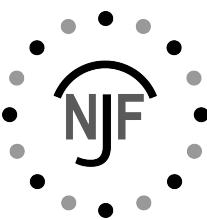
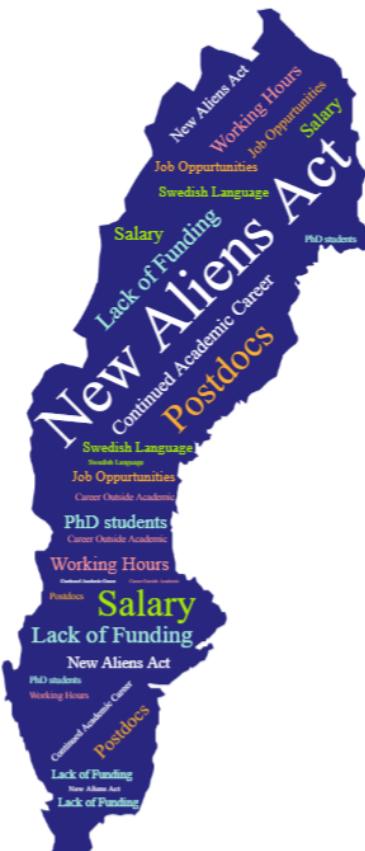


# A Sustainable Migration Policy for Academia and Sweden

28th February 2022



**SFSDK**



## **1 About**

### **Corresponding contact**

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### **About SFS-DK**

SFS-DK is the doctoral students committee in SFS, Swedish National Union of Students. SFS-DK works with issues that concern doctoral students and doctoral education. Through SFS we advocate the doctoral student input on the governmental processes, laws and regulations that concern doctoral students.

### **About KTH-PhD Chapter**

KTH-PhD Chapter is the doctoral students chapter in the student union at KTH (Doktorandsektionen vid Tekniska Högskolan studentkår, THS). The PhD Chapter works with issues that concern doctoral students and doctoral education, works to promote more effective and higher quality PhD education, research and working environment and improve the general conditions for PhD students at KTH.

### **About SNPA**

SNPA is a non-profit, postdoctoral member-driven organisation with overarching goals to improve the quality of the working and living environments for the postdoctoral community in Sweden.

### **About NJF**

The National Junior Faculty (NJF) is an umbrella organisation for local faculty associations supporting researchers 1-15 years post-PhD at nine Swedish universities. NJF's vision is to create the best possible academic environment that enables future academics to achieve their full potential in Sweden.

### **About the survey**

The survey titled "*A sustainable migration and career policy for doctoral students and early career researchers*", conducted by SFS-DK, KTH PhD Chapter, SNPA and NJF between 16th of November 2021 and 31st of January, 2022, was distributed among doctoral students, and early career researchers via email lists and social media.

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## **2 Summary and recommendations**

The Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) of Sweden are at the forefront of attracting highly skilled individuals from around the world to Sweden, such as international doctoral students and other early career researchers (ECR). This not only increases the quality of the higher education and research carried out at HEIs, but the rest of Sweden also benefits when these researchers remain in the Swedish labour market. They contribute to Sweden by attracting funding, instigating new research projects, and as experts in management, problem solving and communication. Therefore, it is important that they have the same access to obtaining permanent residency as those pursuing non-academic careers.

Those with a doctoral degree are less likely to become unemployed [1], but the maintenance requirement for permanent residency is misaligned with the length of doctoral education and the flexible nature of academic contracts making it unlikely that doctoral students and ECRs will be able to obtain permanent residency.

- Individuals affected by the new legislation perceive the impact to be large and, in light of these recent changes, are now less likely to remain in Sweden.
- Moving forward, this may impact the number of international students and researchers wanting to study or work in Sweden in the first place.
- Loss of the most highly educated individuals will also affect other sectors, such as industry as argued by SN [2].
- Doctoral students and ECRs perceive Swedish language skills as important to their future career in Sweden, however, the majority find it challenging to learn Swedish with the time and resources they have available.

Based on this we recommend that

- An exception in the maintenance requirement of the new migration legislation be made for doctoral students and researchers.
- The possibilities for doctoral students and ECRs to learn Swedish are strengthened and that the current possibilities for learning Swedish while employed in academia are mapped.

