

How are international doctoral students doing?

Migration policy, language, discrimination, and the work environment

SFS



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1. Summary

This interim report from the project *Hur mår doktoranden? 2026* (“How is the doctoral student doing? 2026”) focuses on the situation for international doctoral (PhD) students. It is a collaboration between Fackförbundet ST (the Union of Civil Servants), the largest trade union in the Swedish government sector with more than 100,000 members, Fackförbundet ST within the University Sector, and the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS), which represents more than 400,000 students and doctoral students at Sweden’s higher education institutions.

The survey shows that international doctoral students experience various work environment problems to a greater extent than Swedish doctoral students, while also facing additional challenges in their doctoral studies. For example, international doctoral students are more likely to experience work-related stress, have sleep problems, difficulty focusing on things other than their work, and to have been subjected to discrimination or harassment.

In addition, international doctoral students face a further source of uncertainty that affects their vulnerability: migration-related uncertainty. The conditions for international doctoral students to build an academic future in Sweden need to be improved. Otherwise, Sweden risks losing important expertise.

The survey also includes Swedish language skills as a background variable. There is a clear overlap between international doctoral students and doctoral students who report that they do not have sufficient proficiency in Swedish, which makes it difficult to determine which factor is the most significant. In some cases, however, the group who reports that they do not have sufficient proficiency in Swedish has a poorer outcome than the group of international doctoral students as a whole.

This autumn, we will follow-up our previous reports from 2012 and 2021 with a publication titled *Hur mår doktoranden?* (“How is the doctoral student doing?”), which describes general patterns in the organisational and social work environment of doctoral students.

Recommendations

The Swedish Parliament and Government:

- Create more secure migration conditions for doctoral students and researchers, covering both their own residence permits and those of their families, as well as their eligibility for Swedish citizenship. This should include consideration of both specific regulations for doctoral students and researchers, and general migration legislation.
- Provide the Swedish Migration Agency with sufficient resources so that waiting times in migration cases do not limit the effect of the new legislation.
- Strengthen employment security within higher education institutions after completion of the doctoral degree, so that uncertain employment conditions do not worsen migration-related uncertainty.

Higher education institutions:

- Provide all relevant information concerning employment conditions, obligations, rights, and who represents doctoral students in English at all levels of the organisation.
- Take greater responsibility for international doctoral students' work-related stress and its consequences.
- Work long-term to offer more secure employment conditions after completion of the doctoral degree, including as a way of reducing migration-related uncertainty for international doctoral students.
- Raise ambitions and increase efforts to combat all forms of discrimination and harassment against international doctoral students.
- Ensure that education on discrimination and sexual harassment is included in the introduction for doctoral students, in a language appropriate for the target group.
- Ensure that all reports of discrimination and harassment are investigated and followed up, and that those affected are offered sufficient support.
- Create better opportunities for international doctoral students to learn Swedish during their doctoral studies.
- Offer better individual support on migration issues for doctoral students, in matters relating to work and education.
- Ensure that everyone who, through their work, contributes to the administration of doctoral students' migration cases, in matters relating to work and education, has sufficient knowledge so as not to increase the migration-related uncertainty for international doctoral students.

What can trade unions and student unions do?

- Ensure that, within the framework of collaboration, they actively strive to encourage employers to raise their ambitions in preventing discrimination and removing obstacles to equal opportunities for international doctoral students.
- Ensure that, together with health and safety organisations, they develop systematic work environment management and produce measures to improve the situation of doctoral students.
- Ensure that doctoral students are aware of how trade unions and student unions can influence and safeguard their rights.

2. Background

Doctoral students are a central part of the Swedish research system. They not only contribute to knowledge development and scientific quality but also carry out a significant proportion of day-to-day research at universities and other higher education institutions. To benefit fully from their studies, doctoral students need a good study and work environment, as well as clear and equal support from their higher education institution.

The point of departure for this interim report is the situation of international doctoral students. Their results often stand out, in a negative sense. They tend to be more stressed, have more difficulties switching off from work, and experience discrimination and harassment to a greater extent. In addition, since the last “Hur mår doktoranden?” report was published in March 2021, new legislation has been introduced in several stages that has directly or indirectly affected doctoral students’ opportunities to build an academic career in Sweden.

