition policies are briefly described, followed by an analysis of local transition policies. Finally, the success or failure of these policies in promoting successful transitions and the inclusion of young people into society and working life is discussed in relation to our findings and theoretical framework.

**Points of departure**

**Young Swedes between school and work**

To large extent, the trend towards increasingly extended, fragmented and uncertain school-to-work transitions that is observed in Sweden resembles that seen in other developed countries (Colley, Boetzelen, Hoskins, & Parveva, 2007; Dwyer & Wyn, 2006; Walther, 2006). The average age of establishment in the labour market, i.e. the age at which 75% of a cohort has obtained some kind of employment, rose from 21 years in the early 1990s to 28 years in 2006. Although the share of young adults aged 20–24 years who are neither in education or training nor in work – 11% in 2011 – is well below the European Union (EU) average of 17–18% (Eurostat, 2012). Youth unemployment rates are high in Sweden compared with many other EU countries. There are several reasons for this. Especially in the aftermath of economic recessions, Swedish industry has undergone extensive rationalisation that has reduced the number of ‘entry-level jobs’ available for young people. Youth unemployment, mainly consisting of shorter periods of unemployment, may both be related to the large number of students seeking job parallel to their studies and the unusually high levels of temporary employment among young Swedes (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2013) – see below. Whether current entrance salaries and employment security legislation in Sweden constitute obstacles to the employment of young people is often debated, and research does support such a simple presupposition (Neumark & Wascher, 2004). Sweden has one of the EU’s highest percentages of young people (aged 15–24 years) in temporary employment: in 2011, the rate stood at 60% while the EU average was just over 40% (European Commission, 2012). The number of young adults receiving disability benefits rose sharply in the 2000s, and few of these individuals were offered support to get back into education or work, despite the stated aims of the legislation in force at the time (OECD, 2008; Olofsson & Östh, 2011). It should also be
noted that relative youth poverty (i.e., poverty relative to the incomes of other age groups) is higher in Sweden and the other Nordic countries than elsewhere in Europe (European Commission, 2012), mainly because young people in these countries tend to move away from their parents’ homes at a relatively young age (Fahmy, 2007; Vogel, 2002). For many young people, leaving school thus means a risky and sometimes lonely journey (Lundahl, 2011a).

Almost all young Swedes (98%) enrol in an academic or vocational programme at the upper secondary level. The proportion of Swedish students who complete their upper secondary education before reaching the age of 25 years is slightly below 75%, which is comparable to the graduation rates in countries such as Norway, Denmark, the USA and Canada (OECD, 2012). One quarter of each yearly cohort thus fails to graduate by the age of 25 years. This would not be alarming if the labour market was open to people who have only completed their compulsory education, but at present it is not; in reality, it is essential to have upper secondary education in order to get a job. As is the case in other countries (Dale, 2010), young Swedes who drop out from upper secondary education are disadvantaged: they are markedly over-represented among unemployed young receivers of social allowances or an early retirement (Table 1).

The living conditions of young Swedes vary considerably within and between municipalities and regions. A relatively large proportion of the 20–24-year-olds in the larger cities and their surrounding municipalities are actively studying, with fewer having paid jobs than in the other municipalities. At the same time, the unemployment levels in these urban municipalities are significantly lower than those in rural and sparsely populated areas, where the proportion of young adults who are studying is considerably lower and the proportion of youth with paid jobs or full-time unemployment is comparatively high. Municipalities that are dominated by industry or commuting exhibit similar trends to those seen in rural areas (Table 2).

