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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

CASE STUDY:

HVE-flex: a validation fast-track initiative
for obtaining higher vocational education
qualifications (Sweden)

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Abstract

HVE-flex is a Swedish fast-track initiative targeting professionals looking to validate competences corresponding to Higher Vocational Education (HVE)- (in Swedish: *yrkeshögskola*) programmes (qualifications at EQF levels 5 and 6). The initiative combines a structured approach to validation with complementary training suited to users' skills needs based on their individual learning pathways. The fast-track initiative enables already active professionals to acquire a formal HVE diploma more quickly than by following the regular HVE programme.

The HVE-flex is implemented as an integrated part of regular HVE provision and is governed by Law 2009:128 on HVE and Ordinance 2009:130 on HVE (in Swedish: *Lag (2009:128) om yrkeshögskolan and Förordning (2009:130) om yrkeshögskolan*)¹. HVE providers benefit from State grants to implement the fast-track initiative: a fixed grant for the validation component and a variable grant based on the amount of complementary education provided. This approach has been helpful in changing providers' mindsets who previously often saw validation as a difficult and costly activity.

HVE-flex was developed through a pilot initiative in 2019-2022 and is now a permanent feature of HVE provision. Applications for HVE-flex grants among providers increased in 2023, which shows their interest in the initiative.

1 Introduction

HVE-flex is a fast-track initiative implemented as part of regular HVE programmes corresponding to qualifications at EQF levels 5-6. The programme mainly targets already active professionals who wish to have their informally acquired competences (*'reell kompetens'* in Swedish formally recognised). HVE-flex allows for additional study places to be offered in already existing HVE programmes. This fast-track initiative fulfils one of the initial objectives of HVE provision in Sweden: to be aligned with *the needs and reality* of the labour market where professionals informally acquire competences.

Validation in HVE has aimed to support people in joining formal education programmes to obtain exemptions from courses or parts of courses. However, after review, Sweden's National Agency for Higher Vocational Education found that the use of validation has been limited and often seen as too costly compared to regular HVE provision. In addition, HVE programmes do not accommodate flexible study paths. Therefore, HVE-flex was developed in 2019 to address these issues.

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education piloted the HVE-flex initiative in 2020-2022. The Swedish Government allocated an annual budget of EUR 3 million (35 million SEK) for the HVE-flex pilot, which includes almost EUR 500,000 (6 million SEK) in student grants. The pilot initiative's participation target was of around 500 students per year, with a total of 1,539 study places available over the three years (2020-2022). In total, the pilot provided 811 study places across 78 HVE programmes.

The aim of pilot phase of HVE-flex was to:

- test and develop methodologies and models for planning and implementing individualised learning pathways based on validation and exemptions); as

¹ Länkar: [Lag \(2009:128\) om yrkeshögskolan | Sveriges riksdag \(riksdagen.se\)](#) [Förordning \(2009:130\) om yrkeshögskolan | Sveriges riksdag \(riksdagen.se\)](#)

- build the capacity of HVE providers to offer programmes a focus on validation enabling flexible learning pathway.

The pilot was continuously evaluated to refine the methods and an adequate state grant model, adapted for HVE-flex provision.

The social restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic gave the HVE-flex programme a visibility boost since many professionals needed to reskill or upskill and looked for flexible solutions. **Validation was crucial to fulfil the primary objective of HVE-flex in providing quick and flexible education pathways.**

In Autumn 2022, Sweden's National Agency for Higher Vocational Education made HVE-flex a permanent feature of HVE provision. In April 2023, the Agency reported to the Swedish Government on the lessons learnt from the pilot phase. The conclusions were that HVE-flex:

- successfully reaches other groups than those that usually attend HVE in Sweden: compared to regular HVE students, HVE-flex students tend to be older and have more skills and competences acquired from professional experience.
- enables the students to acquire formal education certificates more quickly than via a regular HVE programme thanks to more flexible education pathways and to validation.
- makes more efficient use of the state grant allocated to HVE.

