

## **The Swedish Debate on Tuition Fees for International Students in Higher Education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In 2009, the Swedish parliament decided to introduce tuition fees for students from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland. The first tuition-students arrived in 2011. A direct consequence was a decrease by 80 percent of incoming students. The decision by the lawmakers was debated and questioned by business leaders, students, and representatives for higher education institutions (HEI). In this reflection paper, we present the most common issues in that debate and reflect on those arguments ten years after tuition fees were introduced. The debate in Sweden prior to the reform and the following development represents an interesting case that illustrates some of the dynamics of international student mobility and the impacts this may have on HEI.*

**Keywords:** fee-paying, higher education, international students, tuition, student mobility, Sweden

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2011, Sweden introduced tuition fees for part of the non-European students in post-secondary education. Exempted were students from the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland as well as inbound exchange students. In the Swedish Parliament the decision was made with a reassuring majority. However, among domestic business leaders, students, and management of higher education

institutions (HEI) the decision was questioned and debated (DN, 2011; 2014a; 2014b)

Before the introduction of tuition, the Swedish policy had been that tuition should not be charged at all for students, nor international or domestic students (Börjesson, Ahola, Helland & Thomsen, 2014). Admission to a Swedish HEI had been based on the principle that the best-qualified student was admitted, regardless of nationality or economic background. Since higher education in Sweden mainly is publicly funded, the taxpayer collective stands for a greater share of the direct costs of post-secondary education, compared to a system totally or partly based on tuition. With tuition, the taxpayers share declines while the increased cost for studies taken by the student, at least in the short run and *ceteris paribus*, would reduce the number of international students. Not surprisingly, after the decision was implemented the long-term trend with an increasing number of inbound students was reversed (UKÄ, 2017).

In the bill, the parliament emphasized that the growing number of international students and the cost for their education justified a review of the exemption of tuition. Especially, since in other EU countries only in exceptional cases students from outside the EEA and Switzerland were offered a tuition-free education (Prop 2009/10:65). Hence, the government did not find sufficient reasons to continue with a tax-financed post-secondary education for all foreign students. It was furthermore observed that the no-tuition policy had not always resulted in a competitive advantage for Swedish HEIs. The government therefore concluded that an introduction of tuition would add to the quality of education. The long-range objective to attract foreign students to Swedish HEIs was although kept. Tuition fees would provide an opportunity for an HEI to increase the number of foreign students. Tuition would also mean lower costs for Swedish taxpayers and post-secondary education would become more efficient (Prop 2009/10:65).

This long-term ambition in Sweden to offer an open system for post-secondary education was in line with, first, the strong egalitarian and meritocratic tradition of viewing students, independent of their parents' economic situation, as important potential pillars of human capital in the building of the Swedish welfare system. Secondly, internationalization had also been motivated by a foreign aid-perspective where intercultural understanding would improve collaboration and, in that way, solve global problems (UKÄ, 1974). However, a shift in the narrative was noticeable in the late 1990's and early 2000's when internationalization and international students were emphasized as means of increasing the quality of Swedish higher education, by adding a multitude of perspectives and experiences to the daily life at Swedish HEI. During the period with tuition, Swedish higher education overall has become less domestic and more internationally orientated (Börjesson & Dalberg, 2021). This would probably also to some extent been the case if tuition fees had not been introduced. The economic incitements for the HEI

to develop courses of high quality for international and domestic students would on the other hand been less pertinent.

An important background to the introduction of fees was that during the first decade of the 21st century Sweden attracted an increasing number of inbound students. This should be mirrored in relation to the development outside Sweden. Globally, the number of international students had increased (Börjesson & Dalberg, 2021). Sweden's relative attractiveness had obviously been relatively strengthened. One reason for this was that other countries introduced or raised their tuition. Naturally, when Sweden introduced tuition, this relative attractiveness was reduced.

Bryntesson and Börjesson (2019) interpreted the large decrease in the number of international students as that Swedish HEI could not compete on equal terms with universities from the most advanced countries in the market for international student education. The Swedish language was assumed to be one obstacle. English speaking-countries have a major advantage in the competition for international students. It was concluded that the internationalization of higher education is a policy area where a policy has direct and tangible consequences for HEI and the society at large. Tuition clearly both affected the number, and as we will come back to, the composition of international students in Sweden. Hence, the Swedish example indicate that economic instruments are powerful means in higher education (Marcucci & Johnstone, 2007; Wilkins, Shams & Huisman, 2013).

However, the total impact of the Swedish tuition fees on the business of education is a complex matter. In this article, we initially focus on the domestic discussion in Sweden regarding the perceived impacts when tuition was suggested to be introduced. In a global setting, the idea of introducing tuition in post-secondary education is not new. However, for the Nordic countries this change of policy is quite recent which makes the experiences important evaluate and to share.

In the article we compare the perceptions in the public Swedish debate before the introduction of tuition, with the outcome ten years later. Hence, our aim is to recapitulate the discussions regarding tuition and reflect on the arguments and outcomes in retrospect. Our ambition is to add further insights on the outcome, as well as to deepen the knowledge regarding the motives behind the government reform, given the ongoing internationalization of post-secondary education in Sweden. We find the study important, but we also consider it surprising that the available knowledge about tuition fees and their effects on student flows are quite limited. Especially when one considers the commercialization of education in response to globalization and the overall increased number of and competition for international students (OECD, 2022).

