



CHAPTER 2

First- and Second-Cycle Education in Sweden

Student participation in Swedish higher education reflects both openness and structure. Broad access and flexible study options are combined with clear requirements for progression and completion. This chapter examines application patterns, enrolment trends, and the profile of new entrants, including age at entry and graduation. It then considers outcomes and retention, contrasting professional programmes with other qualifications and presenting key data on graduation by cycle, gender, and programme. Finally, the chapter explores equity and access, as well as national measures to widen participation and support students with disabilities.

Student participation and progression

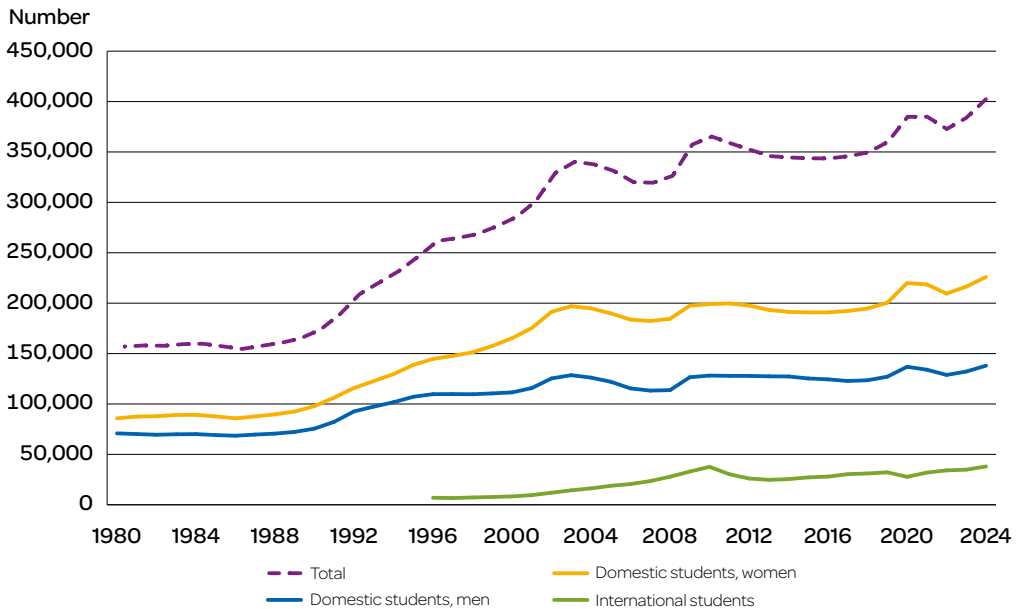
The Swedish higher education system is designed to ensure broad access, academic quality, and alignment with European frameworks. Since the 1970s, higher education has expanded significantly, both geographically and in terms of student participation. Structural features such as flexible course-based study, a unified qualifications framework, and formalised student representation are central to the way the system operates today.

Enrolment rates in higher education have risen over time

Figure 2.1 shows the total number of students enrolled at Swedish higher education institutions over the past 45 years, disaggregated by domestic students (broken down by women and men) and international students. While the Swedish population increased from 8.3 million in 1980 to 10.6 million in 2024, the figure still helps to illustrate the development of enrolment over time.

The number of students enrolled at Swedish higher education institutions in the autumn semester of 2024 reached a historic high. A total of 402,000 students were enrolled, of whom 61 per cent were women and 39 per cent were men. International students accounted for 9 per cent – 38,000 students – of all enrolled students.

Figure 2.1: Number of students enrolled in first- and second-cycle courses and programmes, total and by domestic students (women and men) and international students, autumn semesters 1980–2024



Professional programmes in psychology, medicine, and law are the most competitive

In the autumn semester of 2024, 186,300 applicants were qualified for their top-choice programme. Of these, more than half were admitted. Around half of all programme applicants applied to programmes leading to a professional qualification. The professional programmes with the highest numbers of qualified first-choice applicants were the Master of Science in Engineering, the Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and the Master of Laws.

