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Report by the SULF Doctoral Candidates Association

How current migration policies harm international researchers and undermine higher education in Sweden

Testimonials from PhD students and postdoctoral fellows



How current migration policies harm international
researchers and undermine higher education in Sweden

Compiled by the SULF Doctoral Candidates Association
Board (SULF-DCA)

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1. Introduction: Key obstacles posed by current Swedish migration policy

Sweden relies heavily on recruitment of foreign researchers to promote innovation and develop internationally renowned research institutions. Today, approximately 40 percent of PhD students have a foreign background, according to the Higher Education Authority (UKÄ)¹. However, since sweeping anti-immigration reforms were enacted in 2021, non-EU/EEA (“third country”) PhD candidates and other early career researchers have faced mounting challenges — including long permit processing times that restrict international travel and de facto disqualification from permanent and long-term residence status.

In response to widespread opposition and dissatisfaction in the higher education community, a government-mandated inquiry was initiated to assess the impact of current migration policies to international PhD students and Swedish universities. Released in December 2024, the report² highlighted the urgent need for policy reform and proposed changes intended to facilitate recruitment and retention of international talent. However, these proposals face a long path to government approval – and the SULF Doctoral Candidates Association (SULF-DCA) believes that in their current form, they would not go far enough to resolve the **main hurdles facing non-EU/EEA PhD students today**:

- 1) long permit processing times of uncertain duration that restrict travel abroad
- 2) opaque, misleading, and inconsistent criteria for assessing permit applications
- 3) systemic bias or unfairness in the assessment of applications
- 4) a lack of opportunity to seek long-term settlement and employment in Sweden after completion of PhD studies
- 5) limited options for appealing successfully against incorrect or unjustified decisions by Migrationsverket

2. Overview of SULF-DCA’s investigation

SULF-DCA believes there is a need to highlight the **ongoing challenges that international PhD candidates and early career researchers continue to encounter in the current Swedish migration system** – which, in spite of recent proposals, has remained essentially unchanged since 2021. From 2023-2025, the SULF-DCA Board undertook a comprehensive investigation – interviewing international PhD students, doctoral associations, university administration, and union representatives from nearly every university in Sweden. This report details initial findings from our investigation, which inform our long-term advocacy efforts.

The body of the report compiles **excerpts from ca. 40 firsthand testimonials (collected in 2024-2025) from current PhD students and recent graduates** who represent diverse nationalities, academic disciplines, and higher education

¹ <https://www.uka.se/download/18.72ddc32918529b363f9d77d/1675168187635/rapport-2022-10-10-hogskolans-framtida-behov-av-doktorsexaminerade.pdf>

² <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/departementsserien-och-promemorior/2024/12/ds-202431/>

institutions in Sweden (Table 1). Organized thematically, these accounts detail pervasive obstacles, disruptions, and delays that non-EU PhD candidates and researchers face in the current migration system, in their own words. Statements have been lightly edited for spelling, grammar, and clarity where needed, and varying degrees of anonymity have been granted in accordance with each respondent's preferences.

Collectively, the testimonials reveal a harsh (and often invisible) parallel reality for non-EU researchers, whose immigration status impedes full participation in academic life. **Their widely corroborated experiences of professional marginalization, diminished quality of education, and limited research opportunity contrasts starkly with the public image of Sweden's modern, inclusive, internationalized, and democratic higher education system.**

Table 1. A profile of survey participants

Nationalities	Fields	Universities
Australia	Engineering	Chalmers
Colombia	Humanities	Linköping
India	Natural sciences	Linnaeus
Iran	Medicine	Lund
Nigeria	Physical sciences	Göteborg
Russia	Social sciences	Karolinska
Turkey		Umeå
USA		Uppsala
and other countries (some respondents requested anonymization of their nationality)		Stockholm

3. Thematic organization of testimonials in this report

- 1) Impediments to research progress and loss of professional opportunities compared with EU/EEA colleagues.
- 2) The difficulty of transitioning to a work or research permit forces international PhD students to seek alternative employment, including manual labor positions, just to secure the right to remain in Sweden.
- 3) Lack of transparency, integrity, and consistency in the way Migrationsverket handles cases (including variable processing times and subjective judgments by case officers)
- 4) Reports of blanket discrimination based on nationality.
- 5) Diminished quality of life and widespread mental health consequences stemming from unstable residence status
- 6) Sweden is no longer an attractive destination for international early career researchers.

4. Testimonials

4.1 Impediments to research progress and loss of professional opportunities compared with EU/EEA colleagues

Current migration policies penalize PhD students who engage in international collaboration, which is a cornerstone of academic development and often essential for research progress. PhD students are restricted from traveling abroad while waiting for permit extensions and cannot stay outside of Sweden beyond a designated period (even for work assignments) without losing their chance to seek permanent/ long-term residence. As a result, non-EU/EEA PhD students are forced to choose between securing their residency in Sweden or fulfilling their research obligations and pursuing professional development opportunities. Their dependence on academic supervisors to maintain their residence status also places them at risk for exploitation and abuse.

“If your intention is to stay in Sweden, you can’t prioritize your research or career — you have to sacrifice it.”



