

Report from  
EMN Sweden  
2018:3

# Attracting and retaining international students in the EU

## - Country Report Sweden



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**EMN study 2018:  
Attracting and retaining international students in the EU  
- Country Report Sweden**

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Editor: Bernd Parusel

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Contact: emn@migrationsverket.se

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## Summary

Over recent years, the number of third country nationals who were admitted to studies in Sweden has been increasing. The overall number of first-time residence permits granted for different study purposes rose from 7,274 in 2011 to 13,416 in 2017. In 2010, the overall volume of students from third-countries was greater than in 2017, but numbers then dropped drastically in 2011 as Sweden introduced tuition fees for incoming students from third countries who do not participate in official student exchange programmes, so-called "free-movers". Since then, numbers have been slowly rising again.

Within the group of third-country nationals coming to Sweden for studies, persons who study at master's or bachelor's level or in similar programmes (including exchange students) at the 48 public and private universities, university colleges and independent higher education providers, represent the largest group. 8,098 such individuals received a residence permit in 2016, and 9,292 in 2017. The number of permits granted for studies at doctoral level is lower, with 928 permits granted in 2016, and 1,112 in 2017.

Many students, especially doctoral students, also bring close family members to Sweden. In 2017, almost 2,000 individuals were granted residence permits as accompanying family members of international students.

The internationalisation of higher education and research in Sweden has been an important topic of public discussion, both among universities and university colleges in Sweden and within the government, the Parliament and public agencies. Considerable resources have been used for internationalisation purposes, and the recruitment of foreign students and researchers has been an important aspect within this overall objective.

As this study shows, many universities have developed strategies, measures and tools to actively recruit international students and welcome them in Sweden. Especially since tuition fees were introduced for master's and bachelor's level students from third-countries, efforts to attract foreign students have been stepped up significantly. Making it easier for third-country students to remain in Sweden after graduation to work or conduct business activities has been important as well, although the attraction of students has received greater political and practical attention than their retention. Evaluations have shown that scholarships and exchange programmes play important roles for the recruitment of international students, but it has been argued that ambitions should be raised and more public money made available to support incoming students.

As far as the conditions for admitting third-country students and the process of granting residence permits is concerned, there has been progress, too, not least as the dialogue between the Swedish Migration Agency and higher education institutions has become closer and the processing times for residence permits have been shortened. However, although the vast majority of incoming applications for residence permit are successful, fulfilling the requirements for a permit to be granted is not always easy; a challenge for some prospective students is to prove that they have secured sufficient financial resources for their stay in Sweden. Although no statistics are available for the different possible reasons of rejections of residence permit ap-

plications, experts feel that problems regarding the financial support requirement are the most common reason.

Some structural problems have remained even beyond the formalities of admission to studies and the securing of a residence permit for study purposes. For example, evaluations have shown that there is a severe shortage of affordable housing in many parts of Sweden, especially in larger university cities. While knowledge of the Swedish language is generally not required for studies in Sweden as a great number of study programmes is indeed offered in English, those students who want to remain in Sweden after the completion of their education usually need to speak and understand Swedish to find work and be able to integrate into Swedish society.

In 2019 and beyond, the conditions for, and procedures of, admitting international students are likely to undergo further changes, both as a result of a comprehensive inquiry to enhance the internationalisation of higher education in Sweden, and the implementation of the European Union's new Directive on Students and Researchers. When this study was drafted, a number of likely legal and policy changes in light of the Directive's implementation started to become clear, but the government had not proposed any bill yet. For this reason, this EMN study reflects the legal and policy situation before the implementation of the Directive and only briefly elaborates on some expected impacts.

# 1 Introduction

In view of labour market challenges and demographic developments, the EU and its Member States have been looking at migration as a means to address ageing populations, sustain welfare systems and find skilled workers. Policies to attract and retain third-country nationals who come to Europe for the purpose of higher education are one element of broader immigration strategies in this context.

Promoting the mobility of international students has been part of the EU's migration policies since 1994, when the Council adopted a (non-binding) resolution on the admission of third-country nationals to the territory of the Member States for study purposes. More recently, the 2015 European Agenda on Migration reiterated the need for promoting the mobility of international students, calling for the EU to provide a safe haven for those fleeing persecution and at the same time also become an attractive destination for talented and entrepreneurial students, researchers and workers.<sup>1</sup>

The EU and its Member States have also been working on several comprehensive strategies to enhance the attractiveness of Europe's higher education system to non-EU students, and in 2016, the EU has agreed on a new students and researchers directive,<sup>2</sup> which seeks to improve and harmonise minimum legal standards for welcoming and retaining international students. At national level, Member States' governments, regional institutions, as well as universities and other higher education providers have developed strategies for the attraction of non-EU students, for instance by organising information campaigns in third countries and increasing their social media presence.

In 2017, the European Migration Network (EMN) decided to carry out a comparative study, in 2018, to explore and map the national practices in place in the various EU Member States to attract and retain third-country national students. The study aims to:

- Provide a statistical overview of the number of third-country national students who have been admitted to EU Member States and Norway for study purposes;
- Examine incentives to attract and retain third-country national students;
- Describe the existing admission criteria;
- Provide an overview of the bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements in place with third countries covering international students;
- Outline challenges and good practices of EU Member States and Norway with regard to the attraction and retention of international students.

The overall focus of the study is on third-country nationals who are granted residence permits or long-stay visas for reasons of studies, and/or are undertaking a higher education degree at bachelor's, master's or PhD level. Higher education is understood

<sup>1</sup> COM (2015) 240 final.

<sup>2</sup> Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing.

to comprise tertiary education programmes at levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The study focuses on full-time students.

This report represents the Swedish contribution to the overall EMN study project. The Swedish case study starts with a descriptive analysis of the legal and policy framework in Sweden regarding the admission of students from third countries (Section 2). This Section also presents some statistical trends. The study then proceeds to measures and incentives to attract international students. This comprises both "centralised" measures, which are part of national policy, as well as some actions by individual higher education institutions in Sweden (Section 3). Section 4 examines measures that can help to retain international graduates in the country, and Section 5 looks into existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation arrangements with third countries regarding international students, such as exchange programmes. The final Section (6) offers some conclusions and reflections on the Swedish approach to attract and retain international students.

As all EMN studies, even this one has been produced on the basis of a common template with questions and tables for all National Contact Points of the network. For easier readability, the national case study for Sweden has been restructured and converted from a "questions and answers" structure to a more consecutive and cohesive outline.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The original "template-version" can be obtained from the Swedish EMN Contact Point upon request: [emn@migrationsverket.se](mailto:emn@migrationsverket.se).

## 2 Legal and policy framework in Sweden

### 2.1 Legal basis for immigration for study purposes

The conditions for the entry into Sweden and residence of students from third countries are regulated in the Swedish Aliens Act (utlänningslag) and the Aliens Ordinance (utlänningsförfordning). The Aliens Act states in Chapter 5, Section 10, that a temporary residence permit may be granted to an Alien who wishes to stay in Sweden for work, studies, a visit, or to conduct business activities. This general rule, and a number of other provisions in the Aliens Act and the Aliens Ordinance, form the basis for the admission of international students. Third-country students are generally granted temporary residence permits, which can be extended.

Over the past few decades, the Swedish regulations on foreign students have been influenced by EU law in this area, such as Council Directive 2004/114/EC of 13 December 2004 on the conditions of admission of third-country nationals for the purposes of studies, pupil exchange, unremunerated training or voluntary service and Council Directive 2005/71/EC of 12 October 2005 on a specific procedure for admitting third-country nationals for the purposes of scientific research. Currently, Sweden is working to implement a recast directive on students and researchers<sup>4</sup> into national law. In September 2018, the Government Offices sent a memorandum<sup>5</sup> to various stakeholders to obtain their views and comments on the implementation process. In the memorandum, the government proposes to regulate the grounds for the granting of residence permits in accordance with the Directive in a new, separate Chapter of the Swedish Aliens Act.<sup>6</sup>

How exactly new Students and Researchers Directive will be implemented in Swedish law is too early to say at this point in time. A number of changes are likely, however. The government has announced that it intends to extend the maximum validity period of first-time residence permits granted to exchange students. It has also suggested that the period of time during which international students can look for work in Sweden after the successful completion of their studies shall be extended from six to nine months. It is also likely that the financial support requirement will be somewhat eased. Currently, international students have to show that they have their own means of support during their intended time of study in Sweden. This requirement could be changed to sufficient support, meaning that even assets on shared bank accounts (and not only the applicant's own bank account) might in the future be considered eligible. More favourable provisions on intra-EU mobility of third-country nationals who have a residence permit for studies or research in the European Union are also envisaged. For example, the government has proposed that an individual who has had a residence permit for studies or research issued by another EU Member State,

<sup>4</sup> Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing.

<sup>5</sup> Regeringskansliet (2018): Genomförande av student- och forskardirektivet, Ds 2018:37.

<sup>6</sup> It is currently not possible to predict the exact point in time of completed transposition.

and who has spent a certain time in Sweden to conduct studies or research, can be issued a residence permit to look for work or business opportunities in Sweden.<sup>7</sup> The implementation of the Directive is expected to be completed during the year 2019.

In addition to possible changes relating to the new Students and Researchers Directive, Sweden is working on a new internationalisation strategy for the higher education system. As part of this strategy, there is also an ambition to further increase the attractiveness of Sweden as a destination for studies and research. This work may lead to a few policy and/or legal changes regarding international students, such as the provision of more funding for study scholarships for foreign students and researchers, expanded exchange programmes, or further steps to facilitate the conditions for being granted a residence permit for study purposes.

### 2.2 Role of higher education institutions regarding international students

At present, there are 48 public and private universities, university colleges and independent higher education institutions in Sweden.<sup>8</sup> Residence permits can be granted for studies at these institutions, but also for studies at other institutions, such as the folk university or upper secondary schools.<sup>9</sup> Studies at education institutions that are not universities, university colleges or independent higher education providers are considered "other studies", and some special rules apply for access to such studies. For example, third-country students admitted for the purpose of conducting "other studies" are normally not granted a work permit.

Generally, the responsibility to admit foreign students to Swedish higher education and to supervise them lies with the various higher education institutions. By contrast, the Swedish Migration Agency is responsible for the migration process, i.e., examining applications for residence permits to international students.