### Theoretical framework

**Transition policies** are defined as conscious strategies and efforts within the local, national and international political arenas to promote young people’s school-to-work transitions. They concern the interface between education and the labour market, and include aspects of educational, social and employment policies. Many countries have similar problems with young people finding it difficult to establish themselves in the labour market due to the pervasive demand for qualifications and rapidly changing economic and labour market

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**Table 1. Activities/income sources and educational levels of youths aged 20–24 years in 2008 (%).**

| Educational level | Compulsory \(^a\) | Upper secondary | Tertiary |
|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------|
| Gainful work      | 54                | 82              | 48      |
| Education         | 15                | 10              | 45      |
| Jobseeker’s allowance | 1              | 1               | 0       |
| Social allowance  | 15                | 1               | 1       |
| Early retirement pension | 9             | 1               | 1       |
| Care of child/other relative | 5            | 1               | 1       |
| Other/unknown     | 1                 | 4               | 4       |
| Total             | 100               | 100             | 100     |

\(^a\) Practically, everyone in this category had attended upper secondary education for a longer or shorter time. Source: PLACE database (Olofsson et al., 2012, p. 32).
conditions. Consequently, their transition policies typically have a number of common traits. However, there are also significant differences, which seem to be related to the welfare regimes that have been adopted in each country (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1996; Lope´z Blasco, McNeish, & Walther, 2003; Pohl & Walther, 2007; Vogel, 2002). Walther (2006) has identified four different types of youth transition regimes: universalistic, employment centred, liberal and sub-protective. These regimes differ with respect to the comprehensiveness and standardisation of the associated educational systems, the degree of openness and regulation of the labour market for young people, the level of social protection that is provided and the scope for female employment. In addition, the characterisations of youth, youth unemployment and ‘at-risk’ or disadvantaged youth tend to differ between the regimes, as do the political strategies that are used to manage the school-to-work transition. In all regimes, education and training constitute central parts of transition policies, but there are pronounced differences in terms of the kinds of education and training that are emphasised (Walther, 2006).

In this article, we discuss transition policies (including aspects of education policy) in a similar vein, but highlight somewhat different aspects of the transition regimes. We hypothesise that there are substantial differences between the various national welfare regimes in terms of the framing and general direction of their education and transition policies, and their interactions with the global trend towards neo-liberal marketisation. We focus particularly on the traditional social democratic/universalistic and neo-liberal/specialisation policy patterns because Sweden’s current transition policies combine elements of both. It should be emphasised that these descriptions were constructed for analytical purposes and do not fully describe the complexity of the political and socio-economic situation at any given point in time. Building in part on the work of Hudson & Lidström (2002), we distinguish between three basic aspects of national transition politics: major functions and scope, underlying values and governance, and argue that the elements of both universalistic and liberal policy patterns are apparent in all three aspects of Sweden’s current transition policies.

**Functions and scope**

The universalistic pattern places a relatively strong emphasis on preparing young people for citizenship and democratic participation in society and the workplace, although the importance of economic functions is also acknowledged. Universalistic transition policies

| Municipality type          | Education | Work  | Unemployed | Social allowance |
|----------------------------|-----------|-------|------------|------------------|
| 1. Big cities (> 200,000)  | 44        | 56    | 13         | 9                |
| 2. Suburbs of big cities   | 35        | 63    | 13         | 6                |
| 3. Large cities (50,000–200,000) | 44   | 56    | 19         | 9                |
| 4. Suburbs of large cities | 27        | 62    | 22         | 10               |
| 5. Commuter municipalities | 26        | 65    | 22         | 9                |
| 6. Industrial municipalities| 27        | 67    | 21         | 8                |
| 7. Tourism and recreation  | 23        | 68    | 24         | 10               |
| 8. Sparsely populated municipalities | 21 | 66 | 31 | 11 |

*Two ‘additional categories’ were not included in this work.

*This figure refers to the situation in November 2008.

*Full-time unemployment.

Source: PLACE database, Uppsala University.
typically incorporate general and selective measures that address structures and individuals. As a consequence of economic globalisation and the adoption of neo-liberal policies, the economic functions have, however, become much more heavily emphasised in education and transition politics during the last 25 years than was previously the case.