### **3 Introduction**

Swedish academia has long attracted exceptional international research talent by offering an excellent research environment alongside reasonable working conditions for doctoral students and ECRs in comparison with many other nations. However it is important to stress that even though the general conditions are good, they are not unique. Countries like Norway, Germany and Canada offer similar conditions.

If one looks at the salary conditions, there are many places that offer more competitive wages and in Sweden it is rarely economically beneficial to the individual to obtain a PhD, but it is very economically beneficial for society [1]. Furthermore, PhD graduates are highly sought after in the private sector which has a great lack of expert skills [2]. This is one of the reasons that different Swedish governments have long aimed at retaining international researchers in Sweden even if they leave academia [2, 3].

Eight years ago the Swedish government faced the problem that too many international doctoral students left Sweden upon graduation and the migration legislation was changed to remedy this. It was effective and now more international doctoral students remain in Sweden following graduation [1, 2]. Building on this momentum, the current government, through the Research and Innovation proposition (Prop. 2020/21:60) [3], would like to increase this proportion even further, but the new migration legislation stands as a significant barrier to this goal.

In July 2021 the Swedish parliament passed a new migration legislation, which contains a new maintenance requirement for those who wish to obtain permanent residency. Specifically, an applicant must show they have an employment contract lasting for at least 18 months from the day the migration agency issues its decision [4]. With this new maintenance requirement the future of Sweden's attractiveness to international researchers has been challenged.

If the motivation of the maintenance requirement is to ensure that the applicant is integrated into the Swedish labour market, this target is missed for doctoral students and ECRs. In fact, while those holding a doctoral degree are less likely to become unemployed in general, they are frequently employed by consecutive short-term contracts that are frequently not long enough to fulfil the new maintenance requirement [2].

Though many actors, within and outside of academia, have raised awareness of this issue since the new migration legislation came into effect, we at *Sveriges Förenade Studentkårers doktorandkomité (SFS-DK)*, *Doktorandsektionen vid Tekniska Högskolans Studentkår (KTH PhD Chapter)*, *the Swedish Network of Postdoc Associations (SNPA)*, and *the National Junior Faculty (NJF)*, felt that the consequences for doctoral students and ECRs could be best determined by asking them directly. Our survey “*A sustainable migration and career policy for doctoral students and early*

*career researchers*" was open to all doctoral students and ECRs, including those who do not require permanent residency (i.e. Swedish citizens), though most responses came from those directly affected by the legislative changes (i.e. Non-EU/EEA citizens). The responses, in general, support what others have already argued [5, 6].

## 4 An academic career versus a permanent residency

A career in academia is international even if one never moves abroad. Colleagues, mentors, collaborators, funding sources, publications, meetings and conferences are often international. This is exciting and rewarding, but the academic career path is also a precarious one.

The career path of doctoral students and ECRs follows the funding, this means that until you are offered tenure, it is uncertain where your next position may be and how long your contract will be. The average doctoral education lasts around 5 years [7] and those remaining in academia spend the next 5-8 years as ECRs [8]. Therefore, the current academic financing system often results in a situation where one spends at least 10 years on short term contracts.

From an international doctoral student's perspective, Sweden offers a high-quality education and an excellent research environment. For the past 8 years, since the last change to the migration legislation, this was combined with reasonable long term stability via the ability to obtain permanent residency while following the academic career track. Sweden was not unique in providing such a combination, with countries such as Norway, Germany, Canada and Netherlands [9] offering similar opportunities. However, the new maintenance requirements dulls Sweden's competitive edge making it more likely that highly-skilled individuals will seek opportunities elsewhere. This will have an obvious negative impact on academia in Sweden, with the quality of research and higher education suffering, but, as argued by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (Svensk Näringsliv), it will also adversely affect other sectors that seek to employ PhD holders that leave academia [2].