Swedish higher education institutions are highly internationalised, with international doctoral students accounting for around 37 per cent of all doctoral students. The number of international doctoral students has remained relatively unchanged over the past ten to twelve years, but as the total number of doctoral students in Sweden has decreased, the proportion of international doctoral students has increased over time.¹

International doctoral students contribute scientific excellence that strengthens both the quality of research and Sweden’s competitiveness as a research and innovation nation. This is repeatedly reflected in research policy bills, where increased internationalisation is set as an important goal.

2.1 Who are the international doctoral students

The term “international doctoral students” refers to doctoral students who have moved to Sweden from abroad for their doctoral studies. In our latest report, international doctoral students were referred to as *foreign doctoral students*; this refers to the same group.

International doctoral students are divided into two categories: EU/EEA doctoral students, which includes doctoral students from all EU member states as well as from Iceland, Norway, and Liechtenstein; and doctoral students from other countries, referred to later in the report as “third-country doctoral students”, who are doctoral students who come neither from Sweden nor from an EU/EEA country. The doctoral students stated their nationality in the survey.

In addition to differences between Swedish and international doctoral students, the report also presents differences based on doctoral students’ proficiency in Swedish, described as sufficient or insufficient proficiency.

This distinction is based on a question to respondents about their level of proficiency in Swedish. The categories “Native/Mother tongue”, “Advanced”, and “Intermediate” have all been categorised as “sufficient proficiency”, while “Basic/Limited” and “Do not speak the

¹ Statistics from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ):
<https://www.uka.se/integrationer/hogskolan-i-siffror/statistik?statq=https://statistik-api.uka.se/api/totals/48>

language” fall into the category “insufficient proficiency”. In the corresponding categorisation of doctoral students’ level of proficiency in English, all respondents belonged to the category “sufficient proficiency”.

What is your level of proficiency in Swedish in relation to departmental information and communication?

<i>Native/Mother tongue</i> , I use this language naturally and effortlessly	63 %
<i>Advanced</i> , I can understand and use this language very well in both formal and informal situations	9 %
<i>Intermediate</i> , I can manage most everyday and academic situations, but with some limitations	8 %
<i>Basic/Limited</i> , I can handle simple communication but have difficulty with more complex information	13 %
<i>Do not speak the language</i>	8 %

Proficiency in Swedish

Sufficient proficiency	79 %
Insufficient proficiency	21 %

Insufficient proficiency in Swedish should be understood as having insufficient Swedish language skills to manage most everyday and academic situations.

The 307 doctoral students who stated that they do not have sufficient proficiency in Swedish were all international doctoral students: 37 per cent come from an EU/EEA country, and 63 per cent are third-country doctoral students. This does not mean that all international doctoral students have insufficient proficiency in Swedish, as the 307 respondents who reported this amounts to 56 per cent of all international doctoral students among the respondents. When the results are analysed, it is important to bear in mind that every respondent’s answers fall into both a nationality category and one of the level of proficiency categories. Given the overlap between nationality and level of proficiency in Swedish, it is difficult to determine which of these factors has the greatest impact based on the methods used in this report.

Other background factors that may have affected the results, such as field of research, form of funding, children living at home, and age, are presented in tables at the end of the report.

3. The impact of migration policy

Uncertainty linked to residence permits has always been a problem for international doctoral students. This has included short and uncertain residence permits as well as difficulties when switching from a residence permit for studies to a work permit. In recent years, however, the conditions for obtaining a permanent residence permit have become even more challenging, which has affected the possibility for international doctoral students to stay and get settled in Sweden.

The most significant change came into force in July 2021, when the Swedish Temporary Aliens Act was replaced by a new regular Aliens Act. In connection with this, the requirements for being granted a permanent residence permit were tightened. Between 2014 and 2021, doctoral students could be granted a permanent residence permit after four years of doctoral studies. This possibility was removed when the new Aliens Act was introduced.

Since then, the requirements for being eligible for a permanent residence permit include the ability to support oneself financially and long-term employment, in the form of either permanent employment or fixed-term employment lasting at least 12 months. For many doctoral students, who often have fixed-term employment and precarious employment conditions even after completion of their doctoral studies, this has made the road to a permanent residence permit longer and more uncertain. Especially as the residence permit is strongly linked to performance, progression, and the ability to secure long-term employment, and, in part, dependent on good relationships with managers and supervisors.

Recently, however, the Swedish Parliament has decided on new rules for doctoral students and researchers. These make it possible to obtain a permanent residence permit after three consecutive years in the country, rather than after four years, provided that the international doctoral student can demonstrate long-term means of support. Those who have completed their research or third-cycle (doctoral) studies can be granted a temporary residence permit for up to 18 months, rather than the previous twelve months, to look for work or to start their own business.