**Underlying values**

In the universalistic regime, it is assumed that both the society and the individual benefit from equality and security. The provision of equal educational opportunities for all is therefore a key policy goal. Comprehensive education with minimal streaming is favoured, along with generous provision of adult education and career guidance. Unemployment and failure to complete upper secondary education (addressing 16–19-year-olds) are primarily regarded as structural problems, and transition politics tend to prioritise these issues. The incorporation of neo-liberal ideas into the Swedish welfare system from the 1990s and on has meant that education has increasingly come to be seen as a private good or commodity. Each individual is held responsible for making their own career choices, finding a job or starting a business. Unemployment and failure to complete secondary education are primarily seen as consequences of individual shortcomings, such as a lack of motivation and passivity.

**Governance**

In the universalistic regime, transition policy is primarily steered by the state according to a bureaucratic model. Standardisation is common and regulations designed to achieve equality feature prominently. Conversely, neo-liberal systems of governance and change management are influenced by a range of actors and interests at different levels. The state’s role is minimised by design; instead, responsibility is delegated to local actors, who become accountable for the outcomes within their area of responsibility. The state increasingly acts as a ‘competition state’ whose main purpose is to promote competition rather than standardisation and equality. The model outlined above is summarised in Figure 1.

Local transition policies have been studied relatively sparsely and their relationship to national transition policies is far from self-evident. Local policies are certainly framed and governed by the structural patterns described above. However, the emergence of

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**Figure 1. Models of transition policies.**

| Functions | Underlying values | Governance |
|-----------|-------------------|------------|
| **Universalistic**: combination of economic and social goals | **Universalistic**: focus on equality, social security. Education is seen as a common good | **Universalistic**: strong state governance with an emphasis on standardisation and equality |
| **Liberal**: Dominance of economic goals | **Liberal**: emphasis on choice, individual responsibility, entrepreneurship. Education seen as a private good and commodity. Variation and differences are inherently positive | **Liberal**: deregulated, decentralised, marketized governance; local organizations have accountability and considerable freedom to act |
decentralisation, deregulation and marketisation has had multiple consequences. First, municipalities and organisations such as schools have been given new roles as self-governing units and sometimes even as companies (cf. Lundahl, 2011b). This autonomy enables them to adopt a wide range of strategies; consequently, local transition policies can differ in a number of respects and could in principle work against the neo-liberal ideas that gave them this new freedom to act.

Methods and empirical data

The description and analysis of local youth transition policies are mainly based on the following data from the research project Unsafe transitions (2010–2014): (1) longitudinal population data from the PLACE database at Uppsala University – incomes, education, labour market activity, family situation, demographic and geographic characteristics (1998–2010); (2) semi-structured interviews of 45 leading local actors (politicians and officials) in 20 municipalities, selected to cover a broad variation with regard to size, geographical location, economic and social characteristics; (3) two web-based surveys to leading officials in all 290 Swedish municipalities: (a) survey 1, addressing how they
manage to stay informed of young NEETs, i.e. not in employment, education or training (<20 years), and offer them education and other measures, and (b) survey 2, addressing local strategies and measures of dropout prevention and support of school-to-work transitions (16–24-year-olds). Here, we only refer to survey 2; (4) semi-structured biographical interviews of 90 young people in the same 20 Swedish municipalities (2011–2013). The respondents, who had left upper secondary school without achieving passing grades, were 21–22-year-olds when interviewed the first time. The second round of interviews was conducted 1.5 years later, (5) interview study among senior officials from 10 large cities about a new form of support – temporary youth jobs.

**National transition policies**

The picture of the universalistic transition regime in the Nordic countries has been painted rather vividly by Walther (2006). It was described as being based on a comprehensive school system with generous social and educational allowances. The employment regime is characterised by an extended public sector, broad access options and high rates of female employment, facilitated by the system of public childcare. Counselling is institutionalised throughout the education system and is readily available to people undergoing the transition from school to work. ‘Personal development’ is central to the definition of youth, which is also reflected in the transition policies and measures aimed at early school leavers. Experimentation in the form of yo–yo transitions is encouraged, and there is also a strong focus on the individualised labour market (Walther, 2006, pp. 126–127). However, the following analysis of the Swedish case modifies this positive picture.

