

Isomorphic processes and discursive strategies

Swedish study associations caught between civil society, the state and the market

Pelle Åberg

Ph.D. Political science, Researcher
The Institute for Civil Society Studies
Ersta Sköndal University College
Stockholm, Sweden

Phone: +46 (0)8 555 050 64

E-mail: pelle.aberg@esh.se

Johan von Essen

Th.D. Theology, Researcher
The Institute for Civil Society Studies
Ersta Sköndal University College
Stockholm, Sweden

Phone: +46 (0)8 555 051 44

E-mail: johan.vonessen@esh.se

Abstract

Several challenges, both external and internal, to the identity and position of civil society organizations are present today. Organizations may be tempted or coerced into closer cooperation with the state. There are also incentives to become more market-oriented. The paper deals with such struggles through an investigation of Swedish study associations, involved in popular education or “*folkbildning*”. At the core of the study is the balance these organizations need to strike between on the one hand being similar to each other in sharing an identity as civil society organizations, exhibiting traits distancing them from the state and the market, and on the other hand displaying differences from other study associations, thus, demonstrating a distinct ideological profile. This also concerns the double strivings for legitimacy and efficiency, which may coincide but can also bring conflicting goals and agendas for civil society organizations. The cases also illustrate how civil society organizations handle an influx of market logics and trends of professionalization when this clashes with a civil society identity and expectations in the organizational context. The question posed is: *How do Swedish study associations balance strivings for legitimacy and efficiency and maintain a distinct ideological profile while under isomorphic pressures?*

This is studied through an analysis of annual reports in which study associations position themselves and face their challenges rhetorically as well as an analysis of interviews performed with representatives from each of the nine Swedish study associations.

The findings indicate different isomorphic processes affecting study associations of today. Cultural resources are used to handle partly conflicting myths, which also lead to varied discursive strategies and incidences of decoupling within these organizations.

Keywords: isomorphism, legitimacy, decoupling, cultural resources, popular education

Introduction

The last decades have brought significant changes to the life of Swedish study associations. External pressures have followed changes in the system for distributing state grants to popular education. The “market” for the organizations has changed along with potential competitors, not least since new actors, i.e. private for-profit educational companies have entered the arena.

Study associations aim to be perceived as legitimate actors but also strive to be efficient organizations. These two goals may coincide to some degree since being efficient may bring legitimacy but there is also a potential antagonism between the two where the identity as a civil society organization may be at stake. Explicit demands concerning the organizational form and the direction of the activities also exist, which will be elaborated on below. This is the context leading to the question posed in this study:

How do Swedish study associations balance strivings for legitimacy and efficiency and maintain a distinct ideological profile while under isomorphic pressures?

This relates to a larger discussion about the logics of civil society. Previous research has acknowledged trends of commercialization and professionalization influencing civil society in different countries (Eikenberry 2009, Eikenberry & Kluver 2004, Skocpol 1999, Wijkström & Einarsson 2006). Such developments are believed to threaten the nature and logic of civil society organizations since market transactions imply a different rationality than the ideal-based relations often viewed as inherent in civil society (Enjolras 2001, Sjöstrand 2000). It can thus be seen as challenges to an exclusive institutional logic of the organizational field (cf. Scott 2001). This also connects to debates about the roles of civil society organizations, captured by a phrase of whether there has been a change “from voice to service” or not (von Essen & Svedberg 2010, Lundström & Wijkström 1997), i.e. if civil society organizations today are less of interest groups articulating the wills and needs of citizens and more of service producers alongside the welfare state and market actors. How organizations navigate through such trends and attempt to remain legitimate as civil society organisations while simultaneously adapting to modern “myths” of efficiency and productivity will be studied. For Swedish civil society, the study associations are apt cases since they are old, dominant¹ and deeply embedded in the popular movement tradition². Hence, they are interesting cases for discussing both an influx of market logics into civil society as well as strategies used by civil society actors to handle different and contradictory demands and expectations.

Traditionally, Swedish study associations have had a position as an alternative to state-governed as well as commercial actors and most trace their origin to different popular movements. Today there is a tension embedded in the position of the study associations where they on the one hand need to demonstrate the distinctiveness of these organizations in relation to state-governed and commercial actors to maintain their legitimacy as civil society organizations, both in the eyes of the state, member organizations and the public. On the other hand they are also required to exhibit a distinct profile in relation to other study associations. These requirements follow not least from demands from the state if the study associations wish to continue receiving state grants (Gov. bill 1997/98:115). Thus, study associations have to balance pressures to be similar *and* dissimilar from other actors as well as relate to trends of

¹ The nine Swedish study associations had close to two million study circle participants in 2009. Together they enclosed more than 330 civil society organizations as members or with cooperation agreements (FBR 2009).

² “Popular movement” refers to a generally accepted Swedish concept, *folkrörelse*, which is used to describe Swedish associational life. *Folkrörelser* concerns “broadly based and democratically governed organizations that carry specific ideological messages” and also offer an open membership (Hvenmark 2008: 32f). The Labour movement, the Free Church movement and the temperance movement are often discussed as *folkrörelser*.

commercialization and professionalization. To do this, different discursive strategies are employed through which actors attempt to position the organizations in relation to different stakeholders and external as well as internal pressures.

Civil society, Swedish study associations, and "folkbildning"

Previous research has generally treated Swedish *folkbildning* – henceforth translated as “popular education” – and its organizations, such as the study associations, as parts of civil society (Bron 1995, Gougoulakis 2006, Larsson 2001, Milner 2002, Sundgren 2000, Åberg 2008; 2009). The empirical focus in this paper is the nine study associations that, in 2009, upheld state grants for their activities³. The incorporation of the study associations in Swedish civil society has much of its base in the structure of these organizations. Several of these organizations trace their origins to popular movements such as the temperance movement, the Labour movement and the Free Church movement (Andersson 1980, Gov. bill 2005/06:192). These connections have also been visible through the federative structure that all but one of these organizations adopted (*Folkuniversitetet* being the exception), a structure that lives on till this day. Among the member organizations are not least those who founded the study associations once upon a time as a way of meeting the educational needs of these organizations and the movements they were parts of. The federative structure of the study associations mean that they, apart from being divided into districts and local associations, also are built as umbrella- or “meta-organizations”, i.e. having other organizations, not individuals, as members (Ahrne & Brunsson 2008). These members are not themselves focused on popular or adult education activities but are, for instance, political parties, trade unions, organizations for the disabled, for senior citizens, etc. This organizational form is a way of grounding, or “embedding” (Granovetter 1985) the study associations in Swedish popular movements and Swedish civil society, at least this has historically been the case.

