

**Designing legal pathways into Sweden:
opportunities, challenges and added value**

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Zvezda Vankova and Bernd Parusel

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Preface

In international research and policy discourse, there is an increased focus on the need to expand safe, orderly and regular routes for migration, including for work and study. This has prompted discussions about how existing migration channels might be opened to people in need of protection through so called complementary pathways. Also in Sweden, legal pathways for migration figures in debates on how to respond to overlapping demographic pressures, labour market shortages, and the persistent reality of forced displacement. However, the broader migration policy direction and debate has become more restrictive, even as concerns about long term skills supply, regional disparities in population change and recruitment difficulties across key sectors prevail.

The expansion of legal pathways raises practical and normative questions, though, and meeting labour shortages and strengthening demographic resilience often raises demands on safeguarding rights, preventing exploitation, and ensuring legal clarity and predictability for both migrants and employers. Policy discussions often move faster than the available evidence on feasibility, implementation barriers and the actual effects of specific legal and administrative choices. This underscores the need for well informed decision making.

Against this backdrop, this report examines how Sweden could design and implement new safe and legal pathways for refugees and migrants, in ways that contribute to labour market needs and educational opportunities, while also addressing broader demographic challenges. By mapping relevant legal frameworks, analysing key trends and identifying legal and non-legal obstacles, the study aims to strengthen the knowledge base and provide insights for policymakers and stakeholders engaged in shaping future migration governance.

This report was written by **Zvezda Vankova**, associate professor and senior researcher at the Faculty of Law, Lund University, and **Bernd Parusel**, PhD in Political Science at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, SIEPS. It was reviewed by Delmi's chair, Joakim Palme. At the Delmi Secretariat, the report was reviewed by Pinar Aslan Akay and Jenny Bergsten, both research coordinators at Delmi. An earlier version was also reviewed by external experts, Erik Sjödin, associate professor of labour law at the Institute for Social Research, Stockholm University, and Salvatore Petronella, associate

director for Policy and Public Affairs at Labour Mobility Partnerships, LaMP. As always in the Delmi context, the authors bear sole responsibility for the content, conclusions and recommendations of the report.

Stockholm, February 2026

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Chair, Delmi

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Director, Delmi

Summary

Europe is grappling with ageing populations, declining birth rates, and growing labour shortages, and immigration could play an important role in addressing these structural challenges. At the same time, many people who seek better opportunities abroad or who are forced to flee struggle to access safe and legal pathways due to restrictive immigration rules and deterrence-oriented asylum policies in many destination countries. This raises the question of whether current immigration frameworks in European countries, including Sweden, are fit for purpose.

This interdisciplinary socio-legal study uses Sweden as a case study to engage with the United Nations' Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees, as well as relevant research on 'mixed migration', the 'asylum-migration nexus' and 'complementary pathways'. It examines how solutions developed in these fields, particularly safe and legal pathways for refugees and other migrants, could be translated into practical measures for the Swedish context. Drawing on demographic trends, labour market needs, and recent developments in Swedish immigration policy, and based on qualitative interview data, the study identifies a range of legal and non-legal barriers that currently limit access to Sweden for non-EU workers and students and discourage applicants from low income countries. It also explores how these barriers might be reduced or removed and outlines options for introducing or expanding legal pathways for migrants. In addition, it proposes a step by step approach for designing complementary pathways for refugees.

Ultimately, the study finds that improved access and the development of new legal and complementary pathways could help Sweden mitigate labour shortages, expand education linked mobility that supports skills supply, and advance broader demographic goals. At the same time, if designed and implemented with due consideration for the applicable international and EU standards, these pathways would also offer safer options for people in need of protection, reducing reliance on irregular and dangerous routes. Sweden could start by piloting new legal migration programmes and complementary pathways and then make incremental adjustments and scale up these programmes gradually, while maintaining its doctrine of 'regulated immigration'.

Sammanfattning

Europa brottas med åldrande befolkningar, sjunkande födelsetal och växande arbetskraftsbrist, och migration kan spela en viktig roll för att hantera dessa strukturella utmaningar. Samtidigt har många människor som söker bättre möjligheter utomlands, eller som tvingas fly, svårt att få tillgång till säkra och lagliga vägar på grund av restriktiv migrationspolitik och avskräckningsinriktad asylpolitik i många mottagarländer. Detta väcker frågan om huruvida de nuvarande migrationsramverken i europeiska länder, däribland Sverige, är ändamålsenliga.

Denna tvärvetenskapliga sociojuridiska studie använder Sverige som fallstudie för att analysera Förenta nationernas globala ramverk för migration och flyktingar, liksom relevant forskning om "blandad migration", "asyl-migrationsnexus" och "kompletterande vägar". Studien undersöker hur lösningar som utvecklats inom dessa områden, i synnerhet säkra och lagliga vägar för flyktingar och andra migranter, kan översättas till praktiska åtgärder i en svensk kontext. Med utgångspunkt i demografiska trender, arbetsmarknadens behov och den senaste utvecklingen inom svensk migrationspolitik, samt baserat på kvalitativa intervjudata, identifierar studien ett antal rättsliga och icke-rättsliga hinder som i dag begränsar tillträdet till Sverige för arbetstagare och studenter från länder utanför EU och sökande från låginkomstländer. Studien analyserar också hur dessa hinder kan minskas eller undanrörjas och redogör för alternativ för att införa eller utvidga lagliga vägar för migranter. Därtill föreslås ett stegevis tillvägagångssätt för utformningen av kompletterande vägar för flyktingar.

