



Matching Practices for Secondary Schools – Sweden

Håkan Forsberg ¹

Relevant country background

Education policy in Sweden is decided at a national level but its implementation is carried out by municipalities. The Swedish National Agency for Education sets the educational policy, designs the national curricula and issues regulations. However, implementation and interpretation of national policies are mainly carried out at a municipal level. In all, there are 20 counties and 290 municipalities in Sweden (approx. 10 million inhabitants). The municipalities are obliged by law to provide for childcare/preschool, compulsory and upper secondary education for their residents. Implementation is delegated to the local responsible authority of the school (municipalities or independent agents such as companies, staff co-operatives or foundations).

Main characteristics of the school system. Education in Sweden consists of a publicly-funded large-scale system that caters to everyone from early childhood to young adulthood.

Education is compulsory for age 7 till age 16. This is followed by voluntary upper secondary education which is free of charge and consists of 18 national study programmes, including both academic and vocational tracks. In addition, there are five different preparation programmes for those not eligible for a national study programme. At the local level, it is possible for school operators to design and develop variants of study programmes that deviate from the national study programmes [1].

“Matching in Practice” is a research network that brings together the growing community of researchers in Europe working on the various aspects of assignment and matching in education and related labour markets.

These country profiles are part of a collective effort by network members to map matching practices across Europe

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¹ Uppsala Universitet, Sweden – hakan.forsberg@edu.uu.se

Grades. They are given from year six in compulsory school using a six-grade scale from A-F, with grade F indicating inadequate performance. In order to qualify for upper secondary education, a student must have grades between A-E in the subjects English, mathematics and Swedish or Swedish as a second language. In addition, depending on whether they want to attend an academic or a vocational study programme, students need to have at least grades A-E in five further subjects [1].

Students who do not meet these requirements can apply for one of the preparation programmes in order to obtain the necessary qualifications.

In upper secondary education, subjects are divided into courses, and students are graded in each course on a scale from A to F, as in compulsory school. However, in upper secondary education a grade of F is equal to failure. Extra credits are given in upper secondary education for reaching specific levels in the subjects of modern languages, mathematics and English [1]. Upper secondary school study programmes comprise 2 500 credits, which is the sum of the credits for all courses. In order to graduate from upper secondary school, one must have obtained 90 percent of all credits with a pass grade (A-E), as well as have reached a pass in certain subjects. Graduation from upper secondary education automatically qualifies a student for access to higher education, although constraints may apply depending on the track (academic versus vocational) [1].

Although upper secondary education is voluntary in Sweden, participation is high. In 2017, 97.6 per cent of all 16-year olds entered upper secondary education [2]. This reflects the fact that upper secondary education is perceived as the minimum level of education needed to access the labour market. In fact, making upper secondary education mandatory is under discussion. At the same time, more than 20 percent of students entering upper secondary education drop out before completing their study programme [3]. Approximately one third of all upper secondary graduates continue directly onto higher education or post-secondary education [2].

Voucher system and independent school operators. Since the mid-1990's, Sweden has had a publicly-funded voucher system (there were several reforms between 1991 and 1995 that are usually jointly referred to as the Free School Act). The voucher system guarantees free education and facilitates school choice at both local and national levels [4].

Simultaneously to the introduction of the voucher system, entry into the education market was deregulated: privately-owned operators (companies, staff co-operatives or foundations) were allowed to set up and manage so-called independent schools (preschools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools), under the condition that they abide by the national curricula and regulations.

Independent schools are financed by vouchers on the same basis as municipal schools. This means that students take their funding with them when moving from one school to another.

As of 2017, 73 percent of students attended a municipality-operated school (versus 27 percent an independent school) nationwide. There are important local variations. For example, in the municipality of Stockholm, which is the most populous area in Sweden, the equivalent share students in municipality-operated schools was 44 percent.