The most competitive professional programmes, based on the number of qualified applicants per student admitted, were the Master of Science in Psychology (8.1), the Master of Science in Medicine (5.7), and the Master of Laws (5.1).

A following third of programme applicants applied to general programmes at the first-cycle level, 10 per cent to general programmes at the second-cycle level, and 2 per cent to programmes in the fine, applied, and performing arts. General programmes had an average of 1.7 applicants per admitted student, whereas programmes in the fine, applied and performing arts received around 5.

New entrants increasing in numbers and showing greater diversity

The number of new entrants – students enrolled for the first time in first- or second-cycle education in Sweden – has gradually increased over the past decade. In the 2023/24 academic year, close to 95,760 students began their studies as new entrants. Of these, almost 30 per cent

were international students. Women made up a clear majority of new entrants, 59 per cent, while 41 per cent were men.

Among domestic new entrants, most had completed an upper-secondary school programme. However, 15 per cent had combined upper-secondary studies with studies in municipal adult education, and 12 per cent had completed an upper-secondary education solely within municipal adult education.

Most domestic new entrants begin their studies in a professional programme. In the 2023/24 academic year, more than 40 per cent did so, while around a quarter entered higher education in a general programme. The remaining third started with freestanding courses.

Among international new entrants, only 2 per cent enrolled in a professional programme, while close to 40 per cent were enrolled in a general programme. The majority – 60 per cent – were enrolled in freestanding courses.

For more details on international students and their enrolment, see Chapter 5, Internationalisation and Mobility in Swedish Higher Education.

Professional programmes dominate student enrolment

In the 2023/24 academic year, a total of 459,100 individual students were enrolled at Swedish higher education institutions at some point during the year. Of these, just under three quarters were studying at the first-cycle level, while just over one quarter were enrolled in second-cycle education.

Of the 329,400 full-time equivalent students – measured in this way because not all students are enrolled full time throughout the academic year – nearly 75 per cent were enrolled in either a general or a professional programme. Students in professional programmes accounted for almost 60 per cent of all programme students. Two professional programmes were particularly prominent: the Master of Science in Engineering (20 per cent of all full-time equivalent students in professional programmes), the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (10 per cent). Together, these two programmes accounted for 18 per cent of all full-time equivalent programme students and 13 per cent of all enrolled full-time equivalent students.

More than a third of all students only enrolled in freestanding courses

Around a third of all 459,100 enrolled students in the 2023/24 academic year took only freestanding courses. Around 20 per cent of these students studied at the second-cycle level.

Women represented over 65 per cent of those enrolled in only freestanding courses, while men made up 35 per cent. Table 2.1 shows the distribution of students only enrolled in freestanding courses by subject area.

Table 2.1: Number of students enrolled in freestanding courses only, total and by women and men and subject area, academic year 2023/24

Subject area	Number		
	Total	Women	Men
Law and social sciences	72,700	49,000	23,600
Humanities and theology	59,900	38,700	21,200
Engineering and technology	29,200	13,900	15,300
Natural sciences	19,800	10,700	9,000
Other	9,100	6,200	2,900
Fine, applied and performing arts	8,200	5,700	2,500
Health and social care	7,200	6,200	900
Medicine and odontology	5,700	4,500	1,200
Unknown	500	300	200
Total	163,200	105,300	57,900

Students are comparatively older than in other countries

Relatively few domestic students start higher education immediately after completing upper-secondary school at the age of 19. Contributing factors include the widespread practice of taking one or several gap years to work, travel, or complete military service. In the most recent birth cohort for which data are available (individuals born in 2004), only 14 per cent had begun higher education studies as of the year they turned 19. The transition rate increases significantly when the follow-up period is extended by five years. Individuals born in 1999 constitute the most recent cohort that can be followed, and among them, close to half had entered higher education by the age of 24.

Transition rates from Swedish upper-secondary school to higher education differ by gender. Of those born in 2004, 16 per cent of women and 12 per cent of men had begun higher education studies as of the year they turned 19. At age 24, the gap widened further, with roughly half of women and one third of men having entered higher education.

