



CHAPTER 1

The Structure of Higher Education and Research in Sweden

Sweden's higher education and research system is characterised by government responsibility for overall organisation, funding, and quality, combined with academic freedom and a strong link between education and research. This chapter outlines the main features of the system and the roles of the national authorities responsible for higher education and research. It describes how higher education is governed and quality assured, how institutions are funded and organised, and how qualifications and degrees are structured. It also covers admissions, grading, tuition, student finance, and the conditions under which research is conducted in Swedish higher education institutions.

Key characteristics of Swedish higher education

The core responsibilities of higher education institutions in Sweden are to provide education grounded in scholarship, artistic practice, and proven experience, and to conduct research and development. Institutions are also expected to engage with the surrounding community and ensure that the knowledge and expertise they generate benefit society.

Higher education in Sweden has a long tradition, with Uppsala University – the country's first university – founded in 1477. Today, higher education is provided by institutions categorised as universities, university colleges, and independent higher education providers. The vast majority of higher education is delivered by public-sector institutions. As of 2025, there are 50 higher education institutions in Sweden, of which 31 are public-sector: 18 universities (16 public), 12 university colleges (11 public), and 5 university colleges of the fine, applied, and performing arts (4 public). The remaining 15 are independent higher education providers.

Higher education in Sweden is free of charge for Swedish, EU/EEA, and Swiss citizens as well as for holders of permanent and most temporary Swedish residence permits. There are also a few other exemptions, but these apply to very small groups of students.

Compared with higher education systems in many other countries, the Swedish system is relatively flexible. It is largely based on individual modules, which allows students to take single modules without enrolling in a full programme. Most higher education institutions offer both campus-based and distance education.

Swedish higher education has long been open to people of all ages, not only to those entering directly after upper-secondary school. It plays an important role in lifelong learning

and remains accessible later in life, for example through modules designed for professional or personal development, without the need or intention to complete a full qualification.

Higher education institutions also provide third-cycle (doctoral) education and conduct the majority of publicly funded research in Sweden. In monetary terms, more than half of their activities consist of research and third-cycle education.

Swedish Higher Education Authority

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet, UKÄ) is an independent government agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. The Authority's activities are financed through government funding.

The Authority's main areas of responsibility are:

- Quality assurance of higher education and research, and appraisal of degree-awarding powers for both public-sector higher education institutions and independent higher education providers
- Legal supervision of higher education
- Monitoring efficiency, carrying out follow-ups, and analysing future trends in higher education
- Managing national statistics for the higher education sector
- Representing Sweden within the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Swedish Council for Higher Education

The Swedish Council for Higher Education (Universitets- och högskolerådet, UHR) is an independent government agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. The Council's activities are financed through government funding, commissions from higher education institutions, and support from bodies such as the European Commission and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

The Council's main areas of responsibility are:

- Coordinating the national admissions process to higher education
- Managing the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (SweSAT)
- Providing information on higher education in Sweden
- Evaluating foreign qualifications for study or employment
- Supporting international exchange and cooperation across all levels of education
- Developing digital services in collaboration with higher education institutions
- Contributing analyses and recommendations in education and skills provision
- Serving as Sweden's national agency for Erasmus+, ENIC-NARIC, and Eurydice.

Regulation of Swedish higher education

Higher education in Sweden refers to post-secondary education governed by higher education legislation. Although post-secondary education also includes for example vocational

and folk high school education, these constitute a separate system and are not covered in this publication.

Higher education is defined both by its level within the education system and by the requirement that it be based on scholarship or artistic practice as well as proven experience. It is the largest form of post-secondary education in Sweden in terms of volume.

The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for matters concerning higher education and research. The Government also defines which national qualifications may be offered and sets the requirements for them.

Governance of higher education in Sweden

All Swedish public-sector higher education institutions are governed by the same legislation. The Swedish Parliament and Government hold overall responsibility for higher education and research, primarily through the Higher Education Act (1992:1434) and the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100), both available in English via the Swedish Council for Higher Education (www.uhr.se).

The Act regulates the operations of public-sector higher education institutions. It outlines the characteristics of education at different levels, enshrines academic and research freedom, and sets organisational requirements such as the presence of a board of governors and a vice-chancellor. The Act also defines the duties of teachers, student influence, and institutional responsibilities for promoting equality, widened participation, lifelong learning, international engagement, and sustainable development.

The Ordinance mandates student influence and governs entry requirements, selection procedures, the appointment of teaching staff and third-cycle students, as well as course syllabuses, grading, and qualifications. The Government determines which qualifications may be awarded and their required scope and learning outcomes. These are specified in national qualification descriptors that apply across all higher education institutions, ensuring a common national standard while leaving institutions free to design the structure and content of their courses and programmes.

In addition to sector-specific legislation, public-sector higher education institutions are subject to the general framework governing all public agencies, including legislation on administrative procedures, budget management, public access to information, archiving, language use, discrimination, work environment, and employment conditions in the public sector. Government funding for first-, second-, and third-cycle education, as well as research, is determined in the national budget and specified in the institutions' annual public service agreements issued by the government.