“In my year 5, I applied to LTR (long-term residence). I was 100% working and a PhD student at the time of application. The application was rejected. The main reason is that I had not fulfilled the time requirements due to my research stay in Germany, which was encouraged by my university. A chair professor in our field from Cambridge University contacted me asking if I would be interested in a few months of visit to join a project where all my expenses will be paid. I felt honored and happy, but I was not sure what to respond as the issue with regard to my residency was not solved. If your intention is to stay in Sweden, you can’t prioritize your research or career — you have to sacrifice it.”

PhD student in Humanities at Uppsala University


“Most places don’t want you to do a Postdoc in the same country... But if you leave Sweden (for more than one year) it gets absurd because you get your permanent residence permit canceled out.”



“In most fields of computer sciences, you publish in conferences, journals don’t matter. And so (attendance at conferences) can be a migration issue in most fields of computer sciences. Wallenberg programs have allocated funds for going abroad for a period of time, three to six months of travel. Even if Migrationsverket have promised not to revoke a current permit if PhD students are abroad while working for Swedish universities, this time gets deducted from (the qualifying period for) PR afterwards. Most places don’t want you to do a Postdoc in same country... But if you leave Sweden (for more than one year) it gets absurd because you get your permanent residence permit canceled out.”

Igor, PhD student in Computer Science at Umeå University

“I like to live in Sweden, but to be honest, I felt a bit trapped here, missing out on potentially great opportunities. I do it all in the hope of getting permanent residency.”



“To ensure a successful career as a researcher, it can be very important to establish international connections as well as discuss and promote your work at conferences abroad. Because I had spent so much time abroad with health issues, I had to avoid these efforts in order to not wrack up too much time abroad for long term residency applications. I like to live in Sweden, but to be honest, I felt a bit trapped here, missing out on potentially great opportunities. I do it all in the hope of getting permanent residency. Though after the revocation of the PhD PR guarantee in 2020, I always feel as if something could again suddenly change and these sacrifices would be in vain. I can accept agreements that involve some degree of sacrifice if both parties uphold the deal, but if one side promises things that they don't provide, I could have made other life choices with all this time waiting.”

Paul (pseudonym) from USA, PhD student at Lund University


“I had Postdoc offers from Ireland and France. I thought that if PR was not granted, I will leave Sweden and accept one of the Postdoc offers. Unfortunately no decision.”

Anonymous

“I have had to withdraw from a conference because I can't travel (while waiting for the permit application to be processed). I felt so much shame even though it's not my fault.”

Jessica (pseudonym) from Australia, PhD in Biogeochemistry at Umeå

“Since I've been stranded in Sweden, I've been accepted to 5 different big international conferences which I could not attend due to the travel restrictions.”




“Since May 2023 when I've been stranded in Sweden, I've been accepted to 5 different big international conferences which I could not attend due to the travel restrictions. I've also gotten travel scholarships for two of them as an early career scholar (which I now need somehow to return to the funders) ... So it feels like the whole process is just busting my academic career in all possible ways.”

Anonymous

"I lost several job opportunities and career growth opportunities because I didn't have a PR or Swedish citizenship."

Anonymous


"Due to migration bureaucracy the faculty now tended to recruit more Swedish and EU students, and the international PhD students became fewer and fewer."



"It was also hard, as (due to migration bureaucracy) the faculty now tended to recruit more Swedish and EU students, and the international PhD students became fewer and fewer. So, if we found difficulty, we could not share the experience and ask for suggestions...The condition was even worse for international PhD students supported by external funding (e.g., stipend, funding by external companies, etc.)."

Anonymous, Linnaeus University

"My previous supervisor refused to sign the ISP until I removed my manuscript from [the document]... Because I needed the ISP to obtain my residence permit, I had no choice but to yield."



"My previous supervisor refused to sign the ISP until I removed my manuscript from [the document], with the ill intention of submitting my project work without me. Because I needed the ISP to: sign up for the half time seminar, transfer to the new lab, and obtain my residence permit; after months of fighting alone, I had no choice but to yield. There needs to be a mediating body to prevent students from getting abused."

Anonymous

4.2 The difficulty of transitioning to a work or research permit forces international PhD students to seek alternative employment that doesn't fit their educational profile in order to secure the right to remain in Sweden

Most international PhD students face expulsion from Sweden immediately after completion of their studies, since they face discrimination on the job market without having permanent residence (but paradoxically, also need to provide a long-term job contract in order to qualify for permanent residence). A number of international PhD students reported having to put their PhD studies on hold to find lower-paying jobs in remote areas that would provide them with a permanent contract – just so they can qualify for permanent residence and have a chance of continuing their academic career in Sweden.

"After the (Covid) restrictions were lifted, I was excited to go back to doing my research, but at the same time, the new Aliens Act came into effect, and I was left with two difficult choices:

1. I push through my Phd, but then I run into the risk of not being able to secure a permanent job and will have to leave the country.
2. Put my PhD on hold, doing everything I can to find a job that fulfils the requirements for a permanent residency and get back to the Phd when things are more stable. I chose the second option."

Anonymous


"I had to resort to odd jobs, in particular working in a warehouse where no education of any sort is required just so I could eke out a living and support my family."



"I had to resort to odd jobs, in particular working in a warehouse where no education of any sort is required just so I could eke out a living and support my family...It's a modern slave trade. Payment is layered in a complex and exploitative system. You first work 4 hours straight non-stop, then you have a 30-minute break, then 3 hours, then a 15-minute break, then 1 hour work. When I go to the warehouse, I leave the house close to 11:35 and get home at 2:30 in morning, it's a four-hour commute daily. When you get back you can't think of writing a word because you are thoroughly used."

