



**A synopsis of migration  
issues affecting international  
PhD students in Sweden –  
with firsthand testimonials**

Compiled by

SULF Doctoral Candidates  
Association Board 2024-25

A photograph of a brick building with a white sign for Migrationsverket. The sign features a stylized rainbow logo above the text 'Migrationsverket'. The building has several windows with black frames. The sky is overcast.

Migrationsverket

## Who are we?

Migration working group  
within the SULF Doctoral  
Candidates Association

### Background on the report

- Testimonials from 36 PhD students and recent graduates representing diverse nationalities, disciplines, and universities within Sweden
- Queries with members of university administration, doctoral associations, Saco-S representatives

Nationalities	Fields	Universities
Australia	Engineering	Chalmers
India	Humanities	Linköping
Iran	Natural sciences	Linnaeus
Nigeria	Medicine	Lund
Russia	Physical sciences	Göteborg
Turkey	Social sciences	Karolinska
USA		Umeå
...and others from Asia and South America (not everyone wanted their country named)		Uppsala
		Stockholm

## Questions

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1. How have Swedish migration policies impacted your PhD studies, research, professional development, future career plans, and personal life?
2. What are your experiences in dealing with Migrationsverket?
3. What kind of support have you received from your institution, supervisors, and colleagues?
4. How can current policies be improved?
5. Would you recommend others to do a PhD in Sweden?

# 1. Travel restrictions impede research progress; incompatible with academic career development

- International PhD students can't leave the country while waiting for a permit extension to be processed – which takes Migrationsverket anywhere from 7 months to more than a year.
- This leaves large stretches of time during PhD studies when international students, who have a time-limited contract, are not able to conduct research abroad, attend conferences or exchange courses, or visit family members.
- Such restrictions amount to a discriminatory, inhumane work and study environment that unfairly penalizes non-EU/EEA students



**Hostage crisis**



“To ensure a successful career as a researcher, it can be very important to establish international connections as well as discuss and promote your work at conferences abroad. Because I had spent so much time abroad with health issues, I had to avoid these efforts in order to not wrack up too much time abroad for long-term residency applications.

I like to live in Sweden, but to be honest, I felt a bit trapped here, missing out on potentially great opportunities. I do it all in the hope of getting permanent residency. Though after the revocation of the PhD PR guarantee in 2020, I always feel as if something could again suddenly change and these sacrifices would be in vain. I can accept agreements that involve some degree of sacrifice if both parties uphold the deal, but if one side promises things that they don't provide, I could have made other life choices with all this time waiting.”

**- Paul (pseudonym) from USA, PhD student at Lund University**

“Since May 2023 when I've been stranded in Sweden, I've been accepted to 5 different big international conferences which I could not attend due to the travel restrictions, I've also gotten travel scholarships for two of them as an early career scholar (which I now need somehow to return to the funders)...So it feels like the whole process is just busting my academic career in all possible ways.” - **Anonymous**

I don't understand what's the point in doing a PhD, if we are going to be stuck here every year for 6 months. Why can't anyone take action towards this? Why not give a temporary visa like D-visa for PhD students?

**- PhD student at Chalmers University of Technology**

## 2. Migration policies make it difficult to transition from PhD studies to a work or research permit <sup>5</sup>



**Few survivors**

- Most non-EU PhD students face expulsion from Sweden shortly after their studies – since Migrationsverket requires them to already have a long-term contract in order to qualify for permanent residence (but employers won't offer them jobs if they don't have permanent residence already). Foreign PhD graduates also aren't allowed to switch to a researcher permit without leaving Sweden first.
- Some recent foreign PhD graduates were forced to put their career plans on hold to find lower-paying jobs in remote areas that would provide them with a permanent contract – just so they can qualify for permanent residence and have a chance of continuing their academic career in Sweden.