In 2022, new entrants to first-cycle education in Sweden were the oldest among OECD countries, with an average age of 25 (table 2.2). Because of this later entry, graduates from Swedish higher education also complete their studies at a later age. The average age of graduation at the first cycle in Sweden is 28, compared with 25 in the EU25 and 26 in the OECD. At the second cycle, the average age of Swedish graduates is closer to international norms. This may reflect the high proportion of international students at Swedish higher education institutions at the second-cycle level, who tend to be younger and therefore lower the national average. Rather than domestic students graduating earlier, the figures reflect the composition of the student body.

Table 2.2: Students at first- and second-cycle in a selection of OECD countries, exchange students not included, average age of entry, average age of graduation, and gender distribution, year 2022

Country	First cycle				Second cycle			
	Average age at entry (years)	Average age at graduation (years)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Average age at entry (years)	Average age at graduation (years)	Women (%)	Men (%)
Sweden	25	28	61	39	27	29	58	42
Denmark	24	26	57	43	26	27	55	45
Finland	24	28	56	44	33	32	61	39
Norway	23	25	57	43	28	29	62	38
Estonia	22	26	56	44	27	30	61	39
France	20	..	57	43	24	..	55	45
Germany	23	26	48	52	24	27	53	47
Spain	20	24	57	43	27	28	59	41
South Korea	20	..	51	49	32	..	56	44
United Kingdom	22	23	56	44	27	27	58	42
EU25 - average	22	25	55	45	26	28	59	41
OECD - average	22	26	55	45	28	29	58	42

Source: OECD

Programme students show high performance rates

One way of measuring completion rates in Swedish higher education is the use of a performance indicator. This shows the proportion of credits that students had completed within four semesters since registration. Among all students registered during the academic year of 2022/23, the performance rate was 83 per cent. Programme students have a higher performance rate compared to those studying freestanding courses. Students enrolled in programmes within the fine, applied and performing arts as well as in programmes leading to a professional qualification had performance rates of 95 and 91 per cent respectively. The corresponding performance rates for students enrolled in freestanding courses was 59 per cent.

Retention and graduation rates vary between professional programmes

Two other ways of following up rates of completion in Swedish higher education, in particular professional programmes, is the use of retention rates and graduation rates. In general, the retention rate for programmes leading to a professional qualification is relatively high. For many of these programmes, over 70 per cent of those who began the programme in the 2022/23 academic year were still enrolled in the third semester. The retention rate was often higher among women than among men.

Almost all students who initially enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Military Studies were still enrolled in the third semester (97 per cent). The Master of Architecture and the Master of Science in Medicine programmes had the second and third highest retention rates, at 89 and 88 per cent respectively. These two programmes are also among the most competitive in terms of admission. Among the professional programmes with the lowest percentage of students enrolled in the third semester were the Higher Education Diploma in Dental Hygiene (51 per cent), the Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy (59 per cent), and the Bachelor of Science in Diagnostic Radiology Nursing (63 per cent).

Graduation rates also vary between different professional programmes. This indicator measures the proportion of new entrants who had completed the degree within the standard programme length plus three years. In the follow up academic year of 2022/23, programmes with the highest rates were found in healthcare: the Postgraduate Diploma in Midwifery (89 per cent), the Postgraduate Diploma in Specialist Nursing (86 per cent), and the Master of Science in Medicine (85 per cent). For most professional programmes the graduation rate was higher among women than among men.

General qualifications the most common

During the academic year of 2023/24, a total of 79,060 students graduated with first- or second-cycle qualifications.

Women accounted for two thirds of all graduates, with a slightly larger share at the first cycle than at the second. Roughly half of all graduates were between 25 and 34 years old, highlighting that Swedish students often complete their studies at an older age than in many other countries. General qualifications were the most common, awarded to 62 per cent of graduates, followed by professional qualifications (48 per cent) and qualifications in the fine, applied, and performing arts (2 per cent). For some programmes it is common for students to be awarded both a general and a professional qualification.

Engineering and nursing dominate among professional graduates

In the 2023/24 academic year, 37,920 students graduated from a Swedish higher education institution with a professional qualification (table 2.3). The three most common qualifications were the Master of Science in Engineering, the Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and the Master of Arts/Science in Secondary /Upper-secondary Education.