Sammanfattningsvis visar studien att förbättrad tillgång och utvecklingen av nya lagliga och kompletterande vägar kan hjälpa Sverige att motverka arbetskraftsbrist, att utvidga utbildningsrelaterad rörlighet som stärker kompetensförsörjningen i landet, samt att främja bredare demografiska mål. Samtidigt skulle dessa vägar, om de utformas och genomförs med vederbörlig hänsyn till tillämpliga internationella och EU-rättsliga standarder, erbjuda säkrare alternativ för personer i behov av skydd och minska beroendet av irreguljära och farliga migrationsrutter. Sverige skulle kunna inleda med att pröva nya program för laglig migration och kompletterande vägar och därefter genomföra gradvisa justeringar samt successivt skala upp dessa insatser, samtidigt som principen om en "reglerad migration" upprätthålls.

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1. Introduction

In 2016, Heads of State and Government unanimously adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants as a United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution in response to growing movements of migrants and refugees globally, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The Declaration acknowledged that even though the legal status of refugees and migrants is governed by separate legal frameworks, they share the same universal human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, it stressed that they also share the same challenges and vulnerabilities in the context of mixed migration flows, which comprise people travelling together and using the same routes and means of transport but driven by different motivations. There are people who migrate for economic reasons or in search of better life opportunities and those who have been forced to leave their homes due to armed conflict or persecution. The Declaration initiated a process leading to the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) in 2018.¹

Both Compacts support enhancing the availability of legal pathways to admission as part of states' immigration legislation, including for work and study purposes. Yet, whereas the GCR talks about 'complementary pathways' for people in need of protection in addition to the limited refugee resettlement programmes, the GCM focuses on pathways for regular migration (Objective 5), targeting migrants.² Despite this bifurcation in the Global Compacts, scholars have stressed that the measures envisaged in the GCM could also be beneficial for asylum seekers and refugees in seeking legal access to protection or solutions through onward migration (Costello 2019, p. 647). Furthermore, developing legal pathways to Europe for both people in need of

¹ The Global Compact on Migration (GCM) is designed to support international cooperation on the governance of international migration, provide a comprehensive toolkit for states from which they can select policy options to address some of the most pressing issues around international migration, and give states the space and flexibility to implement it based on their own migration realities and capacities. It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 19 December 2018.

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) is a framework that aims to ease pressures on host countries, enhance refugee self-reliance, expand access to third-country solutions, and to support conditions in countries of origin for refugees to return in safety and with dignity. It was affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly on 17 December 2018.

² There is no formal legal definition of an international migrant. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs defines a long-term migrant as a person who lives outside their country of origin for at least 12 months. See further <https://www.iom.int/fundamentals-migration>.

protection and migrants with skills in demand is among the priorities of the European Union's Pact on Migration and Asylum (EC 2020).

The rationale behind the idea to develop more legal pathways to Europe and beyond – accessible for both refugees and migrants – is situated at a juncture between migration and asylum, domains that states generally keep separate. More pathways are needed as a response to demographic trends and labour market needs. Europe is a continent with an ageing population, and the population is projected to shrink in the European Union (Rizzi 2025; Eurostat 2023). As a result of this development, and due to a mismatch between companies' labour needs and the number of people in Europe with the right qualifications, Europe is experiencing severe shortages of workers, which is having increasing negative effects on growth, innovation and the financing of welfare systems (EC 2024). Demographers and other scholars studying the causes and consequences of the demographic transition and widespread labour shortages broadly agree that migration is of crucial importance and will play a key role for addressing this issue (Rizzi 2025; Parusel 2025a). Even if it is unlikely that migration can halt or reverse population decline, at least not in the long run (unless it continues to increase indefinitely), it can slow down the transition and make it less acute and troublesome. Therefore, many countries in Europe are trying to attract foreign workers with various skills levels, as well as students.

At the same time, the promotion of legal pathways for those in need of protection is also dictated by the growing number of people forced to flee persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order, reaching over 123 million in 2024 (UNHCR 2025),³ and the limited opportunities available to address their displacement due to ever-increasing barriers to territorial asylum and diminishing access to durable solutions.

³ While most of these people were internally displaced, i.e., displaced within their own countries (73.5 million), 31 million were refugees, 8.1 million were asylum seekers (i.e., people awaiting status determination or otherwise in need of protection), and several million were other groups of forcibly displaced people in other countries. The most frequent nationalities among people displaced worldwide (both internally and abroad) in 2024 were Sudanese, Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians.

According to the refugee definition enshrined in the Refugee Convention,⁴ refugees are persons in need of protection who are outside of their country of nationality.⁵ This means that in order to access protection, they need to reach the territory of another state to be able to claim asylum. Yet, the established international protection regime, including the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), has left open the question of how refugees can safely access another state. Furthermore, developed states from the Global North are actively preventing asylum seekers from reaching their territories through deterrence and externalisation measures, such as carrier sanctions, visa requirements and off-shore processing attempts – an interaction framed as the ‘asylum paradox’ (Endres de Oliveira 2024). European asylum policies and legal frameworks are no exception to this trend and have become increasingly strict (Grant 2025), to a point where the right to asylum itself is being questioned.