However, a recent study demonstrates that the originally strong connection between different study associations and various popular movements is not as strong today, due to a development where many more civil society organizations, with a less clear affiliation to any popular movement, have entered the federative structure of the study associations (von Essen & Åberg 2009). Nevertheless, the idea of the democratic federation, with the formal power over the study associations resting in the hands of their members, is still important. Even though this is true, the activities directed at or performed together with member organizations constitute but one part of the activities of study associations today. They also aim activities directly at the general public by offering courses, study circles, lectures, cultural programmes, etc. These activities take place on an open market and are funded through fees paid by participants whereas much of the activities with member organizations benefit from substantial state support⁴. Study associations also take on assignments from the state and public administration and can in this be involved in public procurements where competitors may be, for instance, other study associations, public authorities and private companies. The extent to which the study associations are involved in these various activities differ within the group but all are involved to some extent and it is not a negligible part of their income. We will also return to this in the discussions below but now we will turn our attention to some theoretical tools that will assist the analysis.

³ The nine study associations are ABF (*Arbetarnas bildningsförbund* or Workers’ Educational Association), Bilda (*Studieförbundet Bilda*), FU (*Folkuniversitetet*), Ibn Rushd (*Ibn Rushd studieförbund*), *Medborgarskolan*, NBV (*Nyktterhetsrörelsens bildningsverksamhet* or the Educational Association of the Sobriety Movement), Sensus (*Sensus studieförbund*), Sfr (*Studieförbundet* or the Study Promotion Association) and SV (*Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan*).

⁴ In 2009, state-contribution to the nine study associations totalled over 1,5 Billion Swedish crowns (FBR 2009).

Organizational theory and cultural resources

As noted above, Swedish study associations are under different, and contradictory, pressures. They, as a group of organizations, are expected to be dissimilar from other kinds of organizations and exhibit differences from other spheres of society, such as the state and the market while for instance trends of commercialization and professionalization pull them in a different direction. Partly, they should also be clearly distinct from each other, possessing distinct ideological profiles. To better understand this schizophrenic situation, aid can be found in institutional organizational theory. Below we first discuss structural influences, focusing on myths and isomorphic processes as well as one potential strategy to handle conflicting institutional pressures. Secondly, we add notions of “cultural resources” to further assist an understanding of the strategies of action organizations employ to deal with these challenges.

Isomorphism, myths and decoupling

Organizations need to be legitimate in the eyes of actors in their social and cultural context. This can be achieved by adapting to expectations and pressures in their environment (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008, Røvik 2000). We here primarily draw inspiration from institutional theory where focus is directed towards norms, culture and symbols instead of simply material or technological demands (Suchman 1995).

The concept of institutional isomorphism and isomorphic processes can help explain processes and pressures leading to increased similarities among organizations active within the same organizational field, i.e. organizations active in the same kind of or similar activities (cf. DiMaggio & Powell 1991, Scott 2001).

Organizations can be influenced by different kinds of isomorphic pressures and processes. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) describe different mechanisms leading to increased homogenization among organizations within an organizational field. One is *coercive isomorphism*. This comes from pressures on the organizations from external actors, which the organizations are dependent upon, as well as expectations from the social context in which the organizations reside. In the case of the Swedish study associations, much of the external demands are connected to the state and the significant state-contributions dished out to study associations. This is also the “prototype” of coercive pressures since they circle around power and politics, which means that the state often is an important actor (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008: 80). The state-support is an important source of income for the study associations and this dependence imply a need to be sensitive to expectations and governance from the state. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) hypothesize that greater interaction between state and organizations within a field leads to isomorphism and the more organizations are dependent on one and the same source of financing, the more homogenous they tend to become. Similarities between organizations within the same field can also ease the cooperation and exchange with other actors and contribute to the legitimacy of an organization.

Isomorphism is however not limited to this coercive form. It also concerns that organizations in more freely chosen strategies imitate other organizations, a process known as *mimetic isomorphism*. Organizations choose to imitate others when they are uncertain of goals and strategies. Thus, uncertainty and changing circumstances foster isomorphism. By imitating successful examples organizations attempt to improve their legitimacy, for instance by adapting to models or standards already established in the organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell 1991: 69f, Haveman 1993: 598, Holm Pedersen 2006: 988, Suchman 1995: 589). Also, when enough actors act in a certain way or use a certain form, other actors tend to follow without greater reflection – an action (or organizational form) become taken for granted (Haveman 1993: 595). Mimetic organizational change has therefore been described as a contagious process where popular “organizational recipes” are spread between organizations

(Haveman 1993: 596, Røvik 2000). Finally, isomorphism can also be connected to normative pressures, i.e. *normative isomorphism*. These “pertain to what is widely considered a proper course of action, or even a moral duty” (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008: 80). This concerns evaluations and attitudes in the environment surrounding the organizations of what is the appropriate response from the organization in a specific situation (Suchman 1995).

At the heart of the argument of isomorphism is that the reason for organizations becoming increasingly similar is that they experience pressure from institutionalized ideas and to relieve this pressure organizations adopt similar structures and forms.

Raised in the same research tradition as the notions of isomorphism are ideas concerning the impact of “myths” on organizations as well as on strategies used to handle incoherent pressures. The notion of “rationalized myths”, developed by Meyer & Rowan (1977), concerns ideas and norms in society and in the context in which organizations are to function that deal with how organizations should be organized and act. These myths are popular images of what is expected from an organization. Organizations conform to myths to gain legitimacy and these rationalized myths can also contribute to institutional isomorphism (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008: 78). To gain legitimacy, organizations wish to demonstrate that they act in accordance with the myths currently in fashion. However, such myths do not necessarily coincide with what is the “best” or most efficient course of action. Nevertheless, the external pressure to adapt is still there. Several myths can also be in circulation simultaneously. This puts an organization in a troublesome situation, being under pressure to adapt to something that is not in its best interest or to several, possibly internally contradictory, myths. This can lead to a course of action known as “decoupling”. Organizations then *claim* to adapt to societal expectations in order to gain legitimacy while in fact any adaptation does not take place and the activities of the organization continue in the same way as before (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008, Hirsch & Bermiss 2009, Meyer & Rowan 1977).

