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# INDIVIDUALISED JOB COACHING AT FOLKUNIVERSITETET SWEDEN

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## **Folkuniversitetet**

Folkuniversitetet is an adult education association that offers a wide range of adult education throughout Sweden and in several European countries. The organisation consists of five regional offices attached to the Universities of Stockholm, Uppsala, Göteborg, Lund and Umeå. Each region has a board of directors appointed by the local university.

A large part of the training offered by Folkuniversitetet targets people who need to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills to apply in professional and/or labour market contexts. The aims, contents and methodology of Folkuniversitetet's training and development activities are always adapted to individual needs. Government services, public authorities and the business sector turn to Folkuniversitetet for assistance with specialized training courses.

## **Job coaching at Folkuniversitetet**

A recent trend in Swedish employment market programmes is job coaching. On behalf of labour bureaus all over Sweden Folkuniversitetet runs job coaching programmes for the unemployed. Most programmes address all vocational and professional categories in general, while others will target specific groups like artists or immigrant academics. One current project (ISA) running at Folkuniversitetet in Göteborg has received EFS-funding and a number of regional and local programmes are financed by the Swedish state (SAGA).

The coaching programmes run for a period of ten to twenty weeks and have the following, chief aims

- To lead directly to employment  
or, where that is not realistic,
- To lead to work placement or a traineeship or to identify and initiate any necessary further training or courses of studies
- To support clients in building up a network of contacts
- To enable individuals to hold their own in a changing, less secure and less predictable employment market. This often means coaching clients to help them shift their perception of themselves from one of being dependent on decisions and measures taken by others, to one which empowers them to see themselves in the the role of an active entrepreneur who takes on responsibility for his/her own future career.

For a number of years now, Folkuniversitetet's speciality has been the offer of a structured, yet flexible, coaching process supported by an electronic tool, placed in a VLE.

Folkuniversitetet's coaching programmes adopt a blend of working modes: f2f group meetings with or without a coach, one-to-one coaching dialogues f2f or via electronic communication, virtual meetings, workplace practice with distance coach support, etc. The VLE is the meeting point and pool of resources for clients and coaches alike, and links all activities. Clients are equipped with personal laptops during the entire programme to ensure constant access to and contact with the coaches and the group.

## **An electronic tool for structure and flexibility**

The tool was designed in response to two major needs experienced by coaches, clients and employment centres:

1. The need to identify and make visible clients' potential, to the clients themselves as well as to employment centre staff and (potential) employers.
2. The challenge of helping clients persevere throughout the whole process, leading them from a perception that they have poor job prospects to insights about their own potential to clarify and define perspectives and identify viable, specific actions and strategies which will help them in their search for employment.

Folkuniversitetet refers to the tool as 'metodstöd' which may be translated as 'coaching method aid', rather than 'e-portfolio' in a strict sense. The approach reflects in many ways elements of the classical portfolio.

### ***1. Management and monitoring of the client's development process***

The tool contains a number of content modules with interactive questionnaires, reflection tasks, practical tasks, discussion tasks as well as information and links for further reading.

Individual clients are guided through the modules and tackle specific tasks in order to enable them to

- become aware of their own current strengths and weaknesses at the time, taking into account both formal qualifications and informally acquired skills and knowledge
- analyse the job market that is currently open to them
- widen their perspectives, realise opportunities and become aware of their development potential
- set up a plan of action
- take concrete measures to enhance their chances, e.g. by taking further training, preparing a showcase, planning a personal marketing strategy
- approach employers
- follow up actions and results

The process involves clients in guided self-reflections and dialogues with their coach(es) and fellow clients. They verbalise their reflections and results and document them in written form in their personal (portfolio) area within the tool, as a record of their individual development.

The coaching process is at the same time collaborative and self-directed. This generates the desired side-effect that clients become competent in some of the 'new literacies', i.e. they develop their digital, social, critical and linguistic abilities.

### ***2. Showcase***

Work samples are selected and presented in a professional and individual way and compiled on a CD or website or the personal area within the tool. Folkuniversitetet provides the technology and the training required for the clients to produce the desired electronic content. The coaches encourage and guide the clients in the selection and presentation of the material.

The showcase makes visible the client's abilities both to him-/herself and potential employers.

### ***3. Basis for dialogue***

The tool documents an individual's development and thus provides a basis for an on-going dialogue between coaches and the client. The documentation of reflective activities, coaching dialogues, agreements and action plans serve as a 'contract' or incentive to persevere.

The basic structure of the VLE foresees a situation where each individual client has access to several coaches and/or specialist trainers at a time. A 'coach pool' serves as a meeting area for

coaches/trainers. Clients meet their coaches in ‘private rooms’. A recent development of the platform, however, enables clients to set up rooms of their own, and invite other users of the platform in, e.g. for peer exchange. Also, clients can choose to give external persons access to parts of their portfolios.

### **Development over the past few years:**

The coaching process, the tool and the VLE are continually being developed in order to meet new requirements and adapt to ever changing situations and client groups. From the outset up to the time present, the following needs have been identified, and corresponding, major changes have been made, step by step:

- A need for a structured process and making visible of clients’ potential was met by the design of an electronic coaching tool (Aventus/Flexus).
- A need for increased individual flexibility has led to improved authoring and administration facilities allowing for quick adjustments of the tool.
- A demand for customisation for shifting target groups resulted in specialised coaching processes for various categories of unemployed, e.g. artists.
- When the involvement of other (external) players had to be facilitated a new VLE was set up, based on open source technology (Plone).
- A demand for training courses, such as health coaching, business studies, Swedish for unemployed migrant academics, has resulted in the development of tailor-made courses within the VLE as well as the integration of existing courses in other VLEs.