With durable solutions such as voluntary repatriation and local integration for refugees largely limited, quota-based refugee resettlement provided by developed countries in different parts of the world is the main tool for protection and the only durable solution available for the most vulnerable refugees (UNHCR 2025).⁶ However, these programmes are often small-scale, offer only a limited number of places, tend to be politically unstable, and are therefore far from being able to satisfy the global need for solutions (Parusel 2021). Therefore, the GCR and the EU Pact support the development of legal pathways that are complementary to resettlement.

This study takes the promotion of safe and legal pathways by the two Global Compacts and the EU Pact as a starting point, and contextualises this policy idea for Sweden as a receiving country. Sweden supported the GCM politically, and was also active in the process leading up to the adoption of the GCR (UNHCR 2022a), but has not yet actively engaged in the development of any legal pathways as part of implementing the Compacts or the EU Pact. While thus far demographic changes in Sweden appear to be somewhat less dramatic than in other parts of Europe, the looming population decline as well

⁴ Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 189 UNTS 150, 28 Jul. 1951 (Refugee Convention).

⁵ Article 1(A) of the Refugee Convention contains the following definition of a refugee: ‘For the purposes of the present Convention, the term ‘refugee’ shall apply to any person who [...] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.’

⁶ Resettlement is according to the UNHCR the “selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status” (UNHCR 2011, p. 416).

as persisting labour shortages – in sectors such as healthcare, construction and agriculture – are a growing concern for Swedish politicians too. This is illustrated by the recent launch of an inquiry into measures for “sustainable population growth and a more family-friendly society” (Regeringskansliet 2025a). As already mentioned above, the facilitation of legal migration for work and study purposes could be one of the ways to address these challenges, and tapping into the talent of refugees with qualifications and skills in demand through complementary pathways could serve as a strategic supplement to existing labour and student migration pathways into Sweden. Apart from their economic dividends to Swedish society in the long-term, such pathways would also benefit countries of first asylum, as well as people in need of protection and a better future.

In line with this, the main research question that this study aims to answer is: how could Sweden design and implement new safe and legal pathways for refugees and migrants (i.e., people with and without recognised grounds for protection) to satisfy its future labour market needs, create education opportunities that contribute to its skills supply, and address its broader demographic challenges?

To answer this question, the report has been structured into four main parts. The first part introduces the study’s methodology and presents the current policy and scholarly discussions surrounding the topics of legal pathways and complementary pathways for people in need of protection as important elements of migration management and refugee protection (Chapter 2). It then moves on to the Swedish context, where it provides a review of the current demographic and immigration trends (Chapter 3), as well as the relevant provisions in law that could serve as a basis for the development of legal pathways for migrants and complementary pathways for those in need of protection (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Next, it focuses on the existing legal and non-legal challenges that need to be addressed in order to facilitate legal pathways for both migrants and refugees (Chapter 7). Finally, the last part of the report focuses on how legal and complementary pathways for migration to Sweden could be established and designed (Chapter 8), before laying out our conclusions and policy recommendations (Chapter 9).

2. Method and state-of-the-art

This report has been designed as an interdisciplinary, socio-legal study drawing on law, political science, and migration and refugee studies.⁷ It included qualitative desk research, namely a review of scholarly and policy literature on managed migration, legal pathways and complementary pathways, such as evaluations and guidance documents published by international organisations, NGOs and expert groups. It also involved the analysis of international, EU and Swedish legal and policy documents and other materials, such as government bills and the legislative history behind the relevant legislation. More specifically, it analysed the Swedish legal framework for migration from third countries in general, and labour and student immigration in particular. Using administrative statistics from government agencies such as the Swedish Migration Agency and Statistics Sweden, the report analysed the main demographic and immigration trends in Sweden.

In addition, the study involved the collection of qualitative data from 15 semi-structured interviews with different experts, stakeholders and practitioners in Sweden and abroad who were identified as relevant to the design, development and implementation of legal pathways for refugees and migrants through purposive sampling (Barglowski 2018). The interviewees have been involved in the development of labour immigration policies or strategies, or have practical experience with the immigration process, the recruitment of international students and researchers, the recognition of qualifications and admission programmes for refugees and other people in need of protection. Interviewees also included researchers, experts from employer organisations and trade unions who deal with labour market matters, labour market integration and the recruitment of foreign workers, and people working on legal and complementary pathways in a variety of settings.

A full list of interviewees is included in Annex I to this report. The interviews were conducted digitally (Teams and Zoom) between June and November 2025 using a semi-structured method, i.e., a standard questionnaire that was adapted

⁷ The authors would like to thank all participants at the internal Delmi seminar on 23 September 2025 for their valuable written and oral input and comments, especially Erik Sjödin, Salvatore Petronella, Käbi Bernander and Annika Sandlund. They would also like to thank all interviewees who devoted time to this study (see Annex I). Our heartfelt gratitude goes as well to Petra Herzfeld Olsson, Irene de Lorenzo-Cáceres Cantero, Erika Löfgren, Elin Jansson and Andreas Pettersson, who provided invaluable inspiration, factual information, clarifications and/or comments on various parts of the report. Last but not least, many thanks to Katherine Stuart for proofreading the text, and to the Delmi team for the smooth collaboration. Any remaining errors are, of course, our own.

to the individual interviewed in each case. For example, some interviewees were asked more detailed questions about study-related immigration whereas others received questions focused on the specificities of work-related immigration. The standard questionnaire is included in Annex II. In some cases, the interviews were also followed up with further questions by e-mail.