In Sweden, trust in validation varies among different sectors or industries based on their degree of exposure to it. However, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education believes that interest and understanding of validation is growing among the industries. HVE programmes are implemented in cooperation with industries in Sweden: industry representatives act as course facilitators and ensure that the programmes are aligned with the needs of the labour market.

It is hoped that in future the fast-track initiative will be instrumental in rolling out the transition support scheme (*omställningsstudiestöd* in Swedish): introduced soon after HVE-flex, it provides financial support for professionals looking to reskill or upskill equivalent to 80 % of their current salary (with a set maximum amount) for 44 weeks of active studies.

2 Basis for the validation arrangement

HVE programmes in Sweden have formally always offered exemptions based on prior learning and the legislation stipulates HVE provision should be based on individuals' previous competences and adjusted to their respective learning needs, with validation mentioned as a key component². The importance of validation has been further emphasised with a new regulation on validation implemented in 2023. The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education found that an enabling environment for validation requires providers to have the competences required to provide it and that its use should be easy and beneficial for all³.

² 'Regeringens proposition 2008/09:68 – Yrkeshögskolan' and 'Förordning (2009:130) om yrkeshögskolan' referenced in the HVE-flex report to the government, prepared by the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education: [atterapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf](https://www.myh.se/terrapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf) (myh.se)

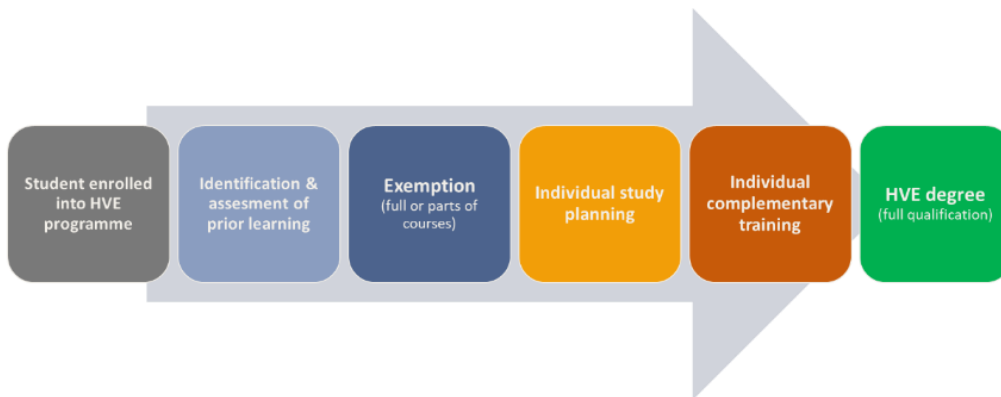
³ 4 Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan (2019). Tillgodoräknande inom yrkeshögskolan. Dnr: MYH 2019/1384 referenced in the HVE-flex report to the government, prepared by the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education: [atterapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf](https://www.myh.se/terrapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf) (myh.se)

3 Approach

The HVE-flex approach can be described as two-fold, it starts with a validation process followed by an individual learning plan with courses complementing an individual's validated competences with the learning outcomes of the corresponding HVE programme.

The validation process includes a set of steps, starting with a mapping of competences followed by corresponding assessments based on the learning objectives of the HVE programme. Competence assessment results serve to justify exemptions from courses or parts of courses in the existing HVE programme. An individual learning plan is then developed whereby the individuals are guided to the complementary courses they need to obtain the HVE degree. Figure 3.1 illustrates the process.

Figure 3.1 HVE-flex process flow



Source: Dnr: MYH 2020/3001, National Agency for Higher Vocational Education provided a translated version of the image.

3.1 Stakeholders and practitioners

HVE-flex is implemented by existing HVE providers under the supervision of the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. Like other Swedish validation initiatives, it is the education providers, more specifically, teachers and practitioners, who conduct the validation process (i.e., mapping and assessment of competences) as it is based on course curricula and learning outcomes. The Managing Board of the HVE programme issues exemption decisions based on the validation outcomes. Providers are responsible for awarding the associated grades.