...organizations decouple their formal structure from their production activities when institutional and task environments are in conflict, or when there are conflicting institutional pressures. Decoupling enables organizations to seek the legitimacy that adaptation to rationalized myths provides while they engage in technical ‘business as usual’. (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008: 79)

Decoupling is a strategy used to gain “moral legitimacy” when organizations face contradictory pressures (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008: 86). Moral legitimacy is not necessarily found in the outcome of activities or decisions but also in what the organization *claims* to be doing. It does not necessarily pertain to either actual behaviour or methods used (concerning study associations, for instance, certain pedagogical methods) but signals of being the organization that is “right for the job” can be sent by the very structure of the organization.

...this sense of rightness has more to do with emblems of organizational identity than with demonstrations of organizational competence. (Suchman 1995: 581)

Thus, symbols and “talking the talk” is important to gain legitimacy while perceived to be working organizational forms and behaviours can be retained.

Cultural resources and repertoires

Most Swedish study associations have a quite long history and many have their origin in different popular movements. With this history and the federative structure of the organizations come historical legacies, ideological packages and organizational cultures, which can affect what rhetoric and actions are available to or deemed appropriate for an organization.

Previous research has argued that it is necessary to take into account the impact of culture and ideology when studying social movements (Williams 1995), and that argument can be used regarding civil society organizations too. Following Williams (1995), we are here interested not primarily in the *internal* impact of culture and ideology but in how these “cultural resources” can be employed strategically as parts of the rhetoric of organizations. From this perspective it is claimed that organizational culture and ideology can be analyzed in similar ways as structural resources such as money, membership, etc. even though it should be acknowledged that cultural and structural resources also are different from each other. Cultural resources are characterized by being contextual as well as public, meaning that they are not exchangeable in the same way structural resources are since they are contextually bound. They are also socially constructed, which implies that they have to be interpreted by other actors if they are to be efficient tools to use (Williams 1995).

From this perspective, culture is viewed as a “tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (Swidler 1986: 273). Thus, cultural components can be used (consciously or unconsciously) by organizations to achieve their specific goals and can as such be perceived as *repertoires*, which actors are more or less proficient in using (Swidler 2001). For instance, it is claimed that culture helps us define and signal organizational (Hvenmark 2008) and group membership (Swidler 2001: 74f). Relating this to the empirical focus here, culture becomes important for actors in the Swedish study associations since they can use it to define themselves and their organizations as parts of the Swedish tradition of *folkbildning*, of the organizational group of study associations and of Swedish civil society. It could however also concern defining themselves as parts of educational organizers on a commercial market and other possible group identities, which one(s) that are most prevalent is an empirical question.

Culture should here not be understood as a rigid system from which it is easily deduced what action or reaction an organization will take but as a tool kit or a repertoire. Instead of individuals and organizations being simply immersed or embedded in a cultural system and passive followers of established cultural norms, such actors are from this perspective seen as actively using various cultural elements in the different situations they face and are, thus, active users of culture (Swidler 1986: 277, Swidler 2001).

With the theoretical background presented above in mind we will now turn to the analysis of the Swedish study associations, the challenges they face and the strategies used to deal with this. Isomorphism and myths relate to the organizational context in which the organizations reside whereas decoupling and cultural resources help delineate the strategies actors use.

Striving for legitimacy and efficiency

Organizations strive towards becoming both efficient and legitimate. However, these two values – efficiency and legitimacy – may come in conflict with each other. As noted above, different external pressures affect the Swedish study associations today. How do these organizations weave their way through different expectations, demands and myths? That is the topic of the empirical sections below. The analysis is based on material from the nine Swedish study associations in the form of interviews with both the chairperson and the highest-ranking employee at the national level of each study association as well as written material such as annual reports. We begin by elaborating on the relations between these organizations and the state, which in a sense set the stage for them and for our investigation.

State-influenced isomorphism?

The Swedish state can influence what activities study associations’ focus on as well as what participants are regarded as target groups and, not least, how the organizations choose to present themselves and the discursive strategies they use. As noted above, in order to receive

state support and to remain or become a legitimate actor in the field (at least in the eyes of the state, which with the substantial financial support being dished out can be regarded as an important stakeholder), the organizations have to meet and relate to certain demands. These include being separate from state- and market organizations as well as having a distinct ideological profile. The study associations thus face two different and somewhat contradictory demands if they wish to maintain a status as a state-supported study association. On the one hand, demands from the state construct a group of organizations that are to share a similar identity as civil society organizations and being able to demonstrate how they, individually and as a group, differ from other kinds of actors, thus generating a collective identity. On the other hand, each organization also has to demonstrate their uniqueness within this group. Hence, there is both a state-influenced isomorphic pressure and a pressure to be “different”. How then do the study associations relate to this dualism and their relations with the state?

Firstly, several study associations were formed as such for the pragmatic reason that this organizational form made it possible to become recipients of state support. The relation to the state is thus a part of the organizational history as well as a part of the reality for the study associations of today (Andersson 1980, von Essen & Åberg 2009).

Some study association representatives’ point to the kind of relation they have with the Swedish state to argue for their legitimate position as parts of civil society. They receive substantial state support but claim that this comes relatively free of demands – the state leaves it up to the organizations to shape the activities. Even though focus is frequently placed on activities that generate state support, the study associations claim a freedom to engage in other activities too, which is seen as a safeguard for their civil society identity. This freedom is stressed to argue the independence from the state.

...we can only be held accountable by the state for as long as we want the money they pay for certain activities but not otherwise... formally that is the case and to me it is incredibly important. (Interview, SV, authors’ translation)

On the other hand, the state *does* place certain demands on the study associations. The state formulates general goals for popular education and what the state grants are to be used for. This can naturally have an impact on the study associations where they have to demonstrate that they contribute to the development of democracy, to the development of society as such as well as filling a purpose for specific groups deemed important by the state. These include for instance the unemployed and people with disabilities. In the annual reports of the study associations it is clear that the organizations relate to these demands. By demonstrating and specifically singling out target groups mentioned by the state, study associations attempt to show their diligence in working towards state-set goals. It also shows what stakeholders the annual reports are written for, i.e. the presumed audience. Hence, areas and groups defined by the state are frequently mentioned, as are elaborations on activities performed in cooperation with member organizations. Thus, the annual reports can be understood as a tool used to legitimize the organization in the eyes of what the study associations perceive as their different important stakeholders, i.e. primarily the state and the member organizations.