Interviewees provided factual information, but in many cases also offered their personal views on issues such as the feasibility of legal and complementary pathways, obstacles and barriers in the immigration process, and the need for foreign labour in Sweden. The interviewees are certainly not representative of the Swedish population, the Swedish Government, employers, trade unions or other institutions or interest groups, but this was also not the aim of the purposive sampling. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their experiences and areas of expertise, not as a representative sample.

This study engages with two main bodies of literature in order to answer its research question, namely literature examining the notion of 'mixed migration' and the interrelated 'asylum–migration nexus', as well as the scholarly works on the development of complementary pathways. What these terms mean, and a brief state-of-the art, are presented below.

2.1 The 'asylum–migration nexus' and the 'mixed migration' reality in Europe

States try to regulate immigration by defining specific grounds for temporary or permanent residence in their immigration laws. With regard to each ground, foreign nationals must fulfil certain requirements in order to be granted access to the territory and be permitted to reside there. For example, a person migrating for family reasons may need to have a close relative residing in the country of destination to be granted access; a worker may need an employment contract and/or be able to prove that they have certain skills; an international student must first have been admitted to a course or study programme in higher education in the destination country. Immigration law is often rather rigid when it stipulates these grounds for residency, and the conditions attached to them. It is not always possible for migrants to switch between different types of legal status (for a European overview of status changes, see EMN 2016). While states try to maintain different and separate channels for legal immigration, migrants often move between countries for different but in many cases interlinked reasons (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Koser and Martin 2011). Thus, they do not always fit easily into the categories set by states, especially in cases where people have to flee their homes suddenly without any chance of obtaining the necessary paperwork.

In Europe, a majority of those coming from a non-EU country migrate in compliance with the existing legal migration rules and travel with permits issued for purposes such as work (the main category since 2016, with 1.3 million first residence permits granted in 2023), family reunification or family formation (almost one million in 2023) and education (roughly 530,000 in 2023) (Eurostat 2024). But there are also individuals who arrive in an irregular way and apply for asylum, as in most of the cases they cannot obtain humanitarian visas, required for legal entry. In 2023, close to 960,000 residence permits in the EU were granted for "other" reasons, which is a broad category that includes permits granted for protection reasons, such as refugee status, subsidiary and humanitarian protection (Eurostat 2024). According to Eurostat, EU Member States registered approximately 912,000 first-time asylum applications (by non-EU citizens) in 2024 (Eurostat 2025c). At the same time, the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) recorded almost 240,000 irregular border crossings into the EU in 2024 (Frontex 2025).

The spontaneous arrival of people without the necessary permits is often referred to as "mixed migration". The term was introduced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the early 2000s in the context of rising numbers of irregular arrivals, and the linking of migrant irregularity, border security and asylum in public debates (Kraler and Hendow 2024). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines mixed migration as "complex population movements including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other migrants". The main characteristics of mixed migration include "the irregular nature of and the multiplicity of factors driving such movements, and the differentiated needs and profiles of the persons involved" (IOM 2008; see also Murphy 2014). As Long (2015) put it, mixed migration flows, both within developing regions and to developed countries, often defy attempts to separate 'refugees' from 'migrants'. Refugees flee due to persecution, but they can also be affected by poverty and economic hardship. Similarly, while migrants may not qualify for legal protection as refugees, they may nevertheless be seeking to escape violence or an oppressive regime in their country of origin (Long 2015, p. 7). Thus, protection-related circumstances can overlap with other migration drivers – an intersection referred to as the 'asylum–migration nexus' – which together could shape a person's decision to leave (Castles 2003; Van Hear 2011; Oelgemöller 2021). This poses challenges not only for national policymaking, but also for global migration and asylum governance.

The debates over migration policy and the evolution of immigration and asylum law in the EU and at national level in the EU Member States demonstrate that legal migration is accepted (and for certain groups of people such as skilled

workers or seasonal workers even encouraged), while policymakers work tirelessly to prevent and deter irregular and mixed migration flows. As all EU Member States are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and other relevant international and European human rights conventions, they must accept that people will arrive at their borders or access their territory in order to seek asylum (Guild and Grundler 2024). Yet this is seen as a problem, and the EU and its Member States invest heavily in external border control, the surveillance of irregular migration routes, and the enforcement of legislation aimed at terminating irregular stays (Carrera and Colombi 2025). They also cooperate with third countries along major migration routes to prevent people from reaching EU territory (Niemann and Zaun 2023) and try to combat the smuggling of migrants into the EU (Luyten 2023). As already mentioned, because of visa requirements, carrier sanctions, various types of deterrence strategies and even physical barriers and pushbacks, it has become very difficult for many people in need of protection to reach the territory of the EU Member States in safe, legal and orderly ways (Parusel 2021). To respond to the challenges stemming from mixed migration, UNHCR has started promoting a 'route-based approach' that aims to apply 'innovative approaches' to engage states worldwide to ensure international protection and solutions for refugees, while upholding rights and creating opportunities for migrants along key routes (UNHCR 2024a).

2.2 The role of complementary pathways

Legal pathways for refugees, also referred to as 'third country solutions' or 'active refugee admission policies', include resettlement led by UNHCR, which is the traditional instrument for transferring refugees from first countries of asylum to other host countries (Kraler and Vankova forthcoming). Several EU Member States, including the Nordic countries, have continuously participated in resettlement efforts, generally on the basis of annual quotas, and in 2024, the EU adopted a Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Regulation⁸ to further promote this process. Globally speaking, however, the number of resettlement places that countries offer is far below the need as identified by the UNHCR.

