



CHAPTER 5

Internationalisation and Mobility in Swedish Higher Education

Internationalisation is an integral part of higher education and research in Sweden. It shapes cooperation across borders, brings global perspectives into classrooms, and connects students and staff to international networks of knowledge and innovation. This chapter examines how internationalisation is pursued both abroad and at home and how global developments and international initiatives influence mobility. It also explores patterns of student and staff mobility, examining both outgoing and incoming flows and highlighting how opportunities and challenges differ across programmes, cycles, and subject areas.

The internationalisation of higher education and research in Sweden

Students and staff at Swedish higher education institutions take part in a wide range of international activities, including international mobility for students and staff as well as other forms of international cooperation and collaboration. According to the Swedish Higher Education Act (SFS 1992:1434), international activities at Swedish higher education institutions must enhance the quality of research and education and contribute to sustainable development both nationally and globally.

Internationalisation at home is also an important component. It targets all students, aiming to provide them with global perspectives and to strengthen their cultural understanding and competence, regardless of whether they study abroad.

Global events affect international mobility and collaboration

International mobility in higher education and research is often shaped by global events. During the COVID-19 pandemic, overall academic mobility dropped sharply due to travel restrictions – for example, the number of exchange students participating in the EU-funded Erasmus+ programme in Sweden was cut in half. Today, international student numbers in Sweden exceed pre-pandemic levels, and outgoing mobility is steadily recovering.

Internationalisation in research and education is crucial for advancing knowledge and innovation. At the same time, shifting global politics have increased the need to balance openness and academic freedom with protecting national interests, knowledge, and technology. As a result, Sweden – like many other countries – has become increasingly aware of the importance of responsible internationalisation when establishing, maintaining, and

evaluating international relationships in higher education. The concept *responsible internationalisation* is referred to in different ways around the world, including *trusted research* in United Kingdom, *principled cooperation* in the United States, and *foreign interference* in the EU institutions.

In 2023, the Swedish Government tasked several government agencies with developing guidelines to promote responsible internationalisation in higher education, research, and innovation. The aim is to support Swedish higher education institutions in engaging internationally in a secure and responsible manner.

Swedish participation in the European Universities Initiative

The European Universities Initiative, launched by the European Commission in 2019, aims to strengthen strategic collaboration and mobility among European higher education institutions. The initiative seeks to build transnational alliances – known as European Universities – bringing together higher education institutions from different EU member states. The long-term goal is to create inter-university campuses where students, teachers, researchers, and other staff can move seamlessly.

As of January 2025, there are 65 European University alliances, involving more than 570 higher education institutions across 35 countries. Of Sweden's approximately 50 higher education institutions, 24 take part in a European University alliance.

No national funding for participation in the European Universities Initiative

The funding model for participation in the European Universities Initiative varies between countries. For Swedish higher education institutions, participation is primarily funded through EU resources, mainly the Erasmus+ programme. There are no government funds earmarked for Swedish institutions' participation in the initiative. Any potential co-funding must therefore come from the institution itself or from other external sources, such as Horizon Europe, national or international project funding, or regional development funds.

This model contrasts with practices in some other countries, where higher education institutions may rely more heavily on government funding or on private-sector partnerships to support their participation in the initiative.

Swedish students participate in internationalisation at home

Swedish higher education institutions actively promote internationalisation at home to reach students and staff who cannot, or choose not to, take part in physical exchanges. Offering entire courses in English allows domestic students to study alongside international peers. Internationally recruited lecturers and researchers, guest lecturers, and required readings in English also provide access to global perspectives and knowledge not otherwise available.

In the 2024 spring semester, 86 per cent of first- and second-cycle students were assigned at

least some required reading in English. The extent varied by discipline: one third of students in the natural sciences, mathematics, and computing had required readings only in English, while nearly one fifth of those in certain healthcare programmes had none at all.

Nearly half of all students received some instruction in English, although this also varied by field of study. Among students in the Master of Science in Engineering programme, 83 per cent had part or all of their teaching in English, compared with less than 20 per cent in teacher training programmes.