**Division of responsibilities**

Swedish local authorities not only enjoy a high degree of freedom but also have wide-ranging responsibilities for promoting young people’s educational circumstances and living conditions. The division of responsibilities between the state and the municipalities with regard to young people’s school-to-work transitions is briefly described in Table 3. For the sake of simplicity, we do not touch on the responsibilities of other actors such as free-school companies, parents and students.

**A radical make-over of upper secondary education**

Sweden’s education system was criticised for a variety of reasons in the 1970s – from the left, it was attacked for not doing enough to prevent the reproduction of the class-based society and not enabling citizen influence, while the right characterised education as being inefficient, bureaucratic and too expensive. Higher levels of local influence were therefore granted to remedy the alleged deficiencies of the system. This led to the replacement of extensive centralised control with governance by objectives and results in the 1980s and 1990s. The early 1990s meant the beginning of a ‘market turn’ with the introduction of reforms that provide legal and financial support for school choice and the establishment of independent (‘free’) schools (Lundahl, 2002, 2011b). At present, one-fifth of Sweden’s upper secondary schools are run by free school companies, many of which are public limited companies (PLCs) from which the owners are entitled to extract profits (Erixon Arreman & Holm, 2011; Lundahl, 2011b). Since the early 1990s, municipalities have been able to offer upper secondary programmes and courses relatively freely to their inhabitants in response to individuals’ preferences and the local conditions. The competition for
students has resulted in an immense array of locally designed programmes and courses of study, which are actively marketed by both public and free schools. Consequently, many students are confronted with a bewildering array of choices and are increasingly exposed to the risk of being induced to make important decisions on irrational grounds (Erixon Arreman & Holm, 2011; Lundahl, 2011b).

The upper secondary education system was reformed in the early 1990s and again in 2009. A central aim of the reform of the 1990s was to create a small number of vocational and academic study programmes with broad scope that would allow for gradual differentiation and specialisation in order to promote flexibility. All of the vocational and academic programmes were run for three years, had certain common core courses and ensured that successful students would be eligible to undertake further study at the university level. A right to upper secondary education was enshrined in law.

Since the 1950s, Swedish vocational education and training (VET) has typically been school based, and apprenticeship training has been rare at the upper secondary level. Repeated efforts to introduce the so-called modern apprenticeship education have been made, most recently in 2009 (Olofsson & Wadensjö, 2011). However, compared with the situation in many other developed countries, such training is still relatively limited. The Swedish VET system that was introduced in the 1990s has been criticised and blamed for being too ‘academic’, which was held to be responsible for its high dropout rates. This was one of the key arguments voiced in support of the 2009 reform, which restored more pronounced divisions between academic and vocational programmes. Notably, the vocational programmes were changed in ways that rendered their students ineligible for admission to higher education without first undertaking further study (Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Lundström, & Rönberg, 2010). Two of the main goals of the 2009 reform were to increase the students’ employability and to allow stakeholders to exert more influence on the education system. However, in contrast to the reformers’ intentions, the attractiveness of many of the vocational programmes has declined since the reform was introduced.

Before 2011, young people who had not completed their compulsory education were encouraged to follow a so-called individual programme (IP) of study as a stepping stone to a three-year national programme, but often failed to do this. From 2011, the IP was replaced by five different introductory programmes, the success of which is unknown at present.