The outline of the paper is as follows. In the next section we examine some of the motives from the lawmakers behind the reform and what can be found in the literature. This is followed by a section on the method used. Thereafter, we make references to the domestic debate in Sweden around the time when the reform was

implemented. Finally, we will discuss and give our reflections on the experiences from introduction of tuition in Sweden. We finalize the article with a summary and suggestions for further studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While reviewing some of the literature relevant to the Swedish introduction of tuition we briefly place the change of policy in a general student mobility context. Thus, to comprehend policies of tuition internationally and more specific in Sweden. International mobility among students, teachers, researchers, post-docs, and professors has a long tradition. For decades, the internationalization of research and higher education has been self-evident. Sweden, a small open economy with intense international trade, foreign investments, and a diverse set of international relations and political ambitions, has by this for long time encouraged international exchange (Åkerlund, 2020).

Young people, students, scientists, artists, and businesspeople have for decades, even centuries considered it important to engage in learning experiences, for example from travel around Europe for the purpose of sharing and gaining knowledge (cf. Sörlin, 1994; Eliasson, 1999). Studying and living abroad involve a physical movement to another country, with its cultures and institutions, that give new perspectives and may change perceptions. Experiences from foreign higher education, to receive a degree abroad and perhaps work for a period are factors that may add to the possibilities to make a career later in life (King, Findlay & Ahrens, 2010). Today, an increasing number of students around the world participate in international student mobility. This has opened a market for education and made admission to studies a tradable commodity. Especially successful countries with export of higher education are English-speaking countries, such as Australia, the US, and the UK (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Choudaha, 2017). This was observed in the UK in the early 1980's when HEI were encouraged to seek new ways of funding, beside governmental funding. Post-secondary education then developed into an export industry (Williams, 1997).

With increased globalization, such efforts have spatial and borderless implications, they reach out to a global spatial domain of action and thinking (Kress, 1996). HEI around the world have had to respond to globalization, that occurs regardless of any activities conducted by an individual HEI. In this respect, the terms globalization and internationalization are often confused with each other. Internationalization implies relations established across borders of nation-states (Altbach, 2004). However, the search for new knowledge is less and less limited by those borders (Teichler, 2012). Instead, cultural and language differences may have a stronger impact on exchange and trade (Johansson & Westin, 1994).

In Sweden, with its fast growth in the number of students in post-secondary education from 1960 onward, internationalization of education became

an increasingly explicit policy issue. The report from 1974 by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ, 1974) is often considered to be the starting point for the elaboration of a more strategic approach to the internationalization of higher education. Since then, Swedish governments have proposed national strategies of internationalization, emphasizing the need to include international perspectives in education and underscored that foreign students are welcome to Sweden (SOU, 2018a; SOU, 2018b; prop 2020/21:60). This has also included measures to encourage Swedish students to go abroad for studies, internships, or to attend PhD courses. Such an exchange should improve understanding between students from different cultures and increase their employability. This policy development has been interpreted as a movement of objectives, towards a discourse on diversity as a driver of enhanced quality in education and a mean for attracting and recruiting international students (Bryntesson & Börjesson, 2019). However, lofty ambitions at the policy level do not always materialize as real changes and there are still significant policy gaps to be addressed (Alexiadou et al., 2021). A sign of such a gap between policy and outcomes is the possibility to evaluate a reform. Thus, the statistical sources available to gain an understanding of numbers, reasons, and the character of international student mobility to and from Sweden, as well as the impact on HEIs and the Swedish economy at large, are quite recent.

In this case, Sweden is not alone. There have been political ambitions in many countries in favor of international student mobility. Policies have been developed with the aim to support inbound mobility, simplify regulations for migration, visas, student loans, recognition of foreign degrees, etc. In other words, beside the flow of students and tuition fees, various national regulations of the exchange of international students and their possibility to gain access to HEI, welfare services, and sources of knowledge also will influence student numbers. One can find change of national policies in many countries and a recent example is the transition in Vietnam due to budget constraints to be able to finance post-secondary education. Hence, Vietnamese public universities faced a shortage of income for maintaining good quality in education. In this respect, the study by Le et al. (2022) provides an example that tuition may be introduced to solve quality issues within HEI. In this study it was shown that there is a high willingness among students to pay for post-secondary education.

If we within these broad spectra of possible policies focus on the question if tuition should be the same or different between international and domestic students, we observe that different countries have different policies. Some have one tuition for both categories, while other countries have a higher tuition for international students. Other countries, did at least previously, not charge tuition at all. Among EU countries, such as Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Spain, and Sweden, international students from other EU countries are treated as domestic students. In Australia and in Canada, international

students pay higher tuition fees than domestic students (OECD, 2014). In this respect, students, or perhaps their parents', choice of place for an education can be described as buying, shopping, or investing in a post-secondary education in an increasingly global market. This fact is crucial to understand the current trends in international student mobility (Osborne, 2015).