Lagbaja from Nigeria, PhD in International Relations


“The HR at my university informed me that I cannot apply for a researcher position from the “search for work” permit I would have to leave the country to apply for such a position... I really feel like I need the LTR if I want to continue here as a researcher.”



“The HR at my university informed me that I cannot apply for a researcher position from the “search for work” permit; I would have to leave the country to apply for such a position. Not only do I feel like this would reduce my competitiveness and delay projects, my last permit of a researcher took about half a year to process, which would be financially devastating for me if I wanted to continue my academic career in Sweden. I really feel like I need the LTR if I want to continue here as a researcher. Otherwise, I would have to take a job not related to the long efforts I put into my PhD.”

Paul (pseudonym) from USA, PhD student at Lund University

“I finished my PhD in mid-December 2023...On 1st Feb 2024, I started working 80 % as a cleaner. I got an invitation to a conference in Cambridge but couldn’t go.”




“I finished my PhD in mid-December 2023, and my employment/contract ended a week after the defense...On 1st Feb 2024, I started working 80 % as a cleaner. I got an invitation to a conference in Cambridge but couldn’t go, and also have a conference coming up in Lund but can’t go. It’s against the normal or usual way of staying in academia, if you want to build a career.”

Anonymous, PhD graduate from Uppsala University

“Before my doctoral study permit expired in December 2023, I had to find another way to stay legally. Job-seeking permits wouldn’t work for me because I couldn’t continue my research. Furthermore, applying for a researcher permit was very risky because it depended on a short 3-month contract, and there was no guarantee that my application would be processed in time. I appealed to the court, and the court's decision was in my favor, but today, 4 more months have passed and still, I have no decision on my LTR case (which means if I cannot find another source of financial support, it will be rejected).”

Azar Rezapour from Iran, PhD in Tumor Immunology at Gothenburg University

“My suggestion to keep foreign talents/researchers: either change the requirement of PR or change the policy of recruiting freshly defended researchers.”




“With co-applicants, specifically teenage children, it is difficult to get PR. A permanent position or long-term job agreement helps/make it easy. However, this is not very easy to secure directly after the defence of PhD thesis. Usually, the university offers short-term extensions, which is problematic. My suggestion to keep foreign talents/researchers: either change the requirement of PR or change the policy of recruiting freshly defended researchers.”

Anonymous

4.3 A lack of transparency, integrity, and consistency in the way Migrationsverket handles cases

Long processing times and inconsistent/subjective interpretations of the law by case officers often lead to rejection for PR or LTR. Moreover, the Migration Office doesn't seem to recognize that many PhD students are on short-term contracts that are renewed incrementally for sick leave and work assignments such as teaching, administrative duties, etc. – which can lead to further problems when extending residency.


“My application was rejected because Migrationsverket claimed that it is not enough that I have a permanent contract, but I also need to show that the employer has started paying my salary... The entire appeals process took over two years, and incurred massive financial costs, not to mention the mental stress. During the entire time my case was being processed at Migrationsverket and the courts I was not able to leave Sweden.”



“I secured a permanent job and applied for a permanent residency, and to my surprise, my application was rejected because Migrationsverket claimed that it is not enough that I have a permanent contract, but I also need to show that the employer has started paying my salary. My application was examined in March 2022, and the job started in the same month, so there was no way for me to show payslips. I appealed the decision, and to my surprise, again, my appeal was rejected. The reasoning was even more odd this time. The judge misread the job contract and claimed that is not a permanent contract even though it clearly stated that is a permanent contract. I filed another appeal to the high court in Stockholm, which was approved, and the case was sent back to the immigration court in Gothenburg which decided in my favour and granted me the permanent residency. The entire process took over two years, and incurred massive financial costs, and not to mention the mental stress. During the entire time my case was being processed at Migrationsverket and the courts I was not able to leave Sweden.”

Anonymous


“Since there is no time-limit for the case closure at all and I can't get any other visa or invite anyone now, I feel trapped and isolated in Sweden.”



Because my PhD studies are supposed to be 4 years +prolongation because of teaching or anything else, I applied for the new residence permit and still haven't received it. Yes, I did it almost as early as it's allowed, and it's been around 12.5 months without any decision. And since there is no time-limit for the case closure at all and I can't get any other visa or invite anyone now, I feel trapped and isolated in Sweden.”

Third-year PhD student in Materials Science, from Russia


“They kept me hanging for 27 months and during that time (since I am a non-EU citizen) I could not leave Sweden, couldn't see my family, couldn't go for academic conferences related to my PhD, and couldn't go for business trips related to my job at the company.”



“They kept me hanging for 27 months and during that time (since I am a non-EU citizen) I could not leave Sweden, couldn't see my family, couldn't go for academic conferences related to my PhD, and couldn't go for business trips related to my job at the company. After 27 months Migrationsverket gave me the shocking decision— they rejected my permanent residency and gave me a two-year temporary work permit instead! In the reasoning they mentioned that I had only 3 years and 11 months of a residence permit type of PhDs (this is while I was still a PhD student for 6 years including the times that I was working full time for the company and working on my thesis in the weekends).”