This has led to the promotion of additional legal pathways, referred to as 'complementary pathways', including at the European Union level (UNHCR 2019; EC 2020). They include state-led humanitarian admission, and private sponsorship for refugees – a model developed in Canada – which relies on the

⁸ Regulation (EU) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 establishing a Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework, and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147, [2024] OJ 22 May.

support of members of local communities in the host countries to support refugees' integration. Complementary pathways could also be developed on the basis of existing immigration channels, such as for labour, education and family reunification, by removing the obstacles that make them inaccessible for people in need of protection. The development of such programmes intensified in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, which caused a drastic increase in refugee arrivals in Europe and prompted debates on legal pathways globally (van Selm 2023; Kraler and Vankova forthcoming).

Even if very small in scale, recent years have seen the development and implementation of a growing number of complementary pathways in Europe and beyond, while there has been a decrease in resettlement programmes (UNHCR 2025). In 2024, 22 countries worldwide reported 188,800 arrivals through resettlement and sponsorship pathways. This was 19% more than during 2023, but the total number of such transfers in 2024 still only accounted for 8% of the estimated 2.4 million individuals globally identified by UNHCR as in need of resettlement (UNHCR 2025). In Europe, 13,790 persons were resettled to EU Member States in 2024, 1.7% less compared with 2023 (14,035), according to Eurostat (2025d). Among the 27 EU Member States, only 12 participated in resettlement. The highest number of resettled persons was reported by Germany (5,720, 41.5% of the EU total), ahead of France (17.2%) and Italy (12.6%). At the same time, around 941,000 refugees worldwide were able to move out of displacement through complementary pathways by applying for work, education or family reunification permits in the period 2019 and 2023 (UNHCR 2025).

Since the academic field on complementary pathways—positioned at the intersection of refugee and migration studies, and refugee and migration law—is relatively new, most of the existing literature has been produced by policy actors such as international organisations, NGOs and think tanks. It consists mainly of feasibility studies; reports providing overviews of the state of play regarding complementary pathways in different parts of the world; and policy briefs promoting best practices and offering recommendations for action or scaling up (see, for instance, Fratzke et al. 2021; EMN 2021; Rimmer and Westerby 2024; De Lorenzo-Cáceres Cantero 2024).

By contrast, scholarly work on complementary pathways is growing but remains limited. Emerging themes include the conceptualisation and categorisation of such pathways (van Selm 2023; Kraler and Vankova forthcoming), and analyses of the feasibility, emergence or implementation of specific types of pathways (Vankova 2022a/b, 2024 on labour migration; Tan 2021; Hyndman et al. 2021; Stefańska et al. 2025; Sulewski 2025 on sponsorship; Welfens 2025 on humanitarian admission). In addition, academic

literature has examined legal and policy issues in particular regions, such as Europe (Bratanova van Harten 2023; Loxa 2023), as well as specific country case studies, such as Canada (Reynolds and Clark-Kazak 2019) and Spain (Pinyol-Jiménez et al. 2025; Bratanova van Harten 2025).

Since the study's focus is on Sweden, we are building mainly on our own previous work, such as Parusel's Delmi report on Legal migration for work and training. Mobility options to Sweden for those not in need of protection (2020). In addition, we also draw on Vankova's research project Refugees as Migrant Workers. Labour Migration as Alternative for Refugee Protection in the EU Context?, which examined the feasibility of using labour migration as a complementary pathway for refugees in Sweden and Germany (Vankova 2022a/b and Vankova 2024).

3. Demographic trends, labour market needs, and immigration in Sweden

To set the scene for our analysis regarding potential new legal and complementary pathways to Sweden for work and study purposes, we first analyse the need for such pathways by looking into demographic trends, the evolution of employers' needs for foreign labour, and recent immigration flows.

3.1 Population trends and projections

Sweden has been experiencing population growth in the last two decades, although the annual growth rate has varied.⁹ After 2016, population growth slowed down significantly, and it is now below 0.4% again. Statistics Sweden reported that a "continued decrease in the number of children born, low immigration and high emigration" had resulted in low population growth in the first half of 2025. There were 10,592,700 people registered in Sweden, which was an increase of only 5,000 people since the start of 2025 (SCB 2025b). Statistics Sweden calls this an "historically low level". 2025 also marked the beginning of more political and media attention on the declining birth rate. The Government launched an inquiry to explore the reasons behind this development and to present proposals on how to remove barriers to starting a family (Regeringskansliet 2025a).

Population development is not uniform across Sweden. According to Statistics Sweden, only five out of Sweden's 21 regions experienced growth during the first half of 2025 (Stockholm, Skåne, Halland, Västra Götaland and Västernorrland). With the exception of Västernorrland, these are regions around or close to major urban areas such as Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. In all other 16 regions, the population stagnated or declined, and the most significant decreases were reported for the northerly region of Västerbotten. Meanwhile, the latest available regional population projections from Eurostat show that the southern part of Sweden – and especially its

⁹ It was between 0.2% and 0.4% in 2000 to 2005, then increased to 0.7% and just under 1.0% in 2006 to 2013, and then was above 1.0% between 2014 and 2018. In 2016, it was even higher than 1.4%, to a large degree as a result of the high numbers of people coming to Sweden to seek protection in the preceding years, especially in 2014 and 2015 (SCB 2025a).

metropolitan areas – are expected to continue to grow until 2050 while the central regions of the country can expect only minor growth (if any), and the northernmost part of Sweden is likely to experience a shrinking population (Eurostat 2021). As Eurostat's latest projection is from 2021, the overall picture for Sweden, which in terms of population development looks better than many other parts of Europe, is likely to change in a more negative direction once the projection is updated.