As mentioned, the introduction of tuition for some students, in e.g., Denmark (in 2006), Sweden (in 2011) and Finland (in 2016), implied that the possibility to attract, or to compete for, students with other countries and their HEI that already offer tuition-based education have changed. The impact on demand for education although may be complex. For some students, the tuition may be an indicator of quality (UKÄ, 2017). Hence, up to a certain level a tuition may both reduce and increase demand, dependent on student category. At some level the discouraging force can dominate. However, if the quality of the education is very competitive there are still categories of students that may be willing to pay a large tuition to get access to studies. As for many other markets, the 'price' may indicate a good quality of a product, when quality is difficult to determine a priori (Karpik, 2010). Based on the impacts in Denmark, Sweden, and New Zealand in connection with changes in tuition levels, a study although concluded that there was a clear negative relation between increased tuition and student flows (OECD, 2017). In this respect, one may as for all forms of studies of demand, add that other variables besides the tuition play a role for the choice, such as cost of living, opportunities in the labor market, the value of learning the local language etc. (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Moogan & Baron, 2003).

If we focus on the Nordic countries, we find that only a few peer-reviewed articles have been published about the introduction of tuition fees in Sweden or in the other Nordic countries. The assumption that the Nordic countries are a cohesive region has then been challenged. In a critical exploration Elken et al. (2022), argued that the motivations for international student mobility include important national translations. In Sweden and Norway, the framing predominantly has been educational, in Denmark and Finland the economic frame instead has become prominent (Elken, Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2022).

The metaphors of students described as consumers and commodities has also been challenged (Nordensvärd and Ketola, 2019). Sweden is considered as a hybrid, a mix of neoliberal images of students, where the image of the student is composed of a merger between a social democratic welfare service model, academic capitalism, new public management, and welfare nationalism. The introduction of tuition for non-EU students in Sweden with its merger of universal tax financing with a more individualized fee-paying solution thus create variegated and complex metaphors of students and higher education. A similar discussion can be found in a Finnish paper (Plamper, Siivonen & Haltia, 2022). The study shows how students position themselves in relation to the student-as-customer discourse in Finnish higher education. It is concluded that the tuition liability creates unequal

positions for some international students and thus challenges the equality principles embedded in Finnish higher education. A somewhat similar experience for Sweden. Another study aimed to shed light on some challenges that internationalization raises for policymakers regarding public funding of higher education in a welfare state, by examining policy logics for introducing tuition for international students in Sweden (Lundin & Geschwind, 2021). In one of few papers, Nilsson and Westin (2022) focused on the outcomes of the tuition reform in Sweden, it was showed that after a significant drop in the number of students the number gradually increased, to reach approximately the same level as before the reform was introduced.

The history of Swedish policies for the internationalization of post-secondary education and research from the 1960s and onwards is discussed and explored by Åkerlund (2020). As mentioned, in Sweden internationalization was for the first time formulated as a policy area in the 1970s, emphasizing internationalization as a concept, a process, and something desirable for post-secondary education (SOU, 1973). Åkerlund (2020: p. 105) argues that “the idea was to conceptualize international solidarity and encouraging development in the underdeveloped world”. Among other issues, active work, and various form of engagement in different projects in low-income countries was mentioned. The aim seems to have been to use student projects as a mean to close the gap between industrialized and low-income countries. Post-secondary education became a tool for solidarity with the development in those countries. In 1977, this also resulted in a change of the Swedish Higher Education Act stating that post-secondary education should promote an understanding of other countries and international conditions. Still, international exchange within the area of research, was primarily perceived as an issue of national interest.

The discourse regarding the commodification of post-secondary education and the ambition to recruit qualified labor from foreign labor market to strengthen the global position of Swedish HEIs continued into the new millennium. In this way, Sweden would get access to international expertise, and thus it could compensate for inadequate domestic education capacity. Inflow of new methods, perspectives, and technologies was considered as positive (SOU, 2018a). To conclude, two economy-related arguments were added in the Swedish context. First, post-secondary education became an important product to offer in the market for international education. Secondly, the recruitment of international students was not only of importance for the HEI, but also, for the demand from the domestic labor market (Åkerlund, 2020).

It was this policy change in combination with the rapid increase in the number of foreign students that initiated the discussion on tuition for students from countries outside the EEA and Switzerland. It seemed that the offer Sweden had for post-secondary education in the global market had become too successful in relation to offers and various restrictions introduced by other countries. In 2009,

the Swedish parliament decided to introduce tuition fees by a convincing majority. In the autumn of 2011, the first group of tuition-paying students began their studies in Sweden.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The objective with this article is to compare the perceptions in the public Swedish debate before the introduction of tuition, with the outcome within higher education and its institutions ten years later. The research was designed as a qualitative case study by reading newspaper articles debating the introduction of tuition fees in Swedish higher education. The chosen articles were written around the time Sweden introduced tuition fees in 2011 for students outside EU/EEA. The follow-up approximately ten years after made it possible to scrutinize the main arguments expressed by business leaders, students and HEI and to compare those with the actual outcome published by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ). UKÄ evaluates the quality of higher education and research, analyses its development, is responsible for the official statistics on higher education, and monitors compliance with laws and regulations among HEIs in Sweden. Annually, the UKÄ publishes a comprehensive overview of higher education in Sweden in the form of a status report. The report contains data on HEI in Sweden on for instance public costs, research, and students. Those are based on reports from each HEI to Statistics Sweden as well as data reported directly to the UKÄ. In this paper, the data from UKÄ is used in a descriptive analysis of the number of tuition students and of other groups of students. Data are used to describe the basic features of Swedish tuition students, focusing on long-term trends. We can therefore compare the situation before and after the tuition fee reform was implemented in 2011.