Concerning the organizational form there are also expectations placed on the study associations. The “democratic federation” is the general rule and this can be related to the expected connections between study associations, popular movements and Swedish civil society. In discussions with representatives of Ibn Rushd, the newest Swedish study

association⁵, as well as in previous studies of this organization (Eriksson & Lundberg 2008) it comes through that they partly formed themselves in this way following external demands.

...it wouldn't have been possible to do it in any other way... also regarding demands it is...well, there has to be member organizations in a study association, otherwise you wouldn't have been allowed to start a new study association. (Interview, Ibn Rushd, authors' translation)

This quotation demonstrates that the organization has perceived external demands to conform to the organizational structure dominating the Swedish study associations of today. This can be connected to the notion of coercive isomorphic pressures discussed above. Since all but one of the study associations are structured according to the model of the democratic federation and have been so for a long time, there is also a more internal pressure and norms and values concerning what the organization should look like, what goals to pursue and what actions to take. Member organizations can be a source of such pressure.

The democratic federation as a rhetoric weapon

A recurring argument for how the study associations differ from other types of knowledge-producers and educational actors concerns the structure of the organizations. As noted above, all but one of the Swedish study associations has a federative structure with a varying number of member organizations. Representatives of the study associations all argue that the member organizations wield the democratic power in the study associations, which is also supported by the statutes of the organizations. The democratic organizational form is advanced as one of the attributes separating the study associations from businesses and private corporations operating on an educational market.

To me it is a question of democracy. If we were to isolate ourselves and just be employees, as in an educational company, then we don't have the connection to civil society. (Interview, *Medborgarskolan*, authors' translation)

It is the member organizations that give us... that is... [that constitute] the reason that we are a study association... If we didn't have that we would have been an educational company... it is the member organizations [that give legitimacy]. (Interview, *Medborgarskolan*, authors' translation)

Connections to and origin in a popular movement is also used to demonstrate differences between study associations and other educational actors. A movement connection is claimed to legitimize the organization and is also believed to affect the organizational identity.

We want to be a part of the Labour movement, our activities shall level out differences between people and we have socialist ambitions with what we do. (Interview, ABF, authors' translation)

Using the connections to member organizations in the rhetoric cannot only be understood as a way of retaining legitimacy from the state. For several study associations, the activities directed at and performed together with member organizations constitute a substantial part of their educational activities, which means that the member organizations are important stakeholders to which the study associations need to speak. This is demonstrated in the annual reports. In the study associations with the most members or where activities with members make up a majority of the total "business" generated, they also have central positions in the annual reports. Reports are made of the member organizations, especially the founding organizations, high-ranking representatives from larger member organizations author texts in the annual reports, etc. The talk of member organizations and the role of study associations in

⁵ Ibn Rushd was approved as an independent study association with access to the state grants in 2007.

assisting these organizations is part of the “mission language”. It is one way of framing the organizational identity in the public eye as opposed to an “operations language”, which is more focused on cost-efficiency and technical demands (Daley et al 1996).

The last of the quotations above demonstrates how representatives use the origin in a popular movement rhetorically to argue for the unique position of the organization. The historical connection between ABF and the Labour movement is used as well as the political identity of this organization. These discursive strategies are examples of how actors in the study associations use their cultural resources to achieve their goals, here being perceived as legitimate organizations. The cultural resources at their disposal concern the organizational history and the tradition of Swedish popular education. Using this in the rhetoric signals membership to the group of legitimate study associations (cf. Swidler 2001, Williams 1995). Arguing in this way may be necessary, not only to be legitimate in the eyes of the state, demonstrating ideological differences from other study associations, but also to remain legitimate in the eyes of the member organizations. However, a recent study shows how ABF, among others, have grown significantly regarding the number of members and that many newer member organizations are not as clearly connected to the Labour movement (von Essen & Åberg 2009). That leads us to question the accuracy of the argument. ABF may *want* to belong to this movement but whether their growth and development challenge or dilute this connection is open for debate. This could thus also concern an incidence of decoupling. In the rhetoric, the democratic federation and the origin in a specific popular movement and political ideology is still held in high esteem but in reality the search for increased revenues has led the organization to broaden the scope of potential members. This means that the rhetoric and the formal organizational structure not necessarily match the actual situation anymore, possibly as a result of the conflicting demands and expectations in the organizational environment (cf. Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008).

In the rhetoric it is possible to observe a slide in the focus of this study association. The rhetoric in ABF still addresses the Labour movement but the “mission” of the organization is claimed to be to provide for “those that have received the least” (Interview, ABF, authors’ translation). This can be regarded as a widening of the organizational goal.

The supposed goal for meta-organizations such as the study associations is to be the only legitimate representative for a certain question or within a certain area (Ahrne & Brunsson 2001). In the case of ABF this means being the legitimate educational organizer for the Labour movement. This central task makes it natural for certain organizations to become members. Thus, a category is created, which is also based on similarities among members (Ahrne & Brunsson 2001: 17, Hvenmark 2008: 43). However, as noted above, the study associations have grown and many newer members do not easily fall into the originally created category of “natural members”. This leads to a need to either redefine the organizational identity or to add new subgroups to the original member categories. With this in mind we can understand why the description of the organizational purpose has widened. It is a way of incorporating other than the original member organizations into the category of natural members. In the case of ABF, defining their target group as “those that have received the least” makes it easier to motivate the incorporation of, for instance, organizations for people with disabilities, patient organizations and others that do not have a clear connection to the Labour movement. Such redefinitions is a way of formulating why also new members should be perceived as natural members, thus maintaining the organizational identity and the legitimacy in the eyes of various stakeholders. This strategy is used to be able to grow and increase efficiency and incomes while simultaneously attempting to remain legitimate, i.e. it is an attempt to handle increasingly diversified demands and possibilities.

There are, as mentioned previously, historic reasons for why almost all Swedish study associations have a federative structure. However, also Ibn Rushd, the newest addition to the study association family has chosen the same structure.

When you are in this [organizational] context, it would be strange to organize [a study association] in a different way, which is alien. It is difficult for the surroundings to understand. So that is one reason, that it becomes easier for us and the surroundings to understand and communicate with each other. Form and structure should be the same as the context. (Interview, Ibn Rushd, authors' translation)

This quotation connects to the ideas of isomorphic processes that have been discussed previously. The respondent refers to the existent dominant structure within the organizational field to explain why this specific organizational form was chosen. In other words, there has been an imitation of organizations that have previously established themselves successfully, connecting this to the ideas of mimetic isomorphism. We should also remember the discussions concerning this study association and the institutional demands that were perceived as a background to their choice of organizational structure discussed above.