Finally, a major change in the working methods used in Swedish schools was introduced in the 1980s. The aim of these changes was to encourage students to work more individually and autonomously. In conjunction with this change, the main role of the teacher shifted from being a provider of information to a mentor guiding the learning process. Swedish students thus spend less time being directly instructed by their teachers than do students in other EU and OECD countries on average. While the impact of increased ‘learner autonomy’ and responsibility may have been favourable in many cases, subsequent evaluations and studies have shown that it produces less desirable outcomes for the large groups of students who require more teacher support and structured teaching (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010).

Guarding the journey after upper secondary school

In international comparisons, the Nordic countries generally stand out as providing extensive options for life-long learning. However, the opportunities for ‘second chance education’ are far less favourable in Sweden today than those indicated by Walther (2006). Young people are not allowed to study at an ‘ordinary’ upper secondary school after the
age of 20 years and are instead referred to a locally administered adult education centre (Komvux). The number of student places in Komvux was reduced by 25% from 2004 to 2009 but was subsequently increased slightly. In addition, the number of people in labour market training has gone down dramatically since the 1990s, and young people are rarely in this group nowadays (Olofsson, 2011).

Because most young people have not worked long enough to be entitled to unemployment compensation, they depend on social benefits, which are related to unemployment schemes and economic support from their parents. As in the rest of Europe, an ‘activation line’, under which recipients of income support are required to demonstrate that they are actively looking for work, has dominated the discourse on social welfare in Sweden in the last few decades (Dingeldey, 2007, Handler, 2003). The scheme that currently applies to most unemployed youths, the ‘Youth job programme’, was introduced in 2007. It addresses youths aged 16–25 years and provides guidance, coaching, job-seeking assistance, training and work experience. Participants who do not return to full-time education or enter into employment within 150 days are transferred to the ‘job and development guarantee scheme’. Both schemes entitle the participants to benefits that are well below the minimum cost of living in Sweden, and thus force them to apply for additional social benefits unless they are supported by their families (Olofsson, Lundahl, Lexelius, Rolfsman, & Östh, 2012).

In 2007, the payroll taxes applied to people under the age of 26 years were halved, and value added tax (VAT) in the restaurant sector was reduced in 2012 in order to make young people more employable and to increase the availability of jobs suitable for people in this age group. However, to date, these measures have not had appreciable effects on youth employment rates. Some of the parties in the current non-socialist coalition government have demanded a reduction in the minimum wage for youths, although this suggestion has not been supported by the largest non-socialist party, Moderaterna.

Local transition policies

The municipal authorities of the Nordic countries function like miniaturised versions of national political systems, with local parties and policies. They have traditionally had relatively high levels of autonomy, with diverse responsibilities and the right to make decisions governing a wide range of local matters. However, before the 1990s, state regulation of local organisation and financing was considered essential for the attainment of two key political goals: equity and equality (Page & Goldsmith, 1987). In the last 25 years, decentralisation and new public management have led not only to increased local autonomy but also to a degree of fragmentation that has weakened the unifying structural principles on which the previous system rested (Bogason, 1996, 2000; Montin, 2000). The boundaries between the public and private spheres have become less distinct; public services are increasingly contracted out to private or non-profit organisations, and industry–community partnerships have become important.

Prevention of school failure and dealing with dropout rates

Swedish schools are obliged to minimise the number of students who drop out and to avoid school failure. Nevertheless, as discussed above, a large proportion of students conclude their compulsory education and leave upper secondary school without achieving passing grades, although there are considerable differences between different schools and municipalities in this respect (see e.g. Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010).
Municipalities also have to keep track of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 years who neither study nor work, and offer them education, training or other alternatives. Schools that provide compulsory and upper secondary education must provide special needs education and career guidance services. Once again, there are substantial differences between different schools and municipalities in terms of the provision of these services (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010, 2011).