Obviously, the study has various limitations. It has only been possible here to account for and discuss aggregated data. The format of the study does not make it possible to cover all the aspects and specific issues of the tuition reform, especially at the level of the individual student. In addition, it may be difficult to isolate the effect of the tuition reform on HEIs from that of other events occurring simultaneously, such as the Bologna Process with its aim to improve student's possibilities to study abroad (see the Bologna Declaration, 1999) and the overall globalization of post-secondary education. Despite these limitations, however, this study gives an opportunity to reflect on and to learn more about the long-term results of a policy intervention such as the tuition reform on the management of HEI.

## **THE DOMESTIC DEBATE IN SWEDEN**

As we have mentioned, one common argument by the lawmakers was that it was not justifiable, or difficult to motivate from a legitimacy perspective, to offer free



tax-financed post-secondary education for a large group of foreign students. However, this opinion was not shared among all Swedes. Here, we will briefly recapitulate the discussion in Sweden prior to and immediately after the introduction of tuition. Obviously, we have had to be selective and focused on the opinions and perspectives given by business leaders, students, and HEI leadership. Still, we believe that we have managed to represent the central issues of the debate regarding tuition fees in Sweden.

### *The perspectives of business leaders*

The Swedish leading morning paper Dagens Nyheter (DN, 2011) published on the opinion page an article written by two very well-known business leaders in Sweden. They argued that it was a serious mistake to introduce tuition fees due to the dramatic decrease in the number of non-European students it would imply. “It is not only a threat to creative diversity, but also risks leading to an acute shortage of competent labor and to poorer opportunities to compete in international markets” (translated from Swedish by the authors) Börje Ekholm, chairman KTH, CEO Investor and Carl Bennet, chairman University of Gothenburg and Getinge. In the article they argued that an education system free of tuition for student’s has been an important part of the Swedish higher educational tradition.

The argument for tuition had followed two main tracks. The foreign students had become too numerous and the cost for Swedish taxpayers was too high. It was also argued that the Swedish HEIs should compete with quality instead of tuition-free education. Ekholm and Bennet (DN, 2011) were surprised that the introduction of tuition for students from non-European countries was made without much protest. Among business leaders it was silence. The student unions feared that this could also become the gateway to charge tuition fees for all students. From the university's management, warnings were expressed that Sweden would have a drastic decline in the number of students from countries outside the EU/EEA.

In their article, Ekholm and Bennet (DN, 2011) argued that more analysis is needed to test how sustainable those arguments really are. What are ‘enough’ foreign students? What is the actual cost when compared to the benefits and positive effects of a tuition-free post-secondary education? They shared the same ambition as the government, i.e., to compete with quality, but added “doesn't the position of the Swedish language already put our universities at a hopeless disadvantage compared to their competitors in English-speaking countries?” (DN, 2011). They urged to review what opportunities there are to attract more foreign students. The government should realize that Sweden is a small player not only in the world of HEI, but also in the business world. Openness to international influences is in this case a prerequisite for Sweden as a nation to develop and maintain a competitive position. International students have an extremely important role to play in this respect, it was argued (DN, 2011)

Hence, Ekholm and Bennet continued that it should be clear that tuition-free education has been a unique competitive advantage for Sweden, i.e., given the country an edge against to the rest of the world. To attract students to take jobs in Swedish companies after completing their education is of great importance. Thus, various ways to compensate a student for having to pay tuition should be explored by the industry. Scholarships should be greatly expanded. From their perspective, the funds required for a substantial and attractive scholarship program should not be regarded as costs, it is an investment in the future for Sweden (DN, 2011)

Finally, Ekholm and Bennet concluded that the fact that Sweden is losing international students is extremely worrying and a risk, leading to the already obvious skill shortage for Swedish companies. It would apply in areas as technology and natural sciences, where many programs are now forced to shut down due to a decrease in applications. International students have strengthened research and strongly contributed to sufficient research areas, for example in Swedish profile areas such as information technology. The difficulty of attracting more domestic students to science and technology and the large future retirements that can be expected, underline that the influx of foreign students must be restored, and preferably increased. Foreign alumni's who have received an education in Sweden often has a unique network of contacts at home, this can be decisive for Swedish companies' wanting reach out to different growth markets. Students who leave Sweden after finishing a degree have proven to be good ambassadors, i.e., to open doors and convey valuable contacts within academia, business, as well as politics (DN, 2011).

### *The perspectives of students*

In 2010, the students' unions from the Nordic-Baltic countries mutually made a statement that they feared that the Nordic welfare system is threatened. The introductions of tuition and the increase of existing fees all over Europe were signs of this. The students argued that an education without tuition fees makes societies prosper by stimulating innovation and by building a knowledge-based society. Equal access to higher education is a human right and it should progressively be made free of charge. Maintaining and increasing access to a qualitative higher education is necessary to build a knowledge society and to secure continued prosperity. Public investment into higher education is especially important during times of economic uncertainty, it was argued. Keeping free access policies will help to avoid youth unemployment and offer good benefits to the society with a long-term flexibility in the labor market and a smarter, more thriving economy (NOM, 2010).