It is still too early to determine the effects of these new rules, which enter into force on 11 June 2026, but they have already been criticised for being insufficient. Given the long waiting times in recent years, and the fact that doctoral students must meet the requirements at the time when the Swedish Migration Agency makes its decision, third-country doctoral students still risk missing the opportunity to obtain a permanent residence permit and to instead continue to depend on more uncertain temporary residence permits. Many research positions also cannot be applied for until after obtaining the doctorate degree, and if an international doctoral student does not have long-term means of support when they complete their doctorate studies, this means that they may be forced to leave academia in order to meet the requirement for long-term means of support.

There is also a group of international doctoral students who will not be covered by the new legislation, as their funding does not last long enough for them to meet the requirement. Despite these objections, the new legislation is an improvement compared to the current situation.

In addition to legislation that directly addresses the challenges faced by international doctoral students, there is parallel, forthcoming legislation that indirectly risks increasing their vulnerability. This includes stricter requirements to live a well-behaved life (*vandel*) to be eligible for residence permits, and the so-called Reporting Act (*angiverilagen*) with an expanded duty to provide information about persons who illegally reside in Sweden, both of which come into force in summer 2026. Legislation that limits the possibility of becoming a Swedish citizen can contribute to making international doctoral students' future in Sweden more uncertain, both for the doctoral students themselves and for their potential families or partners.

4. Organisational and social work environment

4.1 Control and influence

A central aspect of organisational and social work environment concerns the experience of job autonomy, or of having influence and control over one's own work. A work situation with high demands can often be experienced as being stimulating and developmental, but this requires a sense of control and latitude in one's work.²

Just over 20 per cent of international doctoral students stated that they never or rarely have influence over their tasks, such as departmental duties, courses, and research, compared with 12 per cent of Swedish doctoral students. A higher proportion of doctoral students with insufficient proficiency in Swedish, 22 per cent, also stated that they rarely or never have control over their work, compared with 13 per cent of those with sufficient proficiency in Swedish.

There can be many reasons why doctoral students do not have influence over their work. One potential reason is lack of information. However, international doctoral students do not stand out on what they thought about the introduction they received to their doctoral studies, neither based on foreign background or insufficient proficiency in Swedish. At the same time, almost one in five out of all doctoral students responded that the introduction was, in some way, insufficient. This suggests that the introduction itself may be satisfactory, but that the flow of information afterwards may not be available in English to the same extent as during a structured introduction. Regardless of why this is so, it is essential to perceive that you have control over your work situation. Without such control, doctoral students risk ending up in a situation where feelings of stress take over,³ with consequences such as sleeping problems or anxiety.

4.2 Stress, anxiety, and sleep problems

The level of work-related stress differs significantly between Swedish and international doctoral students. Among international doctoral students, just over 10 per cent state that they work overtime every day, compared with 5 per cent of Swedish doctoral students. Among doctoral students who stated that they do not have sufficient proficiency in Swedish, 15 per cent work overtime every day. Almost two out of five international doctoral students and doctoral students with insufficient proficiency in Swedish state that they work overtime at least several days a week.⁴

² Statistics from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ):
<https://www.uka.se/integrationer/hogskolan-i-siffror/statistik?statq=https://statistik-api.uka.se/api/totals/48>

³ <https://www.prevent.se/jobba-med-arbetsmiljo/osa/stress/krav-kontroll-stod/> (link to Swedish page on the Karasek and Theorell Job-Demands-Control model)

⁴ There was no significant difference between third-country doctoral students and other doctoral students.

A similar pattern emerges for work-related stress. Almost 80 per cent of international doctoral students from EU/EEA countries and 70 per cent of third-country doctoral students state that they strongly or somewhat agree with the statement that they often experience stress because of their work, compared with 54 per cent of Swedish doctoral students.

At the same time, international doctoral students experience to a greater extent that they receive good support from their supervisor or manager when they feel stress: almost 60 per cent, compared with just under 50 per cent of Swedish doctoral students.

Universities generally offer support to prevent stress. However, when asked whether their university offers any measures to prevent stress-related illnesses, just over 10 per cent of international doctoral students answer no, compared with 5 per cent of Swedish doctoral students. Doctoral students with insufficient proficiency in Swedish were also more likely to state that there was no such support: 13 per cent, compared with 6 per cent of those with sufficient proficiency in Swedish.