“I had to resort to odd jobs, in particular working in a warehouse where no education of any sort is required just so I could eke out a living and support my family... When I go to the warehouse, I leave the house close to 11:35 and get home at 2:30 in morning, it’s a four-hour commute daily. It’s a modern slave trade...When you get back you can’t think of writing a word because you are thoroughly used.”

– **Lagbaja (pseudonym) from Nigeria, PhD in International Relations**

“I finished my PhD in mid-December 2023, and my employment/contract ended a week after the defense...On 1st Feb 2024, I started working 80% as a cleaner. As a result, I could not attend a very important international conference, the biggest academic meeting of researchers in our field, where I was also supposed to chair a session...I also had an invitation from Cambridge University for short-term visit as a guest researcher to join a project, but I cannot go and work as a cleaner at the same time.”

– **Anonymous, PhD graduate from Uppsala University**

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“Now, even though I need to start studying for a medical license, without a secure residency status, I can't commit to this process. Trying to find a job in the industry has also been hard. Companies often turn me away once they learn I need their sponsorship to stay in Sweden. Although I love research and want to continue in academia, the uncertainty and short-term nature of project contracts make it impossible to plan my life.”

– **Azar Rezapour from Iran, PhD in Tumor Immunology at Gothenburg University**

### 3. Lack of transparency, integrity, and consistency in Migrationsverket's handling of cases



- Long processing times and inconsistent/subjective interpretations of the law by case officers often lead to rejection for PR or LTR.
- Many perceive that Migrationsverket directly manipulates processing times or uses unfounded reasoning to disqualify applicants.
- Case officers don't recognize that PhD contracts are renewed incrementally for sick leave and work assignments such as teaching, administrative duties, etc.
- A recent effort to close off long-term-residence to qualified PhD students and postdocs by rejecting most applicants and letting them run out of time while waiting for the appeal

**Migration purgatory**

“I had fulfilled four years working as a PhD student in Sweden and my university submitted my case application as an extension of my PhD. At that time, I had an 18-month contract left of my PhD...After 6 months, I requested for a conclusion. At this time, my contract had 12 months left, which still fulfilled the MV requirement for obtaining PR after the court adjustment. However, MV rejected my request for conclusion and the process became 1 month longer...My status was shifted from being eligible for PR to being ineligible for PR due to the long processing time.” – **Anonymous**

“The entire process (appealing rejection of permanent residence) took more over two years, and incurred massive financial costs, and not to mention the mental stress. During the entire time my case was being processed at Migrationsverket and the courts I was not able to leave Sweden.” – **Anonymous**

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“Because my PhD studies are supposed to be 4 years +prolongation because of teaching or anything else, I applied for a new residence permit and still haven't received it. Yes, I did it almost as early as it's allowed and it's been around 12.5 months without any decision. And since there is no time-limit for the case closure at all and I can't get any other visa or invite anyone now, I feel trapped and isolated in Sweden.” – **Third-year PhD student in Materials Science, from Russia**

“We noticed that achieving LTR was quite difficult in the beginning. They made it much easier for British citizens for a while, but then they noticed that others (including PhD students) were also taking advantage of it. So, when all the British citizens in Sweden got it, they made it difficult again. It is just discrimination.” – **Mert Can Yilmaz, PhD graduate at Uppsala University & Berrak Pinar Uluer Yilmaz, Doctoral student at Stockholm University**



## 4. Reports of blanket discrimination based on nationality; longer wait times and rejection by default for PhD students from the 'wrong countries'

- Many PhD students from non-Western countries, particularly those deemed 'problematic', face wait times of up to 2+ years when applying for extension of residence or PR.
- PhD students from Russia and Iran have expressed concerns about a lack of due process leading to expulsion by default, leaving them to return to authoritarian regimes where they may face arrest or persecution. Lately a number of Russian nationals have faced long-term expulsion from the EU at the recommendation of SäPo.