There are variations across municipalities in the way the voucher system works. First, the financial value of vouchers varies across municipalities, which means that the budget a student contributes to her school depends on her municipality of residence. Funding for the voucher system derives from municipality taxes

(70 %), government grants (14 %) and fees for childcare/ after-school centre (16 %) [7]. The amount is a combination of the actual cost of education per pupil in the specific municipality and the average cost of a similar education nationwide. As a result, spending on compulsory and upper secondary education differs between municipalities [8].

Second, some municipalities restrict access to municipality-operated schools to their residents. At the same time, independent schools can recruit pupils regardless of local administrative regulations but the value of vouchers may differ due to the students' municipality of residence and these schools cannot discriminate students based on the value of their vouchers. Cross-municipality competition for students has become an important dimension of the competition for students between providers of later year compulsory education and upper secondary education, especially in urban areas [5] [6].

The enrolment policy for upper secondary education. It is defined in the national Education Act. The Act states that children and young adults are entitled to a free education, at both compulsory and upper secondary levels (Education Act, Chapter 7, 3§). Admissions procedures regarding catchment areas or selection by grades differ across municipalities [9]. Admission based on grades is only applicable when a school or a study programme is oversubscribed.

This profile describes the enrolment practices for upper secondary schools. For admission practices for compulsory schools, see Anderson (2017, [MiP profile 24](#)).

Summary box

Organization of education	Coexistence of municipal and private school operators within the same public-school system. A voucher system promotes school choice and determines the exact funding that each school receives.
Stated objectives of enrolment policy	Equal access to education
Who's in charge?	Local authorities (municipalities) administer the application process while admissions are made by individual schools
Admissions system in place since	2010.
Available capacity	Upper and lower limits to class sizes imposed by the school operator.
Timing of enrolment	Choices submitted in February. Preliminary results released in April, final decisions in July.
Information available to students prior to enrolment period	School and municipality websites. The Swedish National Agency for Education provides school-level statistics on gender, nationality and parental education, together with enrolment numbers and average grades.
Restrictions on preference expression	Depends on the local administration of enrolment but in general one can list several options in decreasing order.
Matching procedure	Mostly non-algorithmic as long as legal and local guidelines are respected.

Priorities and quotas	A limited number of seats set aside for students with special needs or social circumstances, and for Swedish students from abroad.
Tie-breaking	Decided by the school operator. Oversubscribed schools typically use grades to break ties.

Description of current practices

After the deregulation and decentralisation of education at the beginning of the 1990's following the Free School Act, the supply of the locally designed study programmes increased while the number of national study programmes decreased.

The choice of school and study programme follows a nationally coordinated time schedule designed by the *Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions*. Students must rank their preferred choices of schools and study programmes. By mid-February, applications are submitted to the local administration of enrolment which, depending on demography, can be a single municipality or an administratively joint group of municipalities. Schools are by law (Education Act Chapter 15, 14 §) responsible for admissions but these are usually carried out by the local administration of enrolment. Schools are not allowed by law to turn down a student if there are open seats and they meet the formal qualifications. Oversubscription criteria are described in general terms in the Education Act which makes room for local variations and interpretations among school operators. In case of oversubscription, the school operator has the final call which usually is decided by grades as tie-breaking, but work samples or auditions can also be applied when it comes to specific study programmes such as arts or special craftsmanship. Furthermore, schools must make a limited number of seats available for students with special needs or circumstances or whose grades are incomparable to the regular ones from Swedish primary school.

Preliminary results are published in April. In May, a second round is open where students can alter/reprioritize their choices. Final admission decisions take place in July and the school year starts in August [15].

One important distinction between schools operated by municipalities and independent providers is that the latter can recruit pupils nation-wide. The municipalities, on the other hand, are obliged to take their “own” pupils and can only accept pupils from other municipalities based on local regulations and agreements.

Performance

Numbers from the Swedish National Agency for Education show a decrease in the share of first choice admissions, from 78 percent 2011 to 65.2 percent in 2017. As shown in figure 1, the decrease is stronger in urban areas, such as the city of Stockholm.