The argument that this problem is caused by the academic contract system and that it should be the academia that resolves it neglects to realise how research is financed. Research and research education are funded by a multitude of sources. The host university only has full control of the portion of funding that comes directly from the financial bill. The remaining research funds come in via competitive external grants, where it is not uncommon that the grants only last for 1-3 years at a time. A further increase in the allocation of research funding via competitive national grants has been supported by different Swedish governments, which is more in-line with how academic research is funded internationally. This further increases the precariousness of the academic career in Sweden [10].

## 5 Background information

Doctoral education is a research-intensive education providing doctoral students with state-of-the-art skills in their field and teaching them how to formulate and drive their own independent research projects. Following graduation, and for the next 5-8 years, researchers are classified as ECRs<sup>1</sup>.

There are currently 17,100 doctoral students and 7,000 ECRs in Sweden [7, 11] with a nearly equal gender distribution. Around 20% of the doctoral students are from outside the EU/EEA. The percentage of international ECRs is even higher with around 75% of the earliest ECRs (postdocs) coming from outside Sweden and a full 50% a later stage ECRs [11]. Furthermore, a very recent, yet to be published, survey conducted by NJF, found that around 50% of all ECRs are from outside of the EU/EEA .

The 5080 respondents of this survey represent this population well in both research fields and gender distribution. However there is an over-representation of responses from individuals with an international background, with 50% of the survey respondents coming from outside of the EU/EEA. This is not surprising considering the focus of the survey (Fig. 1).

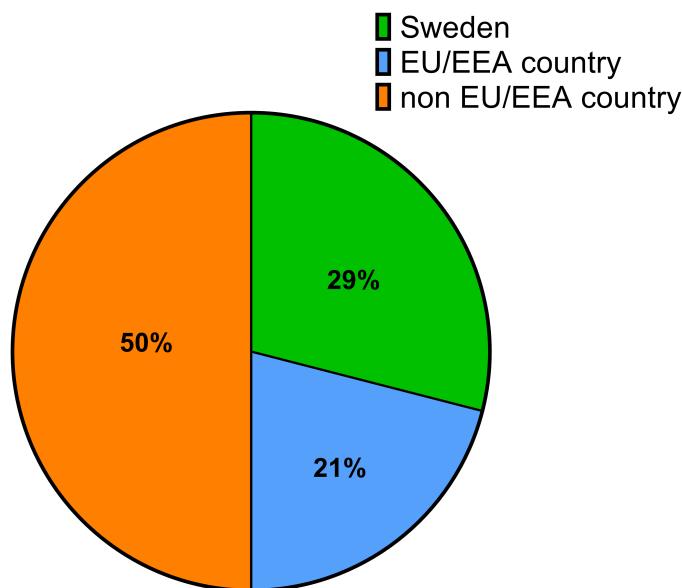


Figure 1: The nationality of the respondents

In most cases doctoral students and ECRs are employed [1]. However, around

<sup>1</sup>Early career researchers describe those in the academic career path with a doctoral degree but without a permanent position. Determining the total number of ECRs in Sweden is difficult [8] as neither UKÄ nor most Swedish Universities keep track of all. In 2021 NJF and SULF estimate the total number of ECRs in Sweden to be 7000 [11]

25% of postdocs are funded by scholarships [11], meaning that they are not employed, and do not meet the new maintenance requirement. Furthermore, being financed on a scholarship makes it difficult for them to get a personal number and start the four-years required for the permanent residency application. [11].

### The length of doctoral students and ECR contracts

Short term contracts are the norm in academia. For doctoral students this is regulated by the Higher Education Ordinance to a maximum of two years at a time [12]. In Sweden, doctoral education typically lasts 4-5 years so by the time doctoral students are eligible to apply for permanent residency (>4 years) they will not meet the new maintenance requirement (>18 months).

For ECRs the situation is less homogeneous, as they have many different employments [11], which is why we in this survey have asked this group about the length of their contract. Indeed, of ECR survey respondents who have come to Sweden from outside the EU/EEA and lived here for four years or more, nearly 37% of them are currently on contracts shorter than 18 months and therefore do not meet the maintenance requirement. A further 30% of non-EU/EEA ECRs have contracts lasting between 18 and 24 months (see Fig. 2) and therefore would require a timely decision from Migrationsverket.