While Swedish students' merits are accessible in national databases, visiting students from third countries must submit proof of merits when they apply for courses at a Swedish higher education institution. General eligibility requirements are centrally decided by the higher education institutions' "Virtual Organization", which has existed since 2007. The virtual organization is comprised of case officers from higher education institutions who work together when assessing applicants from a certain geographical area. The group assesses upper-secondary school merits, language certificates and, for advanced levels, foreign higher education institution awards and merits. Furthermore, the case officers assess whether diplomas, degrees and certificates are genuine and whether the merits correspond to those in Swedish education. The Swedish Council for Higher Education assists the case officers with details of merit values for foreign upper-secondary school and higher education grades.

The Virtual Organization does not assess specific requirements needed for admission to certain courses. Instead, it is the respective higher education institution that controls whether requirements are fulfilled.

<sup>7</sup> Regeringskansliet (2018): Genomförande av student- och forskardirektivet, Ds 2018:37.

<sup>8</sup> A full list is available here: <http://english.uka.se/facts-about-higher-education/higher-education-institutions-heis/list-of-higher-education-institutions-in-sweden.html>.

<sup>9</sup> The Swedish folk university is an adult educational association that offers a wide range of adult education all over Sweden.

As far as cooperation between higher education institutions and the Migration Agency is concerned, a "Forum for internationalisation" was created in 2008 upon the initiative of the Ministry of Education and Research. The objective of the forum is to improve coordination between Swedish authorities and organizations dealing with the internationalisation of higher education institutions. In the forum, participants can share experiences, identify possibilities and organize their work to clear away any impediments to internationalisation. A number of government agencies and government ministries participate in the work of the forum, including the Migration Agency. Within the Forum for internationalisation, there are also a number of working groups on specific topics, such as on migration issues and residence permits. The work of the Forum has mostly focused on students at master's level.

In addition to the Forum for internationalisation, there are ad-hoc meetings between the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Council for Higher Education and the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions. The Migration Agency holds an annual meeting with higher education institutions once a year. Overall, dialogue and cooperation between the Migration Agency and higher education institutions as well as other public agencies in the field of education has become closer and more intensive.

### 2.3 Recent changes to the legal framework

There was an important policy change regarding international students in 2014, which started having some impact in 2015 and subsequent years. Students who have completed a programme of studies at a Swedish higher education institution (lasting at least two terms) have since been able to receive a residence permit for the purpose of looking for employment or investigating opportunities to start a business. According to a provision in the Aliens Ordinance, this "job-seeker's" permit can be valid for a maximum of six months. Previously, international students were only allowed to stay in Sweden when they had found work in Sweden already during their studies and applied for a residence permit for work reasons before the study-related permit expired. Since the legal amendment of 2014 took effect, almost 1 500 third country nationals who had previously held a residence permit for studies in Sweden received a new residence permit to stay and look for work. 122 such permits were granted in 2014, 334 in 2015, 445 in 2016, and 562 in 2017. This legal and policy change was implemented as part of a revision of certain provisions in the Swedish Aliens Act to facilitate circular migration; it was thus not directly linked to the new EU Directive 2016/801 on students and researchers.

Another relevant change was that the Swedish Migration Agency has made it possible for doctoral students to receive a residence permit for two years, instead of only one year, under certain circumstances. For this change, which took effect in 2017, no legislative measures were needed. Since July 2014, doctoral students who have had temporary residence permits for at least four years within a seven-year period can receive a permanent residence permit.

Also since 2014, accompanying family members of incoming students normally receive a combined residence and work permit, instead of only a residence permit.

### 2.4 Policy frameworks for international students

The immigration of visiting students is generally seen very positively in Sweden, not least as it is considered a valuable contribution to the internationalisation of the higher education system and Swedish research environments. Swedish institu-

tions work actively towards this goal, and scholarships and exchange programmes are available to facilitate internationalisation. Foreign students are also seen as an important resource in terms of satisfying needs for highly qualified labour. The Swedish Government aims to have a high number of foreign students studying at Swedish higher education institutions.<sup>10</sup>

The operative strategy of the Swedish Migration Agency also mentions an objective to "make Sweden attractive for international competence".<sup>11</sup> Generally speaking, attracting international students is an objective for all fields or disciplines of study, but the focus is on academic studies and research, rather than on vocational training, studies at upper secondary school level or other types of non-academic studies.

#### Tuition fees

Higher education in Sweden is free of charge for Swedish residents (irrespective of whether they are Swedish nationals, EU nationals or legally resident third-country nationals) and incoming EU-nationals. Since the academic year 2010/2011, third-country nationals who are not already residents but who want to come to Sweden to study at a higher education institution are required to pay tuition fees. The fees vary between the various institutions and are dependent on the type of education. The prices for one year of studies in social sciences and humanities vary between SEK 80,000 and 110,000 per year, while technical programmes and natural sciences are more expensive (SEK 120,000 – 145,000 per year). Architecture and design are among the most expensive programmes (SEK 190,000 – 300,000 per year).<sup>12</sup>

The respective universities and other higher education providers determine these amounts themselves, but the fees have to be calculated so that full cost coverage is achieved, i.e. the amount to be paid by each incoming student must be equal to the actual cost for the respective education, per person.<sup>13</sup>

The introduction of tuition fees reduced the number of incoming students, especially from low-income countries. An important underlying argument in favour of the introduction of tuition fees was that there are not strong enough grounds to offer third-country students tax financed, free education, and that Swedish universities should compete with foreign education institutions by offering high quality rather than free education.<sup>14</sup>

**10** Regeringskansliet (2010): *Konkurrera med kvalitet – studieavgifter för utländska studenter*, Proposition 2009/10:65, pp. 6-7.

**11** In Swedish, the operative strategy states: "Genom vårt uppdrag kan vi underlätta för människor som vill komma till Sverige för att till exempel studera, forska eller bidra med sin kunskap på arbetsmarknaden. När vi håller korta väntetider och ger god service bidrar vi till att fylla behov i samhället och göra Sverige attraktivt för internationell kompetens som är viktig för vår konkurrenskraft", cf. *Migrationsverket (2018): Verksamhetsstrategi 2019–2021*.

**12** The tuition fees for each programme are listed at [Universityadmissions.se](http://Universityadmissions.se) and on each programme's website.

**13** *Högskoleverket [Swedish National Agency for Higher Education] (2011b): Avgiftsreformen - lärosätenas första erfarenheter, Rapport 2011:17, Stockholm*.

**14** Regeringskansliet (2010): *Konkurrera med kvalitet – studieavgifter för utländska studenter*, Proposition 2009/10:65

### Internationalisation of the higher education system

In 2005, the Swedish Government presented a national strategy for the internationalisation of higher education in Sweden.<sup>15</sup> This strategy, which was named "New World, new university" (Ny värld, ny högskola), determined that Sweden should be an attractive destination for foreign students and that universities and university colleges should actively work towards an internationalisation of education and research. These and other goals were reconfirmed in a government bill of 2009, entitled "Knowledge without borders – universities in an era of globalisation" (Gränslös kunskap – högskolan i globaliseringens tid).<sup>16</sup> Although these bills did mention that there should be opportunities for international students to remain in Sweden after their studies, the main focus was on the attraction, not the retention, of international students.

Recently, attracting international students has again been a central aspect within a broader national strategy for higher education and research in Sweden, which is currently being developed and discussed, and which aims at fostering the internationalisation of universities and university colleges in Sweden. In February 2016, the Swedish Government commissioned an inquiry with the following tasks:

- Propose new goals and a new national strategy for the internationalization of universities and colleges;
- suggest how more students can get an international perspective in their education, including through more students, teachers and researchers studying or working abroad and improved internationalization within Sweden;
- and propose measures to increase Sweden's attractiveness as a study destination and knowledge hub, among other things through a review of the registration and tuition fees system.<sup>17</sup>

This inquiry presented its results in two reports, published in January 2018 and October 2018, respectively.<sup>18</sup> The first report proposed that a new vision regarding internationalisation should be added to the Swedish Higher Education Act in order to reflect the increasing importance of internationalisation and international cooperation for higher education institutions and society as a whole. The committee proposed the following wording:

*"All international activities at each higher education institution should contribute to improving the quality of education and research and, nationally and globally, to the sustainable development that higher education institutions are meant to foster."*

Further to this, the inquiry proposed the following long-term vision for internationalisation:

*"Sweden shall be one of the most attractive, international knowledge nations with world leading quality of education and research. International understanding and in-*

<sup>15</sup> Regeringskansliet (2005): *Ny värld, ny högskola*, Proposition 2004/05:162, 5 June 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Regeringskansliet (2009): *Gränslös kunskap – högskolan i globaliseringens tid*, Proposition 2008/09:175, 26 March 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Kommittédirektiv Dir. 2017:19, *Ökad internationalisering av universitet och högskolor*, 16 februari 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Utredningen om ökad internationalisering av universitet och högskolor: *En strategisk agenda för internationalisering*, SOU 2018:3, 31 January 2018; Utredningen om ökad internationalisering av universitet och högskolor: *Ökad attraktionskraft för kunskapsnationen Sverige*, SOU 2018:78, 31 October 2018.

*tercultural competence shall constitute an unquestioned and integrated part of education and research. The internationalisation efforts of the higher education institutions are predicated upon constructive cooperation with the rest of society and efficient coordination between government agencies in order to overcome national and global challenges."*

Specifically on the attraction of international students and researchers, the inquiry argued that Sweden must establish the "best possible conditions for attracting students and staff". It reasoned as follows:

*"As global competition becomes fiercer, higher education institutions need to strengthen their position as attractive collaborative partners in Sweden and abroad. They must be able to attract the students and staff required to maintain education and research at a high level and to supply Sweden's knowledge-based society with highly qualified staff and knowledge."*

*"A prerequisite for high attractiveness is that research and teaching staff as well as potential students in other countries are aware of and have a good impression of Swedish activities. This also requires efficient processes for being granted residence permits, attractive conditions for studying or working in Sweden and a good standard of living."*

To reach the objective of internationalisation, the following targets should be set, according to the committee:

- Foreign students, teaching and research staff and other employees are welcomed, able to settle and encouraged to stay in Sweden or maintain long-term contact with Sweden. Cooperation between higher education institutions, various government agencies and the rest of society must be strengthened to achieve this.
- Swedish areas of advance are highlighted and marketing of Sweden as a knowledge nation is intensified.
- The Government, government agencies and higher education institutions closely and frequently cooperate to generate interest and opportunities for foreign establishment of education or research activities at Swedish higher education institutions and other knowledge-intensive activities in Sweden.
- Sweden can offer attractive scholarships to international students.
- Efforts within the Nordic countries are developed in order to create closer collaboration among Nordic higher education institutions and further develop an internationally competitive knowledge region in northern Europe.