According to the students, education is not only a mean to unleash the potential of human resources, but it is a strong foundation for creating a sense of solidarity in a society and an overall level of civic participation. Tuition would instead shift the focus of students away from their studies. With public funded

education, individuals can allocate their time and resources to get the best results from the study process. In this respect, internationalisation is vital for both science and the future of societies. The implementation of tuition for students coming from outside the EU/EEA-countries will dramatically cut down the number of incoming students and would mark the starting point of making education a commodity (NOM, 2010).

A few years after the introduction of tuition, Dagens Nyheter (DN), a leading Swedish morning paper, opened a new debate on the opinion page regarding tuition fees. It started with an article written by the leading Professor Bo Becker from Stockholm School of Economics arguing that the most important change in HEI after tuition was introduced is that the competition to recruit student's had increased, The trend is global, the number of students outside their home country has doubled in ten years. Becker now argued that tuition would give Swedish universities a chance to expand internationally without Swedish taxpayers having to offer tuition-free education. "If we succeed in attracting foreign students, a new Swedish export industry can be built instead of burdening taxpayers with tuition-free education and above all, Swedish universities at home can offer the quality education that Swedish students need" (Translated from Swedish by the authors) (DN, 2014a).

This article was followed by many more on the topic, some supported Professors Becker's conclusion and other challenged the views of Becker. Two student leaders of Sweden's united student unions (Rebecka Stenkvist, President of Sweden's united student unions & Johan Alvfors, Vice President Sweden's united student unions), argued that putting a price tag on education does not lead to more skilled and motivated students. Instead, only students who can afford to take large loans will be able to study, while other students who may have been more suitable could be excluded. Stenkvist and Alvfors challenged the argument that tuition fees would make it easier for Sweden to attract more international students. They instead referred to the drop in student numbers after 2011 by 80 percent. If Swedish universities should be able to compete internationally, the tuition for non-European students had to be removed. Students who come to Sweden are an opportunity, they bring their perspectives with them which raises the quality of Swedish higher education. They concluded, at a time when higher education is facing major challenges, it is particularly important to stick to the principle that education is a shared responsibility. Education without tuition will make it possible for all to be educated and for society to fully utilize the potential of all people (DN, 2014b).

### *The perspectives of HEI leadership*

Before the introduction, in 2009, Pro-Vice-Chancellors from three prominent Swedish HEIs (Lennart Weibull, Gothenburg University, Eva Åkesson, Lund University and Eva Malmström Jonsson, the Royal Institute of Technology) wrote

that tuition for non-European students can hit hard against the internationalization of the universities and indirectly affects Swedish students. Denmark lost ninety percent of its international students when tuition was introduced too quickly and an important interface with the outside world was lost. “Let's not make the same mistake again” (GP, 2009).

They claimed that Swedish students compete for jobs on an international labor market. To equip students with relevant skills Swedish HEIs need to offer an education that is competitive. They were concerned about the timetable for the proposal for tuition announced by the government. It could cause great damage if tuition for non-European students was introduced as early as the fall semester 2011. An ill-prepared transition could result in chaos, introduction of tuition too quickly could jeopardize what have already been built up of international contacts and networks. In the worst case, HEIs would lose students in the same order of magnitude as Denmark. Furthermore, they were concerned that several master courses with many international students would be discontinued (GP, 2009).

They concluded that the lack of sufficient scholarships to facilitate the transition, at least initially, is a big challenge for Swedish HEI. The government is setting aside to little money for the purpose. The initiative is good, but the sums are too small. There is a risk that an unreasonable number of poor students from developing countries will be shut out and replaced by a small homogeneous group of students, not because they are more talented and motivated, but because their parents can afford it. They argued that Denmark should be viewed as a warning example. However, Finland is a better example worth following. Finland have tested tuition fees on a limited scale, while quietly building up a good scholarship system. They concluded that it is better to slow down and follow Finland in order to give HEI a chance to take their responsibility, i.e., to guard internationalization efforts, developed over a long period, and for HEI to find their own scholarship solutions through donations and funds (GP, 2009).

## **THE OUTCOME OF THE REFORM**

To follow-up a tuition reform is a rather complex task. One challenge is to isolate the reform from other events and ongoing processes occurring nationally and internationally. For example, stricter requirements for student visa, COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine have all been hampering international student mobility. Another challenge is the timeline, the long-term effects on Swedish HEIs probably need another ten-twenty year to be fully evaluated. Thus, our ten-year-follow-up is a rather short period of time. However, a study of the situation after ten years gives a possibility to reflect on some of the most direct and obvious outcomes and relate those to what was discussed during the period when tuition was introduced in Sweden.

Historically, Sweden has had an egalitarian and meritocratic view on post-secondary education. The domestic discussion should be viewed in that context. Sweden was far from a market-adapted system for post-secondary education in 2011, something the vast part of the world already belonged to. This is an important context to be able to understand the discussion at that time.