Research as well as evaluations made by the Swedish National Agency for Education show that the

introduction of the voucher system and the facilitation of school choice have led to increased differences between schools with regard to the socio-economic background of students and their school performance. Although this phenomenon is partly driven by the increase in housing segregation in urban areas, research shows that school choice exacerbates the effect [12, 13 & 17]. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between social background and outcomes in school [13, 14, 16 & 18].

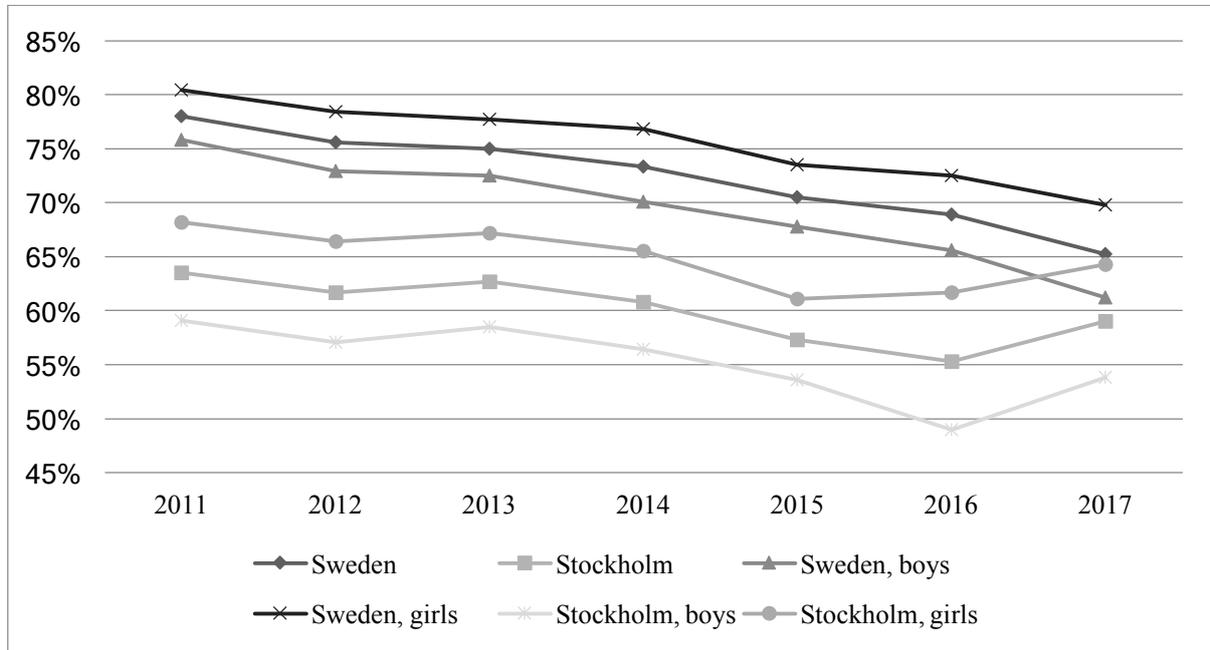


Figure 1: Share of first choice admission (source: Swedish National Agency for Education)

The impact of school choice seems to be greater in upper secondary education where there are more choices to be made, while compulsory schooling is structured by the effects of housing segregation to a greater extent [12, 14 & 16]. These differences can be illustrated by looking at the share of students attending independent schools. The figure below shows the share of students who attend independent schools in upper secondary education respectively compulsory schooling, 2011–2017, in the city of Stockholm and in the whole of Sweden. The numbers for Stockholm underline the impact of school choice in urban areas.