## 2.5 Public debates regarding international students

When Sweden introduced tuition fees for students from third countries in 2010, this was preceded by some debate. The consequences of the fees, which led to fewer incoming students from developing countries, raised some attention as well.<sup>19</sup>

More recently, cases of international students, and doctoral students in particular, who could not extend their residence permits and had to leave Sweden against their

<sup>19</sup> Sveriges Radio: *Studenter från fattiga länder minskar i Sverige*, 28 May 2018.

will, mostly due to not being able to fulfil the financial support requirement (as described further below), also triggered some attention.<sup>20</sup>

More generally, there have also been debates regarding the attractiveness and excellence of academic research in Sweden. Among other things, this debate focused on whether or not there was sufficient research funding from the government and the private sector; whether Sweden was an attractive destination for foreign researchers and their family members, also regarding the availability of affordable housing and the quality of Sweden schools; and whether or not researchers and other academic staff had sufficient job security in Sweden.

Overall, however, the admission of international students is not a controversial topic of debate or public concern.

## 2.6 Statistical trends

In total, 405,539 individuals were enrolled as students at higher education institutions in Sweden in 2017. This number has been fairly stable over recent years. In 2013, the total number of students was 405,878.

By contrast, the number of third country nationals who were admitted to studies in Sweden has been increasing. As Table 1 shows, the overall number of first-time residence permits granted for different study purposes rose from 7,274 in 2011 to 13,416 in 2017. In 2010, the overall volume of students from third-countries was greater than today, but numbers then dropped drastically in 2011 as Sweden introduced tuition fees for incoming "free-mover" students from third countries. Since then, the numbers have been slowly rising again.

Within the group of third-country nationals coming to Sweden for studies, persons who study at master's or bachelor's level or in similar programmes (including exchange students) at the 48 public and private universities, university colleges and independent higher education providers, represent the largest group. 8,098 such individuals received a residence permit in 2016, and 9,292 in 2017. The number of permits granted for studies at doctoral level is lower, with 928 permits granted in 2016, and 1,112 in 2017.

Many students, especially doctoral students, also bring close family members to Sweden. In 2017, almost 2,000 individuals were granted residence permits as accompanying family members of international students.

Separate statistics for doctoral students and of accompanying family members of international students have only been available since 2012.

As Table 1 further shows, two smaller groups are also included in the overall category of persons admitted for "study reasons", namely individuals who immigrate for studies outside higher education institutions (e.g., upper secondary schools, religious schools), and persons who have come to Sweden for studies and then – upon completing of their education – received a temporary residence permit to look for employ

ment or business opportunities. Admission for "other studies" has been possible for a long time, but the "job-seeker's permit" was only introduced in 2014.

**Table 1:** Residence permits issued for study purposes, Sweden 2010-2017

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Studies (higher education)	14 188	6 836	6 281	6 580	7 898	7 874	8 098	9 292
Doctoral studies	-	-	811	979	1 247	1 202	928	1 112
Other studies	757	438	524	612	602	650	458	496
Family members of students	-	-	615	944	1 337	1 356	1 494	1 954
Job-seeking students	-	-	-	-	122	334	445	562
<b>Total</b>	<b>14 945</b>	<b>7 274</b>	<b>8 231</b>	<b>9 115</b>	<b>11 206</b>	<b>11 416</b>	<b>11 423</b>	<b>13 416</b>

Source: Swedish Migration Agency

As regards the main countries of origin of international students, China has been the top nationality over the entire period 2010-2017, followed by India, Pakistan and Iran. No African or Latin American country has recently been among the top 10 nationalities of incoming students.

**Table 2:** First-time residence permits granted for study reasons, top-10 nationality groups, 2010-2017

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
China	2 985	1 534	1 732	1 840	2 081	2 339	2 327	2 466
India	1 231	356	402	650	917	1 005	1 218	1 577
Pakistan	1 430	202	338	393	635	943	849	952
Iran	937	93	132	162	300	330	350	653
USA	1 446	367	461	502	628	543	572	884
Bangladesh	503	403	536	666	821	804	752	874
Singapore	244	292	318	352	385	389	357	416
Turkey	453	367	385	378	416	420	408	384
Canada	685	520	471	414	386	306	308	395
Japan	293	313	335	312	351	373	329	330
Other	4 738	2 827	3 121	3 446	4 286	3 964	3 953	4 485
<b>Total</b>	<b>14 945</b>	<b>7 274</b>	<b>8 231</b>	<b>9 115</b>	<b>11 206</b>	<b>11 416</b>	<b>11 423</b>	<b>13 416</b>

Source: Swedish Migration Agency

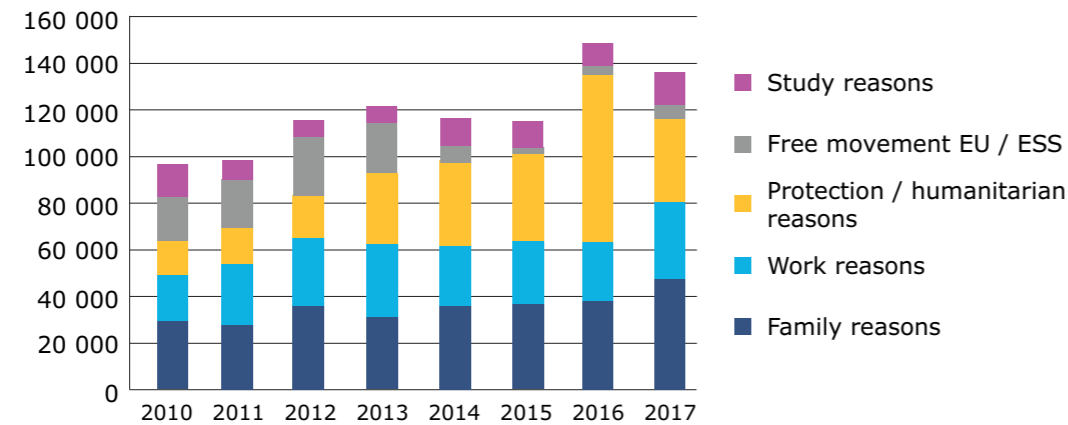
If we look at residence permits issued for study reasons in the broader immigration context in Sweden, i.e. the overall number of first-time residence permits issued over the period 2010-2017, it is clear that study-related permits play a relatively small role compared to other migration channels, notably family reunification and asylum. In 2017, study-related permits amounted to 10 percent of all residence permits

<sup>20</sup> Upsala Nya Tidning: [Kan tvingas lämna Sverige - oklart läge för Miranda](#), 21 May 2018; Svenska Dagbladet: [Migrationsverket slänger ut studenter som följt reglerna](#), 29 January 2018.



granted that year, while family reasons represented 35 percent, asylum 27 percent and work 24 percent (see Figure 1).<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 1:** All first-time residence permits granted, 2010-2017



Source: Swedish Migration Agency

<sup>21</sup> Since May 2014, EU- and EEA-citizens do not need to register their right of residence at the Migration Agency any more, which is why the number of permits or residence rights granted under EU free movement rules appears much smaller for 2015 and 2016 compared to previous years.

## 3 Measures and incentives to attract international students

### 3.1 Admission conditions for international students

To obtain a residence permit for studies at a Swedish higher education institution, applicants from third countries must:

- hold a valid passport;
- be accepted on a course of full-time study at a university or university college;
- be able to support themselves during the foreseen study period in Sweden; and
- have comprehensive health insurance.

Applicants who have to pay a tuition fee are not considered admitted to studies in Sweden until the fee is paid to the respective university or university college. The university or university college informs the Migration Agency when the payment has been made. As a general rule, residence permits for study purposes have to be applied for and granted before the person enters Sweden.

A fundamental requirement for being granted a residence permit for study purposes is that the applicant really intends to study, i.e., that they do not use studies as a pretext for other purposes of getting legal access to, and residence in, Sweden. The Swedish Migration Agency, often in cooperation with the Swedish missions abroad, have to examine whether an applicant really intends to study. Certain indicators are used for this. For example, if an applicant has registered for different stand-alone university courses that do not fit together, if he or she cannot explain their choice of courses or what programme they have chosen, or if their language capabilities are gravely insufficient, the intention to study can be questioned. In such cases, the Migration Agency can demand that an applicant explains his or her reasoning and the purpose of the intended stay in Sweden.

There is no specific fast-track to being issued a residence permit for studies, but the Swedish Migration Agency has an ambition to keep processing times for residence permits as short as possible. Regarding residence permits for study purposes specifically, the aim is that all applicants who are granted a permit receive their residence permit before the start of the study term that they have applied for. Applications that include all relevant information and documentation from the beginning can be processed and decided more quickly than applications that have to be supplemented/complemented during the processing period.

#### Doctoral students

A person who has been admitted to doctoral studies in Sweden with the aim of achieving a PhD shall apply for a residence permit as a student. By contrast, individuals who have completed their PhD (or who are eligible for starting a doctoral education) and have been invited by a Swedish higher education institution to undertake research in Sweden shall apply for a residence permit for visiting researchers, which is a different type of permit, with different conditions and requirements. Entry conditions for researchers are not part of this study.

A third category are third-country nationals who have been admitted to doctoral studies in another country and want to carry out parts of their research in Sweden. In

such cases, doctoral students shall apply for a short-term temporary residence permit (up to one year) for the purpose of visiting Sweden.

### Recognition of credentials

Generally, the admission of foreign students to Swedish higher education is a responsibility of the various higher education institutions. However, as mentioned above, general eligibility requirements are centrally decided by the higher education institutions' "Virtual Organization", which has existed since 2007. This organization also assesses upper-secondary school merits, language certificates and, for advanced levels, foreign higher education degrees and merits. Furthermore, the case officers assess whether diplomas, degrees and certificates are genuine and whether the merits correspond to those in Swedish education.

