

## THE LEARNING CITY OF GOTHENBURG – A CASE STUDY

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A city of 470 000 people, Gothenburg is in the process of transforming itself from a dependence on shipyards and manufacturing to developing new electronic industries. The sudden closure of four shipyards in the 1970's and early 1980's meant the loss of 12 000 jobs and devastation of the existing industrial, economic and social infrastructure. Research has been conducted throughout the last decade into appropriate high tech industries and has spawned a new wave of learning in local government and in the community. A significant achievement has been the establishment of an Ericsson plant on the waterfront that is building strong relationships with schools and the surrounding residential community.

### Planning for learning

Sweden's Adult Education Initiative is a combined effort by national and local governments to generate a comprehensive, nation wide build up of knowledge. This government policy has been implemented in Gothenburg to transform resources that were previously made available for 'passive' unemployment training programs into workplace education (Franson, 2000, p 3). If companies guarantee to retain their employees, government funds will be made available to support their ongoing development in the workplace. In addition to improving employment rates, retention rates and productivity, this has developed skills in the delivery of non formal adult education. Effective learning partnerships have developed between national and local government and between educational providers, businesses and participants.

Sweden has a very strong cultural focus on the well being of the individual rather than developing large and complex systems. A focus on building up from the bottom is retained in managing the macro issues.

'Employers walk arm in arm with their employees in retaining them in their enterprises.'

Lars Franson, Director, Lifelong Learning, Gothenburg, 2002

The national Adult Education Initiative has bipartisan support in aiming to reduce unemployment and secure those who are underemployed. This focus on social inclusion has had some ramifications in the recent Ford takeover of Volvo where a conflict of culture has had to be resolved between the collaborative Swedish approach and the more aggressively competitive approach of the American parent firm.

### Participation in learning

The general public of Gothenburg would not necessarily know that it is a Learning City – although in fact it was probably the first to declare itself a Learning City after the First Global Conference on Lifelong Learning of 1994. But they do understand the importance of lifelong learning. Many organisations deliver formal and informal learning opportunities and up to 1 million Swedes (12%) participate in low cost or no cost adult education annually. The country is wealthy and has high levels of literacy and employment and this is now reflected in Gothenburg's participation rates and employment rates as well.

1 in 10 people in Gothenburg are enrolled in formal post secondary education. Many more participate in informal adult education programs. It is widely accepted that learning is valuable and there is no requirement for formal outcomes or completion rates in order to acquit government funding for adult education.

### Building a learning culture in business

Immigrants comprise 20% of Gothenburg's population with up to 75% in some localities. Since 1997, 100 000 places per year of government funded vocational training have been made available nationally for unemployed people and those at risk of becoming unemployed. AUD\$600m is allocated annually to this national program. A strategy for attracting people who were unemployed or underemployed into the available training was to use Trade Union outreach workers and health care workers who, together with the existing career guidance schemes, contacted people in their neighbourhoods and encouraged them to participate. By using peers who have been specially trained in conducting these negotiations, this program has been very successful.

Sweden is also very willing to validate overseas skills and qualifications and does not insist of high levels of competence in Swedish but rather a useful working knowledge of the language.

Through these strategies, the target in Gothenburg was to reduce the mid 1990's unemployment rate of 9% by 50% and it is now 4%. The planned three year program of vocational training combined with attracting new industries has been so successful that it has been extended for a further two years.

Stakeholders in the major industries in Gothenburg are also committed to retaining people in their companies. There is evidence that they are now prepared to pay for the ongoing education and training of their employees. Participation in learning programs is supported by making the time available during paid work time for learning programs or by paying for replacement staff while people are engaged in learning activity. It is recognised and demonstrated that by continually improving the capacity of individuals to cope with higher demands on quality in production, company performance also improves.

### **International participation**

Gothenburg has developed strong links between national initiatives and local solutions. There are also strong partnerships with European projects rather than regional ones. It is ironic that Gothenburg has difficulty within Sweden in promoting itself as a Learning City. 25 other cities are registered as Learning Cities in the country but only Gothenburg has really capitalised on the opportunities this has presented and it has become involved in European and international projects rather than national ones.

One of Gothenburg's current projects is to develop a network between all of the people in the city who are involved in coordinating European Union projects and is developing an educational program for others who may want to get involved in later projects.

Swedish participation in the European Union is recent (since 1995) but it sees it as a powerful force for peace, not just for its economic and political advantages. Brought up sharply by the violence in Gothenburg during the World Economic Forum in 2001, Sweden also recognises that its comfortable lifestyle and highly educated population is at risk of being left behind through complacency and sees the partnership opportunities offered through EU membership as an important current step in its national development.

'The negative spiral of violence in society must be confronted by further efforts related to the issue of fundamental values.'

## SNAPSHOTS of Effective Practice

### *The Lindholmen Project*

The Lindholmen Project has seen the transformation of a defunct shipyard into a Knowledge Centre that is a showpiece of the city's urban regeneration. In this precinct, education, business, residents and local government are working together to create a new living environment where all of these enterprises coexist.

