

# Future Competencies

A report from The Think Tank  
on Future Competencies

## Summary



# Future Competencies

## Summary

### • Think Tank on Future Competencies

In January 2006 the Nordic Network for Adult Learning established a think tank to draw the outlines for discussions organised by the Nordic Council of Ministers on future competencies from the perspective of continuing education.

The participants in this think tank, representing all the Nordic countries, are individuals with varied background and experience: Harry Bjerkgang (NO), Arne Carlsen (DK), Ingegerd Green (SE), Leena Jokinen (FI), and Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir (IS). The representative of NVL was Sigrún Kr. Magnúsdóttir (IS).

Our work has focused on a number of critical questions: What will Nordic working life and society look like in the future? What competencies will adult individuals need to develop in order to function? Through what systems and organisations can this competence be developed? How can Nordic culture be the basis for an effective policy?

In order to support our answers to these questions, we have read and discussed reports, analyses, and books. We have met nine times, and to these meetings we have invited politicians, representatives of trade, industry, and educational institutions to hear their views on the current situation and the future.

### • Images of the Future

Based on the trends and developments we think will influence our societies during the next five to ten years, we have sketched a series of images of the future. These images should not be looked at individually; together they form a scenario of the future that we used as the basis for our work.

Even though our lives are increasingly marked by globalisation, it is at the local level that the prerequisites for global growth are created. Local communities are going to be increasingly characterised by diversity – a diversity which must be utilised by all sectors of society. Regions must be able to ensure successful integration, remove social rifts, and increase the tolerance of diversity. The individual's ability to accept diversity is largely determined by knowledge and competence.

In order to curb the negative trend of global climate change, we must develop technologies that enable energy production based on renewable energy resources. In addition, we must reduce our energy consumption by changing our lifestyles.

In order to maintain our competitiveness in the IT society, the Nordic countries must be innovative and develop new knowledge and technologies. In the future it will be increasingly important for everyone to develop their digital competence. As demand for developing and updating competencies will constantly grow, good basic education will not be sufficient. An urgent question for the whole Nordic region is how to react and maintain our social welfare at a time when the percentage of senior citizens in the population is steadily increasing. The labour market must, in one way or another, compensate for the fact that the proportion of the elderly will continue to grow in the near future. Irrespective of how this is done, it will change our labour market.

Today there are not any facilities for transferring the competencies of older workers to the younger generation. Expanding the system of learning at work can facilitate this transfer, so that the ac-

accumulated experience of the older generation will not be lost. In addition, if it is possible to keep older workers in employment after they have reached pension age, labour supply will be increased.

In the past few decades there has been increasing emphasis on individualisation. Structures must be reshaped to fit this trend of growing individualism so that we can put the energy and drive of the individualists to good use. The need for cooperation is not going to decrease, however, but the means of cooperation will change.

Regions that cultivate the entrepreneurial skills of their inhabitants will have a competitive advantage. Entrepreneurship education, which today focuses mainly on how to establish and run a business, must pay more attention to the skill of transforming ideas into reality. To promote the innovative and creative powers of the individual, we must enhance the role of arts and practical subjects in all education, particularly in adult education.

## • Competence

In the competence society it will not be enough to “know about” something; “the ability to perform” is a decisive factor in personal success. Personal competence and being capable of performing a job in a way that generates added value are factors which make the individual an attractive job candidate. This requires, firstly, an understanding of the need to constantly learn new things and, secondly, the prerequisites for doing this.

There is a consensus among the Nordic countries that we should not compete on low wages but instead focus on competence. Consequently we agree that industrial and educational policies must support such development. In addition to education and research, we need an understanding that competence is a necessary prerequisite to transform knowledge into results that increase our welfare.

We need to deepen our understanding of the concept of competence and to discern more clearly between developing competence and increasing knowledge. The think tank has based its work on the definition that competence means the capability and resolve to perform a task by using certain knowledge and abilities. If this is to be the basis for the competence concept, competence development has to take place in a number of fields and include capability, resolve, knowledge and abilities.

Until recently formal adult education has consisted of increasing and cultivating the development of knowledge rather than competence. As long as the concept of competence is hazily defined and described, it will be difficult to discuss which competencies need to be developed and how this should be done. Therefore, we have to deepen our understanding of competence and thus arrive at common principles.

When the concept of competence has been clearly defined and common principles developed, it becomes possible to describe the various fields of competence that will particularly influence future development. A common definition of competence and well-defined categories will simplify the development of a system of evaluation and validation which are the essential prerequisites for maintain ongoing competence development.