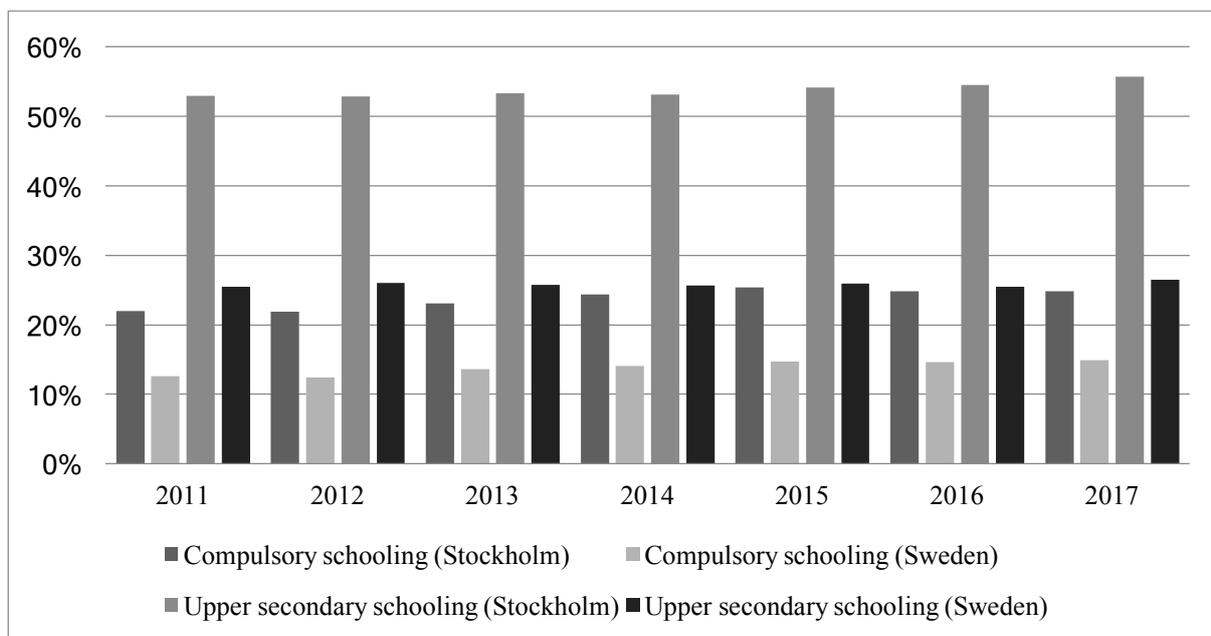


Figure 2: Share of students attending independent schools, Stockholm and Sweden, 2011–17 (source: Swedish National Agency for Education)

In the case of upper secondary education in Stockholm, the significance of geographic location has increased considerably since the introduction of school vouchers. Before the reforms, geographic location had less impact on the competition among schools for new pupils, since proximity decided which pupils a school could recruit and which school the pupils could attend. Thus, housing segregation had a direct impact on schools' recruitment. The emergence of the educational market, and the gradual deregulation regarding both the establishment of new schools and the geographic restrictions on pupils' choices, resulted in location becoming crucial for schools in their competition for students but less crucial for parents. Independent schools could differentiate themselves by setting up schools in areas that are considered attractive, e.g. in Stockholm City and its neighbouring areas. The municipal schools, generally established before the school voucher reforms, could rarely do anything about their geographic location; either the location constituted an asset for the school – which was the case for old municipal institutions in the inner city and centrally located municipal schools in surrounding municipalities – or not. The attraction of central Stockholm turned the inner city into a centre of the education market. In this centre, both upper secondary schools and pupils with most resources, in terms of socio-economic backgrounds and grades, can be found [5] [14]. Examples of the attractiveness of Stockholm city and its concentration of resourceful students are illustrated in Figure 3 and 4. When comparing the numbers in Figure 4 one should keep in mind that the schools in Stockholm city comprise 50 percent of all schools in the county.