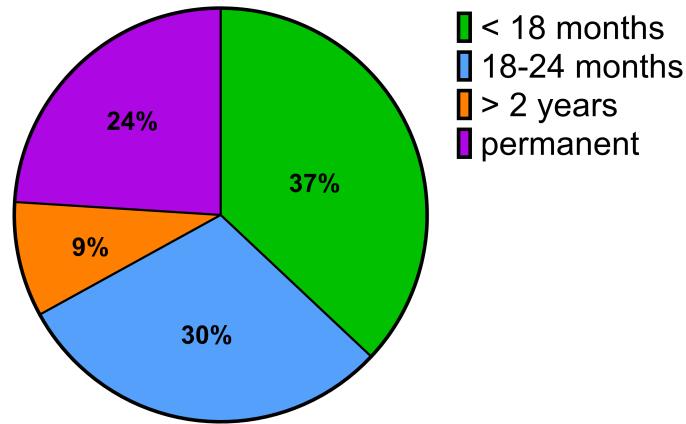


Figure 2: The length of contracts for ECRs who responded to the survey

## 6 The consequences of the new migration legislation

Taken together, the combination of typically short academic contracts, the new maintenance requirement, and the often long and uncertain processing times at Migrationsverket [15], makes obtaining permanent residency a nearly impossible task.

When respondents were asked if the new migration legislation impacts them and their future career in Sweden, the overwhelming majority (93%) of non-EU/EEA, half (55%) of EU/EEA, and a quarter (27%) of Swedish citizens expressed that it will have negative consequences for them (see Fig. 3). When given space to explain why, many Swedish and EU/EEA respondents elaborated that the effect on their non-EU/EEA colleagues will damage their research environment, or because this will directly impact their partner or family members (see Fig. 3).

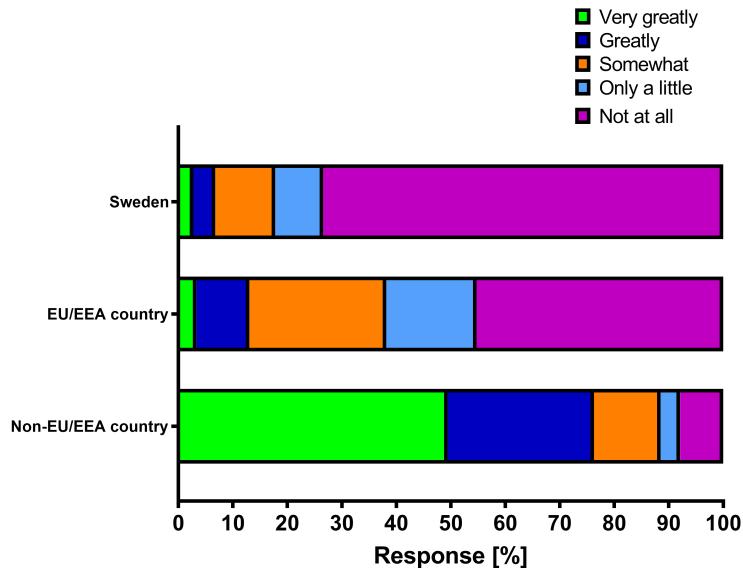


Figure 3: The perceived consequences of the new migration legislation

Of the non-EU/EEA respondents, 90% do not have permanent residency in Sweden and are thus directly affected by the new legislation. However, despite this, the majority (96%) express that they wish to stay in Sweden if they have the opportunity to. However, there are 28% who explicitly named the maintenance requirements of the new migration legislation as a reason for their wish to leave Sweden (see Fig. 4). This means, had it not been for the new migration legislation, a total of 96% would have wished to stay in Sweden after their current position indicating their intention to settle in Sweden long-term. Settling entails, outside of having stable employment, planning their personal life including buying a home, starting a family, enrolling children in school, and building their professional and social networks.