PhD student in Engineering, from Iran


“The application took about two years to process. Even when I asked that my case be concluded, there was no decision at all.”



“The application took about two years to process. Even when I asked that my case be concluded, there was no decision at all. During this waiting time, I felt trapped in a spot in Sweden for the two years that I spent waiting for a decision. I could not attend any conferences that could boost my network and job opportunities.”

Lagbaja from Nigeria, PhD in International Relations

“The total processing time since I submitted my application until receiving the decision was more than 7.5 months. My status was shifted from being eligible for PR to being ineligible for PR due to the long processing time.”



“On 16 August 2023, I had fulfilled four years working as a PhD student in Sweden and my university submitted my case application as an extension of my PhD. At that time, I had an 18-month contract left of my PhD. On 15 January 2024, I requested to consider my ongoing case as PR. After 6 months, I requested for a conclusion (on 19 Feb 2024). At this time, my contract had 12 months left, which still fulfilled the MV requirement for obtaining PR after the court adjustment. However, MV rejected my request for conclusion and the process became 1 month longer. MV made a decision that they granted me an extension visa instead of PR on 5 April 2024 with the reason that I had only an 11-month contract, which did not meet the maintenance requirements. The total processing time since I submitted my application until receiving the decision was more than 7.5 months. My status was shifted from being eligible for PR to being ineligible for PR due to the long processing time. This long processing time also restrained my publication plans and caused the difficulties in choosing the publication outlets. I had to choose the conferences happening in Sweden (due to no visa during waiting time), having a good ranking, and relevant to my topic and fields. How many conferences could I find?”

Anonymous

4.4 Perception of blanket discrimination based on nationality

Many PhD students from non-western countries, particularly those deemed 'problematic', face unusually long wait times and even face expulsion from the EU during or immediately after their studies at the recommendation of Säkerhetspolisen, SÄPO. PhD students from Russia and Iran in particular have expressed concerns about a lack of due process leading to expulsion by default, leaving them to return to authoritarian regimes where they may face arrest or persecution.

"My husband was advised to leave the EU and withdraw his application (for a permit extension to complete his PhD studies). Otherwise, the most likely scenario for him would be to receive a deportation and entry ban immediately after his defense...So, he was facing two options: defend but say goodbye to his career and research abroad for 20 years, or throw out six years of his research and life."



"Migrationsverket has ruined our family and our lives. My husband started his PhD at KTH in February 2018, my two kids and I joined him as co-applicants six months later. We are both from Russia. We received extensions for our residence permit twice - in 2019 and 2021. I got into a PhD position at SU in February 2023, and around the same time we applied for another extension, as my husband had one year left of his PhD (externally funded by this time through Swedish Space Agency). After six months of waiting we requested to conclude our case, the request was denied, so we appealed the decision in the Migration Court, which granted a positive decision requesting Migrationsverket to conclude our case in August 2023. After months of waiting there was still no decision...

According to our lawyer, the current trend is that students from "unfriendly" countries like Russia and Iran are currently treated as a potential security risk and are receiving rejections with an EU entry ban. I personally know two Russian researchers who have received a 25-year EU entry ban as a result of these Cold War-like tactics. So, my husband was advised to leave the EU and withdraw his application. Otherwise, the most likely scenario for him would be to receive that deportation and entry ban immediately after his defense, which was scheduled for Autumn 2024. So, he was facing two options: defend but say goodbye to his career and research abroad for 20 years, or throw out six years of his research and life.

I cannot state enough what devastating effects it had on our family... I am broken, devastated, I miss my family, and I blame Migrationsverket and SÄPO for their discriminatory policies and inhumane treatment of researchers who happen to be unlucky to be born in the wrong country. As far as I am informed, none of the universities are aware of such policies or offer any support to the affected Russian researchers."

Anna Metreveli, PhD student at Stockholm University

“Most [Russian researchers] are awaiting a decision from SÄPO. But the rest have already received negative statements and have been given 5, 10, or 20-year EU re-entry bans, or have withdrawn their applications to avoid these bans... MV seems to be aiming to supply this regime (Russia) with great researchers and engineers.”



“I have established contact with a considerable number of people among doctoral students, academic and industrial researchers, and engineers, who has applied for 1st residence permit, extensions, LTRs, permanent residence, citizenships. Most of them are awaiting a decision from SÄpo. But the rest have already received negative statements from SÄpo and have been given 5, 10, or 20-year EU re-entry bans, or have withdrawn their applications to avoid these bans. Essentially, we all have only one thing in common: our place of birth and, consequently, Russian passports, which we did not choose...MV seems to be aiming to supply this regime (Russia) with great researchers and engineers.”

Anonymous

“We noticed that achieving LTR (long-term residence) was quite difficult in the beginning. They made it much easier for British citizens for a while, but then they noticed that others (including PhD students) were also taking advantage of it. So, when all the British citizens in Sweden got it, they made it difficult again. It is just discrimination.”

Mert Can Yilmaz, PhD graduate at Uppsala University & Berrak Pinar Uluer Yilmaz, Doctoral student at Stockholm University

“I applied for a residence permit extension almost as early as it's allowed and it's been around 12,5 months without any decision. I made a request to conclude the case after six months of waiting and it was denied (because of "lack of information"). But right before it they actually requested personal information about my Russian past which isn't something they usually ask from PhD students...It wasn't confirmed but I think that my case is in the Swedish Security Service because of my nationality and subject.”

