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Upper-secondary education as a market - the expansion of independent schools in Sweden

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The development and expansion of market solutions is one of the most important changes of Swedish education in the last 30 years. The aim of the research project "Upper-secondary school as a market" is to analyse the occurrence of different forms of market solutions and market steering, the strategies from involved actors, and the impact on work in upper-secondary education. Municipalities and schools in two specific regions in the South West and North of Sweden are studied more extensively, and an in-depth investigation of local decision-makers, school staff and pupils in a small numbers of the schools is conducted. Furthermore, the market discourse and market actors at the national level as well as in the two regions are surveyed and analysed. This paper discusses some findings from the first part of the project, focussing the expansion of the upper-secondary school market in Sweden. The aim is to survey and analyse a) the largest school companies/market actors at the national educating market and b) map some reactions from media and elsewhere upon the expansion. The research is based on statistical data, information/marketing texts, articles in newspapers, as well as conversations with persons involved.

The overall picture of the school market is one of quick changes. Since the system of tax-funded independent schools was introduced in Sweden in the early 1990s the amount of such schools has grown immensely. At the same time some "heavy" profit maximising school companies have emerged and become even heavier. As a consequence of this and other changes in the direction of quasi-markets, schools are supposed to compete, and during the last few years the battle over pupils has hardened. Different strategies are used; e.g. offering free computers, sport profiles, grades, journeys, "famous" teachers etcetera. In the common media discourse the school market is mainly discussed in terms of money, shares and profits rather than in terms of pedagogy or pupils' citizenships. The profit making and its negative consequences for society as a whole have been debated and there have also been complaints that public and independent schools do not compete on equal terms. Demands on strengthened rules and harder control have come from e.g. teachers unions and politicians.