Three quarters of Sweden’s municipalities have explicitly stated an aim to increase the rate of successful completion of upper secondary education among young people (aged 16–19 years), and an equal proportion offer support for those who have yet to accomplish this. Adult education and career counselling are provided by 8 out of 10 municipalities to help school dropouts aged 20 years and above to complete their studies. The teenagers (16–19 years) are usually offered individualised study programmes along with special education and career guidance. However, interviews with local officials and politicians have demonstrated that there is considerable variation in their commitment to these goals. With only a few exceptions, special education and career guidance are not included in joint municipal policies. Instead, these services are organised by individual schools; consequently, the municipal authorities have little data on the amount and quality of the support that students actually receive.

The differences between the municipalities in terms of how active they are in the governance of these programmes are partly related to differences in their size, the governing party/-ies of the municipality and the severity of the problems faced by their young people (e.g. unemployment, social security and levels of education). In general, larger municipalities are more likely to have established goals and to offer support for youths in this group than are smaller ones, which are often located in rural areas. The same is true for municipalities run by non-socialist parties compared to those with socialist majorities, and for municipalities that are in the top third nationwide in terms of the severity of their problems with youth unemployment, young people depending on social allowances and educational attainment. The size of the municipality seems to be a prime factor; larger municipalities dispose of more economic and other resources (e.g. competence) and thus have wider discretion than the smaller ones. There is also a relationship between size and the governing party in a given municipality: small rural municipalities are more likely to have a socialist majority than are large municipalities in urban areas. A limited availability of local economic resources was cited as having a detrimental or very detrimental effect on the scope for reducing dropout rates in almost half of the municipalities with a socialist majority but only in one-fifth of those with non-socialist majorities.

Few municipalities cited an insufficient supply of education as a problem when dealing with school dropout rates; the municipalities where it is cited as a problem are generally socialist-led municipalities. Overall, however, the single-most commonly cited problem has to do with the young people themselves, namely their lack of motivation to go to school. Almost half of all municipalities regard this as a major obstacle. Contrary to what might be expected given the model of transition policy patterns presented above, socialist-led municipalities attach even greater importance to the motivation factor than do municipalities with non-socialist majorities, although the difference in this case is small. We return to this topic in the concluding section.

**Supporting transitions to work**

The severity of social segregation by socio-economic class is growing in Sweden, and young people’s life circumstances and career paths often vary considerably between
municipalities and areas within individual cities. The same is true for municipal youth policies, which may also take different forms in different areas of the big cities. Furthermore, there is often little collaboration between employers, the education system and the social welfare sector, or between the municipality and the state employment agency (Arbetsförmedlingen), employers and other external actors. Such divisions were readily apparent in many of the 20 municipalities investigated in this work.

Less than half of the municipalities had established goals and strategies for supporting young people (aged 18–24 years) in their transitions from upper secondary school to work. In cases where goals had been established, they generally related to education and work rather than the provision of economic support. Again, larger municipalities were more likely to have formulated common strategies than smaller municipalities, and the third of the municipalities with the highest levels of social problems was somewhat more likely to have strategies in place than were those of the third with the fewest problems.15

Eight out of 10 of the studied municipalities run local labour market offices to complement the state-run employment agency, Arbetsförmedlingen. Many municipalities want to assist young people in making the transition from school to the workplace and encourage them to become economically independent by providing different forms of work experience and training, primarily in the form of projects (see below), rather than just paying the social allowance to unemployed youths.16 The relationship between the municipalities and Arbetsförmedlingen varies; smaller municipalities often refrain from working directly with older unemployed young people, who they see as being the responsibility of Arbetsförmedlingen. In contrast, the larger cities are more likely to have established a range of youth schemes, which usually provide introductory motivation and job-seeking activities as well as training and work experience.17

While the social and employment policies of the last few decades have been based on the idea of pushing allegedly non-motivated individuals to become active job seekers by providing very limited pecuniary support for the unemployed, a new approach has recently been trialled. Since 2010, in the aftermath of the financial crisis and the resulting high levels of youth unemployment, a number of the largest municipalities have introduced ‘real’, fully paid youth jobs (which normally last for six months) that give young people important work experience and contacts, and also, later on, access to unemployment compensation if needed. No more comprehensive studies or evaluations of these youth job schemes have yet been conducted, but according to senior officials from 10 large cities, the results have been promising: in many cases, the young people who participated had been able to establish themselves in the labour market by the end of the project (Olofsson, 2013).