Businesses cannot solely rely on acquiring competencies through young and recently graduated employees. Consequently, competence development plans for those employees already working for the company have to be made so that the competencies of the whole group can be integrated effectively. Another no less important factor is differentiating between instruction that results in increased knowledge and instruction that leads to increased competence.

Businesses and individuals alike invest time and money in competence development. Therefore it is important that competence development processes lead to the desired outcome. Trade and industry along with educators must broaden their understanding of the different dimensions of competence and of which practical methods are the most effective. Therefore extensive cooperation between employers, educational institutions, and authorities is essential. Provided the strong

Nordic tradition of cooperation between trade and industry and other sectors of society can be reinforced, we will have gained a considerable advantage over not only other European countries but the rest of the world.

## • **Future Competencies**

In order to define future competencies the think tank organised a conference at Selfoss in August 2006 with more than 50 participants from the various sectors of society. In addition to the resolutions of the conference, the think tank has in shaping a potential definition of future competencies made use of the EU definitions of key competence and OECD metacompetence.

The work carried out by the EU and the OECD seems to be in general agreement with the conclusions of the Selfoss conference. Communicative reading, writing and math skills were strongly emphasised. Additionally, communicative and social competence, and interacting with people in heterogeneous groups was stressed, along with the ability to utilize accessible tools like computer technology and so forth, and finally the ability to be innovative, creative, and active.

To these contributions to future competences, the think tank added the importance of constantly developing learning processes that will enhance the personal growth of the individual. Continuous personal development, whose core consists of self-knowledge and self-esteem, is the basis for developing other competencies effectively.

As the individual and individual development is increasingly becoming the focal point of other competencies, the think tank has arrived at the following categories of competence:

**Professional competence** is the competence needed for performing a task in a work situation in a way that creates added value in relation to the work that is being carried out.

**Social competence** comprises the ability to communicate and interact with people in different contexts through, for instance, language, artistic expression, movement, mathematics, or technical tools.

**Personal competence**, whose core consists of self-knowledge, forms the basis for the development of social competence.

The aim of categorising competencies is to make it easier to differentiate and discern between various types of competencies and thus show how the three categories interact and support each other. Understanding competence, how it is acquired, and what competence categories form the essential basis for a better future, helps to improve the planning of adult education.

## • **Future Adult Education**

In order to cohesively plan adult education that supports and promotes adult education and is based on the needs and opportunities that the think tank has pointed out, it is vital to discuss the changes that have to be made in legislation, financing, pedagogy, methodology, evaluation and validation of competencies, distribution, educational situations, and last but not least how the responsibility is divided between the individuals themselves and others.

**Future legislation** must be based on a formal system for adult education that is targeted at the competence development of the entire adult population, regardless of employment or previous education. In order to strengthen the competitive position of the Nordic countries, it is essential to work together at a common political policy and agree on the principles for legislation for adult education.

**Financing** must be restructured to meet the need for a steadily increasing competence development among adults. As it is of vital importance for everyone that competence develops successfully,

it is fair that the financial costs be shared to an adjustable degree by individuals, the labour market, and public authorities. Additionally, a system of shared financial responsibility must be established and the cost must be seen as a profitable investment for the future. A possible incentive would be tax deductions for supplementary or continuing education.

A good deal of the adult education offered today is meant as a compensation for incomplete basic education at the secondary school level. A new educational system that meets the needs of an increasing number of adults for supplementary or additional education can be financed by organising the secondary education so that fewer teenagers drop out of school with incomplete knowledge and competence.

**The pedagogy and methodology** of future adult education have to meet the varied needs of the individuals and respect the informal and non-formal learning they have acquired outside the formal educational system. The teacher must become a counsellor, an adviser who supports people to accept the responsibility for organising and working on their continuous competence development.

Specialised research on adult education has to be promoted in order to develop new teaching methods that accept the informal and non-formal learning of adults. When new knowledge has been obtained, the responsibility for introducing the results into the schools lies with the educators that are in charge of teacher education and continuing education.

**A system of evaluation and validation** based on constant re-evaluation and updating of the individual's competence must be established, and its authority be sufficient to influence the labour market and society as a whole. By sharing such a system, the Nordic countries would increase their competitiveness and thus facilitate labour mobility between counties.