Independent higher education providers are regulated by the Act Concerning Authority to Award Certain Qualifications (1993:792), also available in English at www.uhr.se. This legislation sets conditions for awarding specific qualifications and requires adherence to parts of the Higher Education Act. Independent higher education providers must participate in external evaluations and align with national quality assurance regulations. They are often also governed by government contracts that stipulate specific requirements.

Legal supervision of higher education institutions

The Swedish Higher Education Authority supervises higher education providers to ensure compliance with the legislation that applies to each category of institution. Public-sector higher education institutions are monitored for their adherence to the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance, the Administrative Procedures Act (2017:900), and their internal regulations. Independent higher education providers are supervised in relation to the parts of the Higher Education Act and the qualification provisions of the Higher Education Ordinance that apply to their operations, as well as the Act Concerning Authority to Award Certain Qualifications.

Accreditation and degree-awarding powers

Sweden does not have an accreditation system of the kind found in many other countries. Instead, accreditation takes the form of granting degree-awarding powers. These powers are unlimited in time, provided that quality requirements are met and maintained.

Degree-awarding powers are granted either by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (for public-sector higher education institutions) or by the Government (for independent higher education providers). The Swedish Higher Education Authority monitors compliance through its quality assurance system, and powers may be withdrawn if standards are not upheld.

The Government also decides on the establishment of public-sector higher education institutions and determines whether an institution should be granted full university status. In Sweden, full university status refers to a general entitlement to award third-cycle qualifications across a wide range of subject areas. However, there is no formal legal definition of university status, and the term university is not legally protected. Consequently, some institutions with full third-cycle entitlement are not formally called universities, while some that use the title lack this entitlement. All higher education qualifications are, however, of equal academic status, regardless of the type of institution or its degree-awarding powers.

The distribution of degree-awarding powers in Sweden also differs from that in many other countries, where universities generally have comprehensive and permanent rights to award qualifications across all fields. In Sweden however:

- Some public-sector higher education institutions hold full university status and therefore have general third-cycle entitlement
- Other public-sector institutions do not have this entitlement but still have broader powers than independent higher education providers when awarding first- and second-cycle qualifications
- Institutions without full university status have limited powers to award third-cycle qualifications and somewhat restricted powers to award second-cycle qualifications
- Independent higher education providers must apply separately for each qualification they wish to award.

All higher education institutions – both public-sector and independent – must apply for the right to award professional qualifications and qualifications in the fine, applied, and performing arts.

The autonomy of Swedish higher education institutions

Public-sector higher education institutions in Sweden operate with considerable autonomy within a system of management by objectives. The Government sets overarching goals, but institutions decide independently how to meet them. While most higher education institutions are government agencies, ministerial interference is prohibited by law.

Higher education institutions are free to decide on organisational structure, internal resource allocation, course and programme content, student admissions, and research activities. Freedom of research is also guaranteed in the Instrument of Government, one of the four fundamental laws that make up the Swedish Constitution.

Staffing decisions are largely decentralised, though three academic positions – professor, senior lecturer, and associate senior lecturer – are regulated by law.

Swedish national quality assurance of higher education and research

According to the Higher Education Act, higher education institutions must ensure high standards in both education and research, and use their resources efficiently. Quality assurance is a shared responsibility between staff and students. The Swedish Higher Education Authority, as the national quality assurance agency, is responsible for the external quality assurance of both public and independent higher education institutions.

The national quality assurance system is based on the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance, the Act on Responsibility for Good Research Practice and Review of Research Misconduct (2019:504), the Government Communication Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2015/16:76), and the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). In addition, it is informed by national and international frameworks for research quality, including the European Charter for Researchers.

The objective of the national quality assurance system is to assess the quality of processes and outcomes in education and research, and to support higher education institutions in their continuous quality enhancement. The system consists of four main components:

- Institutional reviews of higher education institutions' internal quality assurance processes
- Programme evaluations
- Appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers
- Thematic evaluations.

Reviews and evaluations are carried out by independent panels appointed by the Swedish Higher Education Authority. Panels include academic experts, student representatives, and labour market representatives nominated by higher education institutions, students' unions, and other relevant organisations. In their reports, the panels assess whether the higher education institution meets the assessment criteria, highlight strengths and good practice, and identify areas for improvement. The Authority makes the final decisions based on these reports.

Sweden is also active in international cooperation on quality assurance within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Swedish Higher Education Authority is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

Student influence in higher education is governed by law

Student influence at Swedish public-sector higher education institutions is regulated by the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance, and the Ordinance on Students' Unions (2009:769). The regulations give students at these institutions the right to be represented in decision-making and preparatory processes that are significant for the situation of students and their studies.