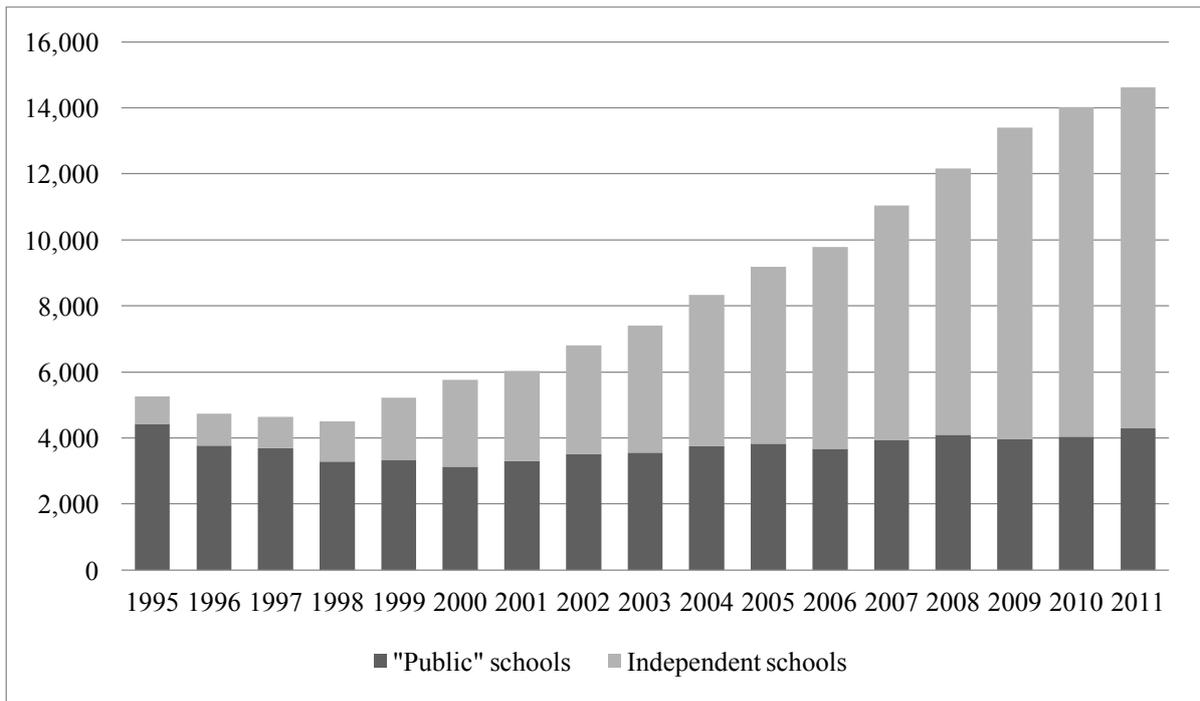


Figure 3: Number of students in Stockholm city schools from other municipalities (source: Forsberg (2015, p. 109))

Recent policy change

In 2011, a reform put limits on locally designed study programmes. Additionally, a more granular grading system was introduced and the curriculum was revised to make access to higher education after completing a vocational program harder.