In addition, international doctoral students state to a greater extent than Swedish doctoral students that they have sleep problems due to stress, anxiety, or discomfort. Just over 40 per cent reply that they experience this at least once a week, compared with 25 per cent of Swedish doctoral students. Doctoral students with insufficient proficiency in Swedish also state this to a higher degree, 42 per cent, compared with 30 per cent of doctoral students with sufficient proficiency in Swedish.

4.3 Employment conditions

Uncertain employment conditions in academia constitute another important dimension of the organisational and social work environment. Being a doctoral student means having fixed-term employment for four years, and there is a high risk of also having fixed-term employment after completing the doctoral studies. Doctoral students are also highly dependent on their relationship with their supervisor, which creates a position of dependency in an already vulnerable situation.

We already know that uncertain employment conditions and structural hierarchies provide fertile ground for harassment and discrimination. They increase the risk of ethnic discrimination⁵ as well as the risk of sexual harassment against women.⁶ International doctoral students become particularly vulnerable in this context (see Chapter 6).

Just over 70 per cent of international doctoral students and 75 per cent of those with insufficient proficiency in Swedish state that they strongly or partly agree with the statement

⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/01425692.2022.2074375?needAccess=true>

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/01425692.2022.2074375?needAccess=true>

that insecure employment conditions in academia make them hesitant to pursue a career in academia. Just under 60 per cent of Swedish doctoral students state the same.

4.4 Individual study plan (ISP)

The individual study plan (ISP) is a central governance and control instrument within doctoral education in Sweden. Under current regulations, every doctoral student must have an ISP that is followed up and revised regularly. The plan must describe the content and structure of the study programme, the timetable, supervision, funding, and the division of responsibilities between the doctoral student, the supervisor, and the higher education institution.

How the ISP is used in practice varies, and experiences differ distinctly between Swedish and international doctoral students. Swedish and EU/EEA doctoral students are more likely to feel that the ISP is rarely used as an active working tool: around 60 per cent, compared with 35 per cent of third-country doctoral students. Third-country doctoral students are also more likely to experience that the study plan helps them structure their work, is helpful for discussions with their supervisor, and increases their understanding of both their rights and expectations of them.

4.5 Work and free time

Difficulties in separating work from free time are a well-known risk factor in academia, but they appear to have a higher impact to international doctoral students. Around 50 per cent of international doctoral students, and just over 50 per cent of those without sufficient proficiency in Swedish, feel that they have difficulty focusing on things other than their work and studies at least once a week, compared with 37 per cent of Swedish doctoral students and 39 per cent of those with sufficient proficiency in Swedish.

Annual leave is essential for the recovery that doctoral students both need and are entitled to. Despite this, almost 40 per cent of international doctoral students have not taken all their annual leave. Among these almost 40 per cent, the responses given are that their workload was too high for them to be able to take all their annual leave, at 13 per cent, that their supervisor or another manager preferred that they did not do so, at 2 per cent, or that they had chosen to not take all their annual leave, at just under 20 per cent.

A similar pattern can also be seen in relation to proficiency in Swedish: 15 per cent of doctoral students without sufficient proficiency stated that they had not taken all their annual leave because of an excessive workload, compared with 10 per cent of those with sufficient proficiency.

The use of annual leave has, however, improved since the last “Hur mår doktoranden?” report in 2021. At that time, just over 60 per cent of international doctoral students did not take all their annual leave, and a higher proportion stated that this was due to an excessive workload. The fact that more international doctoral students now take all their annual leave means that

we can see no significant difference between Swedish and international doctoral students' use of annual leave in this survey, which was the case in the previous survey, when Swedish doctoral students took their annual leave to a clearly greater extent.

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5. Language, cultural and institutional knowledge as work environment factors

In conjunction with the demanding conditions that already characterise doctoral studies, linguistic and institutional barriers risk reinforcing the vulnerability of international doctoral students. International doctoral students experience, to a greater extent than Swedish doctoral students, that they miss out on important professional information because of insufficient proficiency in Swedish. Among doctoral students without sufficient proficiency in Swedish, 20 per cent state that this happens at least once a week, as do 18 per cent of third-country doctoral students and 12 per cent of EU/EEA doctoral students, compared with two per cent of Swedish doctoral students and three per cent of those with sufficient proficiency in Swedish.