The State grants approximately EUR 850 (10,000 SEK) to HVE providers for each HVE-flex validation process completed by a student. The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education found that incentivising providers is critical to boost the offer of validation and sees the State grants are It is one of the success factors of HVE-flex along with its offer of personalised complementary courses for students.

In addition, providers get a 15 % top up to their State grant for each HVE credit obtained from the complementary courses. The aim is to ensure a more sustainable and functional approach to validation, exemptions, and flexible education provision within HVE programmes.

3.2 Methodology

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education has developed an HVE-flex manual for the providers. Given that HVE-flex started out as a pilot initiative, the approach has been rather explorative, and focus has been on the progressive

development of methodologies and models. This manual is therefore regularly updated.

Prior learning is assessed against the learning outcomes for each course. The HVE Ordinance stipulates that exemptions can be based on:

- Previous formal learning that overall matches the actual HVE programme – here the validation process is usually administrative, in the sense of reviewing documentation.
- Competences, skills and knowledge developed through professional experiences or other non-formal or informal learning – this validation process is more complicated since it often involves the mapping and assessment of competences.

3.2.1 Preparation phase

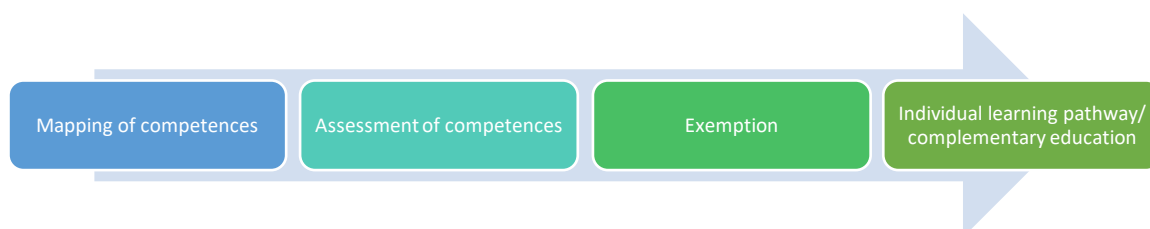
The validation practitioner is responsible for creating an assessment template based on the corresponding courses in the HVE programme with a clear overview of the process (mapping, assessment, and recognition) and a list of critical tasks to be completed by the student. Then, the validation practitioner decides on the suitable assessment methods that should in all cases be flexible and fit for purpose. Students are continuously informed about these processes in the preparation phase.

3.2.2 Validation phase

The validation practitioner starts by a broad mapping of the student's competences (educational attainment, professional experiences and other types of relevant experience) and then compare them against the requirements, curricula and learning outcomes of the corresponding HVE programme. At the end of the process, exemptions are granted as evidence of recognition of the individual's competences and a grade is awarded by the provider.

The HVE provider needs to provide documentary evidence in each of the steps of the validation process for systematic quality assurance. This process is illustrated in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2 Validation process (author's own translation from original figure in Swedish)



Source: 'Handbok för YH-flex – eller allt du behöver veta om försöksverksamheten' (2022) Version 4.

As part of the evaluation of the HVE-flex pilot, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education surveyed the HVE providers taking part in it. A total of 24 responded to the survey which sought to understand how they had implemented HVE-flex, and what type of validation methods that they had applied in this regard.

Table 3.1 Overview of replies linked to the question: which methods have you used for validation and recognition?