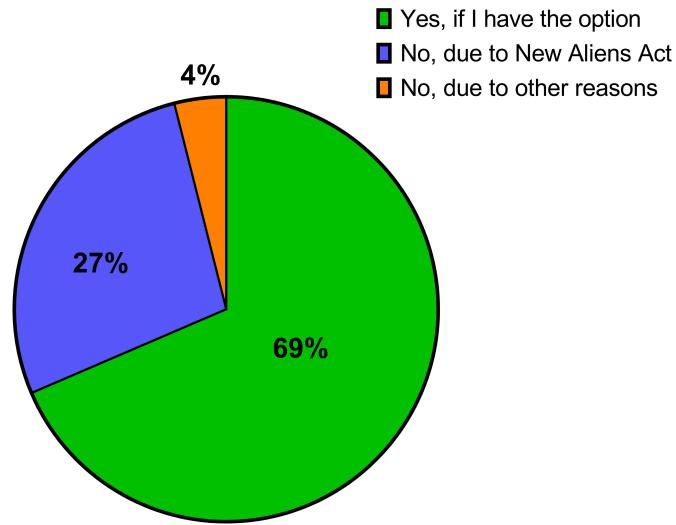


Figure 4: The distribution of the responses to the question *"Is it likely that you remain in Sweden after your current position"*

## 7 Learning the Swedish Language

The new changes in the migration legislation not only introduced a minimum maintenance requirement, but have also promised that applicants should be able to prove a minimum level of Swedish competence. The international working language of research is English. Hence, there is little professional incentive from the academic research environment to learn Swedish.

Academic careers inspire a high level of personal commitment often resulting in heavy workloads. This is commonly the case at research institutions all over the world and is confirmed in this survey, it should be noted that long working hours are especially common for doctoral students and ECRs coming from outside the EU/EEA (Fig 5).

Despite the high workloads, most respondents still invest some of their spare time learning Swedish. In fact, among the international doctoral students and ECRs that have lived in Sweden for 4 years or more, 44% reported having achieved a level of B1 or higher (Fig 6.a).

This matches the strictest language requirements of Norway, Germany and Denmark. However, it is notable that nearly 91% of respondents found learning Swedish a challenging task regardless of the level of Swedish they had achieved (Fig. 6.b).

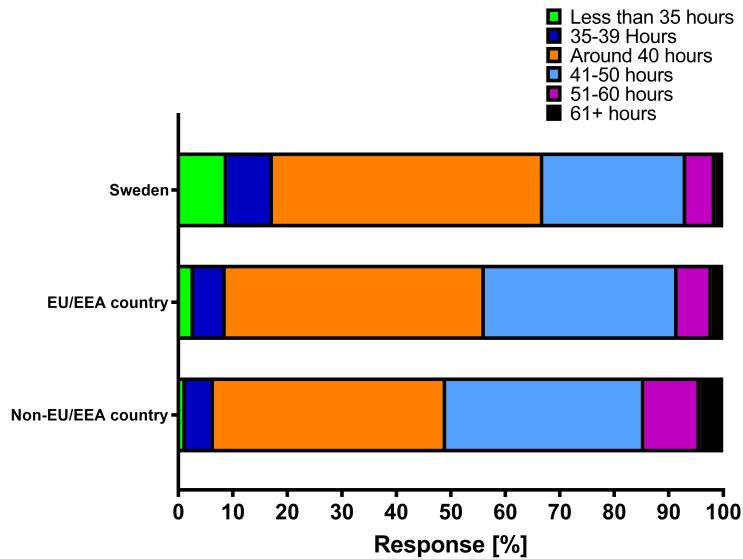


Figure 5: The number of working hours of the respondents.