Language barriers also affect the ability to participate fully in collegial and social situations. International doctoral students more often state that they feel excluded from informal conversations, coffee breaks, and social activities at the workplace because of their language. These situations are often important for exchanging information and building relationships.

When asked whether they have been left out of collegial or social interactions because of the use of a language they do not fully understand or master, 20 per cent of doctoral students without sufficient proficiency in Swedish and the same proportion of third-country doctoral students answered that this happens at least once a week. The corresponding figures were ten per cent of EU/EEA doctoral students, three per cent of those with sufficient proficiency in Swedish, and two per cent of Swedish doctoral students.

5.1 Who is responsible?

The relationship with their supervisor plays a particularly decisive role in the organisational and social work environment for doctoral students. Supervisors often have considerable influence over both work content and future career opportunities for doctoral students, while also providing the main support in the work on their thesis. Overall, doctoral students state that they have a good and respectful relationship with their supervisor, although it is somewhat more common among doctoral students without sufficient proficiency in Swedish and third-country doctoral students to feel that this is not the case: ten and nine per cent respectively, compared with eight per cent for EU/EEA doctoral students, six per cent for doctoral students with sufficient proficiency in Swedish, and five per cent for Swedish doctoral students.

International doctoral students answer to a greater extent than Swedish doctoral students that their supervisor is the person who makes decisions about their employment. This is stated by 44 per cent of EU/EEA doctoral students, 54 per cent of third-country doctoral students, and 59 per cent of doctoral students without sufficient proficiency in Swedish. The corresponding figures are 28 per cent of doctoral students with sufficient proficiency in Swedish and 26 per cent of Swedish doctoral students. This is a pattern we also saw in the previous “Hur mår

doktoranden?” survey from 2021. However, this is a misconception: under the Higher Education Ordinance, this decision must be made by the vice-chancellor. It is common for this decision to be delegated to the head of department or an equivalent managerial position, but not to the supervisor.

On the question of whether the university provides sufficient support for international doctoral students on migration issues, there are clear differences between international and Swedish doctoral students, with third-country doctoral students in particular stating that they do not receive the support they need.

On the question “Who is responsible for safeguarding your rights as a PhD student in situations where you encounter problems related to your doctoral studies?”, the largest differences are between third-country doctoral students and other doctoral students. Among third-country doctoral students, 38 per cent state that their supervisor has this responsibility, compared with 26 per cent of all respondents. This is also either a misconception or a consequence of lack of information. Interestingly, however, fewer Swedish doctoral students than EU/EEA doctoral students state that it is student/doctoral unions and trade unions who safeguard their rights as doctoral students.

6. Vulnerability and discrimination in academia

Previous sections have shown how international doctoral students in Sweden experience stress, lack of influence, and uncertainty relating to their employment and migration status to a greater extent than Swedish doctoral students. These experiences must also be understood in relation to international doctoral students' increased exposure to discrimination, which previous surveys have also shown.^{7 8}

Own experience of harassment or discrimination	Swedish PhD students	EU/EEA PhD students	Third-country PhD students
I have never been harassed or discriminated against	86 %	70 %	65 %
Age	4 %	7 %	6 %
Disability	1 %	3 %	2 %
Ethnicity	1 %	10 %	24 %
Gender	7 %	12 %	9 %
Religion or other beliefs	1 %	3 %	7 %
Sexual orientation	0 %	2 %	2 %
Transgender identity or expression	1 %	1 %	1 %
Prefer not to answer	4 %	5 %	6 %

We can see the same pattern in this survey, where 86 per cent of Swedish doctoral students answered that they had never been harassed or discriminated against, compared with 70 per cent of EU/EEA doctoral students and 65 per cent of third-country doctoral students. International doctoral students state to a significantly greater extent than Swedish doctoral students that they have personally been subjected to discrimination within the framework of their doctoral studies. A total of 24 per cent of EU/EEA doctoral students and 29 per cent of third-country doctoral students have experienced some form of discrimination or harassment relating to the protected grounds of discrimination. The discrimination is primarily linked to ethnicity, which has been experienced by ten per cent of EU/EEA doctoral students and 24 per cent of third-country doctoral students, compared with one per cent of Swedish doctoral students.