Sixty per cent of the studied municipalities allocate at least some of the resources from their ordinary budgets to support young people in making the transition from school to work, and 40% have time-limited youth projects – alone or in addition to the regular activities. The youth projects are commonly run using funding from the EU. Resources especially targeting young people are more widely available in the larger municipalities and those with relatively high levels of social problems than in the others. Consequently, these municipalities have the largest arsenals of measures and programmes to offer young people who have dropped out of upper secondary school.18 However, the stability and sustainability of local transition policies may be limited, in particular in the smaller municipalities. They are often dependent on temporary external project funding and may have to close down their youth programmes when the current projects end (cf. Hansson & Lundahl, 2004).19
Conclusions and final remarks

National transition politics: universalistic and liberal components

We firstly conclude that Sweden’s national transition and educational politics still display universalistic traits but increasingly also embody (neo-)liberal components with regard to major functions, value basis and governance – politics that in turn frame and govern local transitions politics.

The role of the state to boost economic growth has been strengthened, and education has become more directly linked to the economy at all levels, not least by far-going marketisation. There is a greater emphasis on individual choice and responsibility, and employment and social policies are increasingly guided by the concepts of workfare and the ‘activation line’. Moreover, there is a growing tendency to regard education as a private rather than a common good. The reform of upper secondary education introduced in 2009 emphasised employability and stakeholder influence, and can be regarded as an important illustration of the current approach to structural and general transition policies. However, most transition policies are selective rather than general in that they are directed towards specific problems, individuals or groups, which is a characteristic of the neo-liberal policy pattern. The state has withdrawn several of its older governing instruments, in particular those based on economic regulation. Notably, there has been an extensive devolution of power and responsibility to local actors, both municipal authorities and others.

Local transition politics: marked by extensive decentralisation and marketisation

A second conclusion is that Swedish local transition politics are marked by the extensive decentralisation of power to the municipalities and other local actors, and a high degree of marketization in the educational sector. The resulting picture is highly fragmented; Swedish municipalities display unreasonably large variations with respect to the orientation, scope and quality of dropout prevention and school-to-work transition measures. In particular the size of the municipality appears to be a significant factor in this respect; the larger municipalities tend to offer more sustainable policies and a wider range of measures than the smaller ones.

The question of how local transition policies are developed within the broad framework defined by current national policies does not have a single answer due to the limited regulation imposed by the state and the considerable autonomy afforded to local actors. Furthermore, Sweden’s municipalities differ substantially in terms of their conditions and resources. Regardless, they all have to minimise school dropout rates and support young people in making the transition from school to work and/or further and higher education. However, they must also be proactive in many other important areas, including the provision of care for elderly people and social care. Municipalities are thus often left to make very difficult priorities within limited frames of resources.

In principle, decentralisation allows local authorities to adopt policies that are better adapted to local conditions and individual needs than could be achieved with more centralised policy-making, which was the intended outcome of the reforms of the early 1990s. Unfortunately, our analysis indicates that there is an unreasonably large level of variation between different regions and municipalities in terms of their areas of focus and the quality of support they provide for dropouts and young unemployed people. For example, only the larger municipalities can afford more costly measures; smaller and less wealthy areas tend to rely excessively on temporary, externally funded youth projects. The recent emergence of local, fully paid youth jobs is promising and may indicate the emergence of a new attitude towards unemployed young people than that embodied in
the ‘activation’ policy. However, it is likely that initiatives of this kind will only be available in the larger cities due to the limited economic resources available to the smaller municipalities.