EU's 2030 goal for student mobility not yet met in Sweden

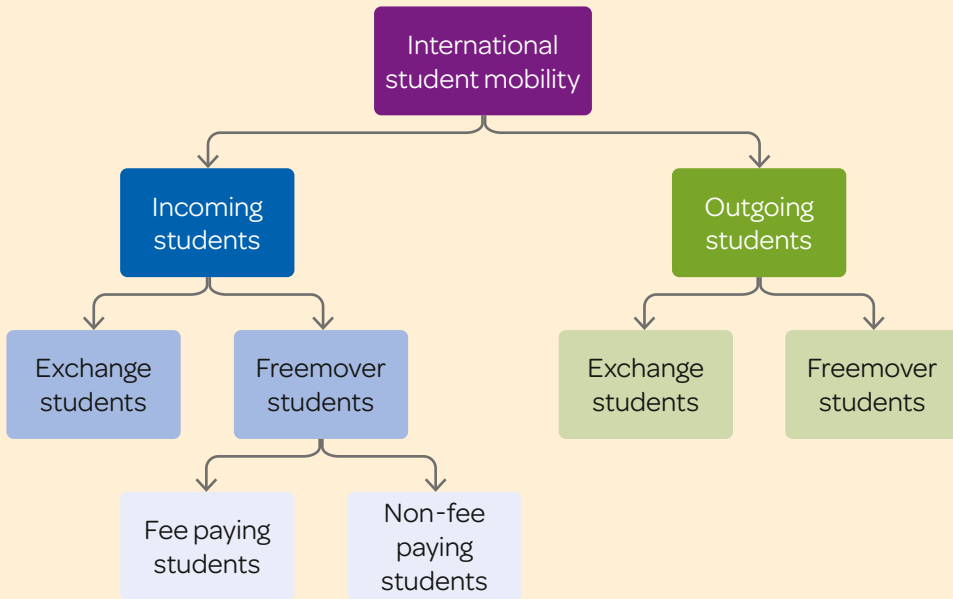
In 2024, the European Commission recommended that by 2030 at least 23 per cent of all graduates from higher education institutions in the EU should have completed either a physical or blended mobility period of at least 15 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) or lasting a minimum of three months, or a shorter physical or blended mobility period of at least 3 ECTS and lasting less than three months. This goal applies to all three levels of higher education. Among first- and second-cycle first-time graduates from Swedish higher education institutions in the 2023/24 academic year, 11 per cent had studied abroad during the preceding 12 semesters.

Sweden, like most EU member states, has no national targets for student mobility. No Swedish higher education institution requires all students to study abroad in order to graduate. However, some programmes include mobility as a graduation requirement.

Student mobility: Definitions used in Sweden

Internationally mobile students at the first- and second-cycle levels are divided into five groups (figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Swedish classification of internationally mobile students



Incoming students are students who come to Sweden to pursue studies.

Outgoing students are students who leave Sweden to study abroad.

Exchange students participate in exchange programmes arranged through collaboration between Swedish higher education institutions and institutions abroad. Incoming exchange students are usually enrolled at a Swedish higher education institution, generally for one semester or one academic year, after which they return to their home institution. Outgoing exchange students study at a higher education institution abroad in the same manner. Exchange students do not pay tuition fees at the receiving institution.

Freemover students, whether incoming to or outgoing from Sweden, organise their studies independently of existing exchange programmes. They may study abroad for any period of time and, if applicable, pay tuition fees at the host institution. Freemover students coming to Sweden from countries outside the EU/EEA and Switzerland have been required to pay tuition fees in Sweden since 2011. Freemover students are therefore divided into two subgroups: fee-paying and non-fee-paying students.

International mobility programmes at Swedish higher education institutions

Swedish higher education institutions participate in several international exchange programmes. In the 2023/24 academic year, over half of the 7,430 outgoing exchange students – 4,360 in total – went abroad through EU programmes, most commonly Erasmus+. Erasmus+ allows students at all three levels, as well as staff, to study or complete a work placement in all EU countries as well as six other European nations. Outgoing students receive monthly grants through the programme, ranging from 400 to 510 euros (2025), depending on the destination.

