



**Sweden Cannot Do Without
Foreign Researchers**

Content

Sweden cannot afford to lose foreign researchers	3
Complicated situation for foreign researchers in Sweden	4
Lack of welcoming attitude causes Sweden to lose talent	6
Strengthen job security and improve Sweden's image	7

**Sweden cannot afford to lose
foreign researchers**
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Sweden cannot afford to lose foreign researchers

In several areas crucial to Sweden's future competitiveness, there's a demand for highly specialized skills. This includes researchers in life sciences, tech, healthcare, and the environmental sector. Notably, climate and environmental issues are complex, and decisions made must be rooted in facts and research. Given Sweden's limited number of PhD graduates and its small size, both academia and industry rely on international recruitment.

A survey conducted by Naturvetarna explored how its research-focused members in academia perceive their work conditions. The findings suggest that foreign researchers work beyond full-time hours and feel more insecure than the overall group. It's clear that while these foreign researchers wish to stay in Sweden, they feel unwelcome and restricted by the Swedish system. Even those with a so-called "permanent" position often feel insecure, as they must regularly apply for and receive funds to keep their jobs.

Having one's life uncertain a couple of years is unsustainable for both Swedish and foreign researchers. However, researchers from other countries face more significant challenges as they risk being forced to leave Sweden if they lack continuous employment for 18 months, according to the legislation. This is particularly the case in universities, where salaries often depend on acquiring funding. While companies are less affected, as they are able to offer longer-term positions, they report difficulties for accompanying family members, especially since children born in Sweden need to apply for residency through their parents, from their home country.

Educating a researcher costs an average of about SEK 5 million. Thus, it's a waste of valuable resources when highly educated researchers leave Sweden after graduation.

Historically, Sweden has enjoyed a favourable international reputation. However, stricter and more complicated laws and harsh rhetoric about people from other countries, have a negative impact on our appeal. This hurts Sweden's reputation as a leading knowledge nation.

Naturvetarna's recommendations include:

- Universities should offer secure and long-term positions with continuous funding.
- Foreign researchers shouldn't be viewed as cheap labour. All researchers should earn liveable salaries and not rely on grants.
- Working conditions should be equal for both Swedish and foreign researchers.
- Immigration laws should facilitate international experts and their families wishing to settle in Sweden.
- The Swedish Migration Agency should speed up permit applications. The regulations need to be comprehensible and allow change of status.
- Assign coordinators to guide highly educated workers, including researchers, through necessary agency contacts and permits when moving to Sweden.
- For companies to recruit international talent, Sweden must be appealing, offering available housing, schools, and efficient infrastructure.

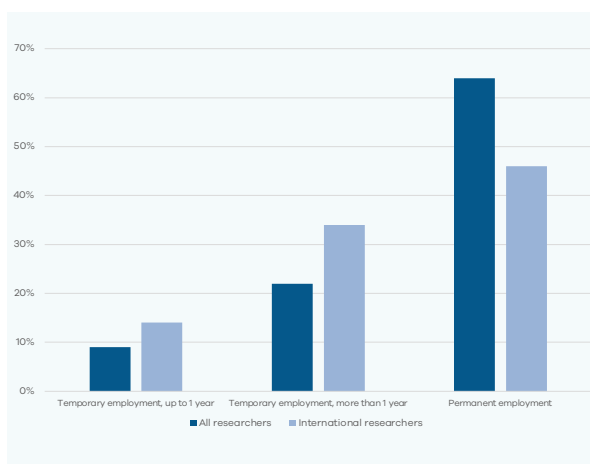
In Spring 2022, Naturvetarna sent a survey to its roughly 3,000 members involved in public or private sector research. Another survey was conducted in Spring 2023, but this time specifically targeting members engaged in research at Swedish universities. Throughout 2022 and 2023, Naturvetarna held with representatives from educational institutions, companies, authorities, funding bodies, research infrastructure, interest groups, and politicians from all parliamentary parties.

Complicated situation for foreign researchers in Sweden

Naturvetarna’s membership database doesn’t record origin or ethnicity so there is no exact number of our foreign research members. However, the survey could identify foreign researchers through a specific, voluntary question regarding their working conditions in Sweden. Of the foreign respondents, 28 per cent were researchers, 19 per cent doctoral students, and 20 per cent postdocs. It’s more common for foreign researchers to be postdocs among the respondents, in comparison with all researchers.

Foreign researchers feel more insecure

Almost half of the foreign researchers (47 per cent) stated they had a permanent position.



However, despite such “permanent” contracts, they don’t feel secure. More than half of the foreign researchers believe their employment is unstable, which is higher than the overall respondent rate (53 per cent vs. 38 per cent).