Students are also entitled to representation on the board of governors at public-sector higher education institutions. Students, along with staff, must also be consulted in the appointment of a vice-chancellor, with the board deciding how this consultation is conducted.

All courses must include a course evaluation. Results must be made available to the students enrolled in the course, and institutions are required to report on any actions taken in response.

Although the Higher Education Act does not apply in full to independent higher education providers, these institutions are included in the national framework for quality assurance. Students' views on the quality of education at these providers must therefore be taken into account in quality reviews.

Funding of Swedish higher education and research

Swedish higher education institutions are primarily funded by the government. As higher education is largely free of charge for students, tuition fees account for only a small share (4 per cent in 2024) of institutional income. Funding is allocated separately for education and research.

Funding of first- and second-cycle education

Funding of first- and second-cycle education is performance-based. It is calculated using the number of enrolled students, measured as full-time equivalents, and completed higher education credits, measured as annual performance equivalents.

Each Swedish higher education institution is assigned a funding cap that specifies the maximum compensation the Government can provide for first- and second-cycle education delivered in a given year. To access their full recurrent funding for education, institutions must deliver a specified volume of education. Funding levels vary by disciplinary domains, with fields such as the fine, applied, and performing arts receiving the most resources and the fields of humanities, social sciences, theology, and law the least.

For more details on funding of first- and second-cycle education, see Chapter 7, Funding of Higher Education and Research in Sweden.

Funding of third-cycle education and research

Government support for third-cycle education and research is provided through recurrent research funding, which higher education institutions distribute across research areas at their own discretion. In addition, a significant share of research funding is awarded competitively through government-financed research councils and research-funding government agencies. Swedish higher education institutions also receive a relatively large share of their research funding from private foundations and non-profit organisations, as well as European Union programmes.

For more details on funding of third-cycle education and research, see Chapter 7, Funding of Higher Education and Research in Sweden.

Research at Swedish higher education institutions

Most publicly funded research in Sweden is conducted at higher education institutions, while research institutes play a more limited role. This sets Sweden's research landscape apart from that of many other countries. The scale of research activity differs across institutions; larger, broad-based, and specialised institutions conduct considerably more research than smaller or more recently established ones.

Information in English on research opportunities in Sweden is available at www.vr.se.

Under the Higher Education Act, researchers are free to choose research problems, develop methods, and publish results. The Act also emphasises academic credibility and good research practice, along with the responsibility of higher education institutions to safeguard and promote academic freedom.

For more details on the funding of and research at Swedish higher education institutions, see Chapter 7, Funding of Higher Education and Research in Sweden and Chapter 8, Research at Swedish Higher Education Institutions.

Swedish Research Council

The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, VR) is a government agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. It is Sweden's largest public funder of research, supporting high-quality research across all scientific fields through competitive grants. The Council plays a central role in strengthening the Swedish research system and promoting long-term knowledge development.

The Council's main areas of responsibility are:

- Awarding research grants through open, peer-reviewed calls
- Advising the Government on research policy and strategic priorities
- Monitoring and analysing developments in the Swedish and international research landscape
- Promoting open access to research results
- Supporting international research cooperation and infrastructure.

The Government research policy bill

Every four years, the Government presents a research policy bill that sets out the budget and strategic direction for research and research funding in Sweden. The current bill, covering the period 2025–2028, prioritises research excellence, internationalisation, and innovation.

Qualification and degree structure in Swedish higher education

Study programmes at Swedish higher education institutions are structured according to the three-cycle system used in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). All programmes follow the Bologna structure, which is now the sole system used across the sector.

The implementation of the Bologna process in Sweden

The Higher Education Ordinance was amended in 2007 to align with the Bologna Process. Sweden has fully implemented the three key commitments of the process: the three-cycle system of qualifications supported by Qualifications Frameworks and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); recognition of qualifications based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention; and quality assurance aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Although Sweden has fully adopted the three-cycle structure, it does not follow the standard 3+2+3 model in terms of duration, as programme lengths vary between qualifications and fields of study.

Swedish higher education qualifications are awarded at three levels:

- First cycle: Higher Education Diploma (120 ECTS) and Degree of Bachelor (180–240 ECTS)
- Second cycle: Degree of Master (60–120 ECTS)
- Third cycle: Degree of Licentiate (120 ECTS) and Degree of Doctor (240 ECTS).

A Higher Education Diploma is a shorter qualification that forms part of the first cycle. It is distinct from the short-cycle programmes recognised in some other countries.

A Degree of Master can be either one year or two years of full-time study.

A Degree of Licentiate is a shorter third-cycle qualification corresponding to two years of full-time study.

A Diploma Supplement in English is automatically issued with all Swedish higher education qualifications. The Swedish Council for Higher Education provides a standardised template for higher education institutions to use in the production of Diploma Supplements.