For example, EU/EEA doctoral students have been subjected to discrimination or harassment linked to gender to a greater extent than other groups, at 12 per cent, while third-country doctoral students have been subjected to discrimination or harassment linked to religion or other beliefs to a greater extent than other groups, at seven per cent. International doctoral students have also experienced discrimination or harassment linked to sexual orientation, at

⁷ <https://www.gu.se/en/news/conditions-for-doctoral-students-in-new-project>

⁸ <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2074375>

two per cent, which Swedish doctoral students do not report having experienced. The same pattern can be seen for doctoral students without sufficient proficiency in Swedish. This group is also exposed to the four previously mentioned grounds of discrimination to a higher degree than the average.

There are also major differences between Swedish and international doctoral students in how they perceive that a report on harassment or discrimination is received. Among EU/EEA doctoral students, 26 per cent answered that their report was not taken seriously; the corresponding figure for Swedish doctoral students was ten per cent. Doctoral students without sufficient proficiency in Swedish responded that they had not submitted a report because, to a greater extent than other groups, they did not know how to report harassment, at 16 per cent, compared with five per cent of those with sufficient proficiency in Swedish. However, the total number of responses to this question is low, and the results must be interpreted cautiously.

In addition to their own experiences of discrimination, international doctoral students state to a greater extent than Swedish doctoral students that they have witnessed other doctoral students or colleagues being subjected to discrimination. On the question of whether they had ever witnessed someone else being harassed or discriminated against, 80 per cent of Swedish doctoral students responded that they had not, while the proportion among international doctoral students was almost 60 per cent.

For doctoral students who do not have sufficient proficiency in Swedish, the same pattern can be seen as in the question of whether they have their own experience of harassment or discrimination. They have, to a greater extent, witnessed someone else being harassed or discriminated against on grounds of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion or other beliefs. In addition, they also state that they have witnessed someone else being subjected to discrimination or harassment linked to transgender identity or expression, at four per cent, to a greater extent than other respondents.

7. Conclusions

Working in academia means working under one's own responsibility to a greater extent than in many other sectors: to a large degree, it is up to the individual to ensure that their research is carried out and meets the desired standard. This creates a pressure situation in which doctoral students must constantly deliver. In addition to delivery and performance requirements, uncertain employment conditions and an uncertain future may become a constant source of concern.

The results of our survey show that international doctoral students have a poorer work environment and experience a more uncertain situation than their Swedish colleagues. This is not something that we, as trade unions and student unions within higher education institutions, can accept.

Migration-related uncertainty

It is not possible to determine from the responses exactly why the results are poorer for international doctoral students; it is likely to involve several factors. One potential explanation for the pattern we see, however, is that international doctoral students have an additional stress factor to deal with: migration-related uncertainty. During the years in which many of the doctoral students in the survey have been active, this uncertainty has increased. This is strongly linked to their possibility of obtaining a permanent residence permit and, consequently, to their prospects of continuing their academic careers in Sweden. Uncertainty about the future has risked affecting the psychosocial work environment of doctoral students, their ability to plan a family life, and their willingness to continue an academic career in Sweden. At a structural level, the problems that international doctoral students face during their doctoral studies mean that Sweden becomes less attractive as a research nation.

The new legislation that enters into force on 11 June this year, which means that doctoral students can apply for residence permits after three years in the country, is a step in the right direction. However, more needs to be done to improve doctoral students' conditions so that they can focus wholeheartedly on their doctoral studies, without constantly having to worry about their academic future. Waiting times at the Swedish Migration Agency for cases concerning residence permits are a significant factor here. The new legislation will only fully serve its purpose if doctoral students still have approximately one year left of their employment when a decision is made. Excessively long waiting times may therefore create problems despite the new regulation. The Swedish Migration Agency needs sufficient resources to keep waiting times short.

The many changes that have taken place in recent years create uncertainty in themselves and may deter current or prospective doctoral students from choosing Sweden for their academic future. Stability and favourable conditions are important components when deciding where to build your future life and career.

In addition to the specific regulations concerning doctoral students' residence permits, doctoral students are also affected by the general framework of migration legislation. In recent

years, this has been reflected, among other things, in the so-called teenage deportations of researchers' children.⁹

When residence permits, both temporary and permanent, are perceived as more uncertain because of several reforms in recent years, the question of the possibility of becoming a Swedish citizen also becomes more important. Citizenship has, however, been made more difficult to access through increased requirements.

Responsibility also lies with higher education institutions, as many international doctoral students state that they have not received the help they need in migration-related issues. Higher education institutions need to ensure that they have the right expertise to handle these issues, as well as sufficient staff resources to provide the support that international doctoral students need. International doctoral students and researchers are an essential resource for achieving the internationalisation goals that university boards, the Swedish Parliament and the Government wish to achieve.