**No due process**

“According to our lawyer, the current trend is that students from "unfriendly" countries like Russia and Iran are currently treated as a potential security risk and are receiving rejections with an EU entry ban...So, my husband was advised to leave EU and withdraw his application. Otherwise, the most likely scenario for him would be to receive that deportation and entry ban immediately after his defence...So, he was facing two options: defend but say goodbye to his career and research abroad for 20 years, or throw out six years of his research and life. I cannot state enough what devastating effects it had on our family...I feel like we've wasted the best years of our productive adulthood on promoting Swedish science, paying Taxes, A-kassan, and high insurance fees, while not receiving anything in return.” –**Anna Metreveli, PhD student at Stockholm University**

“I have established contact with a considerable number of people among doctoral students, academic and industrial researchers, and engineers, who has applied for 1st residence permit, extensions, LTRs, permanents, citizenships. Most of them are awaiting a decision from SÄPO. But the rest have already received negative statements from SÄPO and have been given 5, 10, or 20-year EU re-entry bans, or have withdrawn their applications to avoid these bans. Essentially, we all have only one thing in common: our place of birth and, consequently, Russian passports, which we did not choose...MV seems to be aiming to supply this regime (Russia) with great researchers and engineers.” –**Anonymous**

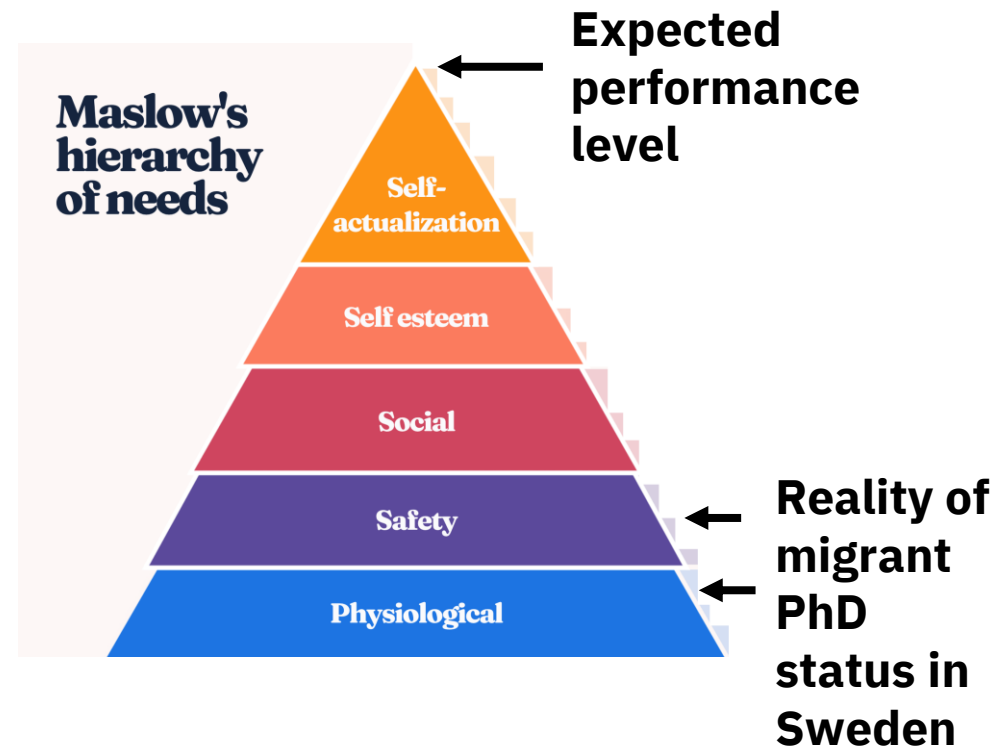
## 5. Diminished quality of life and widespread mental health crises stemming from unstable residence status



**Terror and limbo**

- PhD students in Sweden have made considerable investments to relocate and establish professional networks here, often making personal sacrifices and foregoing opportunities elsewhere to contribute to Swedish research.