3rd year PhD student from Russia in Materials Science

4.5 Many experience diminished quality of life and poor mental health resulting from their unstable residence status

International PhD students who chose to start their academic careers in Sweden have made considerable investments to establish their professional networks here, often foregoing opportunities elsewhere. The Aliens Act upended their career plans and many have reported struggling with their mental health due to the constant stress of adapting to changing migration policies and arbitrary interpretations of the law by Migrationsverket, which have left them unable to make basic personal, professional, or financial plans for the future.

“I came to Sweden optimistic and hopeful. I am just so worn out now, I don’t even recognize myself. I tried really hard to work and provide what I think is valuable for this country, really believing it is a great place. And it really is. I just want some control of my life back, I want to relearn how to be myself.”



“These many years of stress and uncertainty have really worn me down. I feel like I'm spending my energy trying to predict and plan things many years ahead (e.g., rental contracts, jobs, residency requirements, avoiding trips) and don't have the energy to invest in my immediate life. It is hard to relax and keep up with hobbies and friends. I realize how easy it is to take for granted the simple fact that you are allowed to just be somewhere, rather than to constantly jump through hoops to earn it... I came to Sweden optimistic and hopeful. I am just so worn out now, I don't even recognize myself. I tried really hard to work and provide what I think is valuable for this country, really believing it is a great place. And it really is. I just want some control of my life back, I want to relearn how to be myself.”

Paul (pseudonym) from USA, PhD student at Lund University

“I would like to highlight the (difficult) living conditions of (PhD students) during the permit processing time – not being able to renew our ID or leave country, and how vulnerable PhD students are every step of the way (in the migration process) ... No one understands how painful and how existential it is to live your life (like this), how isolating it is.”

Anonymous


“It has been very stressful and draining. I am not hundred percent sure either if it is worth it at the end. I did not expect such a thing would happen in Sweden.”



“I could not visit my family for many months because of the residence permit issues...I do not know how many hours or perhaps days I spent writing over probably a hundred emails, calling people, etc. during these tough processes. It has been very stressful and draining. I am not hundred percent sure either if it is worth it at the end. I did not expect such a thing would happen in Sweden.”

PhD graduate from Uppsala University

“I found myself in a leadership position in an international collaboration but without any job security, and the threat of having to leave the country if I lost my position hanging over me...Eventually the stress associated with this contributed to a mental health breakdown which resulted in several months of sick leave and resulted in me exiting academia.”




“In early 2022 I would have been eligible for permanent residency status based on the old policy regarding researchers, but the law change made me ineligible to apply. As a result, I found myself in a leadership position in an international collaboration but without any job security, and the threat of having to leave the country if I lost my position hanging over me. This made it difficult to take politically difficult leadership decisions in the collaboration, and amped up the stress associated with writing further grants to extend my temporary position. Eventually the stress associated with this contributed to a mental health breakdown which resulted in several months of sick leave and resulted in me exiting academia.”

Matthew Lawson, Postdoc in Physics at Stockholm University, from the USA

“This whole process, even just long waiting times, feels unrewarding after all the contributions, both financial and intellectual, we have made to Sweden...Returning to Russia is not an option due to the potential risk of being sent to the war.”

Anonymous


“There’s a persistent underlying stress knowing that I’m going to undergo another bureaucratic process that is going to take time out of my research.”



“There’s a persistent underlying stress knowing that I’m going to undergo another bureaucratic process that is going to take time out of my research. It’s quite insulting also because the majority of people I know doing their PhD are from EU countries don’t have to continually prove their doing their studies properly or fill out a form legitimizing their relationship with someone. I felt angry because I pay taxes, I pay rent, I have a first-hand rental contract, I haven’t committed any crimes, I have friends and a community in Sweden. I was angry that they can take as long as they want to process something, seemingly regardless of how it impacts the person who’s waiting, how it impacts their life...My dad is sick, and has had some surgeries, but I couldn’t go (home to support him).”

Jessica (pseudonym) from Australia, PhD in Biogeochemistry at Umeå


“I went from an aspiring researcher with a lot of potential to a defeated person.”



“The entire process has left me extremely stressed, and shook my faith in the Swedish system all together. I went from an aspiring researcher with a lot of potential to a defeated person whom his biggest hope is just to be allowed to practice my very basic right to live in peace without worrying about being deported.”

Anonymous

“I have been so destabilised, disoriented and disillusioned that I could hardly focus on many of the exciting projects that I lined up to undertake after my studies.”




“I have been so destabilised, disoriented and disillusioned that I could hardly focus on many of the exciting projects that I lined up to undertake after my studies. Some of my revise and resubmit articles are lying in wait for completion. I had neither the time nor the mental balance to focus on them and get them out for publication. This is quite distressing and depressing. Someone with less mental fortitude and supportive family can contemplate suicide.”

Anonymous, PhD in International Relations

“Many Ph.D. students [in our Faculty] encountered long-term sickness due to stress from the workload, not being supported by supervisors and the heads of departments (in permit applications), and migration issues.”

Anonymous, non-EU PhD student at Linnaeus University

“I cannot plan for the future because I don't know where I will live after my PhD... PhD students also need to have sustainability. One aspect of sustainability is residing stably and having a stable life.”