Discrimination and harassment

One explanatory model for why doctoral students are at greater risk of being subjected to harassment is asymmetric power relations, based on the state of dependency in which doctoral students find themselves in relation to supervisors or more senior researchers in order to build their academic careers.¹⁰ This survey also shows that international doctoral students have been subjected to discrimination or harassment to a greater extent than Swedish doctoral students.

It is a known fact that international doctoral students are more exposed to discrimination linked to ethnicity. Beyond this problem, however, the results of this survey show that an intersectional perspective is needed in striving to combat discrimination. This is necessary to highlight the relationship between the different grounds of discrimination, and the persons who are most likely to be at risk of being discriminated against.

It is also remarkable that international doctoral students are more likely to feel that they are not taken seriously when they report discrimination. When reports do not lead to noticeable actions, higher education institutions not only fail in their handling of a serious matter; they also risk eroding international doctoral students' trust in their employer, and their willingness to pursue an academic career.

In summary, discrimination emerges as a significant additional burden in the organisational and social work environment of international doctoral students. Improving their work environment therefore requires not only clear and legally secure procedures for handling discrimination, but

⁹ Aftonbladet: <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/ArLGgi/larmet-tonarsutvisningar-skrammer-bort-forskare>

¹⁰ Hagerlind, Mika & Löfgren, Charlotta: "Swedish doctoral students' perceptions of how power asymmetries and career gatekeeping influence the risk of sexual harassment": <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09540253.2025.2568444>, published 2025, accessed 2026 May 27

also active measures to strengthen knowledge, trust, and opportunities for influence among international doctoral students.

Efforts to prevent discrimination in the workplace and promote equal rights and opportunities at a general and structural level must be carried out in collaboration with trade unions and student unions. It is also important that doctoral students receive information that they can turn to these organisations for support if they have been subjected to discrimination.

Work-related stress, anxiety, and sleep problems

The fact that international doctoral students experience higher levels of work-related stress, anxiety, and sleep problems is not something we can accept. Responsibility for supporting doctoral students in relation to these problems, and for creating a good work environment, lies with the employer. Improving the organisational and social work environment therefore requires action at several levels, where both individual support and clearer responsibility from higher education institutions and employers are central.

This involves, for example, ensuring that doctoral students take the annual leave which they are entitled to, that their overtime work is monitored and limited, and that greater responsibility is taken to ensure that international doctoral students are not left out and that they feel welcome in both professional and informal situations. It is also important that doctoral students are aware of their rights under work environment legislation.

Trade unions, student unions, and health and safety organisations all have an important part to play here, both in collaborating with employers to systematically improve the work environment of international doctoral students, and in supporting individual doctoral students who encounter various forms of work environment problems.

Knowledge gaps/misconceptions that may reinforce the position of dependency

From a trade union perspective, it is very concerning that the levels of knowledge about who makes decisions concerning one's employment, and who safeguards the rights of doctoral students, are as low as they are. Among third-country doctoral students, the most common answer to both questions was that their supervisor had the main responsibility. Not only is this wrong, and employers must strive to clarify the allocation of responsibilities and decision-making mandates, but this belief is also incompatible with the trade union perspective. Trade unions need to be better at providing information to doctoral students about the fact that they are the organisations that can represent doctoral students' rights as employees, while student unions represent doctoral students within education.

The misconception may partly be due to a higher proportion of international doctoral students having a doctoral studentship that is funded by their supervisor's project, compared with

Swedish doctoral students. This may lead to the boundaries between employer and project manager, or similar roles, becoming blurred.

When the supervisor is perceived as the primary or sole decision-maker, the dependency in the supervisory relationship is reinforced. This may contribute to a culture of silence and an unwillingness to question unclear or unfavourable conditions, something that previous research has shown to be particularly true of those with uncertain employment conditions.¹¹ Insufficient institutional knowledge therefore becomes an additional factor that reinforces unequal power relationships and worsens the organisational and social work environment.

The impact of language skills

SFS has previously stated that “*Understanding and speaking Swedish at a near-native level is one of the hidden requirements for participating in collegial processes and exercising institutional academic freedom*”.¹²

The results of this survey underline that language skills are of great importance for a doctoral student’s work environment and that they inform many different types of problems. In addition to affecting awareness of one’s rights and of who is responsible for upholding them, insufficient proficiency in Swedish is also linked to work environment problems.