The gender distribution was more uneven among those awarded a professional qualification compared with other categories of qualifications: 70 per cent were women and 30 per cent were men. The most common professional qualification among women was the Bachelor of Science in Nursing, whereas among men it was the Master of Science in Engineering.

Table 2.3: Number of graduates and gender distribution from the 15 largest professional programmes, academic year 2023/24

Degree	Total	Gender distribution	
		Women(%)	Men(%)
Professional degrees, total	37,920	70	30
Master of Science in Engineering	4,540	36	64
Bachelor of Science in Nursing	4,370	87	13
Master of Arts / Science in Secondary Education / Upper Secondary Education	3,340	59	41
Bachelor / Master of Arts in Primary Education	3,190	79	21
Bachelor of Arts in Pre - School Education	2,930	96	4
Postgraduate Diploma in Specialist Nursing	2,800	86	14
Bachelor of Science in Social Work	2,600	87	13
Bachelor of Science in Engineering	2,280	29	71
Master of Laws	1,640	66	34
Master of Science in Medicine	1,500	60	40
Master of Science in Business and Economics	910	51	49
Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Training	740	91	9
Master of Science in Psychology	650	69	31
Higher Education Diploma in Vocational Education	580	63	37
Bachelor of Science in Physiotherapy	560	64	36

Equity and access in Swedish higher education

Swedish higher education policy places strong emphasis on equity and widening participation. Legal frameworks and national initiatives aim to ensure that all individuals, regardless of background, have the opportunity to access and complete higher education. Despite these efforts, participation rates continue to vary across demographic groups, including by gender, social background, and foreign or Swedish background.

Widening access and participation in Swedish higher education

According to the Higher Education Act, higher education institutions must promote gender equality and actively work to widen access and participation among underrepresented groups. These include students from migrant backgrounds, non-academic families, lower-income households, and certain Swedish geographic regions. Data on underrepresented groups are collected to monitor participation in higher education. However, data on race, ethnicity, religion, or disability are not collected, as this is prohibited under Swedish law.

Sweden's efforts to widen access and participation in higher education have deep roots. The 1977 higher education reform was particularly significant, as it expanded access by establishing regional higher education institutions. This had a marked effect on students from non-academic backgrounds, whose enrolment increased more in municipalities where new institutions were established. Despite long-standing efforts, however, challenges remain in ensuring equal representation across all demographic groups.

The Swedish Council for Higher Education supports higher education institutions in their work to widen access and participation by encouraging interest in higher education, promoting the validation of prior learning, and advancing the rights of national minorities and minority languages within the sector. The Council works in close collaboration with the institutions to achieve these goals.

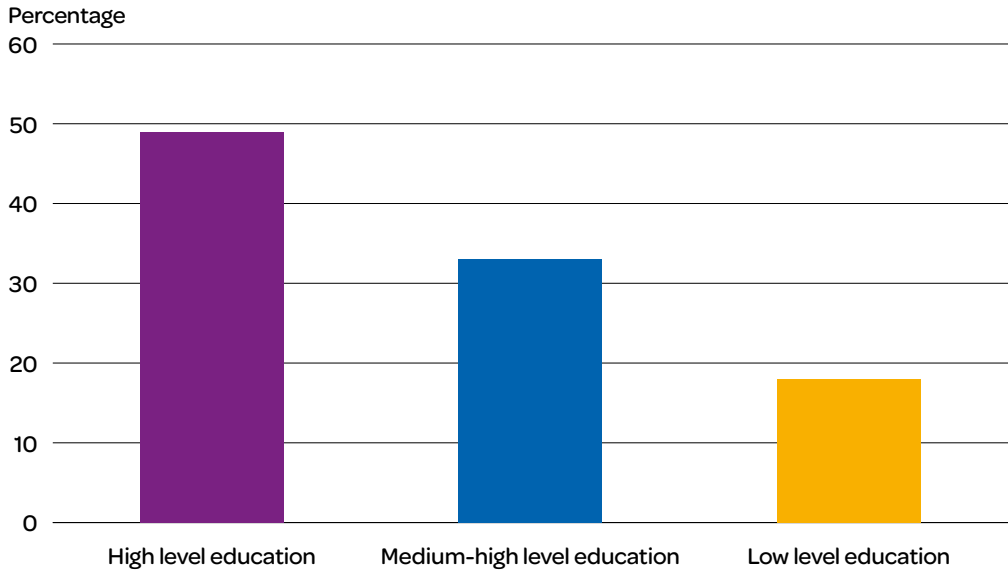
Women make up the majority of enrolled students in Sweden