The Nordplus programme enables first- and second-cycle students, to take part in exchanges with the Nordic and Baltic countries. In the 2023/24 academic year, 30 domestic students participated in the programme. Outgoing students receive monthly grants through the programme, of up to 250 euros (2025), in addition to a travel allowance.

Sweden also participates in the ASEM-DUO Fellowship Programme, an exchange initiative between European and Asian countries that supports reciprocal student exchanges undertaken in pairs at the first and second cycle. For the 2025/26 academic year, DUO-Sweden selected 13 domestic students for exchange. Participants receive a grant through the programme of between 3,000 and 3,500 euros (2025), depending on the destination.

In addition, most higher education institutions have bilateral agreements with partner institutions abroad. Through these agreements, more than 3,000 students from Swedish higher education institutions took part in exchanges in the 2023/24 academic year. Students participating in exchanges based on bilateral agreements generally do not receive grants as a matter of course, although some higher education institutions may provide grants or competitive scholarships.

Outside of exchange programmes, students may participate in the Minor Field Studies programme, which is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Through this programme, students conduct field studies in a low- or middle-income country as part of their first- or second-cycle thesis project. Participants receive a grant through the programme of SEK 35,000 (2025).

Incoming international students at the first- and second-cycles

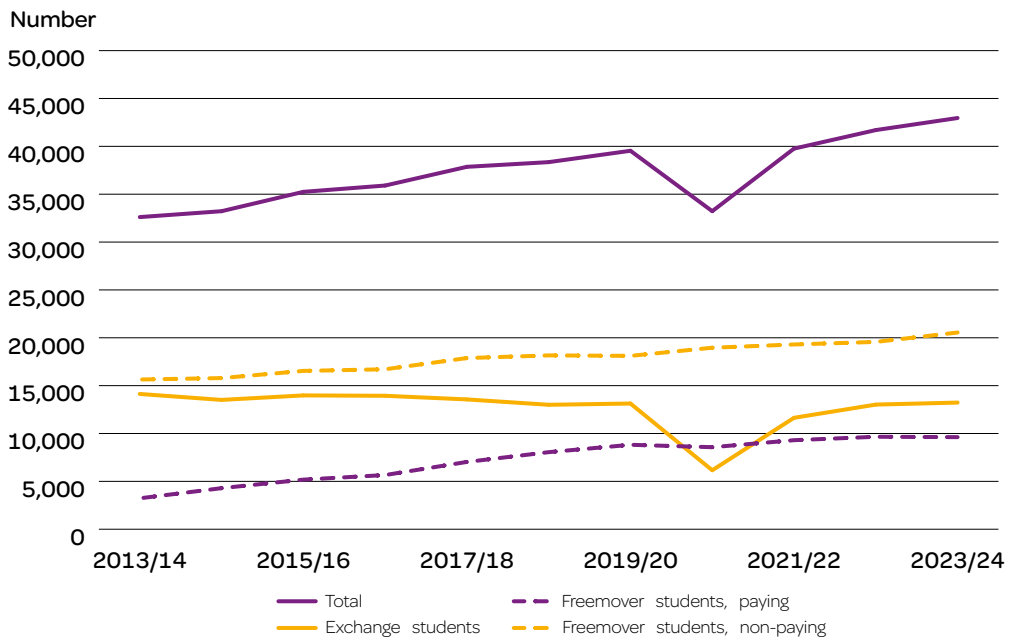
During the 2023/24 academic year, a total of 42,960 international students studied in Sweden (figure 5.2). This represents an increase of more than 30 per cent over the past decade.

While the number of incoming exchange students has fallen by 6 per cent during the same period, the total number of freemover students – that is, both fee-paying and non-fee paying – has risen by almost 60 per cent.

In 2023/24, non-fee-paying freemover students formed the largest group of incoming students at the first and second cycle, accounting for nearly half of all international students. Exchange students made up 30 per cent, and fee-paying freemover students the remaining 22 per cent.