### Fees and costs

The tuition fee for one year of studies at bachelor's (first cycle) or master's level (second cycle) varies between the various higher education institutions and between different types of programmes:

- For social sciences and humanities, the fee is between SEK 80,000 and SEK 110,000 per year.
- For technical programmes and natural sciences, the fee ranges between SEK 120,000 and SEK 145,000 per year.
- For architecture and design, the fee is SEK 190,000 – SEK 300,000 per year.<sup>22</sup>

### The fees are determined by each higher education institution.

There are no tuition fees for studies at doctoral level. Also, international students who come to Sweden as part of an official academic exchange programme, such as Erasmus Mundus, or participate in their home university's "study abroad" programme, are exempted from tuition fees. The reason for these exceptions is that international student mobility under exchange programmes shall be facilitated. Also, international students should not have to pay tuition fees both at their home university and their (temporary) Swedish hosting university.

In addition to tuition fees, an administrative admission fee of SEK 900 is to be paid to the respective university or to the institution that organises admission on behalf of the university. There are a number of exceptions, however, e.g. regarding exchange students.

The Swedish Migration Agency charges SEK 1,000 for processing a residence permit application for study purposes. A reduced fee of SEK 500 applies for applicants under the age of 18.<sup>23</sup> No fees are charged from applicants from Japan and Switzerland, and applicants who have received certain scholarships are also exempted from these processing fees.

Both domestic and foreign students often join a local student union for a small membership fee. This gives them access to various student activities and discounts. These membership fees range from SEK 50 to SEK 350 per semester, depending on the union. Membership in students' unions is voluntary.

<sup>22</sup> The tuition fees for each programme are listed at [Universityadmissions.se](http://Universityadmissions.se) and on each programme's website.

<sup>23</sup> Students at universities/university colleges are normally older than 18, so in practice, this reduced fee is in practice mostly used for students at upper secondary schools or applicants for other, non-academic studies.

### Language requirements

It is generally the universities themselves that determine what level of English is required for each course. Normally, for courses and study programmes at bachelor's level, the general English language entry requirement is the equivalent of English studies at upper secondary (high school) level in Sweden, called "English 6". English 6 corresponds to CEFR level B2 ("Independent user").

Even for most master's level courses and programmes, the requirement is the equivalent of English 6, though a few higher education courses may require a lower or higher level of English. The language requirement can be met by submitting proof of certain upper secondary (high school) studies, certain university studies, or an internationally recognised English test, such as TOEFL or IELTS.

### Insurance coverage

In most cases, incoming students from third countries need to submit proof of health insurance to obtain a residence permit.

Third-country nationals who are considered residents in Sweden (based on registration in the Swedish population registry) normally have comprehensive access to health care via the public health care system in Sweden. They therefore do not need any extra insurance. This applies to many doctoral students as well as to some students at master's or bachelor's level.

Doctoral students often stay longer than one year, hence in many cases they are considered Swedish residents and no extra health insurance is required. By contrast, incoming students at bachelor's or master's level, who have been admitted to a course of study of less than one year, are often granted time-limited residence permits with a duration of less than one year, and as such, they are not considered residents. A foreign national is only registered in the population registry if he or she is staying, or can be expected to stay, in Sweden for more than one year.

For those who need it, there are different possibilities to arrange health insurance. In many cases, it is provided by their hosting higher education institution, which often arranges such insurances via the Swedish Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency (Kammarkollegiet) and include the cost of the insurance in the tuition fee that is paid by the student. Insurances can also be provided via the insurance and welfare system of the student's country of origin, or by acquiring private health insurance coverage. The insurance policy must be valid for the whole period of a third-country national's stay in Sweden and cover the costs of emergency and other medical care, dental care as well as stays in hospitals. It must also cover the costs of transport home, if needed, for example, in cases of medical emergency.

### Financial support requirements

To be granted a residence permit, international students have to show that they can support themselves during their stay in Sweden. In 2018, the minimum maintenance requirement for people applying for a residence permit for studies in Sweden was SEK 8,190 (approximately EUR 800) per month. For 2019, it is SEK 8,370 per month. Applicants have to show that they have secured sufficient means to support themselves for the period for which they are applying for. If an individual intends to study in Sweden for one year or longer, they must show that they can support themselves for ten months per year.<sup>24</sup> Proof can be provided by showing that they have their own

<sup>24</sup> For example, doctoral students who apply for a residence permit for two years must show that they can support themselves for 20 months.

bank assets or a study grant or scholarship. If a student takes a loan for studies in Sweden, this is not accepted.

“Own bank assets” means that an applicant has money in a bank account that belongs to him or her, and from which only they (and – if relevant – their husband or wife) can withdraw money. If an applicant shares a bank account with, for example, a parent or other relative, the bank assets are not regarded as the applicant’s own, and therefore not considered eligible. Neither does the Migration Agency accept the sponsoring of an applicant’s maintenance by anyone else (for example, a relative or a company) as proof of sufficient means of support, unless the money is in the applicant’s own bank account and available to his or her exclusive use. Credit, funds or shares are not counted as bank assets either.

If an applicant will be receiving a grant or scholarship, they must enclose a recently prepared document in their name, including the details of the monthly or total amount granted. The document must also indicate the period during which the applicant will receive the grant, and how much of the money will be available for the applicant’s maintenance. Scholarships for doctoral students are normally for one year, and after that period, doctoral students must be employed. Scholarships or wages for doctoral students must be shown on an employment or study certificate. The study certificate is drawn up and issued by the hosting institution.

If an applicant can show that he or she will receive free accommodation and/or food from a university, university college or an international exchange organisation, the minimum maintenance requirement may be reduced.<sup>25</sup>

### 3.2 Incentives for attracting international students

#### Promotional activities and dissemination of information in countries of origin

The various higher education institutions in Sweden have several promotional measures in place. A frequent promotional measure is to participate in education fairs abroad. Especially larger universities resort to this strategy. Sometimes, they even invite foreign students to visit the university in Sweden to get a first-hand impression. As part of such visit arrangements, there are also meetings with current or former students from the same country of origin.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes, universities also use recruitment agents or consultants.

That Swedish universities have branches or offices abroad in non-EU countries is an exception rather than a rule. However, Uppsala university has an office in Hanoi (Vietnam). Among this office’s tasks is to promote Uppsala university as a study destination. Karolinska Institutet has a research branch office in Hong Kong (China).<sup>27</sup>

At central level, the Swedish Institute promotes Sweden as a destination for studies, not least through its website “Study in Sweden”.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Swedish embassies

<sup>25</sup> For applications that were received by the Migration Agency in 2018, the minimum maintenance requirement per month was reduced by SEK 1,592.50 per month for free food and SEK 1,592.50 per month for free accommodation. For 2019, a reduction by SEK 1,627.00 per month applies for free food and/or free accommodation.

<sup>26</sup> Tillväxtanalys (2018): Svenska lärosäten som verktyg för att attrahera utländsk högkvalificerad arbetskraft, PM 2018:11, Östersund, p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> SOU 2018:78, p. 93.

<sup>28</sup> <https://studyinsweden.se/>.

and consulates abroad frequently participate in international education fairs to promote Sweden as a study destination.<sup>29</sup>

#### Scholarships and bursaries

Since the introduction of tuition fees in Sweden in 2011, there have been two main scholarship systems. The various universities and university colleges as well as other education providers grant scholarships amounting to a total of approximately SEK 60 million a year. The target group are particularly talented students irrespective of their country of origin. Funding for this type of scholarships is provided to higher education institutions by the Swedish state, via the Swedish Council for Higher Education. The scholarships can be paid to students, but they can also be used by universities to reduce the tuition fees for those students who are granted a scholarship. Exactly how state scholarship funding can be used is regulated by a government ordinance.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, the Swedish Institute provides so called “Swedish Institute Study Scholarships” (SISS) amounting to a total of SEK 150 million a year, which are funded through the state budget for development aid (internationellt bistånd). There are two main types of scholarships within SISS. One of them, comprising SEK 70 million, is directed towards students from low- and middle-income countries. The other one targets students from countries that are prioritised long-term target countries of Swedish development cooperation (SEK 80 million).<sup>31</sup> These scholarships cover the cost of subsistence while a student stays in Sweden and the applicable tuition fees. Their aim is to contribute to capacity building and development in low- and middle-income nations. In 2018, the number of applications for SSIS scholarships were higher than ever, with a total of 6,170 applicants from 101 countries. 237 scholarships were ultimately granted.<sup>32</sup>

Further to SSIS scholarships, the Swedish Institute also grants study scholarships in the framework of cooperation within the Baltic Sea Region and countries in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and Turkey. Among others, there is the so called “Visby Programme for Master’s Level Studies”, and the “Swedish Institute Scholarships for the Western Balkans Programme”. These programmes amount to SEK 45 million a year, in total.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to state-funded scholarships, some higher education institutions have created additional scholarships of their own, through cooperation with enterprises and industry, donations, or by using some revenues from tuition fees to fund scholarships.<sup>34</sup>

For example, the KTH Royal Institute of Technology awards a limited number of “KTH Scholarships” each year. These are awarded based on academic excellence. Recipients of the KTH Scholarship will have their tuition fee waived for the first and the second year, provided that the study results during the first year are satisfactory. At KTH, there is also a specific scholarship programme for a small number of students

<sup>29</sup> SOU 2018:78, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Förordningen (2010:718) om stipendier för studieavgiftsskyldiga studenter.

<sup>31</sup> Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar (Burma), Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

<sup>32</sup> SOU 2018:78, p. 300.

<sup>33</sup> For more information, see <https://studyinsweden.se/scholarships/swedish-institute-scholarships/>.

<sup>34</sup> SOU 2018:78, p. 300.

from India. These scholarships are financed through a foundation, which was established in 2012 on the basis of a donation made by an anonymous donor. Recipients of the KTH India Scholarship will have their tuition fee waived for the total length of the programme.

Lund University, as another example, runs the "Lund University Global Scholarship Programme", which comprises a total of SEK 15 million each year. It is a selective, merit-based scholarship that aims to recognise top academic students from outside the EU/EEA. Scholarship recipients have a proven record of achieving consistently high grades in their previous studies and are assessed as being a good fit for the university's programmes. Scholarship grants may cover 25%, 50%, 75% or up to 100% of the tuition fee. The scholarship percentage awarded depends on the budget available to the programme or faculty. These scholarships do not cover living costs.

As far as doctoral students are concerned, they are most often employed, hence their hosting university will pay them a wage.

#### Family reunification rights

Incoming international students have a right to be accompanied by members of their core family, i.e. the student's wife or husband, cohabiting partner, registered partner, and unmarried children under the age of 18. The term "cohabiting partner" refers to couples who are not married but live together as if married.