Overall, the Swedish population has been ageing while fertility and immigration rates have been falling. These trends affect some parts of Sweden more than others, with some areas already experiencing a shrinking population. If the current trends regarding births and immigration persist or even intensify, the country as a whole might soon be facing population decline, which would negatively impact the supply of labour and put the financing of the welfare and pension systems and other state functions in jeopardy. As fertility levels are not easily influenced by policy decisions (Bignami et al. 2024), this speaks to a need for increased immigration, especially of young people who can contribute to the labour market and generate tax revenue.

3.2 Labour market needs

There are different ways of measuring a country's need for labour and of identifying regions within a country – or occupations – where shortages are the most striking. While this report does not intend to provide an in-depth and exhaustive analysis in this regard, identifying some of the major trends can inform the future direction of Sweden's legal migration policy and more specifically, the potential need for more legal pathways and complementary pathways as strategic supplements to labour and student migration into Sweden.

A common way of measuring labour demand is to calculate job vacancy rates for different industry sectors. The job vacancy rate is defined as the number of job vacancies expressed as a percentage of the total number of occupied positions and job vacancies. On average, this has shifted between 1.8% and 3.1% over the past five years in Sweden, with the highest rate measured in 2022.

Several sectors have vacancy rates far above these average values. According to Eurostat, the highest vacancy rates in 2023 were recorded for the electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply sector (5.9), administrative and support service activities (3.9), professional, scientific and technical activities (3.8), mining and quarrying (3.7), and information and communication (3.5). If we look not at sectors but at occupational groups, the highest rates of shortage occupations were for health professionals, building and related trades workers, and health associated professionals (Eures 2025).

Statistics Sweden also reports that human health and social work activities was the industry with the largest number of job openings during the first quarter of 2025, followed by mining and quarrying, and information and communication. They also report that 45% of employers had experienced difficulties in recruiting workers during the past six months. Among employers that tried to recruit workers, 62% managed to hire the number of employees that they were seeking, while 38% did not. Failing to fill their demand was especially common among employers within human health and social work activities (60%), who experience a lack of doctors, nurses and other workers in healthcare and care of older people (SCB 2025c).

A report commissioned by the Swedish Institute in 2025 points out that the Swedish labour market is undergoing significant transformations driven by technological advancements, an ageing population, and large-scale industrial projects (Westman et al. 2024). The report suggests significant labour shortages in some parts of northern and central Sweden, as well as in general in the less populated areas of the country, such as the regions of Västerbotten, Örebro and Värmland. It predicts that labour shortages are expected to become the most challenging in the northern parts of Sweden. Furthermore, it stresses that the already existing labour shortage in Sweden's healthcare sector is expected to become even more acute, also nationwide, driven by demographic changes such as an ageing population that will require more care and support. The construction industry is also likely to continue to face significant challenges in meeting workforce demands. Furthermore, there will be a high demand for engineers and other professionals with technical specialisations in fields such as automation, healthcare, electrification and sustainable technologies. There will be shortages in many of these occupations across all 21 regions of Sweden. This concerns not only occupations with high skills requirements such as doctors, other medical specialists, and engineers, but also medium and lower skilled jobs, such as nursing assistants, construction workers, labourers in civil engineering, and personal assistants (Westman et al. 2024).

To sum up, the available data demonstrates that Sweden is experiencing significant labour shortages – especially in certain sectors and specific occupations – and that this is unlikely to change in the future. Even if there are cyclical shifts, with more vacancies and lower unemployment rates at certain times, and fewer vacancies and higher unemployment at other times, it is clear that there will be labour needs across the whole country in the long term, and that they will be more widespread and acute in some Swedish regions than others. As Sweden also has a high unemployment rate among young people and some other groups, such as foreign-born women (Statistics

Sweden 2025), it might be possible to some degree to fill labour shortages with people already in the country. Still, immigration will also be needed because it is unlikely that all those who are unemployed today can easily be matched to the persisting vacancies.

It needs to be stressed, however, that addressing labour shortages through immigration is easier for some occupations than for others. Occupations that require high levels of Swedish language proficiency could be harder to fill via recruitment from abroad, or could require employers to invest time in language training before third country nationals could start working. Furthermore, regulated professions require a formal recognition of higher education degrees by the responsible bodies, or a specific authorisation or license. For some jobs, such as doctors and nurses, both formal recognition of a higher education degree and language requirements must be met (as described in more detail below in Sections 7.3 and 7.4).

3.3 General immigration trends and number of residence permits

Over the past ten years (2015–2024), immigration to Sweden has fluctuated between roughly 82,000 and 163,000 people per year.¹⁰ The highest number within this period – 163,005 people – was recorded in 2016, one year after the arrival of a record number of asylum seekers from Syria and other countries. The lowest number was recorded in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe and the rest of the world and made travel and migration difficult. 2024 saw roughly 116,000 immigrants.