By sharing essential resources such as premises, equipment and people, the partners in the Knowledge Centre can offer enhanced education and training opportunities. Local government has adopted the role of 'coaching' this development and then withdraws as the other sectors develop skills and confidence to manage their own lifestyle development.

In the Lindholmen precinct there are five secondary schools and one adult education centre with annual enrolments of 6 000. In addition to general curriculum, there are specialised education programs in industrial design, virtual technology and vocational education. University provision in Lindholmen specialises in engineering for 2 000 students on site. Industrial programs in engineering and environmental ICT have 1 000 people enrolled.

In 2002, Ericsson Mobile Data Design has opened in the precinct employing 800 people. The company chose this location because of its strong provision of locally accessible and diverse learning programs. Chalmers Lindholmen has also been located there – a ship's officer and works engineer training college.

### *Volvo and The GTG – an exemplary partnership between business and learning*

Established in 1916, the Volvo car factory is also located near the waterfront and has developed into one of Gothenburg's success stories, surviving the crisis in the shipyards. During the time of that crisis (1967 – 1997), Volvo's sales increased from AUD\$600m to AUD\$3660m. The number of employees grew from 24 000 to 73 000 (City of Gothenburg, 2001, p 33).

Committed to a learning culture, the factory supports a diverse, multi skilled workforce. Ergonomic equipment means that there are no physical prerequisites for employees who are on the assembly lines and women comprise 25% of the factory floor employees. Multiskilling provides enjoyable work variety for employees and protects the factory against skill shortages. The diversity ensures a dynamic, loyal workforce with excellent work ethics.

### *The GTG*

In a joint enterprise with the City Council and the local Education Authority, Volvo supported the establishment of the Gothenburg Technical High School (Goteborgsregionens Tekniska Gymnasium GTG) in 1998. The GTG is located in the Volvo factory precinct and provides a unique opportunity for its students to develop globally competitive vocational skills in a challenging and stimulating learning environment. An innovative partnership between business and learning, the school is funded as a mainstream school by the Education Authority and Volvo contributes 25% of the cost of each student. The GTG meets all accredited curriculum requirements while providing a flexible and broad education for students with multiple pathway options.

The school provides for the final three years of education and currently has its maximum enrolment of 450 students. With 3 applicants for every place it is the most popular school in Gothenburg and consequently a highly motivated student body is selected. All students and teachers work to timetable that reflects the factory hours (7.30am - 4pm with four weeks annual leave). Teachers are marginally compensated for this work schedule but there were still 150 applicants for the initial 5 positions and strong stability in the current staff of 30.

Students get paid work experience in the Volvo factory and develop vocational skills on equipment supplied by the factory. International exchanges are readily available. The learning environment is well supplied with modern ICT facilities that students can access at any time. They have self paced learning periods as well as timetabled programs. Personal discipline is high and there is no graffiti or vandalism in the school.

'Of the first group to graduate in 2001, 50% have gone on to further education, 25% have been employed at Volvo and the rest are completing their compulsory military service.'

Svien Holm, Principal, GTG, 2002

## **Young people at risk**

In the Gothenburg school system generally, individual programs are developed for young people who are not suited to mainstream educational approaches. There is a strong cultural belief in the right of young people to have a choice of programs that suit them. The intention is that after a year of alternative program provision, young participants will return to mainstream programs but this is not proving highly successful. Consequently, individual programs are continuing to be developed as this cohort continues in 3 or 4 years of senior school participation.

Nationally, Sweden aims for 12 years of education as a minimum standard and there is a 98% retention rate. Of these, 12 – 15% of students participate in individual programs and there is an observation that those students who don't succeed in any of this provision tend to have marginal disabilities but don't qualify for full scale disability support.

The individualised program is not chosen by students but the resources are implemented when students are deemed to be at risk of not succeeding. The program includes a strong focus on work experience and the predominant client groups are boys and migrant girls. A current educational debate centres on the provision of a bridging year between the first 9 years and the final 3 years.

There is little risk of young people dropping out of the various social systems altogether. Swedish municipalities are required to track young people until they are 20, including and especially after they have left school. Career guidance authorities, health and social services all keep records of individuals and what they are involved in. Culturally accepted, it is a very effective system for minimising people dropping out of support systems and into cycles of disadvantage.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sweden has a culture of being highly socially inclusive, to a degree where its lack of skill in a competitive approach can be seen to be a potential weakness. However, national support of lifelong learning and innovative strategies to engage and reengage individuals in learning has contributed to the multi faceted renewal of Gothenburg.

As a Learning City, Gothenburg encourages and welcomes debate on many issues and acknowledges that many solutions need to be tried and tested as well as renewed and reinvented. This approach is underpinned by committed politicians, employers, local government and individuals. Gothenburg has a complex and detailed vision of its future directions and is actively engaged in partnerships across many sectors, nationally and internationally, to achieve the aspirations of its citizens and its role in the European community in particular.