The number of family members coming to Sweden to join international students is relatively large. In 2017, the Swedish Migration Agency granted 10,404 first time residence permits for study purposes (students at universities/university colleges and doctoral students), and another 1,954 permits for family members of international students.

Family members can be admitted under the condition that they have a valid passport, that they have sufficient means to support themselves, and that they indeed plan to live together with their "sponsor", i.e. the international student. The minimum support requirement is lower than for the student, however, with SEK 3,500 per month for adults and SEK 2,100 per month for each child.

Residence permits for family members of international students are granted for the same time period as the sponsor's permit. If the sponsor's permit is valid for more than six months, which is often the case, the residence permit for the family member usually includes a work permit.

Certain support services for family members of international students are available in Sweden, but not for all family members and depending on the length of residence in Sweden. Family members of students who stay in Sweden for less than one year are not considered Swedish residents, hence they will not be included in the Population Registry. Family members who stay for a longer period of time, depending on the length of stay of their student "sponsor" will be considered residents. As such, they have access to general health care and welfare, as well as to "Swedish for immigrants" language classes, which are offered by the municipalities. In any case, children can attend school.

In addition to such general services, universities may offer certain support or activities.

#### Language of teaching

The number of higher education study programmes and classes where the teaching language is English has increased substantially over the years. Programmes at mas-

ter's level are normally held in English, while Swedish is still frequent as a teaching language at bachelor's level. The Swedish state does not offer particular incentives for higher education institutions to offer education in other languages than Swedish, but there does not seem to be a particular need for any such incentives either, as universities and university colleges already work towards internationalisation, which includes teaching in English. However, the above-mentioned "Internationalisation inquiry" has recommended higher education institutions to review and possibly increase their offer of programmes offered in English at bachelor's level.

### 3.3 Hosting international students: preparation, arrival and housing

#### Documents and their validity

As regards travel and entry documents, Sweden normally issues residence permits for study purposes, and not visas. Visas are normally only used for short visits up to three months. The length of residence permits granted to first and second cycle students varies, but the Swedish Migration Agency uses standard validity periods, as follows:

Study period	Residence permit standard validity period
One autumn term	1 August – 31 January the following year (6 months)
One spring term	1 January – 30 June (6 months)
Two terms, starting with autumn term	1 August – 30 June the following year (11 months)
Two terms, starting with spring term	1 January – 31 January the following year (13 months)
Longer than two terms, starting with autumn term	1 August – 1 September the following year (13 months)
Longer than two terms, starting with spring term	1 January – 31 January the following year (13 months)

Residence permits can be extended if the respective conditions are fulfilled. Doctoral students can start any time of the year and receive a two-year permit.

As a general rule, residence permits must be applied for and granted before a third-country national arrives in Sweden. This includes the issuing of residence permit cards. However, applicants from countries that are not subject to visa requirements can obtain their residence permit card after their arrival in Sweden, but even in this case, the permit must have been applied for and granted before arrival.

A long-stay visa (type D-visa) can only be issued in rare, exceptional cases, if a person has been granted a residence permit but cannot receive his or her residence permit card before travel to Sweden. Schengen visas are not issued for studies in Sweden if the intended study period is longer than three months.

#### Processing times for residence permit applications

In 2018, the average processing time for residence permits for studies at universities/university colleges was 31 days. This includes processing at the Swedish Migration

Agency and Sweden's missions abroad. 96 percent of all applications were decided within three months. For students at doctoral level, the average processing time was slightly longer, 44 days.

In 2017, the average processing time for master's / bachelor's students was 30 days, and 59 days for doctoral students.

#### Renewal / extension of residence permits

The requirements for extending a residence permit for study purposes are similar to the requirements relating to first-time permits, but applicants also have to show that they have made acceptable progress in their studies.

Applicants must:

- hold a valid passport;
- be accepted on a course of full-time study at a university or university college;
- have a comprehensive insurance policy;
- have made acceptable progress in their studies; and
- be able to support themselves during the planned extension of their stay in Sweden.

If a student takes more time to complete their studies than originally foreseen, this must be explained. In such cases, applicants are required to enclose a certificate from their instructor or other person at the university or university college who is familiar with their studies. This certificate must explain why the studies have taken longer than originally expected. It should also contain details of the start date and the normal end date of the course, and when the student can be expected to have completed their course.

To demonstrate that acceptable progress in their studies have been made, applicants for extensions must enclose excerpts from the university or university college register indicating the study progress. Applicants must have taken 15 higher education credits during the first year, 22.5 credits during the second year, and 30 credits during the third and any subsequent years, in order to be granted an extension. Exceptions can be made under certain circumstances, such as in cases of illness.

If a student has started their final examination/graduation work, they must also enclose a recently issued certificate from their instructor describing how the work is progressing. The certificate should indicate how much of the examination work, as an approximate percentage, they have managed to complete so far, specifically during the previous permit period.

Doctoral candidates follow an individual study plan and supervisors write a statement of their study performance.<sup>35</sup>

#### Introduction and orientation support

The Swedish higher education institutions have rather different types of introduction and orientation support in place, hence no general information can be given.

However, as an illustrative example, Malmö University regularly invites all new international students to take part in a University introduction programme. This programme consists of lectures and activities that are designed to help foreign students become acquainted with university and student life in Malmö. The aim is also that

<sup>35</sup> More information on these and other requirements is available at the website of the Swedish Migration Agency: <https://www.migrationsverket.se/English/Private-individuals/Studying-in-Sweden/Universities-and-university-college/Extend-a-permit.html>.

they can get to know their peers and make new friends. There is usually a welcome meeting, followed by a series of practical, academic and social activities. The programme is limited to a few activities every day, and students are welcome to attend all of them, or just the ones they find relevant. All activities are free of charge.<sup>36</sup>

At Gothenburg University, a special "arrival day" is organised for international students, where the university arranges pick-up at the airport. They are then brought to the university's Welcome Services' Office. International students also receive a Welcome pack including maps, University information, a SIM card for a Swedish mobile phone operator, a bucket list, and information about public transport. A few days after the "arrival day", there is a "welcome day", where the university introduces itself to their new students and presents available services and activities. Students also learn more about Sweden and the Swedish people. The day finishes with a panel discussion among current Swedish and international students, who share their insights into student life in Gothenburg. There is also a "Fair and Information Day", where practical information is provided on topics such as health care, insurances, and student housing. Optional sessions cover services offered by the University library, as well as travel in Sweden and to neighbouring countries.<sup>37</sup>

#### Housing and accommodation support

Support regarding accommodation is provided, but not systematically nor in a centralised manner. As Sweden has severe housing shortages in many regions, universities indeed often offer such support to increase their attractiveness to foreign students. Support typically includes the provision of guaranteed housing, or at least advice on where to find a room or flat. The exact offer varies between universities, as does the availability of student accommodation. It is usually easier to find accommodation in small and medium-sized towns and cities, while this can be more challenging in larger cities, especially in Stockholm and Gothenburg and in the traditional student cities of Lund and Uppsala. Student accommodation in Sweden is nearly always managed by organisations or companies separate from the university itself.

At Karolinska Institutet, a medical university in Stockholm, for example, tuition-fee paying students are guaranteed accommodation through the company KI Housing for their first year of studies. KI Housing offers furnished apartments and rooms in several areas in Stockholm to incoming international students and researchers. KI Housing does not own any of the housing areas or buildings but rent contracts are signed between KI Housing and the student/researcher.<sup>38</sup>

At Umeå University, the International Housing Office offers accommodation for exchange students and tuition fee-paying students from outside the EU/EEA. Here, the maximum period of accommodation is two academic terms. The Housing Office offers single-occupancy student room accommodation in student corridors.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> For more information on the example of Malmö university, see <https://mau.se/en/after-admission/>.

<sup>37</sup> For more information regarding this example, see <https://utbildning.gu.se/education/incoming-student>.

<sup>38</sup> For more information, see <https://ki.se/en/education/accommodation-for-students>.

<sup>39</sup> For more information, see <https://www.umu.se/en/education/accommodation/student-housing/>.

### Preparatory courses

The offer of preparatory courses varies between the different universities and university colleges in Sweden. Typically, however, there are preparatory courses in English and/or Swedish.

At Linnaeus University, which is situated in the Swedish cities of Kalmar and Växjö, there is a preparatory English course for international students, aiming to provide knowledge and skills related to reading, writing, speaking and listening with the objective to fully prepare international students for academic courses taught in English. After completing the course, students will be able to account for the main content as well as details in both speech and writing. The course has been designed to meet the needs of non-native English speakers who wish to develop their English language competencies and be able to communicate effectively in an academic environment. The course gives eligibility equivalent to English 6 (B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference) for further studies.<sup>40</sup>

Jönköping University has introduced a specific "Pathway Year", which aims at enabling international students to reach their full academic and social potential while in Sweden. The Pathway year is based on a combination of activities such as lecture-based input, seminars, study visits, projects and guidance, which shall provide prospective students with a framework to succeed in their studies. In addition to the formal courses, participants are expected to engage in self-studies for 20 hours per week. Upon completion of the programme, students shall have the necessary English language capacities to qualify for enrolment in degree programmes at the University, be familiar with Swedish culture and informed about the organisation of Swedish higher education. They shall thus be able to directly enter a degree programme at Jönköping University.<sup>41</sup>

Some universities arrange preparatory language courses via external, private education providers. Preparatory language classes in Swedish are also available at Folk Universities. A number of universities also offer preparatory courses in Swedish as a foreign language.

## 3.4 Rights of international students

### Right to work

Third-country nationals holding a residence permit for study purposes are exempted from the requirement to hold a work permit.<sup>42</sup> This means that they can engage in any kind of work for an unlimited number of hours a week. There are no other limits either, as long as work is in line with general labour law requirements. However, international students have to show that they have made sufficient progress in their studies if they want to extend a time-limited residence permit. Thus, it is not realistic to both engage in full-time studies and full-time work. If a student decides to quit their studies and work instead, it is possible to apply for a work permit. It is important to note that residence permits granted for study permits can be withdrawn by

<sup>40</sup> <https://lnu.se/en/course/preparatory-english-course-for-international-students/vaxjo-international-spring/>.

<sup>41</sup> <https://ju.se/en/study-at-ju/our-programmes/pathway-programmes/programmes/pathway-year.html>.