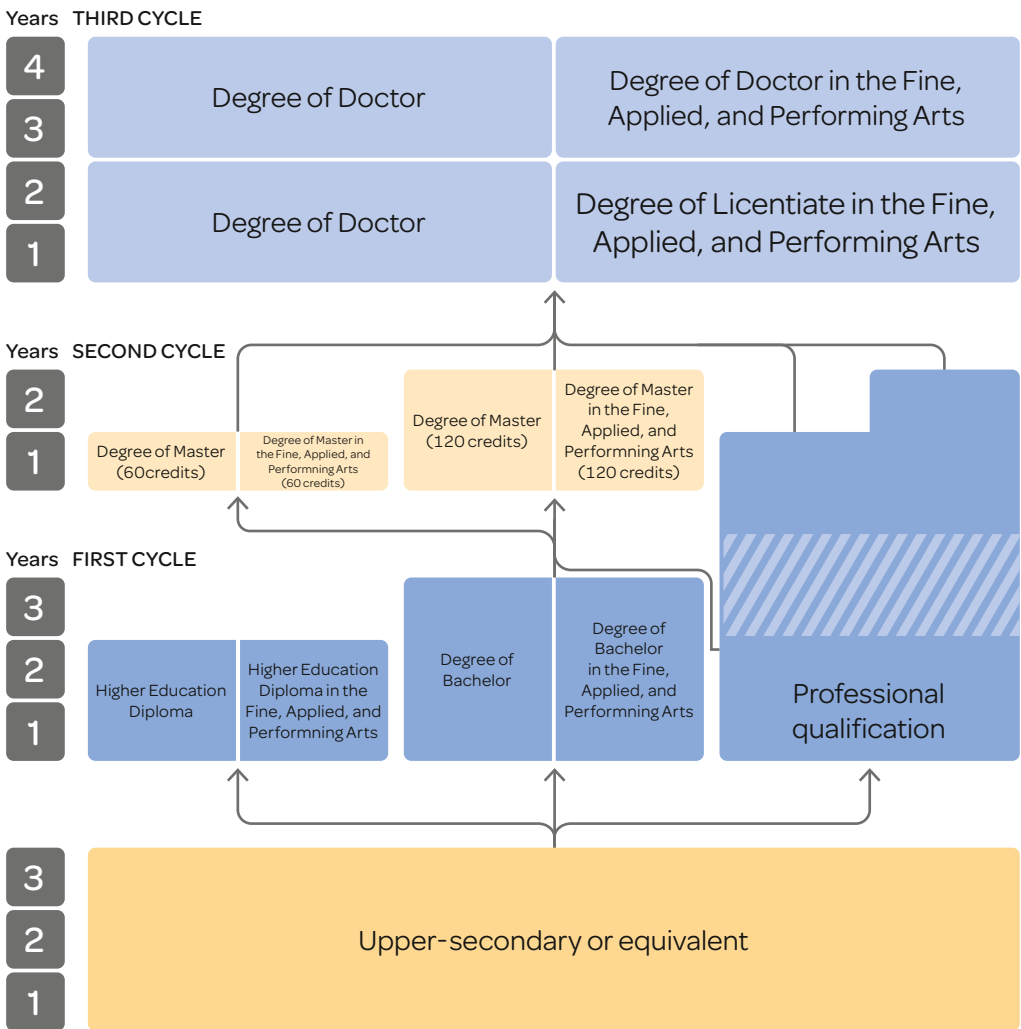
Three types of higher education qualifications are awarded

Higher education institutions award three categories of qualifications, all of equal academic status (figure 1.1):

- General qualifications
- Qualifications in the fine, applied, and performing arts
- Professional qualifications.

English translations of qualification titles are standardised at the government level, but higher education institutions may add a prefix and specify the main field of study.

Figure 1.1: Qualifications framework within Swedish higher education



General qualifications and qualifications in the fine, applied, and performing arts

Both general qualifications and qualifications in the fine, applied, and performing arts are awarded at the first-, second-, and third-cycle levels.

Professional qualifications

Approximately 50 programmes leading to a professional qualification are offered by Swedish higher education institutions, primarily for regulated professions. These qualifications are awarded at the first and second cycle.

Several professional qualifications are awarded at the second cycle, including the Master of

Laws (270 ECTS), the Master of Science in Engineering (300 ECTS), and the Master of Science in Medicine (360 ECTS). These long, integrated programmes lead directly to a second-cycle degree without the intermediate award of a first-cycle qualification. As such, they do not require a prior three-year first-cycle qualification, which is otherwise an entry requirement for most second-cycle programmes.

The Swedish Council for Higher Education maintains an English-language list of all Swedish professional qualifications at www.studera.nu.

Professional qualifications commonly lead to regulated occupations

Approximately 60 professions in Sweden are regulated by legislation, requiring specific qualifications, authorisation, or other formal recognition to practise. Many of the professional qualifications awarded by Swedish higher education institutions lead to these regulated professions.

Recognition of professional qualifications in Sweden is also governed by Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications, which facilitates mutual recognition of professional qualifications across EU and EEA countries.