Whether the choice of strategy and organizational form depends on external, pragmatic, conditions to gain access to state funds or not this choice can be seen as a conformist approach where the actors conform to the existing institutional environment. Conformist strategies are a way to gain legitimacy by paying homage to established logics and ideas in the organizational field. This can contribute to a perception of the organization as a legitimate actor in the eyes of, in this case, other study associations as well as the state. In relation to actors outside of the organizational field, as well as possible participants or customers, this kind of demonstration of allegiance can also add to the legitimacy reservoir of the organization by being perceived as one of a group of already accepted legitimate actors (Suchman 1995: 587f, cf. Oliver 1991).

References to the structure of the democratic federation and the importance of member organizations is used as a marker demonstrating the different character of the study associations in comparison with other actors. This unites the study associations, demonstrating unique qualities and similarities within this group of organizations. However, as noted above, a study association is also expected to be different from other study associations. In strategies and rhetoric used to manifest this, the federative structure and the member organizations also come through. For instance, ABF refers to their embeddedness in the Labour movement via member organizations, Bilda does the same with reference to the free churches and NBV argues for their position in the temperance movement via organizations like IOGT-NTO⁶ and several other temperance organizations, etc.

To summarize, the traditions of the organizations, the connections to popular movements, member organizations and the notion of the democratic federation as the ruling organizational form are used as cultural resources. This is used strategically to gain legitimacy and demonstrate differences from other spheres in society, i.e. demonstrate why "study association" is a specific type of organization in Sweden. The history of the organization, the connection to a *specific* popular movement and the *specific* members of a particular study association are also tools used to demonstrate the unique profile of a certain study association, indicating differences from other study associations and portraying a distinct ideological profile. In a sense, this is a way of downplaying potential isomorphic processes and homogenization within the organizational field and is used as arguments for why there is a need for more than one study association. Thus, the study associations make strategic and rhetoric use of these cultural resources in various ways to argue their case.

⁶ IOGT-NTO is part of the international organization IOGT (International Organization of Good Templars).

Local presence, democracy and efficiency

There are, as is the case with many types of organizations, norms and values influencing the study associations. We will not go into detail on values and notions incorporated in the concept of *folkbildning*, etc. However, some important aspects should be highlighted if we wish to understand the organizing decisions made and how they affect and are affected by current trends and “myths” in the context study associations have to relate to and work within.

In the most recent government bill concerning *folkbildning* (Gov. bill 2005/06:192), the uniqueness of this sector of activities and organizations like study associations are partly attributed to these organizations’ presence in local communities throughout Sweden. The organizations’ ability to offer activities to citizens all over Sweden is stressed as an important contribution to the good of society achieved by the study associations. Hence, this local embeddedness is presented as essential in the eyes of the state. Several representatives from the study associations also stress the same embeddedness. With this in mind it is interesting to study the development of these organizations and their organizational structure. With a more or less explicit ambition to provide activities for citizens in every part of Sweden, one can wonder about the restructuring of several study associations in recent times. The trend has been to close down local organizations, let local organizations merge and even to change the organizational blueprint of the study association as such.

ABF, for instance, has seen a significant decline in the number of local organizations. In 1993 ABF maintained 156 local organizations (ABF 1993). Through mergers and shutdowns this decreased to 109 in 2003 (ABF 2004) and currently the number is 69 (www.abf.se)⁷. This development is interesting since an expressly stated goal of ABF was that there should be a local ABF organization in every Swedish municipality (ABF 1993: 3, 16). By the year 2000 there seems to have been a shift in attitude and goal, at least in the official rhetoric, reflected in the annual reports. The merger of local organizations, which results in fewer local organizations, was by then described in positive terms. The total amount of activities increased in the year 2000 and several local organizations are described as having come closer to each other, “some so close that it has even become one larger organization out of several smaller” (ABF 2001: 3, authors’ translation). Here such mergers are viewed as a result of close cooperation and a coherent organization.

Similar trends can be observed in other study associations, for instance in *Studieförbundet* and also in SV (*Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan*), the latter which throughout the years has emphasized the importance of being present in every municipality. This emphasis is clear in the annual reports of the last twenty years. However, also in this organization, the number of local organizations has diminished. During the first half of the 1990s the rhetoric in the annual reports concerns a distancing from the trend towards mergers and shutdowns of local organizations in other study associations, exemplified with the development in ABF mentioned above (SV 1994: 3). However, a decade later the same trend has also reached SV even though it is pointed out that this development goes slower in SV than in other study associations. Between 1992 and 2004, the number of local organizations in SV was reduced from 300 to 198 (SV 2005: 9). Today, SV has 170 local organizations (www.sv.se). The rhetoric changed along with the organizational structure. By 1999 the discussions in SV had swung from focusing on the number of local organizations, which are constructed as independent legal persons, to emphasizing the importance of being present in more general terms throughout the country (SV 1999: 5).

⁷ A drastic decline actually took place much earlier. At the peak in the 1950s there were 964 local ABF organizations. However, much of this decline coincided with major changes in the Swedish political-administrative map. Municipalities were merged and the total number of municipalities decreased from 2 500 to less than 300 in roughly two decades.

Another way of accomplishing similar results to the trend described above is the one chosen by *Medborgarskolan*. This study association chose to restructure the organization and remove one level. The standard for a majority of the organizations has been to have a three-level organization with one central/national, one regional and one local level. Thus, each national organization incorporates a number of regional or district organizations that each, in turn, cover a number of local organizations. However, *Medborgarskolan* decided in 2001 to change this structure and nowadays there is a central/national umbrella organization and nine regions. The regions have a number of local offices but they are not anymore the relatively autonomous organizations with their own board, etc. that they were before.

Some representatives argue that the decreased number of local organizations does not by default imply a decreased local presence but more concern an organizational and administrative restructuring. Nevertheless, the result is fewer autonomous local organizations with their own elected representatives. Local offices remain that representatives mean can provide activities for the individual citizen. However, some problematize this from a democratic standpoint. Fewer local organizations equal fewer local boards, i.e. fewer elected representatives in the organization. This is perceived as a potential problem since:

the boards get larger geographical territories to monitor. The price for making the administration more efficient and free people for activities is therefore an increased distance between FS⁸ as an organization and the local congregations. (FS 1992: 23, authors' translation)

This is said in a context when such organizational changes were pending and once this study association went through with rationalizations along these lines, it is addressed that they did in fact lead to such results (FS 1994: 21).

