Higher vocational education
– for post-secondary vocational education and training

Higher vocational education programmes provide vocational education and training at the post-secondary level outside higher education institutions. To be included in higher vocational education, programmes must meet the needs of the labour market for qualified labour or contribute to the development or retention of qualified professional expertise in niche occupations, such as craft occupations. Higher vocational education programmes are organised within a legally secure, high-quality structure and education providers work in close cooperation with the business sector.

Which programmes are covered by higher vocational education?

Programmes included in higher vocational education are designed to meet the needs of the labour market for post-secondary skills and are offered in many areas, such as IT, economics, health and social care, tourism, hospitality, construction, agriculture, media, technology, etc. Vocationally oriented continuation courses that used to be included in municipal adult education are now also included in higher vocational education, as well as apprenticeship training for adults in some craft occupations. Programmes under the Advanced Vocational Education Ordinance will remain under higher vocational education during a transition period, but until 2013 at the latest.

Higher vocational education programmes are delivered by private and public education providers, and to ensure that these courses meet the requirements of the labour market, they are run in close cooperation with companies and other employers.

What is the difference between higher vocational education and higher education?

There are clear differences between higher education and higher vocational education. Whereas higher education programmes are linked to research and based on scientific and artistic foundations, higher vocational education programmes build primarily on knowledge that has emerged in the production of goods and provision of services. These rarely have a traditionally scientific basis but are, instead, linked to the labour market’s needs for practical vocational skills.

Higher vocational education leads to a higher education qualification

Programmes normally consist of two years of full-time study, but there are also shorter and longer programmes. The knowledge students acquire on higher vocational education programmes is documented according to a uniform system that will, as far as possible, also be recognised both within and outside the EU. Twenty weeks of full-time study in higher vocational education are equivalent to 100 credits, and a higher vocational education qualification consists of a minimum of 200 credits. It is also possible to study for an advanced higher vocational education qualification consisting of at least 400 credits (i.e. two years of full-time study). Most higher vocational education programmes include a period of workplace-based training, at one or more workplaces. The aim is for students to be able to develop and apply professional skills that cannot be acquired in a school environment. Programmes that lead to an advanced higher vocational education qualification include an independent project, and at least one-quarter of the programme period is to be spent on workplace-based training.

All those who have completed an upper secondary education or equivalent are eligible to apply to enter a higher vocational education programme. It is important that the real skills of the applicant be taken into account, which means that the eligibility requirements for programmes are flexible so as to enable a freer assessment of the applicant’s chances of benefiting from the course.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education was established on 1 July 2009 to administer and to decide which programmes come under higher vocational education. Through regular supervision and quality review, the agency monitors that the programmes maintain a high standard, follow the course syllabus and meet the requirements contained in law, ordinances and other regulations. The agency is also responsible for supervision and decisions concerning government grants under the Ordinance on state support for supplementary education programmes (2000:521). To ensure that the programmes organised under higher vocational education are relevant to the labour market, they are designed in collaboration with the business sector. An important role for the Agency for...
Higher Vocational Education is to concentrate on strategic monitoring to ensure that there is a link between labour market needs and the range of higher vocational education programmes offered. This link is also a guiding principle in determining the number of places on programmes. The content and focus of programmes may also change over time, depending on labour market needs.

In a globalised world where individuals look for work across borders, there must also be a system in place for evaluating previously acquired skills and expertise. Over the past few years, it has become clear that Sweden needs an agency with a special responsibility for validation, and the Government has therefore placed the responsibility for coordinating and supporting a national structure for validation with the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. The agency works with other relevant agencies to promote the involvement of the education system and industry when strategies, methods and information in the area of validation are developed. This creates favourable conditions and the expertise required for developing a national structure for validation. The agency also acts as the national coordinator for EQF – the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. Another of the agency’s tasks is to take responsibility for the assessment of foreign post-secondary vocational education programmes that do not correspond to education programmes within the meaning of the Higher Education Act. All higher vocational education programmes are offered free of charge and entitle students to financial support, and any associated fees for course material must be reasonable in relation to the actual costs.