

Irresponsible conjectures on driver training anger national researcher

Would like greater focus on road user behaviour, more training and later licence-qualification ages

Sonja Forward, a senior research leader at the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute (VTI), feels that driver training in Sweden needs more mandatory elements and a greater focus on road user behaviour. She is also extremely critical of those who use their positions to advocate driver training that is less regulated.

We meet Sonja Forward at an airport as she is on her way from one conference to another. First, she addresses the sweeping criticisms the newly appointed CEO of Företagarna (an organisation representing around 60,000 entrepreneurs in Sweden) has levelled at the entire driver training set-up. On the debate pages of national newspaper Aftonbladet, he has, amongst other things, accused the training industry of fomenting the issue of low interest rates for students taking out loans to get a driving licence. According to the CEO, the industry has thereby contributed to pushing up the costs of driving licences. He also maintains that the Swedish National Association of Driver Trainers (STR) and driving instructors are responsible for Sweden having one of the most expensive driving licences in Europe. He attributes this to the training obligations introduced over the past 20 years. His article on the debate pages does not mention traffic safety. Nor does it cite any references.

“He’s very unknowledgeable,” says Sonja Forward. “Since the 1990s, Sweden has had a syllabus that covers, amongst other things, driving being about much more than handling a vehicle. This latter was behind the introduction of two mandatory risk training courses. Additionally, he states that what happens in the first mandatory risk course is already part of the theory test. This is untrue.”

Sonja Forward asserts that the aim of risk training is to create awareness. Primarily, it seeks to influence behavioural norms rather than simply transfer knowledge.

“His reasoning here is woefully inexpert. After all, knowing the rules and being able to pick the right answer in a test is meaningless if drivers choose to act incorrectly behind the wheel.”

She also finds it odd that anyone should attack an entire profession as the CEO of Företagarna has done. In her opinion, the assault has to be put into a context. There are several stakeholders who want there to be less regulation and lower qualification ages in commercial transport.

“Recently, such demands have featured prominently in the debate. Common to them all is, for example, that they trivialise the significance of age as regards the risk of accidents. Research clearly demonstrates such a connection. This is why more, not less, training should be demanded, just as higher, rather than lower, licence-qualification ages.”

Sonja Forward believes that deregulation arguments are based on ideas that have been the hallmark of traffic safety philosophy in Sweden ever since the introduction of the zero deaths and serious injuries vision in 1997. This philosophy centres on a so-called ‘safe-system approach’. The problem is that there is too little focus on one of its pillars, namely road user behaviour. Instead, there is greater focus on other pillars such as safe vehicles and safe infrastructure. The underlying argument is that people make mistakes and the system thus needs to prevent them being severely injured in traffic. Problematically, this ignores the fact that road crashes are also often the consequences of traffic violations. In law, violations are intentional

and thus not mistakes. Consequently, by not compensating for drivers who consciously take risks or otherwise behave incorrectly, the safe-system approach is arguably failing.

“Such compensation would require a fully automated traffic system. That is a long way off.”

Sonja Forward remarks that driver training has a higher status in many other countries. Australia and Canada are examples. However, in training learner drivers and instructors, Norway also places greater emphasis on road user behaviour.

In Sonja’s opinion, the emergence of deregulation demands in Sweden’s driver training is purely business motivated.

“There is absolutely no consideration of traffic safety. The number of traffic fatalities seems to have levelled out, but is still high in relation to the goals. The same applies to the number of injured, many of whom suffer throughout their lives. Besides the human tragedy, this also entails huge costs for society.”

She considers that there should, of course, be freedom of speech in the debate, but finds it frustrating that influential people are using their positions to air unscientific conjectures.

“The risk is that these will throw spanners in the works and hold back measures that can reduce the number of road crashes. Examples of such measures are mandatory training elements and greater emphasis on road user behaviour.”

Sonja Forward feels that, for instance, ten mandatory hours at a driving school would be reasonable for anyone seeking a driving licence. Early training in traffic standards, risk behaviour and awareness of consequences would, presumably, be equally important. Perhaps this could even be given in the state’s ordinary schools. It could then be supplemented in driver training.

“Driver training isn’t comparable with other private courses. In the hands of anyone who is poorly trained, a vehicle can be an immediately lethal weapon. Conversely, no one has died after, for example, being incorrectly massaged.”

Sonja also considers that sentences for traffic offences should be more constructive and not simply restricted to fines or imprisonment.

“Austria and Germany have a risk and behaviour training programme for traffic offenders.”

Text: Johan Granath