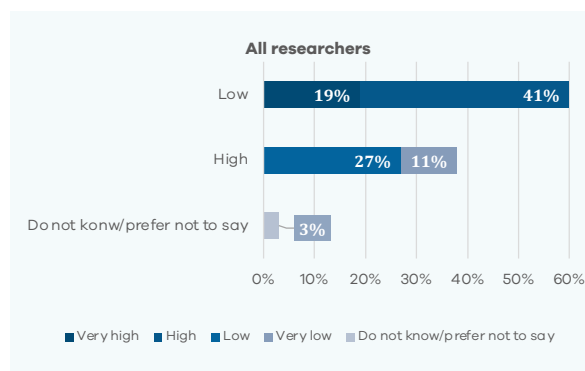
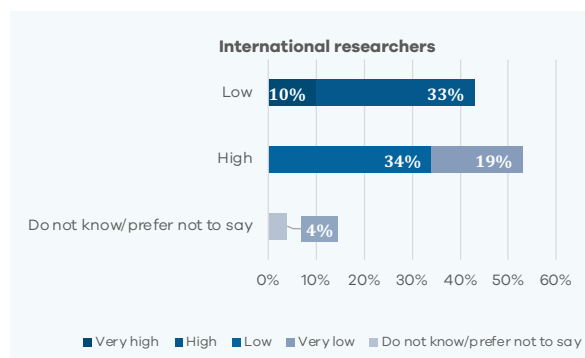
More than half of the foreign researchers believe their employment is unstable.

Researchers often work beyond the standard 40-hour week.

This insecurity seems tied to their dependency on obtaining funds to finance their research, which is common in academia. Furthermore, the tightened immigration laws require one to have continuous and sufficient income for at least 18 months, a difficult criterion for many researchers who are dependent on short-term project funds. Temporary contracts are also more common among foreign researchers.

Though most felt the psychosocial work environment was good, foreign researchers slightly more often viewed it negatively (28 per cent vs. 24 per cent of all respondents). Due to job insecurity, followed by stress and lack of leadership. Researchers often work beyond the standard 40-hour week, with 65 per cent of foreign researchers reporting over 40 hours weekly, compared to 58 per cent for all respondents.

How do you rate your employment security?





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While most want to remain and pursue careers in Sweden after completing their education, many are uncertain if it's feasible.



Lack of welcoming attitude causes Sweden to lose talent

Nearly half of the respondents state that they are satisfied with the overall work environment in Sweden and their own professional conditions. At the same time every second respondent believe there's room for improvement, noting comments such as:

“As a researcher getting my PhD in Sweden, I do not feel that Sweden wants to keep me here. In fact, I feel that immigration policies in Sweden are trending towards getting outsiders to leave rather than stay in Sweden.”

“The stricter immigration rules combined with precarious contract conditions (stipends, short term contracts, and positions completely depending on grant success) make it very difficult for us foreigners to focus 100% on our job. Every 9 months, we essentially have to consider whether we'll receive another contract that extends our visa, or if we need to move elsewhere. It is very stressful.”

Legislation and bureaucracy create stress and a poor work environment. This also impacts perceptions of the future. While most want to remain and pursue careers in Sweden

after completing their education, many are uncertain if it's feasible. 79 per cent wish to stay and continue working in Sweden after taking a PhD. 15 per cent are uncertain, noting reasons such as:

“The new migration policies make it very challenging for doctoral students like me to plan a long-term stay here.”

“Uncertain immigration laws. If I don't see any improvement in the next few weeks, I might decide to take my talent and leave Sweden. I will invest my skills and expertise in a country that values it more.”

Business representatives that Naturvetarna have spoken to emphasize the importance of making it possible for PhD students and researchers to establish here. As a small country Sweden lacks highly skilled competence in natural sciences. Beyond ensuring residency permits for required expertise from other countries, essential facilities, such as housing and schools for accompanying children, must be offered.

Strengthen job security and improve Sweden's image

Our survey shows that foreign researchers want to stay in Sweden but feel unwelcome and pushed out by the Swedish system. Bureaucracy and administrative hurdles hinder those aiming for careers in Sweden. Dealing with authorities is challenging for accompanying family members, and the long waiting times to get a decision from the Swedish Migration Agency are problematic for those renewing or applying for new permits, as their freedom of movement is limited until the new permit is approved.

A significant portion of foreign researchers works in academia, where they are particularly vulnerable when employment contract durations don't align with funding opportunities. Sweden is known for offering favourable conditions like flexible working hours, parental leave, holidays, and a good work-life balance. But foreign researchers unfamiliar with employment laws find it challenging to defend their rights. Many find the career structure difficult to understand and struggle to qualify for faculty positions that offer security. Employers, using the law as a pretext, can continually hire new staff when current contracts expire.

The way forward

Naturvetarna doesn't believe an exception in the migration law specifically for researchers is the best way forward. Instead, other measures can secure foreign researchers positions. Educational institutions should provide stable employment opportunities, enabling researchers to fulfil the requirements for a residence permit.

The Swedish Migration Agency has been tasked with developing a process to prioritize highly skilled workers for work permits. Naturvetarna believes that the legislation and its application in practice must align with policymakers' intentions. Currently, foreign researchers' prospects depend on their employers. Naturvetarna advocates for a smoother and more efficient case handling for PhD students and researchers, being highly educated and an important asset for many research-intensive companies.



Naturvetarna is a non-partisan trade union within Saco, Sweden's central organization for academics, whose unions organize members according to field of education.

We have about 35,000 members within life science, forestry and agriculture, environment and nature conservation, physical sciences, mathematics, IT and statistics.

Natural scientists create the future of the world. Our members find solutions to society's challenges and develop the innovations of tomorrow.

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