“I cannot plan for the future because I don't know where I will live after my PhD. I feel sad with the current policies and the humanity in Sweden because after many years PhD students have contributed to the innovation in Sweden, MV get rid of PhD students (I mean we don't have a permanent visa to reside here) just because of the maintenance requirement while Sweden is ranked as one of the top countries in innovation. MV needs to know that to have maintenance requirements, PhD students also need to have sustainability. One aspect of sustainability is residing stably and having a stable life. With that amount of time for paying tax, using our brains, and health to contribute to Swedish society, is it not enough to prove that we can live independently by ourselves without relying on the welfare systems?”

Anonymous

“Companies often turn me away once they learn I need their sponsorship to stay in Sweden. Although I love research and want to continue in academia, the uncertainty and short-term nature of project contracts make it impossible to plan my life.”




“The continuous uncertainty and restrictive new policies not only hinder my career development but also my personal stability and well-being. Now, even though I need to start studying for a medical license, without a secure residency status, I can't commit to this process. Trying to find a job in the industry has also been hard. Companies often turn me away once they learn I need their sponsorship to stay in Sweden. Although I love research and want to continue in academia, the uncertainty and short-term nature of project contracts make it impossible to plan my life.”

Azar Rezapour from Iran, PhD in Tumor Immunology at Gothenburg University

4.6 Sweden is no longer an attractive destination for international early career researchers

Sweden will lose qualified international applicants to other countries due to its migration policies, and its universities will become less competitive as a result. When asked if they would recommend Sweden as a destination for PhD studies, our respondents said the following:


“I think Sweden owes an apology to the young researchers who chose to move here. When we moved here the legislation was different. When they changed it, they made it so it would affect the people who already made the decision to live here.”



“I think it's a no. I feel at home now in Sweden, but I saw the dramatic change in Sweden the last seven years, maybe I had a bit romantic ideas about Sweden before I moved here. Now, I wouldn't say yes. I think Sweden owes an apology to the young researchers who chose to move here. When we moved here the legislation was different. When they changed it, they made it so it would affect the people who already made the decision to live here. Usually people who have done the PhD have already moved around, and they have a vision that they might settle down – that vision is destroyed.”

Anonymous, PhD graduate from Uppsala University


“This ongoing struggle represents a significant constraint to international talents like myself, who are eager to contribute meaningfully to Swedish society but find themselves hampered by policy limitations.”



“I am forced to reconsider my commitment to a country where I have invested so much of my life and aspirations. This ongoing struggle represents a significant constraint to international talents like myself, who are eager to contribute meaningfully to Swedish society but find themselves hampered by policy limitations. It is crucial for policymakers to understand the personal and professional confusion caused by these regulations, which seem to contradict Sweden's reputation as a nurturing hub for global research and medical expertise.”

Azar Rezapour from Iran, PhD in Tumor Immunology at Gothenburg University

“I would definitely not recommend it if you are serious about doing research.”




“I would definitely not recommend it if you are serious about doing research. If you are doing it in industrial application field, give it a try, but in core science like physics or biology, it's difficult to have a connection to get a job to get a PR so you can live in Sweden...Try Poland or Germany, etc.”

Anonymous

“PhD is good in Sweden, but if there are other choices, I recommend going somewhere else.”

Anonymous


“I would prefer to stay in research and move to another country rather than stay in Sweden and leave academia.”



“I would like to move to Stockholm and do a Postdoc at KTH or SU...(but) I would prefer to stay in research and move to another country rather than stay in Sweden and leave academia - possibly the UK (Cambridge)...maybe the Netherlands.”

Victor Gonzalez from Colombia, PhD graduate in Physics, University of Gothenburg


“The inefficiencies at Migrationsverket not only disrupt the lives of international talents, but also diminish Sweden's attractiveness in the global labor market.”



“The inefficiencies at Migrationsverket not only disrupt the lives of international talents, but also diminish Sweden's attractiveness in the global labor market. Addressing these issues is essential, not just for the benefit of applicants like us but for the overall competitiveness and fairness of Sweden as a desirable destination for skilled professionals.”

Mert Can Yilmaz, Doctoral Student at Uppsala University & Berrak Pinar Uluer Yilmaz, Doctoral student at Stockholm University

“Unless you are lucky enough to have dual citizenship in an EU country, why wouldn't you go to a different country that has slightly better infrastructure in place to help migrants?”



“I think it was my mistake to do a postdoc in Sweden.”

Ivan from Russia, Postdoc at Gothenburg University in Chemistry


“At the moment I would say don't do it. I'm glad I've done my PhD in Sweden but unless you are lucky enough to have dual citizenship in an EU country, why wouldn't you go to a different country that has slightly better infrastructure in place to help migrants?”

Postdoctoral researcher at SLU Uppsala

“I never recommend coming to Sweden for PhD studies.”

Maria (pseudonym) from Russia, PhD student in Humanities


“I feel like we've wasted the best years of our productive adulthood on promoting Swedish science, paying Taxes, A-kassan, and high insurance fees, while not receiving anything in return.”



“I feel like we've wasted the best years of our productive adulthood on promoting Swedish science, paying Taxes, A-kassan, and high insurance fees, while not receiving anything in return.”

Anna Metreveli, PhD student at Stockholm University

“I spoke with a recruiter who told me: ‘your PhD has no meaning in Sweden’.”