The Swedish Council for Higher Education provides an English-language list of regulated professions and the government agencies responsible for formal recognition at www.uhr.se.

Swedish qualifications frameworks for higher education

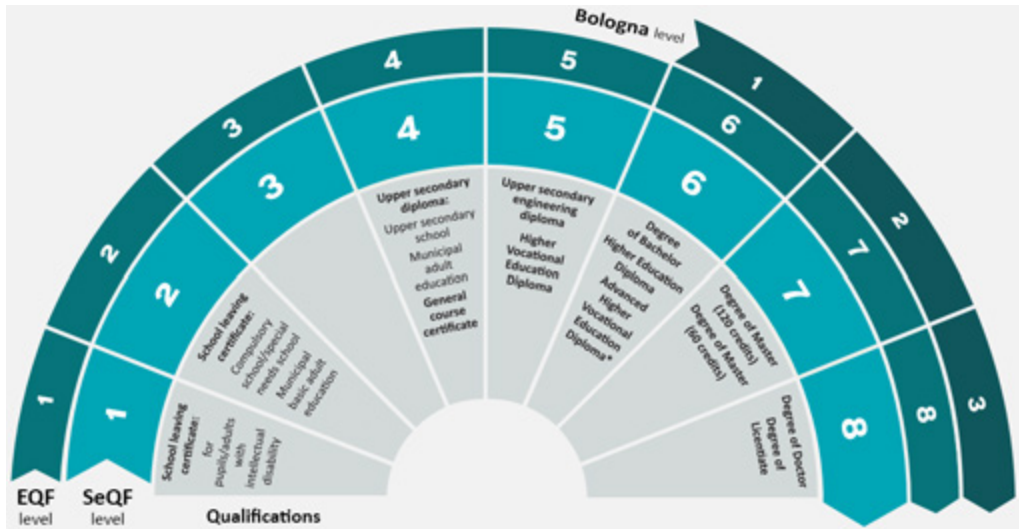
Sweden's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for higher education is referenced to the Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). These frameworks define what learners are expected to know, understand, and be able to do upon receiving a qualification, as well as how they may progress within the education system.

Most qualifications regulated by Swedish legislation are included in both the NQF and the Swedish National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (SeQF). The relationship between frameworks can be summarised as follows:

- The NQF covers higher education qualifications and is referenced to the QF-EHEA
- The SeQF provides a national structure for comparing learning outcomes and qualifications, aligned with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)
- The three cycles of Swedish higher education correspond to SeQF levels 6, 7 and 8.

The SeQF was established in 2015 through the Act Authorising the Issuance of Regulations on Validation and Fees for Applications Concerning Qualifications for Lifelong Learning (2015:478) and the Ordinance on the Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (2015:545). It includes qualifications from formal and non-formal education, as well as work-based training.

Figure 1.2: Qualification frameworks for Swedish qualifications and degrees, all levels of education



Please note that the Advanced Higher Vocational Education Diploma is included in EQF and SeQF level 6, but not in Bologna first-cycle qualifications.

Source: Swedish Council for Higher Education

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is responsible for managing the SeQF.

The Swedish Council for Higher Education’s website contains detailed descriptions of all qualifications frameworks applicable to Swedish higher education: www.uhr.se.

Admissions and structure of studies in Swedish higher education

Processes related to application, admission, enrolment, and graduation in Sweden are shaped by a national framework designed to promote accessibility, transparency, and institutional autonomy. Centralised systems, clearly defined entry requirements, and flexible course structures support a broad range of educational paths.

Information in English on education offered at Swedish higher education institutions and about studying in Sweden is available at www.studera.nu and www.studyinsweden.se.

Prospective students wishing to apply to first- and second-cycle programmes or freestanding courses offered at a Swedish higher education institution will find all necessary information at www.universityadmissions.se.

Entry requirements and selection criteria for first- and second-cycle education

General national entry requirements for applicants to first-cycle education, are defined in the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance. Most applicants meet the general requirements by completing Swedish uppersecondary education, including vocational pathways. Applicants may qualify through municipal adult education or international qualifications as well.

The Act and the Ordinance also define general entry requirements for second-cycle education. The general requirement for programmes is a first-cycle qualification comprising at least 180 credits. Many programmes also require specific first-cycle qualifications or courses in defined subject areas.

Specific entry requirements vary by field of study. The Swedish Council for Higher Education issues regulations on subject-specific upper-secondary requirements for entry to certain programmes, in particular professional degree programmes.

As independent higher education providers are not covered in full by the Act and the Ordinance, their admissions procedures and entry requirements are determined locally, in accordance with the conditions laid down in their government authorisation.

Higher education institutions may also decide on certain entry requirements themselves. They may grant exemptions from the national requirements and, in some cases, impose higher requirements, subject to a statement by the Swedish Council for Higher Education.

Institutions may also, at their discretion, admit applicants without formal qualifications if prior learning or experience demonstrates the ability to benefit academically from the studies. Recognition of such informal or non-formal learning is assessed locally by each higher education institution.