The survey shows that international doctoral students are more exposed to discrimination and harassment, have less control over their work, and that uncertain employment conditions make them more likely to hesitate about pursuing an academic career in Sweden.

It is also problematic that doctoral students without sufficient proficiency in Swedish to a greater extent state that they are left out of social interactions, compared to their peers. A lack of social participation can make it more difficult to recover from work-related stress, and it makes it more difficult to create informal networks, which are important for building a career in academia. It can therefore be suspected that there may be a link between language skills, discrimination, and stress.

Improving the work environment for international doctoral students therefore requires not only individual language actions, but also responsibility on the part of higher education institutions. This means, firstly, to ensure that the structures, division of responsibilities, and rights within academia are clear and accessible to everyone, regardless of their linguistic or national background. Secondly, to provide international doctoral students with the conditions to study Swedish without this coming at the expense of their doctoral studies or their wellbeing. This may involve opportunities to take language courses during working hours, extensions for such courses, or other ways of making it easier for international doctoral students to combine an

¹¹ Aronsson, Gunnar & Gustafsson, Klas (1999). *Kritik eller tystnad – en studie av arbetsmarknads- och anställningsförhållandens betydelse för arbetsmiljökritik*. http://nile.lub.lu.se/arbarch/aa/1999/aa1999_vol05_s189-206.pdf

¹² Universitetslärares: <https://universitetslararen.se/2023/03/30/language-barriers-exclude-english-speaking-academics/>, published 2023 March 30, accessed 2026 May 27

already demanding doctoral education with acquiring sufficient language proficiency to manage communication at work, in both collegial and social contexts.

DRAFT REPORT

8. Method and delimitations

A report focusing on the doctoral student group as a whole will be published in autumn 2026. That report will be a follow-up to Fackförbundet ST's and SFS's previous "Hur mår doktoranden?" reports about how doctoral students are doing, the most recent of which was published in 2021.

The interim report "How are international doctoral students doing?" focuses specifically on the conditions and work environment of international doctoral students. A total of 1,511 doctoral students responded to the survey, which was conducted by Indikator, giving a response rate of 40 per cent. Of the respondents, 579 – or 40 per cent of the 1,465 who stated their country of origin – belonged to the group of international doctoral students. Of these, 318 came from another EU/EEA country and 261 from other countries, referred to in the report as third-country doctoral students.

The most common countries in the third-country doctoral student category were:

- China
- India
- Iran
- USA

Participants were invited by letter, which contained information about the survey and an individual link/QR code to the survey. This was to ensure that the survey was only answered by doctoral students and by respondents from the selected higher education institutions. Reminders were sent by e-mail where possible, otherwise by letter. Subsequent reminders were sent by text message (SMS), and finally by e-mail. Participants without an e-mail address received reminders by post. The field period was from 19 January to 10 March 2026.

A selection of universities was made based on the size of the higher education institutions and a sufficient number of active doctoral students in their doctoral education programmes. All universities except the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences were also included in "Hur mår doktoranden?" in 2021. The respondents are found at the following universities:

- Karolinska Institutet
- Linköping University
- Luleå University of Technology
- Lund University
- Stockholm University
- Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
- Umeå University
- University of Gothenburg
- Uppsala University

Background facts

	Swedish PhD students	EU/EEA PhD students	Third-country PhD students
What is your field of research as a PhD student?			
Humanities and social sciences	30 %	17 %	25 %
Natural sciences and technology	22 %	41 %	52 %
Medicine and life sciences	44 %	39 %	18 %
Agricultural and veterinary sciences	4 %	2 %	5 %
How are your PhD studies primarily financed?			
I have employment, financed by university funding	28 %	26 %	33 %
I have employment, financed by my supervisor's project funding	34 %	52 %	53 %
I receive a stipend of at least SEK 25 000 per month	1 %	3 %	1 %
I receive a stipend of less than SEK 25 000 per month	1 %	0 %	2 %
I have employment as a medical doctor	16 %	12 %	4 %
I am out of funding	5 %	3 %	2 %
Other	16 %	4 %	6 %
Do you have children living at home, full-time or part-time?			
No	47 %	75 %	68 %
Yes, children under 12 years of age	41 %	20 %	27 %
Yes, children aged 12 or older	19 %	6 %	7 %
How old are you?			
0–29	27 %	50 %	31 %
30–39	32 %	33 %	51 %
40+	41 %	17 %	18 %

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