### **New challenges and work in progress**

Clients’ testimonies as well as facts and figures bear witness to the success of Folkuniversitetet’s job coaching. Clients experience personal empowerment with respect to their situation and become aware of their ability and the possibility to influence it. Within six months of completing the coaching programme a large number of participants have found new jobs or have started work as freelancers.

The main challenges for the near future, as perceived by Folkuniversitetet’s coach coordinators, are:

#### ***Involving all players in the game***

The pathways from unemployment to employment involve a number of players: The coaching client him-/herself, labour bureau staff, prospective/potential employers and in Folkuniversitetet’s case the job coaches. Ultimately, the success of the programme depends on how smoothly and efficiently communication and cooperation progresses between them all. Using the electronic tool as an interface between players seems to promise considerable improvement. Multi-channel and multi-modal exchange between all players (coach to client, client to client, labour bureau clerk to coach/client, potential employer to client, etc.) should simplify and speed up processes.

#### ***Labour bureaus***

Labour bureaus are required to set up and follow up individual plans of action with their clients. These plans are to include feasible labour market measures, such as traineeships and further training or studies. In parts these are consistent with the plans of action coaching clients compile during Folkuniversitetet’s coaching process and which are documented in their portfolios. Action plans developed during the coaching process are much more elaborate and realistic, being products of long individual processes. Labour bureau staff appreciate this and readily build on them. The technical issue that is being looked at is how labour bureau staff can easily access selected parts of the clients’ documentation. In what way could and should they be interacting partners on the platform?

### *Matching employers' demands and coaching clients' resources*

- Work placement: Companies often experience need for extra, temporary staff. They will have a clear picture of the job and the person they are looking for. The electronic tool could help them to match their needs with coaching clients' / prospective trainees' profiles.
- Project employment: it is far more interesting for Folkuniversitetet's coaching clients to have an opportunity of project employment. Although project work normally will be time-limited, too, it is 'employment' rather than a 'labour market measure' and it allows the project employee to use and prove his/her specific professional expertise. The chances of obtaining a regular position are considered higher for project employees than for trainees in work placement. The challenge for Folkuniversitetet's job coaching departments lies in approaching companies and guiding them in identifying areas where external competence would be beneficial for their development and, in a second step, defining the competencies required. Again, the electronic tool is a valuable help to find the best person for the job.
- Permanent positions: Employers seeking to fill permanent positions may find the showcase function of the tool interesting, as it allows them to view samples of work produced by a potential future employee.

New questions that arise are: How can employers access the electronic tool? Which areas should/could be open and who grants access to clients' details and work? How can employers be attracted to the site in the first place? What kind of interaction - technical and/or human - should take place via the platform? What new technical requirements will have to be met?

### *European standards*

When Folkuniversitetet's job coaching started, both the labour market and the individuals' perspectives were rather Sweden-bound. Since then we have experienced a change, and a strong interest in the European perspective has emerged both with labour market authorities and individuals. European standards such as Europass or the Common European Framework for languages (CEFR) are gaining ground and ways of aligning the coaching tool with those are being explored.

### *Continued training of Folkuniversitetet's staff*

The VLE and the electronic coaching tool have developed rapidly and have become more and more flexible. This has created a demand for extensive initial training and constant up-dating of coaches. How is this best accomplished alongside a heavy workload and coaches' irregular schedules?

Future training of coaches will comprise of initial pre-service training, on-the-job follow-up modules, semi-formal training and development opportunities using the platform functionalities, as well as regular f2f meetings with distinct pedagogical and technical objectives.

### *The optimal balance*

Experience has shown that the electronic tool is not used to the same extent in all programmes and by all coaches. What is the optimal balance of structure and flexibility? How obligatory is the use of the tool? How should responsible coach coordinators react if a client strongly rejects the tool and a coach feels that an individual would benefit from a completely flexible and individualised process? Can the quality of the coaching process be safe-guarded without the structure, communication and documentation provided through the tool? Is the reason for not using the tool to be found with individual coaches' attitudes rather than their clients'? Can improved coach training bring about change in attitudes?

### *Active ownership*

Given the present labour market climate, employees cannot expect to remain in the same type of employment all their working lives. During the coaching process they are trained to adopt an entrepreneurial attitude and acquire an entrepreneur's skills. The objective is to ensure that they will be able to keep these up and employ them in their future working life and, we believe that their

portfolios will support them in this. This calls for perceived and actual active ownership where today's coaching clients take along their portfolios when they move on to jobs or courses of studies and continue to maintain them. For Folkuniversitetet's coaches and technicians this raises new questions about technical requirements. Where will portfolios be hosted after the end of the programme? What are the (technical) standards portfolios need to conform to? How can individuals access and edit them in the future?

### **Folkuniversitetet as a learning organisation**

After years of experience from working with the electronic tool we can observe the mutual influence of 'traditional' training and teaching and digitally aided training. Folkuniversitetet's 'traditional' values and view of adult learning laid the basis for the characteristic coaching process that is both collaborative and individual-driven. The development of distance training concepts and electronically aided learning processes offer a new range of pedagogical tools and resources to all areas of Folkuniversitetet's activities. The demands on organisation and staff development posed by the new working modes require 'lifelong learning' within the organisation and by the organisation itself, thus creating ways of working which will provide added value.