As we have seen, students, the HEI leadership and business leaders were all arguing for education without tuition. This was a unique competitive advantage for Sweden. They clearly were right in their worries that the number of students should drop drastically. Figure 1, illustrate the slow return of students from 2011 and onwards, the number of inbound students dropped with 80 percent after the implementation of the tuition reform (UKÄ, 2017). After this decrease, the numbers have bounced back to almost the same level as before 2011. Sweden had approximately 40,000 inbound students prior to 2011, when COVID-19 hit the global mobility for students, Sweden was once again on the same numbers of inbound students, a group that consists of exchange students, tuition-paying student, and degree students from Europe, i.e., EU/EEA and Switzerland that are exempt from tuition. The number of tuition students has increased from 1,469 in 2011 to 8,820 in 2021 (UKÄ database). The Figure shows that only a few Swedish HEI have a large group of tuition students. The big, comprehensive universities seem to have an advantage, as these can offer programs attractive to tuition students, such as Lund and Uppsala. However, also small, and specialized HEI with a good reputation among students and highly ranked can successfully recruit tuition students, as for example Karolinska and Stockholm School of Economics. Some studies suggest that science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) favors students who are career-focused or more concerned about the financial investment aspects of a post-secondary education (Bunce et al., 2017). In Figure 1, this can be illustrated by the attractiveness of Chalmers and KTH (Royal Institute of Technology).

However, the share of tuition students of the total number of enrolled students in Swedish HEI amounts to approximately 2 percent. The revenues from tuition fees have although grown continuously, from approximately 8 million US dollars in 2011 to 93 million US dollars in 2021 (UKÄ database) and at some HEIs, tuition add up to approximately 10 percent of the total incomes from teaching (UKÄ, 2021b). Thus, HEI with a large number of tuition students gain considerable revenues from tuition (UKÄ, 2021b). The size of the tuition is determined by each HEI and varies due to cost differences between courses and programs.

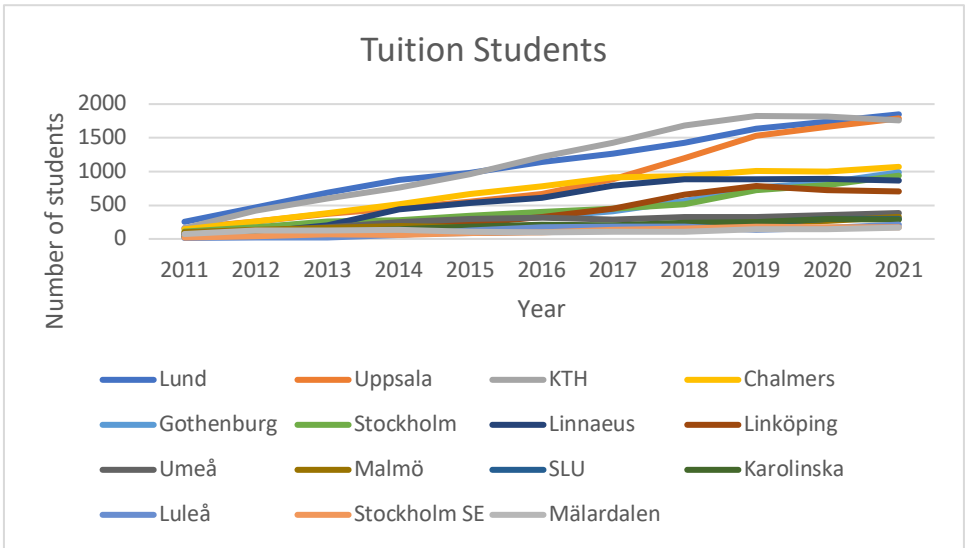


Figure 1. Number of tuition students enrolled at Swedish Universities 2011-2021. A selection of Swedish HEIs. Source: UKÄ database.

The business leaders had economic arguments about the cost and benefits of receiving international students. In a study about the economic effect of international students, published by the Swedish Institute (SI, 2022), it was claimed that international students contribute with between 333 and 380 million US dollars annually, depending on the scenario, to the Swedish economy. The study analyzes the period since the introduction of tuition fees in 2011/12 until 2020/21 for students outside the European Economic Area (EEA). The report also examines the economic impact of the international students who stay and establish themselves in the Swedish labor market after their graduation. In addition to the pure financial effect, there are also several other advantages that international students who establish themselves in the Swedish labor market will contribute with, e.g., supply of skilled labor in the private and public sectors. The study also shows that only among the international students who graduated in the last decade is the contribution to the Swedish economy through educated labor supply, income tax revenue, and potential consumption support significant (SI, 2022). Other scholars have shown that international students can become an injection into the local economy and especially in cities with a HEI. Besides purchasing education and services, students are spending time at the study destination. They use restaurants, shops, and visit attractions, sports centers, etc. (Payne, 2009). In other words, they constitute a sizeable market segment for the local service sector (Michael et al., 2003). Moreover, some studies indicate that students are a fast-

growing travel group. Approximately 20 percent of international travel involves students (Abdullateef & Biodun, 2014).