In addition, the number of first residence permits issued (i.e., not including permit extensions or renewals) has fluctuated between approximately 89,000 and 142,000 over the past five years (2020–2024), with the highest number within this period recorded in 2022,¹¹ when displaced people from Ukraine

¹⁰ Calculated on the basis of the population register. It needs to be stressed that this immigration data not only includes foreign nationals but also Swedish nationals who had been living abroad.

¹¹ The number of residence permits issued can be both higher and lower than the number of immigrants. On the one hand, EU nationals (and Swedes abroad who return to Sweden) do not need residence permits to settle in Sweden, but they are recorded as immigrants if they are expected to stay one year or longer. On the other hand, many residence permits are temporary (for example in cases of short-term work or studies in Sweden), which means that people need a residence permit but are not recorded as immigrants because people who stay, or are expected to stay, for less than one year are normally not registered in the population registry.

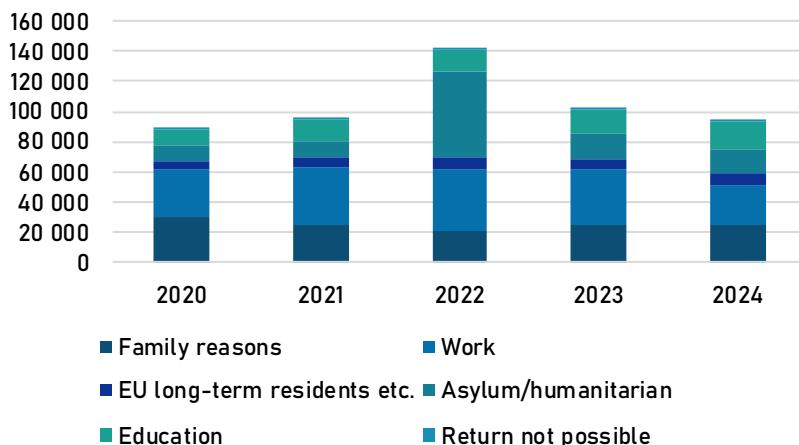
arrived in Sweden and were granted EU temporary protection.¹² The main categories of residence permits issued in this period were for work and family reasons. Permits issued for work reasons were the most prominent category in 2020 and 2021, and then again in 2023 and 2024. Until 2018, permits were granted more often on family grounds than for work reasons (Swedish Migration Agency 2020). This changed in 2019 when Sweden adopted stricter rules on family reunification, alongside other restrictive policy changes, in the aftermath of the record refugee situation of 2015. But preliminary statistics show that in 2025, the number of family-based residence permits was again greater than the number of work-based residence permits issued (Migrationsverket 2026).

The number of third country nationals who were issued a residence permit for studies in Sweden has increased from around 11,000 in 2020 to over 18,000 in 2024. Within these figures, the majority of residence permits are granted for studies at higher education institutions (HEIs) at Bachelor's or Master's level (or equivalent), as well as for family members of students. PhD students make up a smaller group, with only 900 permits issued in 2024. Permits issued to students who have finished their education and are looking for work are also included in these numbers, as well as a small number of people who receive residence permits for studies outside the academic world, such as for vocational training or religious studies.

In recent years, the numbers of asylum seekers in Sweden have been at historically low levels. After a record number of applications filed in 2015 (almost 163,000), the numbers started to decline in 2016 (28,939) and reached 9,645 people in 2024, which is the lowest number recorded so far this century. 2022 could be seen as an exceptional year due to the many temporary protection permits granted to people who had fled from Ukraine. Permits issued on protection grounds were also the main group in 2016, when many Syrians applied for asylum in 2014 and 2015.

¹² On the basis of the Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof, [2001] OJ L212/12.

Figure 1. First residence permits granted per broad category and year, 2020–2024



Source: Swedish Migration Agency.

Notes: "Asylum/humanitarian" includes also displaced persons from Ukraine with residence permits under the EU Temporary Protection Directive.

3.4 Immigration of workers and students from refugee countries of origin

Up until 2023 when the Swedish Government introduced a more restrictive labour migration policy, many people coming from asylum seeker countries of origin were able to access the available legal migration channels (see Parusel 2020; Vankova 2022b). For instance, in the period 2009–2018, many labour immigrants came to Sweden from the same countries as asylum seekers, i.e., Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, Russia, Serbia, Mongolia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Parusel 2020). Annual statistics for 2022 also indicated significant overlaps between protection-related and labour-based migration. Among persons who were granted a work permit in Sweden that year, seven of the 20 most common nationalities were also among the most common 20 countries of origin for asylum seekers: Turkey, Ukraine, Iran, Russia, Iraq, Uzbekistan and Albania (Parusel 2023a). This trend was also confirmed by figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UNHCR, which indicate that Sweden issued approximately 71,500 first time residence permits to individuals from Syria, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Venezuela in the period 2019–2023. About 10% of these permits (or 7,100) were issued for work purposes, and 5% (or 3,300 permits) for education purposes (OECD/UNHCR 2025, p. 20).