“The education, technical skills and the rest are not valued that much. I spoke with a recruiter who told me: ‘your PhD has no meaning in Sweden’.”

Lagbaja from Nigeria, PhD in International Relations

5. Key takeaways from SULF-DCA's investigation

Our investigation demonstrates:

1. Widespread disapproval of current Swedish migration policies, which disenfranchise doctoral students by **disrupting their research, education, and professional development.**
2. A perceived **lack of transparency and consistency in Migrationsverket's assessment of cases**, including unreasonably long permit processing times.
3. Doctoral students are **disqualified from permanent or long-term residence by default**, often due to delays in case handling times and poorly defined criteria surrounding income requirements.
4. Perceived **discrimination by nationality** with regard to permit handling times and case outcomes
5. **Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression** among foreign PhD students due to a lack of agency and stability caused by migration insecurities.
6. International PhD students experience **diminished academic freedom and are more vulnerable to abuse** as a result of their migration status.
7. Many PhD students report that **university staff and supervisors were poorly trained in communicating with Migrationsverket**, some failed to provide employment documentation needed for permit applications.
8. A number of non-EU/EEA **PhD students regret the decision to locate their doctoral studies in Sweden**, since their migration status has constrained their research opportunities and limited their potential to build a long-term career here.

6. Recent government proposals for policy reform: SULF-DCA'S position on the 2024 migration inquiry by the Ministry of Justice

The report from the recent government-mandated migration inquiry, presented by the Ministry of Justice in December 2024, proposes a number of policy changes that are meant to improve recruitment of international researchers. SULF-DCA's stance is **that these proposals, in their current form, do not go far enough to ensure migration security for the vast majority of non-EU/EEA PhD students.**

It is also important to emphasize that the new proposals are just proposals – they have no legal force unless ratified by the government. Swedish migration policy (as it pertains to doctoral students) has, at the time of this report's publication, remained essentially unchanged since the Aliens Act reforms of 2021. SULF-DCA expresses concern that media publicity surrounding the recent migration inquiry may perpetuate the misconception that the report's proposals are *fait accompli* –

which telegraphs the message that Sweden remains an attractive destination for international researchers without actually making any concrete progress towards that goal. **Until the new migration proposals lead to meaningful changes enshrined in law, they amount to little more than window dressing.**

A brief (but not exhaustive) synopsis of key proposals in the migration report that affect doctoral students is presented in Table 2 below, with along with SULF-DCA's commentary. These statements reflect the position of the SULF-DCA Board but are generally aligned with the position of SULF central (our parent organization).

Table 2: SULF-DCA'S comments on the main proposals of the 2025 migration inquiry report by the Swedish Ministry of Justice

Policy proposal	SULF-DCA's position
Doctoral students/researchers qualify for permanent residence (PR) after three years of consecutive residence	<p>Reducing the qualification period for PR from 4 years to 3 years will still prevent the vast majority of international PhD students from qualifying for permanent residence, since an applicant must have at least a year of employment remaining at the time that Migrationsverket assesses their application.</p> <p>Non-EU/EEA doctoral students should have a transparent and attainable path to PR in which the majority of PhD graduates actually have a reasonable prospect of success. This can be achieved in any number of ways, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing the qualifying period to 2 years • Reducing/eliminating the maintenance requirement for PhD students • Allowing all PhD students to qualify for PR if they have completed their degree within their term of employment.
An applicant should be able to revoke a time-limited study permit and replace it with another permit at any time, while remaining in the country	Good – doctoral students should be able to apply for permanent residence whenever they meet the requirements, not just in conjunction with an expiring short-term permit.
A permit can be revoked if the student has not made acceptable study progress	It is not clear whether this proposal would also apply to PhD students. If so, there should be safeguards in place to ensure that supervisors do not abuse this measure to exert undue influence over doctoral research or attempt to expel migrant students without cause. Preventing weaponization of migration systems against junior researchers is essential to preserve academic freedom and research integrity.
A study permit can be revoked if the student has worked more than they are allowed (proposal: 15 hours/week) outside their	It is uncertain whether this rule will apply to PhD students. If so, it is potentially detrimental since part-time work concurrent with research can ease the transition to the workforce at the end of PhD studies. Supplemental income from secondary