After this elaboration on processes of change among Swedish study associations we can return to the issue of *why* this has occurred. Improved cost-efficiency is the main argument raised, both in past and current annual reports as well as in interviews with study association representatives. According to representatives it is costly to have a large number of autonomous local organizations and thus maintain local boards and a larger administration than would be necessary with a leaner organizational machinery. Concepts like cost-efficiency, management, guarantee of quality, etc. also become increasingly prominent in annual reports from 1990 onwards and less exclusive focus is put on member organizations, ideological profiles, etc. even though these are still very much present. This indicates a more pronounced internal division or rift in the official rhetoric of the study associations today.

A reformulation of goals can be observed in several study associations. As managing demands for cost-efficiency has become more urgent, some organizations have chosen to let go of goals relating to their presence throughout the country. Organizations have been restructured and democratically run, autonomous, local organizations have been replaced with service producing offices. This has resulted in fewer elected representatives, thus restructuring the democratic build-up of the study associations. It demonstrates how parts of the original mission have become subordinate to day-to-day operations (cf. Daley et al 1996). Several study associations exhibit a development where greater efficiency has been sought and local democratic participation in the organization has paid the price. This can be seen as meeting demands for professionalization and efficiency at the expense of ideal-based goals. Thus, study associations still seek legitimacy by referring to their local embeddedness and democratic structure while strivings for increased efficiency seem to undermine this.

⁸ The abbreviation "FS" stands for *Frikyrkliga studieförbundet*, which can be roughly translated as the study association of the free churches. FS was the predecessor of Bilda.

The market, business and Swedish study associations

Study associations, as well as many organizations active in society today not only face various pressures from the state or from within the organization itself. Trends of professionalization and pressures to become more market-oriented are also claimed to influence Swedish civil society as such more and more (Wijkström & Einarsson 2006). Several Swedish study associations shun any claim that they are actors on a market. Instead they argue for their identity as “social organizations”, without the focus on profit perceived as inherent in the concept of a market actor. However, looking at the activities of these organizations a picture emerges that lead us to problematize this.

All study associations today engage in various activities that can be deemed market-, and potentially profit-, oriented. The incidence of for instance various contract educations have increased from 1990 onwards (Gov. bill 2005/06:192). The activities most clear-cut in line with the historic ambitions underlying the founding of these organizations are educational activities directed towards or undertaken in cooperation with member organizations. For the study associations, an important part of their *raison d'être* is that they should provide educational competence and assistance to the members of the popular movement in which they originated.

Leading representatives of the Swedish study associations wield a rhetoric aimed to legitimize the organizations as parts of Swedish civil society. Therefore, they also wish to distance themselves from any likeness to a company or firm. However, representatives address that this is a problematic balancing act to conduct.

...many larger organizations of our distinction strive for professionalization, which makes you more similar to companies both in the way of organizing and in the way you express yourself. But in this there arises an estrangement from *Folkrörelsesverige* [popular movement-Sweden], not all want that kind of development. Some think its good but most do not. The advantage of this connection we have [to civil society and member organizations] is that any possible surplus or profit generated shall be reinvested in that which creates benefits for the member organizations and their members. Our purpose is not to create a profit but something of value for the people who are members in these organizations. At the same time, some companies express themselves in similar ways...companies become more value-oriented and voluntary organizations become more like companies and start talking of profits instead of increased value and surplus. (Interview, Sensus, authors' translation)

...we try to develop into a professional organization, conduct ourselves professionally in relation to our tasks and sometimes this can of course clash with an ideal-based reality... it is two different cultures that meet. (Interview, Bilda, authors' translation)

On the one hand there is a wish to remain different from market actors like companies. On the other hand there are processes of professionalization, pushing the organizations in that very direction. The quotations demonstrate ambivalence towards this development and also the difficulties in separating actors often described as inhabiting different spheres in society. To varying degrees, all study associations are today engaged in commissions, contract educations and other forms of activities that they themselves do not define as popular education. Apart from more or less direct commissions, some study associations run private schools, preschools, etc. To stand on several legs as an organization can according to some respondents lead to problems and pose challenges to the organizational identity, which is also reflected in the quotations above.

To accept a position as a market actor does not come naturally for all study associations or their representatives. Most agree that they to some extent act in competition with other actors but more than one argue that the extent to which they meet private for-profit educational companies in competition is very limited. Some even aggressively assert that they in no way are actors on an educational market.

Medborgarskolan and *Folkuniversitetet* (FU) are quite sympathetic to the market and to being actors on such a market whereas a representative of SV wishes to distance the organization from any kind of market connection.

...this is *incredibly* important to us who work in popular education – we are *not* a part of the educational market! ... We do not *want* to be part of the educational market! (Interview, SV, authors' translation)

Representatives who wish to uphold this distinction argue that the study associations seldom meet for-profit educational companies in competition because they act on different markets. This argument rests on a belief in or the rhetoric use of the distinctiveness of *folkbildning* with a different view of the activities and the pedagogy. For these respondents, the other study associations are perceived as the main competitors – those are the other actors working the same market. We will also return to the relations between the study associations shortly. However, there are other respondents who have a broader understanding of what the competition looks like and include private companies, public education and universities.

The various commissions and contract educations that study associations are involved in today has led to an interesting development that took off in the beginning of the 1990s. Study associations have created companies, i.e. firms of the more classic market-organization type. Several study associations have or have had companies that, in one way or another, are connected to the organization. We will here not engage in a description of how these relationships are constructed in legal or economic terms but it is nevertheless interesting that these presumed civil society organizations choose to construct companies where they hold significant ownership. One can of course ask *why* this has occurred? It could be viewed as unorthodox for presumed civil society organizations to organize in such a manner, especially considering the demands from the state discussed previously. Representatives however use this development to argue for their identity as popular education- and civil society organizations. Creating a company is claimed to be a way to distinguish between popular education and more market-oriented activities. The quotation below demonstrates this as well as issues of potential competition with for-profit educational companies.