International applicants must demonstrate qualifications equivalent to Swedish uppersecondary education. Applicants from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway who are eligible for higher education in their home country are automatically eligible in Sweden.

For courses and programmes taught in Swedish, all applicants whose native language is not Swedish, Danish, Faroese, Icelandic, or Norwegian must demonstrate sufficient proficiency in both Swedish and English. For courses and programmes taught in English, applicants need only demonstrate sufficient proficiency in English.

Meeting the entry requirements does not guarantee admission. At the first-cycle level, if the number of eligible applicants exceeds the number of available places, selection is made as follows:

- At least one third are admitted based on upper-secondary grades
- At least one third through results from the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (SweSAT)
- No more than one third through other locally determined criteria, such as interviews or work experience. The use of these criteria is at the discretion of the institution.

Taking the SweSAT is not a requirement for entry to higher education.

The credit, course, and programme structure in Swedish higher education

Swedish higher education credits correspond to ECTS credits.

Higher education institutions offer both courses and programmes. A course is a self-contained unit of study, typically – though not always – worth 7.5 or 15 credits, focusing on a specific subject. Courses may be part of a degree programme or offered as freestanding courses. Freestanding courses are individual modules open to anyone who meets the admission requirements.

A programme consists of a set of predetermined courses that together form a coherent route of study leading towards a qualification.

Courses are often studied one at a time, each lasting several weeks before the next begins, although the structure may differ between programmes and fields of study.

Upon successful completion of a programme, students may apply for a degree, or a qualification. Students may also earn a qualification by combining freestanding courses, provided they accumulate the required number of credits at the appropriate levels and in the relevant fields of study. For example, a Degree of Bachelor requires 180 ECTS credits in total, including at least 90 within a main field of study.

A centralised application system for first- and second-cycle education

Prospective students to first- and second-cycle education in Sweden apply through a centralised system that allows them to submit a single application to multiple higher education institutions and study programmes or courses. National application regulations are set out in the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance, and in rules issued by the Swedish Council for Higher Education. Applicants rank their choices in order of preference. Once an applicant accepts an offer of admission, all lower-ranked choices are automatically deleted.

The application system is managed by the Swedish Council for Higher Education and is similar to those used in other Nordic countries and in some other international contexts. Although the system is centralised, each higher education institution makes its own admission decisions.

Application is free of charge for citizens of Sweden as well as holders of Swedish permanent and most temporary residence permits, as well as for citizens of the EU/EEA and Switzerland. There are also some other exemptions that apply to very small groups of students. Applicants from other countries must pay an application fee of SEK 900 (2025).

Entry requirements and selection criteria for third-cycle education

To meet the general entry requirements for third-cycle education, applicants must have been awarded a second-cycle qualification, have completed at least 240 credits of which 60 are at the second-cycle level, or have acquired substantially equivalent knowledge in another way.

They must also satisfy the specific entry requirements for the position, or in some cases, for the programme.

Unlike in many other countries, applicants to third-cycle education at Swedish public-sector higher education institutions often do not apply to a PhD programme as such. Instead, admission normally takes place through open calls for specific doctoral or licentiate positions.

Public-sector institutions are governed by the Higher Education Ordinance, which specifies that third-cycle education leading to a doctoral degree corresponds to four years of full-time study, or two years for a licentiate degree. Institutions must ensure that full financial support for the student is secured at the time of admission and that studies can normally be completed within the period of two or four years. This requirement applies regardless of the form of funding, whether through a doctoral studentship, scholarship, or external employment.

Independent higher education providers are not bound by the Ordinance but are regulated under the Act Concerning Authority to Award Certain Degrees and their own internal rules. Each provider determines its own policies on admission and funding. To maintain their degree-awarding powers, they must still meet the same overall standard – that third-cycle education leading to a doctoral or licentiate degree corresponds to four and two years of full-time study, respectively.

Distance education is common in Sweden

Distance education has a long tradition in Sweden, owing to its large geographic area and low population density. Advances in technology have further expanded opportunities for this mode of study. Higher education institutions offer a wide range of distance courses and programmes, some fully online and others blended with on-campus teaching. Some students also combine distance and on-campus study.

During the 2023/24 academic year, nearly one third of all enrolled students studied entirely by distance. This share has increased over time.

Qualifications earned through distance education are equivalent in status to those obtained through on-campus study and are subject to the same quality assurance frameworks.

The academic year is longer than in most countries

The Swedish academic year is divided into two semesters: the autumn semester typically begins in late August or early September and ends in mid-January, while the spring semester runs from mid-January to late May or early June. The academic year generally spans 40 weeks, with 20 weeks per semester. This means that Swedish semesters are longer than in many other European countries, where teaching periods often range from 12 to 15 weeks.

Higher education institutions determine the organisation of the academic year, including the scheduling of breaks and examinations. Many also offer additional courses during the summer.