Method	Mapping of competences	Assessment of competences	Not used this method	Number of respondents
Self-assessments and reports	86.4%	50.0%	13.6%	22
Test with fixed answers/multiple choice questions (oral and/or written)	9.1%	18.2%	77.3%	22
Written tests and essays/essays	13.0%	30.4%	60.9%	23
Dialogue, conversations and interviews	82.6%	73.9%	8.7%	23
Observation of demonstration/simulation/role-playing at work (in control environments)	9.1%	9.1%	86.4%	22
Observation of work task/demonstration performance (in authentic environment)	4.5%	22.7%	72.7%	22
Portfolio (assessment of work samples and the like presented in a portfolio or merit portfolio)	28.6%	38.1%	61.9%	21
Review and assess documents (e.g. grades or employer certificates)	78.3%	82.6%	8.7%	23

Source: Copied and translated from the internal document Dnr: MYH 2020/3001 Uppföljning genomförande YH-flex 2022' by the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education MYH..

These results not only show that HVE providers used many different methods for mapping or assessing competences, but also that they are given the freedom to define the most suitable validation methods depending on the type of HVE programme.

3.2.3 Support to HVE providers

In addition to the manual mentioned earlier, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education provides online support to HVE providers taking part in HVE-flex with a dedicated Microsoft Teams channel to facilitate exchanges and feedback. The Agency has also hosted 'open house' webinars to address the questions and concerns of the providers.

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education concluded having a functioning support structure for HVE providers. It also allows them to develop their own 'learning by doing approaches, which is also proving to influence the provision of regular HVE.

3.2.4 Monitoring and Quality Assurance

The same requirements for monitoring and quality assurance apply to HVE-flex and to regular HVE programmes. Quality indicators for validation measures are embedded in the HVE quality assurance framework and self-assessment reports. The Managing Boards of HVE programmes have responsibility for internal quality

assurance while the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is responsible for conducting audits and external quality assurance.

3.3 Outcomes

At present, the number of HVE-flex graduates remains small low that the initiative is still recent. Monitoring data on HVE-flex outcomes is not yet included in overall HVE statistics (whereby around 90 % of the Swedish HVE graduates are in relevant employment one year after graduation)⁴. There are currently no statistics on the total graduation or employment rates among HVE-flex students. However, a survey of HVE-flex students and graduates conducted in 2023⁵ revealed that among the 89 respondents taking part:

- 85.4 % were working when they applied for the HVE-flex programme;
- 84.3 % agreed that the process enabled them to prove and validate their 'real competences';
- 92 % agreed that HVE-flex provided them with a more flexible path towards obtaining their HVE diploma.

4 Results

The National Agency of Higher Vocational Education reported to the Swedish Government on the results of the HVE-flex pilot. The results showed that most HVE-flex students were able to validate significant parts of the HVE programmes. On average, an HVE-flex student validated 47% of the programme, which is a higher share compared to exemptions obtained in regular HVE provision. Table 4.1 shows that 19 % of the HVE-flex students validated 75-100 % of the courses included in a HVE programme between 2020 and 2022.

Table 4.1 Share of HVE programmes validated via HVE-flex (for which students are then exempted from)

	2020	2021	2022	2020-2022
0 (nothing exempted)	4 %	10 %	17 %	13 %
1–24 %	20 %	18 %	15 %	17 %
25–49 %	8 %	31 %	25 %	24 %
50–74 %	24 %	27 %	29 %	28 %
75 % or more	44 %	14 %	14 %	19 %
Total	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Total number of students	126	291	394	811

Source: Copied and translated from the *RAPPORT 2023 :Återrapportering av regeringsuppdrag för en snabbare och mer flexibel väg till en yrkeshögskoleexamen, YH-flex'* (2023). Available at: *aterrapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf* (myh.se)

The validation and the flexible provision of complementary training have enabled most HVE-flex students to graduate earlier than if they had done so through regular HVE provision: this was the case for 174 of the 217 HVE-flex graduates (80%). Only a small share of students was unable to complete the HVE-flex programme but did have their validation outcomes documented.

⁴ 'Statistik: Program (YH-utbildningar från 100 poäng)' by the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education

⁵ Dnr: MYH 2020/3001

In an external review (Dnr: MYH 2020/3001) of HVE-flex (interviews), all the interviewed providers were positive about the initiative and many of the students found the validation component to boost their confidence to showcase their competences. The review also highlighted that HVE-flex students often applied to the initiative because they wanted to progress in their professional careers but could only study while working. The students also highlighted that motivation, self-discipline and academic experience are important factors to successfully graduate via HVE-flex.