Well, not pure educational companies [are met in competition], I wouldn't say that because there you work on a partly completely different market... Of course it can happen, if a municipality for instance commission an education, that we can be one of those that compete alongside other companies. However, we try to isolate this by having an educational company so to say besides the popular education activities to also be clear that this is a divider. When we work with education, well, then we do so in the shape of a company but when it comes to popular education activities we act in the name of the voluntary organization. (Interview, SV, authors' translation)

Thus, the creation of companies is used strategically in the rhetoric to demonstrate the difference between popular education activities and more general, for-profit educational activities. It could also be viewed as a way of making sense of the situation the organizations find themselves in and the norms and myths they have to relate to, thus, rationalizing and justifying their “reality” and actions (cf. Weick 1993). This “divider” is used to show the uniqueness demanded by the state and hence may help the study associations remain legitimate while at the same time engaging in fund-generating activities. Thus, it can be understood as a strategy to achieve both legitimacy and efficiency.

... I believe we are part of civil society. Then we also do things on assignment in ABF where we are not part of civil society but of an educational society and we are very careful to keep a strict boundary between the two. (Interview, ABF, authors' translation)

When it comes to the activities of the companies framed within the study associations, the rhetoric is clearly inspired by a market “lingo”, which perhaps could be phrased as an

“operations language” infiltrating the “mission language” of the organization (cf. Daley et al 1996). When the development of ABL Konsult AB is described in annual reports from ABF it is done so in terms of “gaining market shares”. Successful development is measured in terms like “we are today the tenth largest educational organizer in the country” (ABF 1994: 14, authors’ translation). The year after it is stated that ABL Konsult AB:

has taken additional market shares and the turnover was 105 million kronor in total, a 59 % increase. This results in that we today are the fifth largest educational organizer in the country. (ABF 1995: 16, authors’ translation)

This illustrates how a market vocabulary has entered Swedish civil society and the rhetoric of Swedish study associations. The extent to which this market-inspired rhetoric is present varies between the study associations but it can be found in all. *Medborgarskolan*, for instance, has a quite “market-friendly” approach, which is evident both in annual reports and in interviews with representatives. Already during the first half of the 1990s there is much use of words like customers, product development, PR-instruments, the “business idea” of the organization, etc. Even the concept “knowledge company” (*kunskapsföretag*) is used to describe the organization. This approach and to, at least rhetorically, treat the organization as a business enterprise has not subsided. In the annual report of 2003 the following statement is found:

The most important, long-term, goals for Medborgarskolan’s marketing efforts is to strengthen the trademark “Medborgarskolan”, to identify the customers and increase the loyalty of the customers. (*Medborgarskolan* 2004: 8, authors’ translation)

This cannot by default be understood as an innocent linguistic change. On the contrary, it has been argued that influences like this, vocabulary and concepts from the market sphere, are far from innocent. Such changes are believed to have the capacity to alter the logic of civil society organizations since roles like member or participant, which involve ideal-based relations are replaced by ideas of customers, which indicate calculative relationships (Wijkström & Einarsson 2006). Thus, such changes may alter the rhetoric as well as the priorities and the way actors think of the activities undertaken within the study associations.

Similarities, differences and competition between the study associations

We have now been discussing issues of competition and how the study associations can be understood in relation to the market and for-profit educational companies. However, there is also the issue of how the study associations relate to each other. As has been noted several times, these organizations are supposed to form a group based on certain similarities while at the same time they are to be significantly different from each other. How are these relations then portrayed? Are the study associations competitors, partners or something else or in between? If they indeed were significantly different from each other, following distinct ideological profiles, the competition between them would be limited. On the other hand, since member organizations are a source of income we can also wonder whether the study associations compete for members as well as for individual participants.

Most representatives agree that there is competition between the study associations regarding activities aimed directly at individual citizens, i.e. activities offered on an “open market”. One representative however asserts that there is very limited competition, that each study association has a distinct niche. This assertion is made with reference to ideologically different profiles, which are claimed to rub off on the activities to such an extent that the study associations never really meet in the market, they do not compete for the same participants. The study associations are believed to supplement, as opposed to competing with, each other. Nevertheless, most agree that there indeed is competition regarding mainstream subjects. Hence, the vast majority of respondents speak of a competitive situation.

Some talk of the other study associations as the closest competitors. At the same time, the other study associations are also spoken of as partners and that they together are a stronger force in relation to for instance the state. Therefore, cooperation is discussed as important. Some are of the opinion that the quality of the cooperation has improved and that the study associations have grown closer to each other, a development ascribed to competition from other actors and external pressures on the organizations.

Our relationship [the relationship between the study associations] is very good today. This has developed as new actors have come in and created a kind of external threat, which has forced the study associations to cooperate more... we see ourselves as closer together and must do so to be effective against the other actors... The pressure from outside, external threats, always lead to increased solidarity. (Interview, *Folkuniversitetet*, authors' translation)

This quotation expresses that societal developments and new, common, challenges have fostered increased cooperation and a close-knit "family" of study associations. This can be rephrased in terms used in organizational theory where uncertainty and changes in the context are claimed to increase the likelihood for isomorphic processes. Thus, the study associations have gathered around the commonality of being a study association and of being organizations focused on *folkbildning* instead of focusing on internal differences, for instance their different ideological profiles. Certainly there is a measure of protectionism involved in safeguarding the market hitherto dedicated to these organizations.

So far in this section we have discussed issues concerning general notions of competition and cooperation among the study associations. Finally, we will explore potential competition between the study associations regarding activities performed in cooperation with or directed towards member organizations. As discussed previously, these activities are of varying, both ideological and financial, importance for the study associations. Even so, these activities are a basis for the state grants and are as such important. From an economic perspective it would therefore make sense for the study associations to compete for members. From an ideological perspective this competition is more questionable following connections to popular movements and the need to preserve, at least in rhetoric, a distinct ideological profile. How is competition concerning member organizations then discussed among study associations?

Moving in on organizations that are members in another study association is a sensitive issue according to the interviewees. There is more or less a consensus among the respondents that you simply do not do that. This illustrates that activities directed at member organizations and especially the binding of members to a study association is beyond or besides the acceptable area of competition within the family of study associations. We can thus here speak of a cartel, which is also a word used by more than one representative. The study associations have divided this part of the market between themselves and changes could thus be illegitimate or subject for negotiations.

