In this thesis the vocational orientation of the courses offered – as an expression of the folk high school’s self-identity – is analysed. The point of departure was that what the folk high school do, is a way to show what it wants to be and, therefore, reflects what it is. Focus is on how the folk high school meets with contemporary tasks and demands in different areas of society. The research objects are, the folk high school as type of school (a total of 147 schools) and a sample of ten individual schools with different ownership. The study is about what the offered courses reveal about the folk high school’s reflections and conclusions as regards its future activities in relation to its history and contemporary society.

The theoretical framework of the thesis is built on the sociologist Anthony Giddens’ Theory of Structuration and the concepts of structure and agency. Reflections about the surrounding world and the contributions the schools’ want to make in society is assumed to result in a more or less conscious strategy for the future, the folk high school’s course politics as it is expressed in action. The identity has been interpreted in vocational roles as they appear in course contents. The word ‘vocation’ is used in almost the same sense as Giddens defines ‘work’.

Self-identity was analysed from three different kinds of texts and with one question for each. In the first perspective focus is on official investigations and political decisions, in the period 1970–2000. What role in society is imposed upon the folk high school in contemporary educational policies? In the second perspective all courses offered at all folk high schools in 1972 and 2000 are studied, in order to present a picture of the overall pattern of vocational orientation. In the third perspective the course politics of the ten selected folk high schools are investigated, from the start of the respective schools, and in relation to what each school thinks it ‘is’ – with different owners and in its particular geographical situation.

One overriding conclusion is that the characteristics that make the identity of the folk high school seem unclear and paradoxical are the very same that constitute the self-identity of the folk high school as being complex and multifaceted. The self-identity seems paradoxical when the vocational orientation presents itself as both preserving traditions and answering to today’s needs. In other words, the school ‘does what it has always done’ (is conservative) and at the same time ‘captures new needs and tasks’ (is flexible).

The folk high school’s role and uniqueness in what they actually do can be understood as what I have called ‘contemporaneous civic functionaries’. Their profiles emerge when flexibility is based on history. I want to designate ‘existential rationality’ to the motivating mechanism that seems to at the same time force changes and lean on own experiences. Expressing contemporaneous self-identity is grounded in the individual tradition as motivation-based values, cultural and geographic conditions.

**Keywords:** Folk high school, popular adult education (folkbildning), social and educational change, democracy, structuration and agency, life politics, course politics, vocational courses, vocational training, vocational roles, identity, self-identity, reflexive project of the self, institutional reflexivity, historicity, existential rationality.