- The Aliens Act reforms upended their career plans and many have reported struggling with their mental health due to the constant stress of adapting to changing migration policies and arbitrary interpretations of the law by Migrationsverket, which have diminished their research capacity and left them unable to make basic personal, professional, or financial plans for the future. Many have experienced feelings of profound despair and some have spoken of suicidal ideation.



“The entire process has left me extremely stressed, and shook my faith in the Swedish system all together. I went from an aspiring researcher with a lot of potential to a defeated person whom his biggest hope is just to be allowed to practise my very basic right to live in peace without worrying about being deported.” – **Anonymous**

“Eventually the stress associated with this (lack of job security due to the Aliens Act reforms) contributed to a mental health breakdown which resulted in several months of sick leave and resulted in me exiting academia.” – **Matthew Lawson, Postdoc in Physics at Stockholm University, from the USA**

“I would like to highlight the (difficult) living conditions of (PhD students) during the permit processing time – not being able to renew our ID or leave country, and how vulnerable PhD students are every step of the way (in the migration process)...No one understands how painful and how existential it is, to live your life (like this), how isolating it is.” – **Anonymous**

“These many years of stress and uncertainty have really worn me down. I feel like I'm spending my energy trying to predict and plan things many years ahead (e.g., rental contracts, jobs, residency requirements, avoiding trips) and don't have the energy to invest in my immediate life. ... I came to Sweden optimistic and hopeful. I am just so worn out now, I don't even recognize myself. I tried really hard to work and provide what I think is valuable for this country, really believing it is a great place. And it really is. I just want some control of my life back.” - **Paul (pseudonym) from USA, PhD student at Lund University**

“I have been so destabilised, disoriented and disillusioned that I could hardly focus on many of the exciting projects that I lined up to undertake after my studies...Someone with less mental fortitude and supportive family can contemplate suicide.” – **Anonymous, PhD in International Relations**



## 6. Sweden is no longer an internationally competitive destination for research

- Universities are losing qualified international researchers to other countries due to hostile and discriminatory migration policies, which also tarnish Sweden's national brand as a center of innovation.
- Widespread dissatisfaction among foreign scholars who were misled about their immigration prospects when they were recruited to a PhD in Sweden (many had other options)
  - Many see hypocrisy and deception in the “revolving door” migration policy
- When asked if they would recommend Sweden as a destination for PhD studies, almost none of our respondents said yes.



**Immigration fearmongering:  
Foreign academics  
unwelcome in Sweden**

“The inefficiencies at the Migrationsverket not only disrupt the lives of international talents but also diminish Sweden's attractiveness in the global labor market. Addressing these issues is essential, not just for the benefit of applicants like us but for the overall competitiveness and fairness of Sweden as a desirable destination for skilled professionals.” - **Mert Can Yilmaz, Doctoral Student at Uppsala University & Berrak Pinar Uluer Yilmaz, Doctoral student at Stockholm University**

“I am forced to reconsider my commitment to a country where I have invested so much of my life and aspirations. This ongoing struggle represents a significant constraint to international talents like myself, who are eager to contribute meaningfully to Swedish society but find themselves hampered by policy limitations. It is crucial for policymakers to understand the personal and professional confusion caused by these regulations, which seem to contradict Sweden's reputation as a nurturing hub for global research and medical expertise.” – **Azar Rezapour from Iran, PhD in Tumor Immunology at Gothenburg University**

“I would definitely not recommend it if you are serious about doing research. If you are doing it in industrial application field, give it a try, but in core science like physics or biology, it's difficult to have a connection to get a job to get a PR so you can live in Sweden...Try Poland or Germany, etc.” – **Rohan (pseudonym) from India, PhD student in Physics**

“At the moment I would say don't do it. I'm glad I've done my PhD in Sweden but unless you are lucky enough to have dual citizenship in an EU country, why wouldn't you go to a different country that has slightly better infrastructure in place to help migrants?” - **Jessica (pseudonym) from Australia, PhD in Biogeochemistry at Umeå**



# Tack.

On behalf of the SULF Doctoral  
Candidates Association