Over the past decade, the gender distribution among incoming students has shifted, with the share of women increasing across all three groups from 52 per cent in 2013/14 to 56 per cent ten years later, while the share of men has fallen from 48 to 44 per cent.

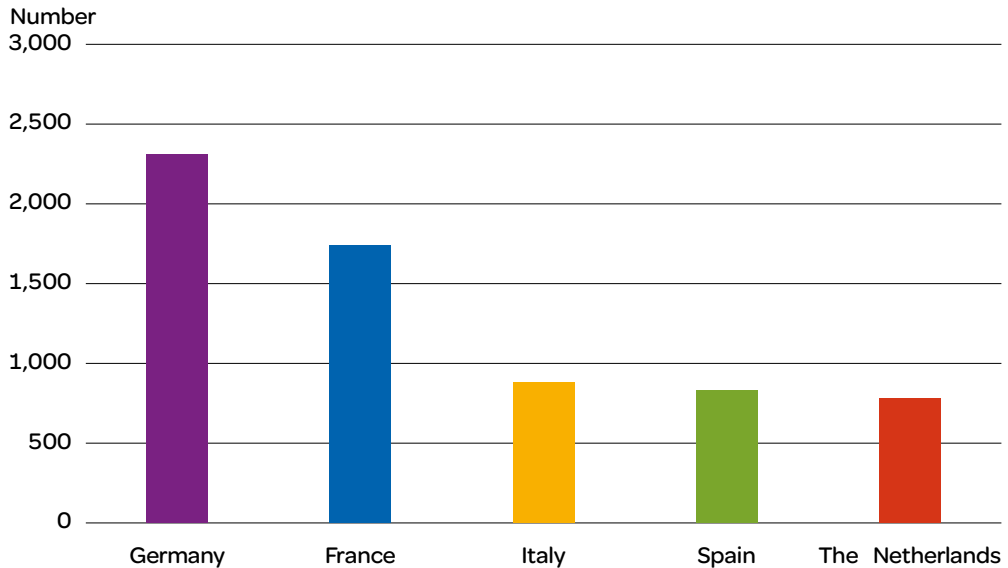
Figure 5.2: Number of incoming students, in total and by exchange students, fee-paying freemover students, and non-fee-paying freemover students, academic years 2013/14–2023/24



Most exchange students come from Europe

Sweden welcomed 13,230 exchange students from 69 countries during the 2023/24 academic year. The majority of incoming exchange students came from Europe. The five most common countries accounted for nearly half of all exchange students, with Germany at the top of the list, contributing 2,310 students (figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3: Number of incoming exchange students from the five most common countries, academic year 2023/24



Freemover students form large share of second-cycle programme students

In most OECD countries, the proportion of freemover students increases with each cycle of education, and Sweden is no exception. In 2022, freemover students accounted for 3 per cent of those enrolled in first-cycle courses and programmes, below the OECD average of 5 per cent. At the second cycle, the figure was 12 per cent in Sweden, compared to the OECD average of 15 per cent. However, at the third cycle, incoming students represented 36 per cent of all enrolled students, significantly higher than the OECD average of 25 per cent.

Freemover students at the first- and second-cycle level at Swedish higher education institutions generally enrol in programmes rather than freestanding courses. In the 2023/24 academic year, 78 per cent were enrolled in a programme, while 22 per cent took courses.