We have divided it [the market] concerning our member organizations. We do not go in and work organizations that are members in another study association. (Interview, ABF, authors' translation)

It is an unspoken rule [not to work members in another study association]. But at the same time it is complex since one cannot lock "popular movement Sweden" to the way it was divided in 1900 – it is kind of like that is the way it is supposed to be divided until the end of time. I believe there has to be a movement in popular movement Sweden where an organization all of a sudden may want to choose a different study association. (Interview, Bilda, authors' translation)

Even though "getting involved with" other study associations' members is perceived as taboo, many respondents assert that this nevertheless happens at the local level. How this should be viewed is not clear and there is no consensus among respondents. Some regard it as "accidents happen" but that it should be avoided whereas others are of the opinion that it is far

from self-evident that this competition should be impeded and that the competition between the study associations should be freer, also regarding member organizations.

The last of the quotations above also indicate a belief that there is a preserving aspect in the cartel the study associations make up that may not be best suited for the challenges of today. Some believe it to be too static and not make room for the dynamic character of civil society. The way this is discussed and the different standpoints taken by representatives of various study associations also reflect different strategies used to argue for what may be best for a particular study association both regarding legitimacy and efficiency.

Conclusions

The investigation of different aspects of challenges facing Swedish study associations today has illustrated both the balancing acts necessary and strategies used to walk the tightrope. It is evident that these organizations consider and are affected by a variety of demands and pressures, both external and internal. It is also clear that changes have occurred during the last two decades that have significantly affected the situation for the study associations and, following this, also the strategies, formulations and rhetoric available to them.

We have illustrated coercive isomorphic pressures coming from the state in the form of both identified target groups to which the study associations experience a need to relate to secure future state-funding as well as pressures to conform to the dominant organizational form, i.e. the democratic federation based on member organizations. However, one can wonder to what extent this isomorphic pressure originates solely in the state. The remaining “family members” in the group of study associations may also influence newcomers in this direction so as not to challenge the existing structure that is perceived to be working for most in relation to different stakeholders. This can also relate to mimetic isomorphic processes in that it does not necessarily concern coercive institutional demands but also a wish to fit in with other actors that are perceived to have established themselves successfully. Thus, a new organization like Ibn Rushd may wish to reduce uncertainty and ease the transition into the identity of an independent study association by adhering to dominant myths and norms and also to gain legitimacy by imitating already well-established actors.

The notion of the democratic federation and the importance of member organizations and historic connections to popular movements play a significant role for study associations also today. This concerns safeguarding the organizational identity and hang-on to what has previously been and still is the most self-evident road to legitimacy, at least concerning the ideal-based civil society identity. The connections to popular movements and member organizations are used as cultural resources. They are wielded in discursive strategies in attempts to argue both for similarities among the study associations in being something different than commercial and state actors as well as to argue for the ideological profiles that separate the study associations from each other. Both these demands are important since they are requisites for access to the state grants as well as for remaining legitimate in the eyes of the civil society organizations that are their members. The latter is not least important since it can be understood as the basis for why there should be more than *one* study association.

Apart from being a cultural resource the organizations can use, the idea of the democratic federation and connections to popular movements is necessary to relate to since the stakeholders in the organizations expect this organizational form. Thus, this can be viewed as a myth concerning how a study association should be organized in Sweden. This makes it important to uphold the image of this organizational form as well as norms concerning the “pure” civil society identity of these organizations. However, as has been demonstrated above, financial strains and professionalization trends as well as strivings for increased efficiency can lead to a diluting of its importance in the practical reality of study associations today, or rather that study associations now have to relate to other myths concerning for

instance precisely efficiency. At the same time, the expectations, not least from the state, concerning how the study associations should be organized explain why it is not possible for the organizations to accept such myths openly. It should also be recognized that stimuli for isomorphic processes appear not only to be related to relations with the state. Commercialization, increased competition and new, for-profit, actors are perceived as external threats, which has led to tighter relations between the study associations. They have, in a sense, closed ranks and focused on their common traits instead of internal differences.

Our study has, for instance, demonstrated how strivings for efficiency have led to decreased democratic participation in several study associations through organizational restructuring and a decreasing amount of elected representatives at the local level. We have also shown how study associations have reformulated goals and altered their discursive strategies to allow the organization to expand and house members that do not fit the original blueprint of what a “natural member” would be. This is a strategy used to allow for expansion while attempting not to lose the legitimacy based in historical and ideological connections. Thus, arguments concerning the historical legacies, the rather unchanged nature of the organization and the democratic federative structure can be understood as a symptom of *decoupling* where the practical work has drifted towards greater inclusion of market- and for-profit activities and even the creation of companies under the umbrella of the study association while the rhetoric still claim adherence to “old” values and forms. This is, for instance, quite obvious in the way representatives discuss issues relating to the potential presence on a commercial market, which has been elaborated on above. Here, decoupling concerns *distancing* the organization from new fashions with a focus on efficiency, etc. and the way to legitimacy is to claim *not* to follow these new trends.

Our study has further demonstrated how market logics and rhetoric have affected the development of the large civil society organizations studied and how these organizations attempt to handle the different and contradictory institutional pressures they face. The study illustrates how a different institutional logic has found its way into Swedish civil society. Under the disguise of being true to their popular movement heritage, the study associations seem to import concepts, strategic management and organizational solutions connected to commercialization and professionalization. To remain legitimate, several of the organizations however apparently believe it necessary to officially distance themselves from such a development. This begs the questions of how true the public image of civil society organizations is, to what extent the boundaries between different institutional logics have been erased and what this means for the expected contributions of civil society organizations? These are all questions warranting further research.

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Asbai, Temmam, Chairman, Ibn Rushd
Baggström, Ruben, Chairman, NBV
Bernerstedt, Mats, Director, Sensus
Bjuggren, Björn, Director, Studieförbundet
Brändström, Dan, Chairman, Folkuniversitetet
Carlsson, Leif, Chairman, Medborgarskolan
Danielsson, Berit, Chairman, SV
Degerlund, Stefan, Director, NBV
Ekdahl, Mikael, Chairman, Sensus
Enlund, Kerstin, Director, Bilda
Gradin, Anders, Director, SV
Kindblom, Leif, Chairman, Studieförbundet
Nihlgård, Martin, Director, Ibn Rushd
Nilsson, Annika, Director, ABF
Thorwaldsson, Karl-Petter, Chairman, ABF
Wlodarczyk, Michel, Secretary-general, Folkuniversitetet
Öhrn, Per Olof, Chairman, Bilda
Östh, Carl Johan, Director, Medborgarskolan