A full-time study load is equivalent to 30 credits per semester

Full-time study corresponds to 30 credits per semester, with students expected to devote approximately 40 hours per week to their studies. It is possible to be enrolled in up to 45 credits per semester.

Many students study part-time. During the autumn semester of 2023, more than one third of all enrolled students were enrolled in fewer than 30 credits.

Many courses and programmes are taught in English

Swedish is the primary language of instruction at Swedish higher education institutions, although required readings may be in English. Some courses and programmes are taught entirely in English, and their number has steadily increased.

Courses and programmes in English are undertaken by both domestic and international students, although international students constitute the majority in many second-cycle programmes delivered in English.

During the autumn semester of 2024, Swedish higher education institutions offered approximately 650 programmes taught entirely in English. Of these, a little over 10 per cent were at the first cycle and nearly 90 per cent at the second.

No national grading system or ranking in Swedish higher education

Sweden does not have a national grading system. Each higher education institution determines which grading scale to apply, and several may be used within the same institution. Common systems include: A–F (from excellent to fail), pass with distinction/pass/fail, or pass/fail only.

No overall grade is awarded for qualifications, and students are not ranked at the national level. Grade Point Average (GPA) or similar ranking systems are not used nationally, although some higher education institutions may calculate average grades for internal purposes.

Flexible retake rights and course completion

While uncommon in an international context, Swedish higher education normally offers students several opportunities to pass failed course components. The Higher Education Ordinance does not stipulate any right to retake a failed examination, but it is common practice among higher education institutions to provide multiple attempts.

Each institution decides whether to limit the number of opportunities to retake examinations or other course components. If limits are introduced, students must be offered at least five examination opportunities, and at least two periods of work placement or equivalent where a course requires placement to achieve a pass. A student who has failed an examination twice is entitled to be assessed by another examiner, unless special reasons exist to the contrary.

There is no general time limit for completing courses. However, delays may affect eligibility

for student finance, and progression within a programme may be restricted if a failed course is required for continued study.

Degrees are not automatically awarded

Qualifications from Swedish higher education institutions are not automatically awarded. Students must apply for their qualification once all formal requirements have been fulfilled.

The proportion of students applying for their qualification varies between programmes. This is influenced by factors such as professional licensing; in fields where a licence is required – such as healthcare – students must present proof of a qualification to work in their profession. In other fields, such as information technology (IT), employment may not require formal documentation of graduation.

As of 2024, most qualifications are issued in digital format as e-stamped degree certificates, which students may download. The certificate can be accessed an unlimited number of times, and students may, for example, send it digitally to employers or other higher education institutions.

Certain decisions in higher education can be appealed

The Higher Education Appeals Board hears appeals against specific decisions made within the higher education sector. Its rulings are final and cannot be challenged. Applicants for study places, job applicants, and students have the right to appeal in certain cases, but not all decisions taken by higher education institutions can be appealed. The right of appeal covers, for example, employment decisions at public-sector higher education institutions (except appointments as third-cycle students), rejections based on entry requirements, credit transfer decisions, and refusals to grant deferral or re-entry following a study break.

Appeals must be submitted within three weeks of receiving the decision and sent directly to the higher education institution concerned. The institution may reconsider its decision, but the appeal is always forwarded to the Higher Education Appeals Board for a final ruling.

Disciplinary measures consist of warnings and suspensions

At public-sector higher education institutions, disciplinary measures are regulated by the Higher Education Ordinance. Independent higher education providers are not bound by these provisions but must maintain their own rules and procedures for handling disciplinary matters as a condition of their degree-awarding powers.

Disciplinary measures at public-sector institutions may be imposed on students who:

- Use prohibited aids or other methods to deceive during examinations or other assessments
- Disrupt or obstruct teaching or related activities
- Disrupt activities in the higher education institution's library or other designated facilities
- Subject students or staff to sexual or other forms of harassment.

Sanctions consist of warnings or suspensions. A suspension may be imposed for up to six months and may include restrictions on access to specific premises at the higher education institution.

Cases are handled by the institution's disciplinary board, which is chaired by the vice-chancellor. Students have the right to be represented on the board by two members. The student concerned must be given the opportunity to present their case. The vice-chancellor may decide to take no further action, issue a warning, or refer the case to the board. If a warning is issued, the student may request that the board review the decision.

The student has the right to address the board and to be present during hearings, unless special circumstances require otherwise. Unless otherwise stated in the decision, suspensions take effect immediately. Decisions on disciplinary measures may be appealed to the administrative court.

Student finance and tuition for domestic first- and second-cycle students

The Swedish system for financing higher education students is designed to reduce financial barriers and enable participation in higher education at different stages of life. It combines grants and loans and has gradually been adapted to reflect changing labour market demands. In recent years, new support schemes and tuition regulations have been introduced for both domestic and international students.