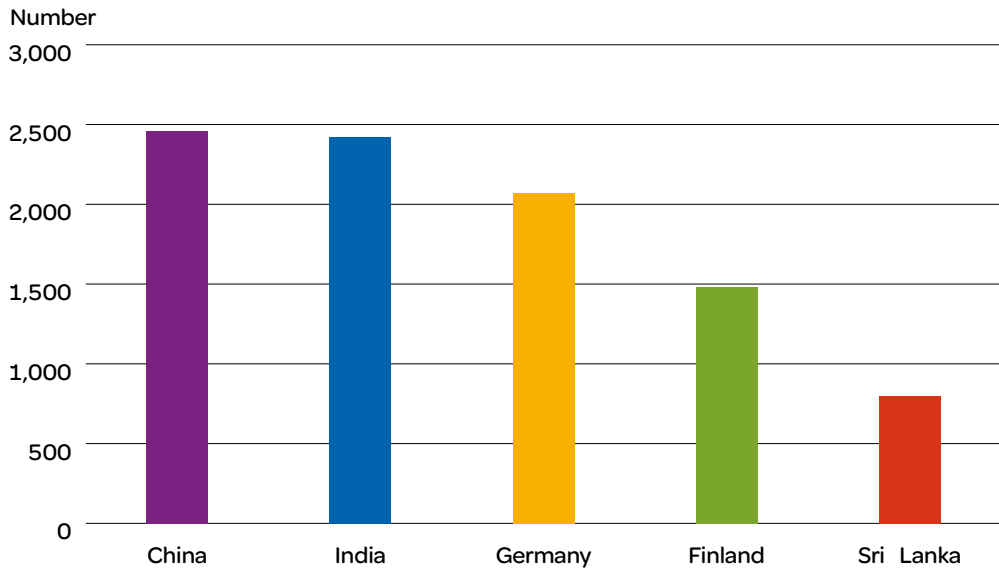
Freemover students also accounted for a significant proportion of all students in second-cycle programmes: 43 per cent of those in two-year programmes and 34 per cent of those in one-year programmes.

Incoming students generally study in English. In the 2024 autumn semester, Swedish higher education institutions offered a total of 651 programmes taught entirely in English – 84 at the first cycle and 567 at the second cycle.

Most freemover students come from Asia

Just under 30,000 freemover students from 120 countries studied in Sweden during the 2023/24 academic year. China and India were the two largest countries, with 2,460 and 2,420 students respectively (figure 5.4). Germany is the only country that ranks among the five most common countries for both incoming exchange students and freemover students.

Figure 5.4: Number of incoming freemover students from the five most common countries, academic year 2023/24



International students can apply for scholarships

International students in Sweden must cover their living expenses and, where applicable, pay tuition fees. However, scholarships awarded on a competitive basis are available to cover full or partial tuition fees and, in some cases, living costs.

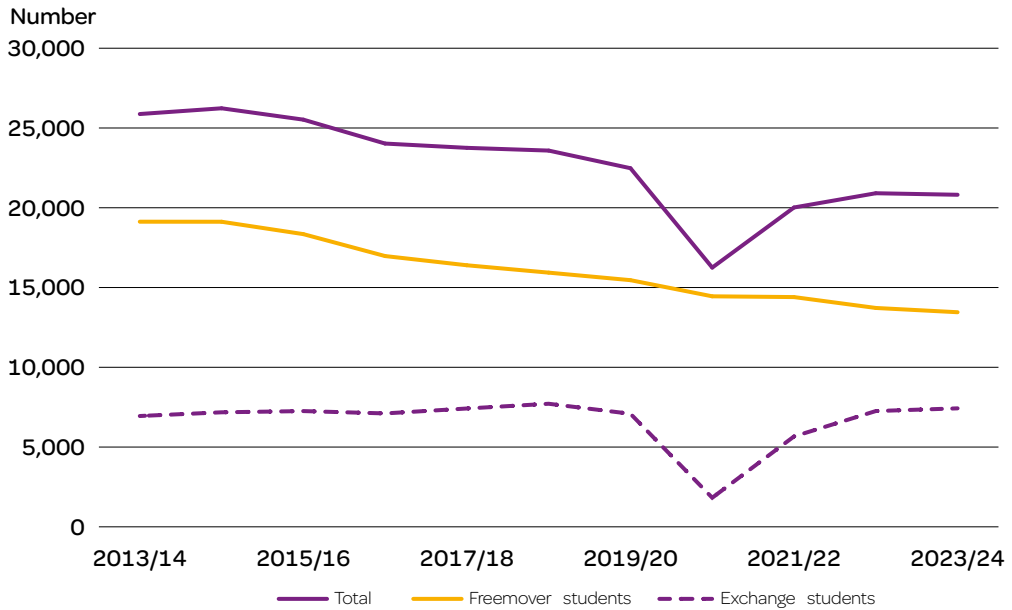
For more details on scholarship funding, see Chapter 1, The Structure of Higher Education and Research in Sweden.