Women constitute a clear majority in Swedish higher education. The proportion of women beginning studies at both the first and second cycles is larger than that of men. This pattern holds across all social groups.

The level of parents' education is a factor in higher education entry

The level of parents' education varies significantly among students entering higher education in Sweden. There is a considerably larger share of students with parents with a higher level of education compared to those with a lower level. Among new entrants in the 2023/24 academic year, nearly half had at least one highly educated parent, defined as having at least three years of post-secondary education (figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Proportion of new entrants to Swedish higher education with parents of high, medium-high, and low levels of education, academic year 2023/24



In 2023/24, the Master of Science in Medicine programme had the highest proportion of students with at least one highly educated parent (78 per cent), followed by the Master of Architecture (73 per cent). By contrast, the Higher Education Diploma in Vocational Education and the Higher Education Diploma in Dental Hygiene had the lowest proportions of students with at least one highly educated parent, 19 and 21 per cent respectively. These programmes also had the highest proportions of students whose parents had a low level of education, defined as a maximum of two years of upper-secondary schooling.

Limited impact of foreign background on overall participation

Whether a person has a foreign or Swedish background has limited impact on participation in higher education in Sweden. Foreign background refers to individuals born abroad or born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents, while Swedish background refers to those born in Sweden with at least one Swedish-born parent. Among individuals who turned 25 in 2023, just over half of those born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents had entered higher education. Similar rates were observed among those who migrated to Sweden before the age of seven (48 per cent) and those with a Swedish background (47 per cent). In contrast, only 26 per cent of those who migrated between the ages of seven and eighteen had entered higher education by the same age. The rate of transition to higher education is higher for women than for men in all groups.

However, representation by foreign background varies significantly between programmes. The highest shares of students with a foreign background were found in the Higher Education Diploma in Dental Hygiene (85 per cent), the Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy (82 per cent), and the Master of Science in Dental Surgery (78 per cent).

By comparison, programmes with the highest proportions of students with a Swedish background were the Bachelor of Science in Military Studies (96 per cent), agricultural and forestry programmes (91 per cent), and the Master of Architecture (88 per cent).

Support for students with disabilities in Swedish higher education

The Discrimination Act (2008:567) requires Swedish higher education institutions to work proactively and inclusively to ensure that no student is disadvantaged in their studies due to a disability.

Students with permanent disabilities – generally defined by higher education institutions as lasting, or expected to last, at least six months – can apply for study support at their institution. The type of support provided varies but may include adapted examinations, accessible course literature, note-taking assistance, and interpretation in sign language or deafblind interpretation. Support may also relate to teaching methods, course organisation, and assessment procedures.

In 2024, just under 8 per cent of all students were granted access to support resources for disabilities. The number of students granted support has increased significantly, from 11,060 students in 2014 to 35,950 in 2024 – an increase of over 200 per cent. During the same period, the overall number of students only increased by approximately 17 per cent (figure 2.3).

This rise is largely due to substantial growth in support for reading and writing difficulties, including dyslexia, as well as neurodevelopmental disorders. Support related to mental health issues has also increased. In 2024 it was most common to be granted support for neurodevelopmental disorders (41 per cent), followed closely by dyslexia or other specific reading and writing difficulties (39 per cent).

Of all students offered support in 2024, 70 per cent were women and 30 per cent men.

Figure 2.3: Number of students with disabilities granted access to support resources in higher education, total and by women and men, years 2014–2024