<sup>42</sup> This exemption does not apply to individuals who are granted residence permits for "other studies" (e.g., at upper secondary schools). Thus, this group is normally not allowed to work.

the Swedish Migration Agency if a student no longer studies. Universities are required to inform the Migration Agency if international students quit their studies.

Self-employed economic activity is possible as well. International students are free to engage in self-employment or to start a business. As mentioned above, however, international students have to show that they have made sufficient progress in their studies if they want to extend a time-limited residence permit. Thus, it is not realistic to both engage in full-time studies and full-time business activity. If they do not want to study any more but run their own business instead, it is possible to apply for a residence permits for self-employment.

### Permanent residence and acquisition of citizenship

For third-country students at bachelor's or master's level, residence permits are always temporary and the time spent in Sweden under such temporary permits does not count towards any subsequent access to a permanent residence permit. Students at doctoral level, however, can get a permanent residence permit if they have lived in Sweden and have held a residence permit for doctoral studies for a total of four years over the past seven years.

As far as the acquisition of Swedish citizenship is concerned (naturalisation), a standard minimum period of five years of continuous usual residence is required in most cases. However, time periods spent in Sweden on the basis of a temporary residence permit for studies is not counted as a period of usual residence. Again, this is different for doctoral students. Doctoral students can in certain cases be allowed to count the period with a residence permit for studies as usual residence. For this rule to apply, it must be evident that the person in question intended to stay in Sweden after completing their doctoral studies.

## 3.5 External factors

How further, external factors may impact international students' choice of study destination is very difficult to know. However, from literature and analysis, it is clear that there is fierce global competition for attracting international students. Bigger nations, such as the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia, France and Germany (in that order), have a comparative advantage in this competition and attract far more students than the Nordic countries. In 2015, Sweden ranked number 16 on the list of student-receiving countries. It was one place behind Denmark (no. 15) but ahead of Finland (no. 17) and Norway (no. 22), according to the OECD.<sup>43</sup>

The Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis (Tillväxtanalys) points out that the fact that English is a widespread teaching-language in Sweden plays an important role for attracting students.<sup>44</sup> The Swedish Institute confirms this on its "Study in Sweden" webpage, asking the rhetorical question: "And did we mention that everyone speaks English?"<sup>45</sup>

The Swedish Institute also emphasises a number of cultural features of Swedish teaching environments and Swedish society in general on its "Study in Sweden" webpage. For example, it emphasises that

<sup>43</sup> OECD (2017): *Education at a glance 2017, Paris*. See also Table in *Tillväxtanalys (2018)*, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Tillväxtanalys (2018)*, p. 66.

<sup>45</sup> <https://studyinsweden.se/why-sweden/5-reasons-to-study-in-sweden/>.

"When you study in Sweden, you're encouraged to think independently, creatively and critically. (...) You'll be free to think creatively because of the informal and non-hierarchical nature of Swedish society, where everyone is encouraged to contribute ideas and opinions. This independence of mind and the fact that everyone can make their voice heard are two of the reasons why Sweden ranks among the world's most innovative nations. Another is that investment in research is among the highest in the world in relation to GDP."

The Swedish Institute also points towards innovations and inventions, pointing out that Sweden is "a leader in innovation and a home of trendsetters". (...) "The list of Swedish world-changing inventions is a long one and includes the seatbelt, the pacemaker and the music service Spotify." It also refers to cultural and value-related features, such as this:

"Swedish society is known for its inclusiveness and equality – you may have heard Sweden referred to as the most equal country in the world. It consistently places among the world's top countries in gender equality, while lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights in Sweden are regarded as among the most progressive in the world."

Global HEI rankings may also play a role, but it is not entirely clear whether Sweden ranks particularly well compared to other countries. Tillväxtanalys (2018) provides an overview of how Swedish universities perform in different rankings, compared to five other European countries (Denmark, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands and Germany). In 2017, Sweden had three universities that ranked among the top 100 universities of the world according to "THE World University ranking"; Karolinska Institute ranked 38, Uppsala University 86 and Lund University 93. Denmark and Norway had none, Finland one, the Netherlands seven, and Germany ten.<sup>46</sup> This is certainly not a bad result, but on a global scale, Sweden is certainly a relatively small player, and its universities are not particularly visible. In the "QS World University Ranking", there are only two Swedish universities among the top-100; Lund university is ranked number 78, and KTH Royal Institute of Technology ranked number 98.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.6 Challenges and good practices in attracting international students

#### Challenges

As a government-appointed inquiry on the internationalisation of higher education in Sweden argues in a recently published report, there is a strong and mutually reinforcing connection between the quality, the internationalisation and the visibility or attractiveness of Swedish higher education institutions. Even though the quality of Swedish research and higher education is considered high, Swedish higher education institutions are not very visible in many other countries. As a result, the quality of higher education and research cannot fully contribute to internationalisation by attracting students and researchers. Highly internationalised research and education environments tend to feature a high level of quality, which also makes them visible internationally. The inquiry also notes that several other countries have focused more on internationalisation and attraction strategies than Sweden.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Tillväxtanalys (2018), p. 71-72.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2018>.

<sup>48</sup> SOU 2018:3, p. 87.

Conversely, inadequate internationalisation risks leading to lower quality and thus poorer visibility, according to the inquiry report. A lack of international awareness of Sweden as a destination is therefore a significant problem if Swedish higher education institutions are to remain attractive and Sweden is to continue to be a leading knowledge nation.<sup>49</sup>

On this basis, the inquiry proposed the following measures:

- The international presence of Swedish higher education and research should be increased through the establishment of an organisation abroad, based on the work of the current Offices of Science and Innovation that are organised within the Government Offices and have a foreign presence at six Swedish embassies.
- Alongside these offices, a pilot project should be launched in which two new international offices are established specifically to meet higher education's need for international cooperation, hosted by an agency outside the Government Offices.
- The Swedish Institute's remit to promote and market Sweden as a study destination should be expanded. It should also be given a new remit to provide information about Sweden as a knowledge nation abroad. A programme for Swedish "research and higher education ambassadors" should be established within the Swedish Institute.
- A pilot project for a five-year period should be initiated for postdoctoral appointments within the humanities, with the appointees simultaneously serving as Swedish senior lecturers abroad.
- A variable resource for a five-year focus on contacts with a specific country should be created to facilitate a coordinated gathering of strength.
- The coordinated "Team Sweden" groups within the framework of Swedish trade promotion abroad should include higher education institutions and research funding bodies in their work.
- The Swedish Council for Higher Education, the Swedish Higher Education Authority, the Swedish Institute, Sweden's Innovation Agency, and the Swedish Research Council should be tasked with supporting the internationalisation of Swedish research, higher education and research-linked innovation by way of providing continuous and in-depth information and analysis of international developments that are relevant to these areas.

Further proposals of the inquiry relate to the process of applying for residence permits for studies, which the inquiry recommends to facilitate, and to substantially increase the funding available for scholarships.

It has also been argued that tuition fees can have a negative comparative impact on the Swedish attractiveness for foreign students, if other countries offer free tuition. According to Tillväxtanalys (2018), Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands require third-country students to pay tuition fees, while there are no fees for this group in Norway and Germany.<sup>50</sup> Sweden introduced tuition fees for third-country students in 2010/2011. The main argument was that higher education institutions should compete to attract international students on the global market by offering high-quality education and not on the ground that education provided for free.<sup>51</sup> The recent government-appointed internationalisation inquiry recommended that tuition

<sup>49</sup> Inquiry on increased internationalisation of higher education institutions (2018): *Internationalisation of Swedish Higher Education Institutions, Summary of the reports SOU 2018:3 and SOU 2018:78, Stockholm, p. 28.*

<sup>50</sup> Tillväxtanalys (2018), p. 41-45.

<sup>51</sup> Proposition 2009/10:65.

fees should continue to apply, and only requested that universities should provide better information on what services tuition fees include, to increase transparency. It also recommended clearer rules on refunds of tuition fees that have already been paid, such as when a third-country national has paid a fee but not managed to be granted a residence permit, or in cases of illness.<sup>52</sup>

Other obstacles for international mobility of students to Sweden are the lack of affordable housing in many parts of the country, especially bigger university cities, and the difficulty for foreign students to secure funding for their stay. Also, the fact that the demand of foreign students to come to Sweden has been greater than Swedish students' interest in studying abroad means that there is a limit to expanding official exchange programmes, at least if these programmes are based on parity between the number of incoming and outgoing students.

Finally, a number of challenges relate to migration law and the processing of applications for residence permits for study purposes. As described above, the Swedish Migration Agency has to examine whether a person who applies for a residence permit for studies in Sweden really intends to study, or whether they have other motives of coming to Sweden. This is often challenging and can lead to long processing times, especially if the Migration Agency needs to ask for clarifications or supporting documents to assess an applicant's intention. To facilitate this process, it has been proposed that the Swedish higher education institutions are given a right to assess applicants' intention to study. The Migration Agency would then follow the higher education institutions' assessment when making its decision on a residence permit application.<sup>53</sup> A certification system for universities trusted to carry out this task could be introduced for this purpose.

#### Good practices

The Swedish Migration Agency has recently managed to shorten the processing times for residence permits for study purposes. This was achieved through an effort to work off "old cases" that had been pending for a long time, and through intensified cooperation with higher education institutions and other actors. Since 2017, doctoral students can be granted residence permits with a validity period of two years, instead of one year. This has reduced the number of applications for residence permit extensions and can certainly be considered a good practice.

Another positive aspect in Sweden in the context of migration law is that international students are exempted from the requirement to hold a work permit, which means that they have unrestricted access to all sectors of the labour market during and upon completion of their studies. They can also be granted a permit to look for work in Sweden after their final exams. Students can be accompanied by close family members, if they can support themselves while staying in Sweden.

Efforts to make Sweden known abroad as a knowledge hub and an attractive destination for studies have certainly also played a positive role. Initiatives such as the "Study in Sweden" website, which is run by the Swedish Institute and provides prospective international students with easy-to-read and at the same time comprehensive information on Swedish universities, Sweden as a country, scholarships and exchange programmes, student life, and many other aspects, can be considered useful tools. The various higher education institutions are actively promoting themselves abroad as well, using different methods and tools.

<sup>52</sup> *SOU 2018:78, p. 280.*

<sup>53</sup> *SOU 2018:78, p. 232-234.*

The various welcoming arrangements undertaken by Swedish higher education institutions and help regarding housing can certainly also be considered good practices.