This system of adult education will have to face an increased demand for individual education both regarding content and **forms of distribution**. In accordance with the opportunities that the IT has to offer, the adult education system has to develop a flexible structure that is geared towards both the individual's and market demand. If the new adult education is capable of integrating informal and non-formal learning, demand for **new forum for learning** will increase. In the future, studies will not only take place within the traditional school system. An interdisciplinary forum has to be established to serve different interests and others concerned.

**Responsibility** is an important factor in a functional educational system. The individuals is responsible for developing and re-evaluating their competence; the workplace and official institutions have to create conditions that enable the individual to shoulder the responsibility of acting upon them.

## • **The Nordic Countries as a Winner Region**

It is well documented that the Nordic model has ensured social welfare as well as high productivity and competitiveness, and therefore the Nordic countries have become an example for other regions. This position is based on common cultural values. An important prerequisite for continued sharing of these values, as well as reinforcing them, is to develop a joint Nordic identity. As globalisation increases, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to adopt one single identity. For instance, one might be Swedish, possibly a second-generation immigrant, and at the same time a European and Nordic citizen.

## • **19 Messages**

Discussions on future competencies and their development have to be continuous. As the world changes, we discover the need for new competencies. As a conclusion to our report, we would like to send nineteen short messages that we hope the readers will continue to discuss within they are active in.

1. The structure for non-formal and informal adult education has to be based on constant analysis of the situation so future competencies continuously develop in correlation with the challenges and opportunities that emerge at home and internationally.
2. We have to respond to the effects of globalisation and sustainable development in our educational policy.
3. There is an imbalance between knowledge acquisition and competence development in the present educational system. In order to keep up our competitiveness, we have to focus more keenly on developing competence without relinquishing knowledge acquisition.
4. If we are to organise studies that give real opportunity to develop competence in different fields, we have to deepen our understanding of the various dimensions of the competence concept. Capability, resolve, knowledge, and skill are developed in different situations using different methods.
5. Various definitions and descriptions of the competence concept exist. If we are to understand how competence can develop, evaluate it and validate, we have to come to an agreement on shared terminology.
6. Adult education must systematically create constructive conditions for people to deepen their self-knowledge and reinforce their self-image as this is the basis for effective competence development in other fields.
7. Future competencies can be divided into three categories that are variously interdependent: personal competence, social competence, and professional competence.
8. Decisive competencies for developing the economy of the future are: to communicate by using a wide range of technology, interact with heterogeneous groups, be independent, innovative, and active. These competencies are the cornerstones of entrepreneurship and innovation.
9. The formal adult educational system has to be restructured so that it responds to the needs of the entire adult population for competence development, regardless of employment and previous education.

10. In order to emphasise the perspective of continuing education of the adult education system, it is necessary to sharpen the overall view of how and where adults acquire their competence in various fields. The formal adult education system has to be restructured to give more weight to informal and non-formal learning.
11. The policies and legislation that are the framework of the present formal adult education can be used to structure a comprehensive system by reducing the split between the various sectors (basic education, vocational education, re-education, validation, etc.) and instead be united in one institution.
12. Information and communication technology can offer individualised educational solutions, both concerning content and distribution. To make full use of the potential that the technology has to offer, the adult education system has to create a flexible structure based on individual needs and demand.
13. In the future, education will not be limited to the traditional school system. Completely new educational forums and meeting places for competence development should be created in cooperation with different individuals, institutions, and interests.
14. Diverse forms of counselling and competence training will have a central function to enable individuals to take personal responsibility for planning and continuing their competence development.
15. New forms of financing, where the individual, the work place, and the authorities share responsibility to a varied degree, will serve to sustain the increasing cost of adult education. Competence development must be seen as a profitable investment.
16. A secondary school system that manages to reduce the number of individuals that at a later stage need adult education to compensate for incomplete basic education will free resources for increased adult education.
17. There is demand for more research that leads to new pedagogical methods and processes that allow for the informal and non-formal learning of adults. The research-based information that already exists has to be transformed into action in a more comprehensive way than has been done so far.
18. National evaluation and validation systems have to be established. In order to bolster the position of the Nordic countries in the world, these systems ought to be jointly structured and in harmony with those that have been established elsewhere in Europe.
19. Now it is time to create a vision that the citizens of all the Nordic countries can identify with in order to preserve our strong cultural values and reinforce our position in the world.

**The complete report Future Competencies  
can be downloaded at [www.nordvux.net](http://www.nordvux.net)**