In recent decades, Sweden’s educational sector has been extensively de-regulated and is now characterised by high levels of de-standardisation and marketisation. It is notable that many matters are decentralised to be autonomously managed by the schools. For example, our interviews in this study with local decision-makers clearly demonstrated that in almost all cases, special needs education is organised at the school level and municipal decision-makers have little knowledge of the scope of such problems or the quality of the measures taken to address them. In many cases, school choice and marketisation have resulted in aggressive competition for students because schools receive a substantial sum of money for each student they enrol (and reversely lose money when they cannot recruit or retain students). This has dramatically enhanced the differences between schools in terms of, e.g. the provision of special needs education, class sizes and student–teacher ratios. Marketisation and competition have also produced a vast supply of upper secondary schools and programmes to choose from, which has made it more difficult for employers to accurately assess the merits of each one; the same is true for parents, students and career counsellors.

The alleged problem of unmotivated youth

When school failure and dropout are discussed by decision-makers, some explanations and recommendations are invoked on a regular basis. Problems are often blamed on the shortcomings of specific individuals; young people are claimed to be tired of school, to lack entrepreneurial attitudes and to have unrealistic expectations. A lack of motivation was the factor that was most commonly cited in survey 2 as preventing young people from succeeding in school. Our interviews of young people aged 21–22 years who had left upper secondary school without achieving passing grades were not consistent with this simple picture. Many of them had experienced unstable and sometimes difficult family situations. Primary education was often regarded as providing a more peaceful and secure environment, and several interviewees reported having had at least one teacher in the later stages of their education who was very committed, saw them as individuals and listened to them while also demanding that they make a reasonable effort. However, the majority of interviewees found that it became progressively more difficult to keep up with their peers as they moved through their secondary education. Students who were later diagnosed as having conditions such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia seldom received adequate support for their learning difficulties. There were a number of recurring themes in their narratives, including frequent changes of programme, leaving school and then returning, and alternating periods of attendance and absence. In many cases, the interviewees’ problems were exacerbated by harassment and truancy, and the school did little to tackle their harassment. The young interviewees’ hopes for the future were hardly excessively glamorised or unreasonable – they wanted jobs and families, and several reported a desire for further education. These are exactly the sorts of goals that transition policies – at both the national and the local level – should be helping them to achieve.

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Notes

1. Email: Jonas.olofsson@edusci.umu.se
2. The unemployment rate among Swedes aged 15–24 years was 25% in 2011. This figure is calculated based on manpower, i.e. in the same way as in EU statistics.
3. Around 40% of unemployed 15–24-year-olds were students who were looking for jobs, typically for shorter periods of time (Öhman, 2011).
4. Based on data for the cohorts that graduated in 2009.
5. The surveys were conducted in collaboration with the National Swedish Agency for Education and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, respectively.
6. The youth interviews are, however, only marginally referred to here.
7. The reform was implemented in 2011.
8. However, Swedish VET compares well with other Nordic countries when the percentage of diplomas awarded seven years after the start is taken as a measure (Bäckman, Jakobsen, Lorentzen, Österbacka, & Dahl, 2011, p. 36).
9. The benefit connected to this scheme amounts to approximately €5/day (18–24-year-olds) and €15/day (>24 years).
10. Such services are even offered in adult education and in connection to job seeking.
11. Survey 2.
12. Interviews with politicians and officials in 20 municipalities.
13. Survey 2.
14. Survey 2.
15. Survey 2.
16. Interviews with politicians and officials in 20 municipalities.
17. Interviews with politicians and officials in 20 municipalities.
18. Survey 2.
19. Interviews with politicians and officials in 20 municipalities.
20. In addition, Sweden does not have national statistics on special needs and related education, as gathering such data has been seen as possibly stigmatising the students concerned. This lack of statistics is a major obstacle if one wants to enable national decision-makers to obtain an accurate overview in order to formulate a more comprehensive special education strategy.

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