## 4 Measures and incentives to retain international graduates

### 4.1 Measures and incentives for the retention of international graduates

#### Residence permits for job-seeking after studies

Third-country nationals holding a residence permit for studies at a university or other higher education institution in Sweden, and who have completed their studies, can get a residence permit to seek employment or examine the possibilities of starting their own business. This "job-seeker's permit" is currently granted for a period of six months, but it is likely that this validity period will be expanded following the implementation of EU Directive 2016/801.

To be eligible for such a permit, applicants have to fulfil the following conditions:

- They must still be in Sweden.
- They must hold a valid passport.
- They must have had a residence permit for university college education lasting at least two terms.
- Their last residence permit must have been a permit for university college studies (not "other studies").
- They must have completed their studies.
- They must plan to seek employment or examine the possibilities of starting their own business.
- They must be able to support themselves during the time for which they are applying.
- They must have a comprehensive insurance policy.

Once a job-seeker's permit is granted, the third-country national can stay in Sweden and work for as long as the permit is valid. If they are offered a permanent job, they can apply for a work permit and – if this is granted – stay in Sweden on that basis. Any occupation or profession, and any legal business activity, are permitted.

#### Support offered by higher education institutions

Support to international students to find work in Sweden after their studies is available, but not systematically. There is no explicit state policy to support international students who want to stay in Sweden other than providing a legal framework for job-seeker's permits and "status changes" from study permits to work permits.

Some higher education institutions work together with local companies to facilitate job-seeking for international students, but this does not seem to be a mainstream policy across all universities or university colleges. According to Tillväxtanalys (2018), a few universities have only recently started projects or activities in this regard, while a limited number of others have had such activities in place for a longer time. But there are also universities that do not engage in efforts to retain international students in Sweden after their graduation apart from, for example, offering help to write CVs and job applications. Tillväxtanalys mentions a special internship programme at one university college, where international students can gather work experience and get to know potential employers while still studying. Another university used a consultant to help international students find work opportunities. Others had alumni

programmes including mentorship programmes, which can help students establishing networks and contacts to employers.

Some universities have no centralised strategies or activities in place but individual faculties run their own labour-market related activities.<sup>54</sup> Some universities have alumni networks that, among other activities, share information about job opportunities.

### 4.2 Challenges and good practices in retaining international students

#### Challenges

The number of international students who remain in Sweden after their studies appears to be relatively small. In 2015-2016, the retention rate was estimated to be around seven percent.<sup>55</sup>

As regards challenges and obstacles to increasing the retention rate, a survey among higher education institutions that was conducted in 2017/2018 found that the lack of affordable housing in Sweden represented a significant obstacle.<sup>56</sup> Some higher education institutions have witnessed that international students have left Sweden because they were not able to secure adequate and affordable accommodation.<sup>57</sup>

Another challenge relates to the labour market. Many study programmes in Sweden include mandatory internships or training at companies, which can facilitate students' entry into the labour market at a later point in time, after their studies. But while academic studies are often possible in English, external actors that can offer internships or training often require knowledge of Swedish, as do employers at a later stage, when students try to find work.

Yet another problem is that international students often lack the private and professional networks that domestic students might have to get in touch with employers and find work.<sup>58</sup> Many universities are not particularly active when it comes to connecting international students to potential workplaces or employers; others have only recently identified this as a problem and started initiatives to improve networking and facilitate contacts to employers.

Universities have also expressed concern about the Swedish Migration Agency's handling of residence permit applications. While the average processing time is relatively short for first-time applications, it has been longer for extensions. Processing times have become shorter, however, and the average processing times for applications for extensions are now not significantly longer than for first-time applications.

<sup>54</sup> *Tillväxtanalys (2018), p. 59. The study by Tillväxtanalys, which is the source of this information, is based on interviews with staff at a number of universities and university colleges, but it does not state the universities' names, which therefore remain anonymous.*

<sup>55</sup> "Retention rate" calculated on the basis of the share of third-country nationals who were granted a work permit after having had a residence permit for studies; see *SOU 2018:3, p. 292.*

<sup>56</sup> *SOU 2018:3, p. 295-296.*

<sup>57</sup> *Tillväxtanalys (2018), p. 68.*

<sup>58</sup> *Tillväxtanalys (2018), p. 66.*

Students can also find it difficult to satisfy the financial support requirement. The longer the intended study period in Sweden is, the more difficult it becomes to provide evidence of sufficient resources. Students have also complained about the information available concerning the conditions for the extension of residence permits.<sup>59</sup>

#### Good practices

The introduction of a "job seeker's permit" in Sweden in 2014 can certainly be regarded as a good practice. Higher education institutions have reported that the possibility to be able to stay in Sweden and work plays a major role for many incoming students. Students can now stay in Sweden after their graduation and look for work for six months. However, this period is longer in several other countries, not least in Sweden's neighbouring countries Norway and Finland (12 months) as well as Germany (18 months).<sup>60</sup>

The fact that international students are allowed to work during their studies can also be considered a good practice, especially if other countries request prior authorisation or impose limits for the number of working hours.

<sup>59</sup> *Tillväxtanalys (2018), p. 67.*

<sup>60</sup> *Tillväxtanalys (2018), p. 54-55, 50.*

## 5 Bilateral and multilateral cooperation with third countries

### 5.1 Bilateral and multilateral agreements

The Swedish government has concluded bilateral cooperation agreements in the areas of research and education with around twenty countries, both European partner countries and countries in other world regions. Some bilateral agreements mainly deal with other areas but include provisions on cooperation in research and/or higher education. Others are linked to Swedish development cooperation with low- and middle-income countries.

The existing agreements vary in content. Some of them only outline general commitments to cooperate more, while others are more specific concerning certain fields or disciplines of research and /or studies, including the financing of cooperation.

Sweden's bilateral agreements on research and education have often been initiated by the respective partner country, and the Swedish government has not set out any priorities regarding what countries to cooperate with through bilateral agreements. Some of the existing agreements include provisions on meetings between the Swedish side and the respective foreign country. It is normally officials from the Swedish government offices that take part in such meetings, sometimes together with representatives from organisations that fund research activities.

There are also cases, however, in which the government has "outsourced" the contracting role for bilateral agreements to a public authority. For example, the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) has an agreement with the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) in South Korea and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research in Russia. The Swedish Council for Higher Education (Universitets- och högskolerådet) has an agreement with its Brazilian counterpart CAPES regarding the reception of students who have received a Brazilian study scholarship for studies abroad.<sup>61</sup>

A survey of higher education institutions that was conducted in the framework of a government-commissioned inquiry on the internationalisation of higher education and research revealed that 62 percent of the Swedish higher education institutions are of the view that Sweden's bilateral agreements are meaningful for their institutions' cooperation with other countries. The agreements are considered useful for initiating and financing new cooperation efforts, especially with countries in which the governance of the higher education system is more centralised than in Sweden, or where there is political instability. Bilateral agreements can thus facilitate contacts to countries or regions where cooperation has been underdeveloped or non-existent.

At the same time, higher education institutions also expressed that bilateral agreements could have stronger relevance if they included a clearer thematic focus, targeted measures, action plans and regular follow-ups.<sup>62</sup> In other words, they are regarded as being vague. There is little literature on bilateral agreements between

<sup>61</sup> *SOU 2018:3, p. 239-241.*

<sup>62</sup> *SOU 2018:3, p. 241.*

Sweden and other countries in the area of student mobility and research, or on their impact, hence it seems that their role is symbolic and limited in practice. As the higher education system in Sweden is decentralised and individual higher education institutions have considerable freedom to develop their own internationalisation strategies, including mobility arrangements for students and researchers, agreements at university level or even faculty level seem to have far greater practical relevance as broader, government-level bilateral agreements. It has been argued that Sweden's bilateral agreements on higher education and research should become more concrete.<sup>63</sup>

A relevant actor regarding bilateral cooperation is the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT). STINT was set up by the Swedish Government in 1994 with the mission to internationalise Swedish higher education and research. The foundation promotes knowledge and competence development within internationalisation and invests in internationalisation projects proposed by researchers, educators and the leadership of Swedish universities. STINT promotes internationalisation as an instrument to enhance the quality of research and higher education, increase the competitiveness of universities, and strengthen the attractiveness of Swedish universities.

STINT's mission also includes to encourage innovation through new collaboration forms and new partners. For example, STINT invests in young researchers' and teachers' international collaborations. Moreover, STINT's ambition is to be a pioneer in establishing strategic cooperation with emerging countries in research and higher education.<sup>64</sup>

## 5.2 Circular migration and brain drain / brain gain

The fact that residence permits for studies in Sweden are temporary suggests that incoming students shall leave again when their programme of study is finalised. As described earlier, however, it is possible for international students to remain in Sweden to look for work, take up employment, or start a business, both after and during their studies. Thus, there is neither a clear policy to avoid, nor to encourage brain drain.

However, increased mobility of international students is seen positively. When Sweden introduced the above-mentioned "job-seeker's" permit, which made it possible for international students to remain in Sweden after their final exams and look for work, the government argued in the related bill that the experience of studying in Sweden and the possibility to work there could have many positive effects, also in case an international student later returns to his or her home country. Study and work experiences could also facilitate legal circular migration.<sup>65</sup>

A recent study on the career pathways of international students who had studied in Sweden under the Swedish Institute's "Visby" scholarship programme showed that a substantial majority of the former scholarship holders are of the view that their time in Sweden had a positive impact on their careers, by helping them to acquire knowledge and establish professional networks. A majority of those who moved away from Sweden after their studies retained various types of contacts to Sweden, mainly through personal networks, alumni networks, and Swedish universities. By acting as

<sup>63</sup> SOU 2018:3, p. 209.

<sup>64</sup> [http://www.stint.se/en/stint/about\\_stint](http://www.stint.se/en/stint/about_stint).

<sup>65</sup> Regeringens proposition 2013/14:213, Cirkulär migration och utveckling, p. 36.

"knowledge brokers", mainly between their home country and Sweden, a majority of the scholarship holders also considered that they contributed to the development of their home countries. The scholarship holders viewed themselves as brokers both of disciplinary knowledge and of knowledge of the culture and values of another society. Roughly half of the former Visby scholarship holders moved back to their home country after their scholarships ended, while 27 per cent stayed in Sweden and about 23 per cent settled in a third country.<sup>66</sup> Thus, this study does not show that studying in Sweden and being granted a scholarship there leads to any major brain drain on countries of origin.