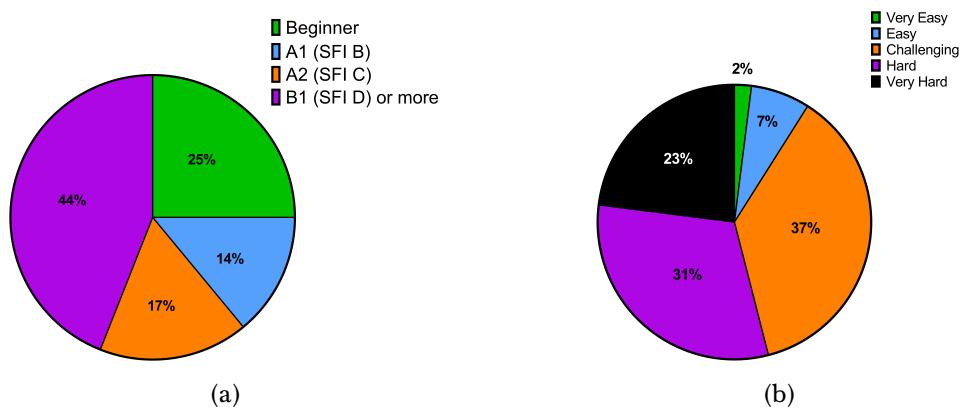


Figure 6: Fig. 6.a shows the distribution of the Swedish language level of the non EU/EEA respondents while Fig. 6.b shows how hard the same respondents gauged it was to learn Swedish

When respondents were asked about the impact their Swedish language skills have on their current academic activities, researchers with higher Swedish competency perceived a greater and more positive impact on their work. Comparatively, the majority of researchers with a basic level of Swedish do not perceive an impact (positive or negative) on their academic activities. Nonetheless, most ECRs believe that having sufficient Swedish language abilities will impact on their future career perspectives in Sweden (those at lower language competency perceiving a negative impact that shifts to a positive impact as respondents language ability increases) (Fig. 7).

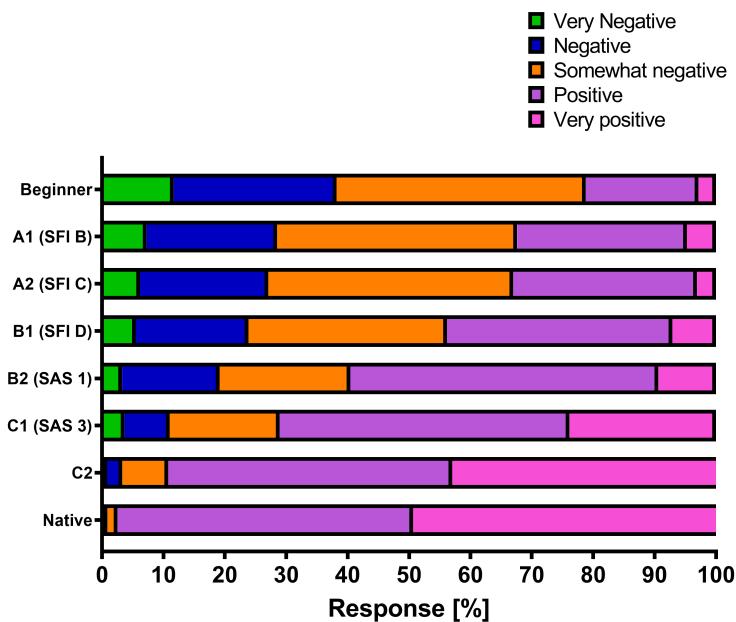


Figure 7: The perceived impact of Swedish language skills on a future career in Sweden.

Overall, we observed that researchers are willing to learn Swedish despite finding it challenging, and that they perceive that this will have a positive impact on their careers. This strongly highlights the importance of supporting doctoral students and ECRs in Swedish language learning, in turn supporting their career advancement and the likelihood of Sweden to retain more highly skilled individuals. As the overall situation differs vastly from university to university, mapping out the reality across Swedish Higher Education Institutions is highly recommended.

## **8 Conclusion and outlook**

Sweden has long benefited from a strong, international research community and is renowned as an attractive destination for doctoral students and ECRs through its combination of world-class academic institutions and healthier work-life balance. Yet, this survey indicates that the new migration legislation puts this reputation in jeopardy.

If the impact of the new migration legislation turns out to be as doctoral students and ECRs anticipate, it is highly likely that the coming years will see a decrease in the number of international doctoral graduates remaining in Sweden. This will have wide-reaching negative consequences both within academia and other highly-skilled labour sectors.

Therefore, we believe that an exception for doctoral students and researchers to the maintenance requirement in the migration legislation is necessary and prudent to prevent a decline in Sweden's international competitiveness in the knowledge economy and to continue Sweden's ability to attract the very best international talent.

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