Tuition-free higher education with limited exceptions

Higher education in Sweden is free of charge for Swedish, EU/EEA and Swiss citizens as well as for holders of permanent and most temporary Swedish residence permits. There are also a few other exemptions applying to very small groups of students.

Since 2011, students who do not fall within these categories have been required to pay tuition fees for first- and second-cycle education. Exchange students participating in formal exchange programmes are exempt, regardless of nationality.

Higher education institutions must ensure that the tuition fees charged to international students cover the full cost of the education provided, including services such as academic counselling, health care, and other forms of student support. Full cost coverage also means that institutions may neither subsidise nor make a profit from such activities.

Government-funded student finance is available to domestic students

Swedish student finance is government-funded and administered by the Swedish Board of Student Finance. Most domestic students rely on this support to cover living expenses while studying. The system is comparable to those in Australia, Canada, and England.

Domestic students admitted to a higher education institution who meet basic criteria are eligible for student finance. Eligibility is independent of parental income and is not contingent on whether the student lives with their parents or independently. Continued support requires that students meet minimum academic performance requirements based on completed credits.

Student finance consists of grants and low-interest loans. For a full-time academic year, the grant totalled about SEK 40,000 in 2025. Students with children may receive more. The maximum loan available in 2025 was approximately SEK 94,000, although students may borrow less or decline the loan entirely. Larger loans are available to students studying abroad, adjusted by country. Students may work during their studies, but income above a set threshold results in reduced support.

Student finance is available for up to the equivalent of six academic years. The upper age limit is 60, with reduced borrowing permitted from the age of 51.

Loan repayment begins six months after the end of studies, regardless of the borrower's income. Repayments are based on the borrower's taxed income, unlike in some other countries where employers deduct payments directly from untaxed salary. The system follows an annuity model with fixed, non-income-based instalments, and loans are normally to be repaid within 25 years.

Special student finance available for labour market transition and retraining

Sweden has recently introduced a form of student finance aimed at individuals already active in the labour market. This scheme is separate from the regular student finance scheme. The objective is to support retraining and skills development to enhance long-term employability.

To qualify, applicants must be aged 27 to 62 and have worked for at least eight of the past 14 years. The chosen studies must be considered relevant for improving the applicant's employability.

This financing also consists of a grant and an optional loan. The grant covers up to 80 per cent of the applicant's previous salary. A loan may be added to supplement the grant. The support is available for a total of 44 weeks of full-time study and can be adjusted for part-time study.

Loan repayments follow the same structure as for the regular government student finance scheme.

Scholarship financing is available for fee-paying international students

International students in Sweden must cover their own living expenses and, where applicable, tuition fees. Scholarships awarded on a competitive basis are available for full or partial tuition, and in some cases also for living costs.

The Swedish Institute manages two scholarship programmes for second-cycle students: the Global Professional Programme, for citizens of 33 primarily African and Asian countries with leadership experience, and the Pioneering Women in STEM Programme, targeting women from 10 countries in the same regions. Both scholarships cover full tuition, a monthly allowance, and a travel grant.

The Swedish Council for Higher Education allocates government funding to higher education institutions for scholarships aimed at attracting highly qualified international students. Institutions determine how these funds are distributed, which may include full or partial tuition support, often tied to specific study programmes.

Finance for third-cycle students

Successful applicants to third-cycle education at public-sector higher education institutions usually receive financing in the form of a salaried doctoral studentship. During the 2024 autumn semester, 71 per cent of enrolled third-cycle students in Sweden were financed through such studentships. Students holding a doctoral studentship are simultaneously both students and employees of the higher education institution where they undertake their studies. This entitles them to employment benefits such as annual leave, parental leave, sick leave, and pension rights.

Other students are financed through scholarships or other secured financial arrangements, such as medical posts or other external financing. Scholarships accounted for only 3 per cent of total financing in the 2024 autumn semester. Students admitted on scholarships are not eligible for employment-related benefits.

At public-sector higher education institutions, the Higher Education Ordinance requires that full financial support be secured at the time of admission and that studies can normally be completed within the period of full-time studies - two years for a licentiate degree and four years for a doctoral degree.

Independent higher education providers are not covered by the Ordinance and therefore have greater flexibility in how third-cycle students are financed. Some employ third-cycle students under conditions comparable to a doctoral studentship at a public-sector institution, while others rely primarily on scholarships. Extensions for scholarship students may be permitted in specific cases such as parental leave or illness. Regardless of financing model, independent higher education providers must demonstrate that their third-cycle education maintains standards equivalent to those at public-sector institutions.

Third-cycle students do not pay tuition fees, regardless of their nationality or the type of higher education provider.

Further information on Swedish higher education and research

Sweden.se provides general information on higher education and research in Sweden: www.sweden.se.

The Swedish Research Council provides information on research in Sweden: www.vr.se.

Eurydice offers comparative information on European education systems, including Sweden: www.eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu.

The OECD's annual report Education at a Glance presents data on the structure, funding, and performance of education systems across OECD countries, including Sweden: www.oecd.org.