Another argument shared by students, leadership at higher education institutions, and business was that HEI should compete with quality. They urged Sweden to invest in quality. There are some evidence of increasing quality for international students. Quality was one of the main issues addressed before tuition was introduced and underlined in the government bill (Prop 2009/10:65) called *Compete with quality – tuition fees for foreign students*. The low achievement rate among international students studying in Sweden was a problem in the first decade of the 21st century. This resulted in an aggravation of the requirements for study results by the Swedish Migration Agency to receive a study permit for post-secondary education (see the Migration Court of Appeal MIG 2009:5, UM4691-08). Moreover, after the introduction of tuition, students who paid fees also became more critical to shortcomings and lack of quality in their education. The Swedish Supreme Court ruled that a HEI had to repay part of the tuition to a student due to lack of quality in the education (Court Case no 2018 T 2196-17). Tuition thus makes students more interested in the quality of their education and what a university actually delivers, compared to what it promises to deliver. Data for the academic year 2020/21 shows that the achievement rate now is high for tuition students: 88 percent, compared to 84 percent among those who did not pay tuition (UKÄ, 2021a). Among the inbound tuition students, 97 percent studied a full program and 3 percent through independent courses. The most common programs are focused on technology and manufacturing, followed by social sciences, law, and business administration. From this perspective, it seems that Swedish HEI have managed to develop a more internationally competitive supply of courses (UKÄ database).

Some arguments were about the language used at Swedish higher education institutions. The business leaders claimed that the focus on Swedish as the language of teaching put universities at a hopeless disadvantage compared to their competitors in English-speaking countries. Sweden has now seen an increase in courses taught in English at Swedish HEI. Malmström and Pecorari (2022) have shown that the use of English as a language of instruction has increased at virtually all HEI in Sweden. On average, 66 percent of teaching at an advanced level was conducted in English in 2020, which corresponds to an average increase of 15.7 percentage units over the last ten-year period. At the same time, it can be noted that 24 percent of the courses taught in Swedish do not have compulsory course literature in the Swedish language; instead, all literature is in English. This is another sign of the increased globalization of HEI and, may be seen as an adjustment to the introduction of tuition fees in 2011. However, this has been a challenge. It requires more courses offered in English, as well as information, teaching, and counseling in English. Campuses at higher education institutions have now become increasingly international, with students and staff from many

countries. This offers an asset in terms of a variety of multicultural and multilingual skills but also entail a challenge and a cost for the HEI.

The ability of HEI to offer a generous scholarship program has been pertinent in the debate regarding the cons and pros from tuition. This is difficult to fully evaluate. The Swedish Institute was able to introduce a scholarship program, that was claimed to be too small. Others have asked for grants and scholarships directed at international students lacking resources, thus enabling directed support for excellent students with a drive to become successful. In 2020, it was reported that approximately a fourth of tuition students depend on a scholarship for their studies in Sweden. This only is reported scholarships to the HEI, there might be other scholarships as well from the student's home country (UKÄ, 2021b). The report from the Swedish Institute (SI, 2022) showed that 12 percent of tuition students in 2020/21 had a grant from Sweden that covered their entire tuition fee, while 20 percent had a grant covering the tuition partially.

Another issue has been the benefits of having international students at Swedish HEI. It was claimed that students who come to Sweden are an opportunity that bring their perspectives with them, which raises the quality of Swedish education. It was then a focus on the importance of welcoming talented and well-motivated students. This reflects a general labor and skill shortage in Sweden. It was also argued that international students who have received an education in Sweden often have a unique network of contacts at home, making them good ambassadors for Sweden. International students were claimed to be able to open doors and convey valuable contacts within academia, business, and politics. Here, we can only speculate. To fully evaluate those arguments are difficult. It is evident that international students studying and working in Sweden have a significant economic impact on the Swedish economy (SI, 2022). Thus, there is a strong potential for increased economic effects and increased labor market supply if more students were able to stay and start their professional career in Sweden. With the future skills supply problems that Sweden and many other Western countries are expected to face, every addition of skilled labor would help alleviate future labor shortages. Furthermore, students who enter Sweden also enter the Schengen Area (SOU, 2018a), the zone in Europe where people may move freely with a minimum of border controls. The free and unrestricted movement of people means that students arriving in Sweden and the Schengen Area (which Sweden became a member in 2001), also have access to other countries to work and live in. Thus, after tuition fees were introduced, the cost of entering Sweden and the Schengen Area with studies as a motive increased (Schengen Area, 2023).

As we have shown many debaters ten years ago claim that the decision by the Swedish Parliament to introduce tuition fees in Sweden would be a starting point of making education a commodity. Thus, emphasizing that putting a price tag on education does not lead to more competent and motivated students. The introduction of tuition has clearly affected the selection and composition of



inbound students in Sweden. One objective of the bill passed by the Swedish parliament in 2009 was that student from outside the EEA and Switzerland should not be free riders on Swedish taxpayers. This objective has clearly been fulfilled. However, it seems as if students from low-income-countries have difficulties entering Sweden after the reform. In that sense Sweden has become more homogeneous and lost some of its diversity. Students and their parents cannot afford studying in a country as Sweden, considered to be due to the relative high cost of living. For decades, Sweden had developed bilateral relationships with many countries, mainly in Africa, regulating the exchange of students and researchers. It was also apparent that differing possibilities for students from different countries to obtain scholarships affected the ability to recruit students. This is of course pertinent for students from low-income countries, considering the combination of tuition and the relatively high cost of living in Sweden. On the other hand, for some students from countries such as the US, who are used to pay tuition, Sweden can offer an education that is less expensive than at home. Bryntesson and Börjesson (2019), however, found that the composition of tuition students had changed in regard to the field of study as well as country of their origin; their analysis showed that students had become more homogeneous as a group. This can be illustrated just by looking at student numbers. In the Academic Year 2010/11 15,959 students (42%) were from within EU/EEA and 17,984 (47%) were non-European students. Ten years later this has changed, 12,154 students (37%) originated from outside EU/EEA (UKÄ database). The dramatic decrease of students can partly be explained by Covid-19. For the whole ten-year period (2010/11 until 2020/21) the average share of non-European students was 39%, confirming that foreign students at Swedish HEI have become less diversified (UKÄ database),