4.1 Strengths

The main strength of HVE-flex is that it has been implemented within the framework of regular formal HVE programmes, providing the students with a guaranteed opportunity to validate their competences. Attending shorter courses in the context of HVE-flex also translates into financial savings, which means that HVE-flex provision may be more cost-effective than regular HVE provision (a 43 % saving of the State grant allocated to HVE was reported according to the National Agency of Higher Vocational Education report to the Swedish Government⁶). The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education stated that HVE-flex has significantly incentivised HVE providers to offer validation and exemptions. The HVE providers that took part in the pilot initiative were also able to build capacity for validation.

4.2 Weaknesses/ Barriers

Some of the main challenges were related to designing individualised learning paths and associated complementary courses, planning access to HVE-flex study places, delivering validation services as well as decisions on exemptions. Some of the more practical aspects such as adjusting schedules and adapting the existing (digital) learning platform to HVE-flex students have also been challenging for the providers. The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education discovered that certain participating HVE providers did not utilise their approved HVE-flex study places due to two primary reasons. Firstly, some providers encountered challenges in swiftly adjusting to the social restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, some providers encountered difficulty in reaching the intended demographic of students—professionals already engaged in the labour market. Additionally, some companies were hesitant to release their staff for training purposes.

5 Lessons learnt

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education highlighted the transformative impact of HVE-flex on the traditional delivery of HVE programmes in Sweden. In their report to the Swedish Government⁷, the Agency emphasised the necessity of addressing associated challenges through a proposed pilot programme. This pilot would integrate preparatory courses with HVE programmes to validate and exempt prior learning.

Additionally, the Agency identified several areas requiring ongoing development to foster an enabling environment for HVE-flex. These include expanding the number of available study places, enhancing the planning and implementation of validation components, and effectively complementing individualised training. The process of

⁶ [aterrapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf \(myh.se\)](https://www.myh.se/aterrapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf)

⁷ [aterrapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf \(myh.se\)](https://www.myh.se/aterrapportering-av-regeringsuppdrag-for-en-snabbare-och-mer-flexibel-vag-till-en-yrkeshogskoleexamen-yh-flex.pdf)

exemptions for HVE-flex students, as decided by Managing Boards, also needs careful consideration and standardization.

Recognising the need for student support, HVE providers acknowledged the importance of assigning dedicated personnel, such as supervisors, mentors, or tutors, to guide and assist HVE-flex students throughout their educational journey.

The Agency noted that HVE providers accustomed to distance learning found it comparatively easier to transition to HVE-flex and complementary education due to existing similarities in approach and the availability of substantial recorded materials and online tools.

Moreover, reflections on HVE-flex outcomes have spurred broader discussions regarding curriculum development, designing learning outcomes, and the adaptability of these outcomes to accommodate more individualised learning paths.

6 Conclusions

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education identified a rising demand for solutions akin to HVE-flex in Sweden, particularly concerning the transitional support required for professionals already engaged in the labour market. The Agency outlined three primary conclusions drawn from their assessment of HVE-flex:

- Much of the success of HVE-flex can be attributed to its **incorporation into the regular provision of HVE programmes** (same legislation, learning outcomes, providers etc.);
- **The adapted State grant** model, which includes a fixed cost for validation and further additional funding based on the credits achieved in complementary training, incentivised providers to engage in validation processes and offer complementary training facilitating the development of flexible personalised learning pathways.
- **The programme encompasses both validation and complementary education** through personalised learning paths, thus facilitating HVE-flex students to graduate faster than in a regular HVE setting.

In 2023, there was an increase in applications to offer HVE-flex, showcasing a heightened interest among HVE providers in validation and other flexible learning solutions.

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