The Visby programme provides a number of full scholarships for master's programmes in Sweden. The programme aims to build an integrated, knowledge-based and research-intense region centered on the Baltic Sea and including the EU Eastern Partnership countries and Russia. It covers studies in all subject areas with an emphasis on sustainability, innovation and corporate social responsibility. Candidates from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine can apply.<sup>67</sup> There is also a Visby programme for doctoral students and post docs.<sup>68</sup>

## 5.3 International cooperation agreements between higher education institutions

Altogether, the various Swedish higher education institutions participate in around 30 different types of international cooperation. The number of students engaged in such cooperation varies between thousands of foreign exchange students studying in Sweden in the framework of the biggest cooperation agreement, Erasmus+, to very few foreign students in smaller programmes, such as the "Euroleague for Life Sciences". While most cooperation agreements exist between Swedish higher education institutions and partner institutions in other EU countries, cooperation also reaches beyond Europe.

A detailed mapping undertaken by the Swedish Higher Education Authority showed that in the academic year 2014/2015, there were a total of 9,500 agreements between Swedish higher education institutions and foreign ones (including within the EU) in the area of student exchange. 7,100 of these agreements were active at the point in time when the mapping was carried out. In addition, there were at least 300 agreements on joint study programmes with universities or other partners in foreign countries. Again, cooperation is most frequent with other EU countries and Norway, especially Germany, France, Spain, Finland and the UK, but the mapping also showed that the United States ranked number nine as regards the number of cooperation agreements in place. Other frequent non-EU partner countries of Swedish universities were China, Canada, and Australia.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> A. Åkerlund, A. Collsiö, M. Börjesson (2018): *Akademiskt utbyte och internationell migration - en studie av stipendiater inom Svenska institutets Visbyprogram 1997-2015, Rapport 2018:2, Stockholm: Delegationen för migrationsstudier.* <http://www.delmi.se/upl/files/147953.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> <https://si.se/en/apply/scholarships/visby-programme-masters/>.

<sup>68</sup> <https://si.se/en/apply/scholarships/visby-programme-phd-postdoc/>.

<sup>69</sup> Universitetskanslersämbetet (2016): *Internationella utbildningssamarbeten - en redovisning av regeringsuppdraget om högskolornas utbildningssamarbeten med utländska lärosäten, Stockholm, p. 31.*

As an example for a cooperation framework between Sweden and non-EU countries is the Linnaeus-Palme programme. Linnaeus-Palme is an exchange programme intended to support bilateral contacts between higher education institutions in Sweden and low- and middle-income countries. The programme offers exchanges for students and teaching staff. It is financed by the Swedish development cooperation agency SIDA and administered by the Swedish Council for Higher Education. Project-related cooperation is financed for up to eight years, participants receive scholarships, and no tuition fees need to be paid. In 2016, 32 Swedish higher education institutions participated in the Linnaeus-Palme initiative.<sup>70</sup>

Science without borders is a scholarship program that was instituted by the Brazilian Government in 2011. It targets students and researchers in mathematics, science and engineering-related subjects (STEM) with the aim of covering 100,000 individuals. The scholarships funds up to one year of study at foreign universities. In Sweden, 19 higher education institutions offered courses within this programme in 2015. The formal counterparts of the Science without borders agreement between Sweden and Brazil are CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior) in Brazil and the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR).<sup>71</sup>

Many Swedish higher education institutions are running joint study programmes in cooperation with foreign universities. "Joint study programme" means that two or more universities arrange a certain programme jointly and that participating students are awarded a double or joint degree upon successful completion.

#### 5.4 Challenges and good practices

As regards bilateral agreements between Sweden and third countries at central, government level, there is a lack of clear analysis regarding the practical meaning and effect of these agreements. The practical impact of these agreements seems to be less tangible than bilateral or multilateral agreements between Swedish and foreign higher education institutions, official exchange programmes, or scholarship programmes. However, bilateral government-level agreements can pave the way and facilitate concrete partnership arrangements between Swedish and foreign institutions.

In 2018, a survey among higher education institutions looked into obstacles for international mobility of students. While it did not focus on the question of bilateral and multilateral agreements, it found that the fact that the demand of foreign students to come to Sweden was greater than Swedish students' interest in studying abroad means that there is a limit to expanding official exchange programmes. This is especially challenging if exchange programmes are based on parity between the number of incoming and outgoing students. In the academic year 2017/2018, the number of Swedish students studying abroad decreased for the third academic year in a row. While 24,100 Swedish students studied abroad in 2016/2017, their number was 23,800 in 2017/2018. By contrast, the number of incoming foreign students (from all countries) was 37,800 in 2017/2018, an increase of 5 percent compared to

<sup>70</sup> *Universitetskanslersämbetet (2016), p. 27.*

<sup>71</sup> *Brazil did not grant any new scholarships under this framework in 2016/17, but students who had already been admitted were able to complete their studies; see Universitetskanslersämbetet (2016), p. 28.*

the previous academic year. Thus, the gap between outgoing and incoming students has recently widened.<sup>72</sup>

There also seems to be a challenge regarding the financing of higher education in Sweden. The current system of financing can act as an obstacle to recruiting more exchange students. Each higher education institution receives funding by the state on the basis of the number of students enrolled, but only up to a certain level or number. If a higher education institution recruits more students, it does not receive financing for these. While this is not a problem regarding the recruitment of free-mover students from third countries who pay tuition fees, the financial ceiling can limit the number of incoming exchange students because these are normally exempted from tuition fees. If a university already has a high number of domestic students, close to the ceiling, it is not clear why it would work towards recruiting additional exchange students who do not pay fees.<sup>73</sup>

A number of good practices can be identified, based on the challenges as described above. Bilateral agreements at central level can facilitate cooperation between universities in Sweden and abroad. Bilateral agreements can also enable contacts and open communication channels that have not existed before.

Scholarship schemes and exchange programmes play an important role to produce concrete results and attract more students to Sweden, hence it has been proposed that scholarship and exchange programmes should be expanded.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> *Universitetskanslersämbetet/Statistiska Centralbyrån (2018): Internationell studentmobilitet i högskolan 2017/18, UF 20 SM 1803.*

<sup>73</sup> *SOU 2018:3, p. 295-296.*

<sup>74</sup> *SOU 2018:78, p. 330-335.*

## 6 Concluding remarks

This study has shown that attracting and retaining international students is an evolving policy area in Sweden, and one that various stakeholders have devoted considerable energy and resources to. Attracting and retaining students is both a matter of migration policy and part of the Swedish government's and higher education institutions' ambitions to create internationally competitive and reputed education, teaching and research environments. Compared to certain other migration-related topics, study-related immigration has not triggered any major controversial debates in Sweden, it is overwhelmingly seen positively.

As regards migration law and policy, the Swedish regulations for study-related immigration have undergone a number of changes over recent years, and they have generally focused on making it easier for third-country students to get access to Sweden and stay there. The most notable examples are the introduction of a possibility for foreign students to stay in Sweden after their studies and look for work, and the option for PhD students to get a (renewable) residence permit for two years, instead of only one. Students who manage to find a job or a viable self-employed activity in Sweden after their graduation have significantly better prospects to become part of Swedish society, move from temporary to permanent residence permits and, eventually, become Swedish nationals, than before. At the same time, it must not be forgotten that there are also obstacles to increased student mobility towards Sweden; mainly the requirement for free-movers to pay tuition fees and the relatively strict financial support requirements act as barriers. Students with limited financial resources, who have not qualified for a scholarship, can find it hard to be admitted to Sweden. Particularly for free-movers from developing nations, Sweden is certainly not among the top attractive destinations.

As regards higher education institutions' strategies to attract, welcome and retain international students, much has happened over recent years. Although this study could not provide a full picture regarding decentralised attraction and retention measures, the examples it showcases – in terms of, e.g., welcoming arrangements, preparatory courses, and guidance and counselling – clearly indicate that Swedish universities and university colleges have a high level of activity and ambition in this regard. There are some external factors that limit their impact, however, such as the lack of affordable housing in many parts of Sweden and the fact that foreign students face difficulties when trying to find a job after their studies; difficulties that are related to a lack of knowledge of the Swedish language and lacking personal networks and contacts to potential employers. Overall, retention strategies in terms of bringing international students closer to the labour market could be further developed, mainly at the local and regional level.

There is a lack of clear evidence regarding positive impacts of national, government-level bilateral or multilateral agreements with third countries on student mobility. Programme-based initiatives and transnational partnerships between higher education institutions appear to play a bigger role for incoming and outgoing students than government-level initiatives. Whether more concrete and targeted bilateral agreements could improve the recruitment of international students and simultaneously help to address other migration-related issues, such as the objective to prevent irregular migration, is a question that this study could not explore. As the EU ventures

towards "migration partnerships" with certain third countries, potential future Swedish activities in this regard could be worth examining.

As regards exchange programmes, increased international student mobility is sometimes limited by the fact that Swedish students appear to be less inclined to study abroad than foreign students are interested in coming to Sweden. As there is a clear ambition to internationalise education, teaching and research, it is therefore important to not only address the conditions for student mobility towards Sweden but also outward mobility of Swedish students.

Finally, the Swedish frameworks for attracting and retaining international students are likely to undergo some significant changes in 2019 and beyond – both as a result of the implementation of the revised EU Directive on students and researchers and as a consequence of the adoption of a new overarching internationalisation strategy for higher education in Sweden. The European Migration Network and other actors should keep track of such developments as a large part of the information provided in this study might soon be outdated.



### **About the EMN**

The European Migration Network (EMN) is an EU funded network, set up with the aim of providing up-to-date, objective, reliable and comparable information on migration and asylum for institutions of the European Union, plus authorities and institutions of the Member States of the EU, in order to inform policymaking. The EMN also serves to provide the wider public with such information. The EMN was established by Council Decision 2008/381/EC adopted on 14 May 2008. The Swedish Migration Board is the Swedish National Contact Point (NCP) for the EMN.

Migrationsverket • 601 70 Norrköping

phone +46 (0)771-235 235 • e-mail [emn@migrationsverket.se](mailto:emn@migrationsverket.se)

[www.migrationsverket.se](http://www.migrationsverket.se) • [www.emnsweden.se](http://www.emnsweden.se)