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we have been focusing on the domestic discussion in Sweden when tuition was introduced. The issues brought up in the public debate is compared to the outcome of the reform ten years later. The total impact of the Swedish tuition reform is a complex matter, here we can only make a few reflections after ten years. The tuition reform has been a challenge for the Swedish HEI. It involved changes to formalities, such as rules, regulations, and policies, as well as a more mental and perhaps ideological adaption to a system with tuition, and full acceptance among staff at HEIs of the incitements that accompany this. However, the reform showed to be more successful than was expected by many in the public debate which has been recapitulated in this article. Here we want to share a few observations.

One can observe that the culture within Swedish HEIs when it comes to fully accepting the incitements of a tuition system seems to have varied. Thus, a lack of full acceptance of the incentives created by tuition can also explain

differences in student recruitment. Some HEIs work hard to recruit tuition-paying students, for example launching programs attractive to non-European students, such as master's programs taught in English, while others do not target tuition-paying students at all, ignoring this group. Still, the share of tuition students only amounts to approximately 2 percent of all enrolled students in post-secondary education in Sweden (UKÄ, 2021a).

An obvious result is that long-term cooperation with many low-income countries can now only be maintained for students with various scholarship programs. Another impact is that HEIs have tried to develop a more internationally competitive supply of courses. Furthermore, a shift from the Swedish post-secondary education sector to other Swedish and international funders is evident. International student mobility is an international arena, or market, where governments, education institutions, students, and various 'market agents' are active. In this respect, education is seen as an investment commodity. For example, in countries like Australia, the US, and the UK, this has become more obvious for a long time (cf. Altbach & Knight, 2007; Choudaha, 2017). On the supply side, some countries and individual institutions have developed the business aspect of international education in response to decreases in public HEI funding (Knight, 2012). On the demand side, students must adjust their internationalization strategies to the growing global supply of education offered by HEIs and changing regulations from governments. This may have added to the increasing demand for quality and efficient management in post-secondary education. The global flow of students to receive a post-secondary education is, as in most markets, not free from government intervention. The market for post-secondary education has failures and it is not always clear how the allocation of resources can be improved. However, as Rickmann (2021) concludes, marketization as the application of business practices can provide universities with a toolbox within a partially marketized global higher education landscape. However, it is problematic to view marketization as an ideology because its theoretical premises are flawed. At the same time, with tuition for post-secondary education, the Swedish system became more like most countries in the world. From this narrow point of view, it seems that Sweden has been strengthened as a study destination for international students since 2011. At any rate, the number of inbound students shows that Sweden continues to make a place for itself in the global education market; this will bring about challenges, but also possibilities. At Swedish HEI, the calculation of, and size of, the tuition and the payment routines have also increased awareness among staff and students that education comes with a cost to society, in addition to their own time and effort.

According to the government bill in 2009, the objectives were to share the cost of increased internationalization with actors in student's home countries, increase the control over the inflow of students, increase the quality of education, and strengthen Sweden's brand as a study destination. Parts of these objectives

have been fulfilled. Students from outside the EEA and Switzerland pay full-cost coverage for post-secondary education in Sweden. After a significant drop in the number of students when the reform was introduced, the number has gradually increased, to reach approximately the same level as before the reform was introduced. Some HEI now also have revenues amounting to more than 10 percent of their total income from teaching. The achievement rate among tuition students has also increased since the tuition were introduced. Hence, the education system seems to have become more efficient, and the costs seem to be directed at those who reap the benefits of education.

When looking at Sweden in retrospect it becomes clear that the lawmakers during the last ten years have prioritized a long-term and sustainable migration policy. On the political agenda has been an ambition to restrict citizens from outside EEA and Switzerland to enter Sweden. A new migration act has been implemented. This is a parallel political initiative during the last ten years as to the introduction of tuition. HEI in Sweden are now concerned that stricter requirements for student visa, working visa and permanent residence permits can make it more difficult to retain foreign students and researchers. For Sweden it seems decisive for both HEI and for businesses to retain a volume of international recruitment. Thus, that legislation around this is transparent and predictable to be able to qualify for different types of visas for non-European citizens.

The aim of this article is to reflect on the motives behind the tuition reform in Sweden and its outcomes ten years later. Thus, to fill a knowledge gap in the international literature with regard to the Swedish experience from the introduction of tuition for some students in post-secondary education. We have described the domestic debate in Sweden to compare it with the outcome of the reform. However, more studies are required to scrutinize the impact of tuition and the effect on international student mobility, and how the HEI did respond and adapt to different challenges., as for instance in Denmark (in 2006) and Finland (in 2016). Norway might follow, the Norwegian parliament is discussing introducing tuition for students from outside EEA and Switzerland. On question for further studies, is to examine how tuition fees have affected the views among university management regarding post-secondary education, and the dilemma of viewing education as both a national and an international – as well as a public and private – good.

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