Outgoing domestic first- and second-cycle students

In the 2023/24 academic year, 7,430 domestic students studied abroad as exchange students and 13,450 as freemover students (figure 5.5). Of all outgoing students, 59 per cent were women and 41 per cent men. The gender distribution was the same among both exchange and freemover students.

While the number of outgoing exchange students has remained relatively stable over the past ten years, the number of outgoing freemover students has fallen by almost 30 per cent over the same period.

Figure 5.5: Number of outgoing students, in total and by exchange students and freemover students, academic years 2013/14–2023/24



Outgoing students study mainly in Europe

Of all outgoing students, 70 per cent studied in European countries. However, exchange students and freemover students tend to choose different destinations. In the 2023/24 academic year, France and Italy were the most popular choices for exchange students, while the United States and the United Kingdom were by far the most common destinations for freemover students.

Government student finance available for studies abroad

Domestic students studying abroad, whether as exchange students or freemover students, can apply for government student finance from the Swedish Board of Student Finance.

Students studying abroad receive the same grant and loan amounts as those studying in Sweden. In addition, they may apply for a country-specific loan to cover travel expenses to and higher living costs in the country of study. A separate additional loan is available to cover tuition fees where applicable.

For more details on student financing, see Chapter 1, The Structure of Higher Education and Research in Sweden.

International mobility varies widely by programme

Opportunities for international mobility vary by study programme. Students at a number of programmes leading to professional qualifications, such as the Bachelor and the Master of Arts in Education or the Bachelor of Science in Nursing, rarely study abroad. Among graduates of these programmes in the 2023/24 academic year, only 1–2 per cent had studied abroad during the preceding 12 semesters.

By contrast, studying abroad was more common among graduates of the Master of Science in Business and Economics (38 per cent), the Master of Laws (31 per cent), and the Master of Science in Engineering (26 per cent) programmes in the same period.

Efforts to widen participation in international student mobility

Widening participation in outgoing international mobility has been a topic of discussion in the Swedish higher education sector in recent years. Particular emphasis has been placed on increasing participation among students with fewer opportunities. The European Commission has set a specific objective: by 2030, these students should make up at least 20 per cent of all participants in international mobility activities.

Students with fewer opportunities are defined as those disadvantaged compared to their peers due to one or more exclusion factors. These include being accompanied by children while studying abroad; having a disability or long-term health condition; experiencing discrimination or structural barriers in the education system; or being affected by cultural or linguistic background, social or economic conditions, or geographical location.

For more details on widening participation, see Chapter 2, First- and Second-Cycle Education in Sweden.

Outgoing domestic third-cycle students

Third-cycle students have the opportunity to go abroad through mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ or through initiatives offered by organisations such as the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education. Many also arrange their stays independently, outside formal mobility programmes or agreements, or participate in international conferences.

Third-cycle students take part in international mobility activities to a greater extent than first- and second-cycle students. Of the 2,750 third-cycle graduates in 2023, 30 per cent had spent part of their studies abroad. Overall, women and men were equally likely to have undertaken international study periods.

Third-cycle students mainly travelled to countries in Europe, although the single most common destination in 2023 was the United States. Students may have travelled to several countries during their studies, but the statistics refer to the country in which they spent their longest continuous period abroad.

Research and teaching staff travelling abroad

In 2023, nearly 30 per cent of research and teaching staff at Swedish higher education institutions reported travelling abroad for work. Staff often use the same mobility programmes available to third-cycle students. International travel includes both short trips of less than a week and longer stays of more than a week, with the vast majority taking part in shorter trips. Many travel as part of research projects involving time abroad or to attend conferences.

Research and teaching staff in the natural sciences were the most likely to travel abroad for work in 2023. In this field, 35 per cent had spent time abroad. Overall, men travelled to a greater extent than women – 31 per cent of men compared with 28 per cent of women. However, differences appear between fields of research and development.