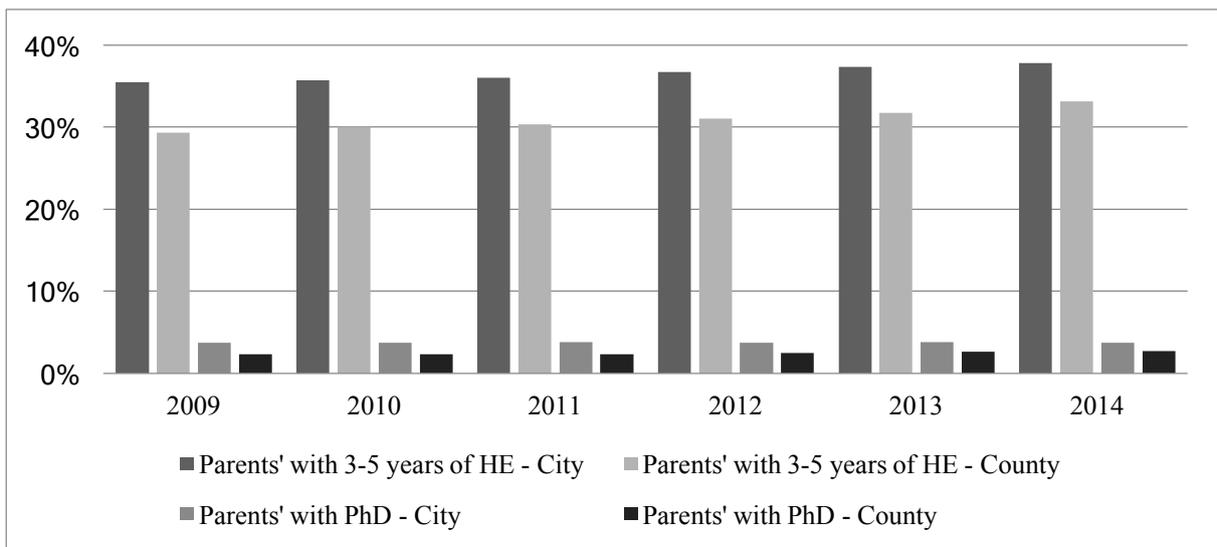


Figure 4: Level of parents' education, Stockholm city and Stockholm county, 2009-14 (source: Statistics Sweden)

Perceived issues

The effect of school choice and the entry of independent operators owned by private agents into the public sector of education are hot topics in Sweden. There is a debate on whether the decentralisation and deregulation of the Swedish school system are related to the deteriorating performance of the Sweden education system in international comparisons such as PISA and TIMSS.

Another frequently discussed topic concerns the profits made by the private companies running the independent schools, since their operations are financed by tax money. Today, there is no restriction on entry into the education market and several corporate groups running multiple schools have emerged. The largest corporate group is Academedia which runs 650 schools catering for 176 000 children and students at all school levels and has 15 800 employees. In 2017, Academedia had a turnover close to 940 million EUR and made a profit equal to 41 million EUR.

Since tuition fees are not allowed in the Swedish school system, grades have become an essential dimension of competition. Grade inflation is becoming an issue. Several studies provide evidence for grade inflation in Sweden [10] and suggest that independent schools are more generous with grading than municipal schools [11]. Furthermore, the national tests, which are an important source of data for grading pupils in compulsory and upper secondary education, are corrected internally by the supervising teacher, creating a source of conflict of interest.

Legal texts

The Swedish parliament

The Education act of Sweden, http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/skollag-2010800_sfs-2010-800#K2

The Swedish National Agency for Education

All national information on curricula, subject plans and courses, <https://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/andra-sprak/in-english/the-swedish-national-agency-for-education-1.61968>

Other resources and references

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MiP Country Profiles downloadable from matching-in-practice.eu

- MiP Country Profile 1. Cantillon, Estelle (2011), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Belgium \(French-speaking region\)](#).
- MiP Country Profile 2. Kübler, Dorothea (2011), [University admission practices – Germany](#).
- MiP Country Profile 3. Irving, Rob (2011), [Matching practices for entry-labor markets – Scotland](#).
- MiP Country Profile 4. Kiselgof, Sofya (2011), [Matching practices for universities – Ukraine](#).
- MiP Country Profile 5. Biró, Péter (2011), [University admission practices – Hungary](#).
- MiP Country Profile 6. Biró, Péter (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Hungary](#).
- MiP Country Profile 7. Chen, Li (2012), [University admission practices – UK](#).
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- MiP Country Profile 10. Chen, Li (2012), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Ireland](#).
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- MiP Country Profile 12. Manlove, David (2012), [Matching practices for primary and secondary schools – Scotland](#).
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MiP Country Profile 25. Bronfman, S., Hassidim, A., Kalif, G., and Romm, A. (2017), [Matching practices for entry-labor markets – The Israeli Medical Internship Match.](#)

MiP Country Profile 26. Herzog, Sabrina and Thilo Klein (2018), [Matching practices for childcare - Germany.](#)

MiP Country Profile 27. Håkan Forsberg (2018), [Matching practices for secondary schools - Sweden](#)