studies. Exemption if the work is directly pertaining to one's education.	employment may also be the only means by which PhD students can meet the maintenance requirement to qualify for permanent residence. Therefore, SULF-DCA opposes this measure.
Extends period of 'search for work' visa after completion of PhD studies to 18 months, if you can prove you have sufficient funds. Also exempts those with a research or study permit from meeting the standard minimum salary requirements to qualify for a work permit for their first job (instead, other salary conditions in line with collective agreements or similar stipulations would apply).	<p>Under the current rules, it is difficult for international PhD students to meet the qualifications for a work visa given the income requirement and the fact that most prospective employers will not consider an applicant who does not already have the right to work – regardless of whether the person meets the permit requirements. The inquiry's proposals would facilitate the transition from doctoral studies to work, but only if employers are aware that they can hire "third country" PhD graduates without encountering problems. Otherwise, recent graduates will continue to face discrimination in the job market.</p> <p>For those who want to remain in research, the proposal to allow PhD graduates to apply directly for a research permit from within Sweden is welcome. Those who want to move to the private sector should be aware that there is currently a separate government proposal to raise the income level required to obtain a regular work permit, but one of the migration inquiry's proposals would exempt those who have previously held a research or study permit from meeting that requirement for their first job.</p> <p>Under the current rules, PR and LTR remain the most plausible pathways to long-term employment for PhD graduates in Sweden. However, obtaining a "search for work" permit also disqualifies applicants from seeking LTR. To improve PhD graduates' chances of finding stable employment, SULF-DCA proposes that Migrationsverket should no longer interpret the "search for work" permit as an interruption of continuous residency in Sweden.</p>
A child born in Sweden can obtain a residence permit from within the country	This would be a positive change – the current system penalizes all international researchers who become new parents, but disproportionately affects female researchers who have children while in Sweden.
Universities must keep a study register and report citizenship of students, as well as info about whether they have stopped/paused/completed their studies, to Migrationsverket.	There is a risk of disclosing potentially sensitive data that can be misused by certain parties. Therefore, SULF-DCA opposes this measure.
Foreigners should be able to apply for permits to leave Sweden while their extension application is processing.	The circumstances under which travel abroad would be permitted may be open to interpretation. What are the "special reasons" for which people can apply? How quickly would such applications be assessed? Are there any emergency provisions

	for those who have experienced a family illness or bereavement, for example?
When assessing the self-support requirement, it has to be considered 'likely in forecast that foreigner will be able to support themselves in future for some duration'	There should be clear protocols for what counts as 'likely forecast' and 'some duration.' Migrationsverket has repeatedly used the ambiguity in this phrasing to reject PhD students and postdocs for PR/LTR. Nothing will change unless the rules are clarified by the Migration Courts, and they have been reluctant to do so.
Doctoral students have the option to obtain a research permit, facilitating mobility within the EU	These recommendations are solid, as long as there are clear steps for implementation.
Scholarships should be recognized in the self-support requirement, if they meet the income threshold established for salary after tax.	While it would be a positive step forward for scholarships to be recognized as a source of income, the threshold (currently 6000 kr/month after taxes + housing expenses) might disqualify some applicants. Questions remain about the treatment of non-university grants: if international or private scholarships are not uniformly accepted, this can create uncertainties for many researchers. This proposal would also have greater effect if postdoctoral scholarships could be counted towards the income requirement.
New provisions for family members of international researchers/students, including the ability to apply for a permit from within Sweden.	Provisions to eliminate red tape for family members of researchers and doctoral students would be a welcome change.
The legal changes are proposed to come into effect on March 1, 2026.	The proposed timetable is not by any means guaranteed. Given that four years have already passed since migration reforms were enacted under the Aliens Act in 2021, and that these reforms were passed without regard to the impact on international researchers, SULF-DCA advocates for a shorter timetable. Many of these proposals could already be evaluated and implemented sooner and in staggered fashion, rather than all at once.

7. Synopsis: An urgent need to reform current migration policy for international researchers in Sweden

Unequal opportunities for international researchers

Swedish universities strive to be centers of research excellence and innovation, while pledging to uphold values of academic freedom, equal opportunity, and democratic governance. In recent years, these objectives have been greatly undermined by the country's exploitative "revolving door" migration policies, which permit recruitment of international talent to bolster innovation, but deny migrant scholars equal access to professional opportunities and preclude them from achieving long-term stability in their residence status – basic prerequisites to building a successful research career.

End false advertising and mixed messaging about migration policy

There are chronic, glaring discrepancies between the public representation of migration processes as explained by Migrationsverket, and the reality of interacting with the migration system as a foreign researcher. Such discrepancies do not arise by accident, but rather by design. Non-EU/EAA ("third country") doctoral students and early career researchers who immigrate to Sweden should not find their work and professional opportunities impeded by their migration status – nor should prospective candidates be misled about their immigration prospects in the recruitment process. If Sweden aims to grow its international stature in research and higher education, it should establish migration policies that are transparent, straightforward, and attractive to international talent.

Universities must play their part

Universities as employers and research institutions should not only do their part to advocate for migration reforms to support their own development goals, they should work constructively wherever possible to counteract the disenfranchisement of migrant scholars within their academic communities – first and foremost by providing the personnel, resources, and training to support third country nationals who require prompt communication with Migrationsverket and accurate, up-to-date employment documentation when renewing a residence permit in Sweden. Universities can also assure greater stability to early career researchers if they offer more permanent positions or longer fixed-term positions, ex. employing doctoral students in two-year increments. Finally, higher education institutions should strive to increase competence and awareness regarding the potential for migration insecurities to affect academic freedom, research integrity, and power dynamics within work environments.

New migration proposals have a long way to go

The recent recommendations set forth by the Swedish Ministry of Justice represent a significant step forward in recognizing the dire need for migration policy reform. However, the report's keystone proposals (ex. reducing the qualifying period for permanent residence to three years rather than four years) actually do little to create realistic pathways to a stable residence status for the vast majority of non-EU/EEA doctoral students in Sweden. If the aim is to improve long-term recruitment and retention of international talent in Swedish higher education, these proposals do not go far enough. SULF-DCA's message to international researchers who are weighing a move to Sweden in 2025 and beyond: do your homework, know what to anticipate, and beware the fine print.

**The SULF Doctoral Candidates Association (SULF-DCA) is a subsidiary of SULF, but its board is organizationally and editorially independent. This report was authored by members of the SULF-DCA Board.*



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