In 2024, according to statistics from the Migration Agency (Migrationsverket 2025a and 2025b), the overlap was much more limited, with only four nationalities (Iran, Turkey, Nigeria and Russia) showing up among both the top 20 asylum seeker countries of origin and the countries of origin of people granted residence permits for work purposes. As mentioned above, this can be explained by the restrictive turn in Sweden's labour migration policy, which has become more selective, and more specifically, by the new pay threshold (as described in more detail below in Section 4.2) acting as a hurdle for labour migrants from countries affected by conflict or other forced migration drivers. Furthermore, it is also due to the fact that it is no longer possible for asylum seekers with unsuccessful claims to regularise their stay by 'changing track' and staying in the country on employment grounds.¹³

According to the Migration Agency, the raised pay threshold has also caused a sharp decline in the overall number of people coming to Sweden to work, from around 24,100 in 2022 to 20,800 in 2023 and then approximately 13,400 in 2024.¹⁴ This explanation is quite plausible given that the decline occurred immediately after the change and was concentrated in low-wage sectors. Other factors, such as weaker labour demand, may also have contributed, but are unlikely to explain the trend on their own (Migrationsverket 2025c, p. 74).

In summary, evidence suggests that changes in the law in the last few years have narrowed labour migration as a legal pathway into Sweden.

¹³ Previously, asylum seekers who were rejected had an opportunity to apply for a work permit from within Sweden if they had already been working and fulfilled some additional conditions (Parusel 2020, pp. 49-50).

¹⁴ These figures exclude accompanying family members.

4. Sweden's labour immigration policy: rules, debates and recent reforms

The legal system pertaining to migration in Sweden is governed by the Aliens Act (Utlänningslagen, SFS 2005:716), and the Aliens Ordinance (Utlänningsförordningen, SFS 2006:97), which is based on the Act. The current Aliens Act came into force on 31 March 2006 and has subsequently been amended many times, both as a result of domestic reform efforts and to implement EU legal instruments in Swedish law.

4.1 Political views and public debates

Over the past few years, public attention and political discussions around labour-related migration to Sweden have mostly shifted between two opposite dimensions. On the one hand, there have been reports of widespread abuse of the system by rogue employers that have exploited their migrant workers (Calleman and Herzfeld Olsson 2015, p. 18-19) and, on the other hand, there has been a focus on what have been termed 'talent expulsions' denoting cases of migrant workers losing their residence permits as a result of (often minor) mistakes made by their employers related to working hours, salaries, insurance or other rules, and being served with orders to leave Sweden (Eliasson 2021; Lindsay 2019). This means that the system was considered too liberal and prone to abuse by many, while at the same time criticism was directed at the Migration Agency and the Government for enforcing the existing rules in an excessively pedantic manner.

To address this bifurcated criticism, lawmakers tried to remedy abuses through various measures such as raising the pay threshold, making binding work contracts a condition for work-related immigration, clarifying and widening the post-arrival inspection tasks of the Migration Agency and tasking law enforcement agencies with increasing checks on foreigners in the country, as well as conducting workplace inspections. As regards the 'talent expulsions' problem, the Swedish Migration Court of Appeal eventually ruled that overall assessments must be made when examining applications for work permit extensions, instead of rejecting such applications due to insignificant and most likely unintentional mistakes by employers (Engdahl and Sjödin 2024, p. 54).

However, the recent restrictive turn is certainly also a result of the current Government's general ambition to reduce immigration from third countries and demonstrate to voters that they can control migration. The Tidö cooperation agreement between the three centre and centre-right Government parties and the far-right Sweden Democrats includes many far-reaching changes in migration and asylum policy. While these mainly concern asylum seekers (and their family members), irregular migration and return, the agreement also reflects a tougher and more selective approach to labour immigration (Tidöavtalet 2022).

Overall, Sweden has pursued a restrictive approach to immigration, especially protection-related immigration, since 2015. The aim has been to reduce Sweden's attractiveness as a destination for asylum seekers, and this had been accompanied by generally negative communication from the Swedish Government concerning migration and the integration of foreigners (Parusel 2025b; Emilsson 2025).

4.2 The evolution of the general Swedish system for labour immigration

The Swedish legal system for labour immigration has also undergone significant changes in recent years, some of which could be called drastic, or even radical, because they substantially, and rapidly, altered both employers' opportunities to recruit from abroad and, as demonstrated above, the composition of the group of incoming workers from non-EU countries. Essentially, in 2008 Sweden had switched from a relatively strict and state-controlled approach to a very liberal, employer-driven system and then, after some time, gradually introduced new restrictions again. A very significant step was taken in 2023, when a much higher pay threshold for work permits was introduced (Engdahl and Sjödin 2024, p. 60-61), aiming to strengthen the position of labour migrants in the labour market and to counteract wage dumping (Govt Bill 2021/22:284). This essentially excluded low-skilled and low-paid third country nationals from coming to Sweden for work.

Since 2008, when Swedish lawmakers abandoned the obligatory labour market needs test as a condition for work-based immigration, Sweden became renowned internationally for its unusually generous rules for labour immigration, which provided ample opportunities for third country nationals to obtain residence and work permits for work in occupations that required a high level of qualifications or specialist skills, but also for jobs with low or no

qualification requirements (Parusel 2020; Calleman & Herzfeld Olsson 2015).¹⁵ This was mainly due to the fact that the Swedish system gave employers a great degree of freedom to recruit foreign labour whenever they needed it. The state's involvement in the process was in principle reduced to the Migration Agency examining applications for residence and work permits and checking that third country workers were not being abused or exploited.¹⁶

The current regulations require employees from third countries to have terms of employment (pay, working hours, etc.) no worse than those in collective agreements between trade unions and employer associations in their respective sectors or industries, or are considered customary for the occupation (Chapter 6, Section 2 of the Aliens Act). The minimum monthly salary that a labour immigrant from a third country had to receive was SEK 13,000, until this was more than doubled in November 2023 due to a Government Bill requiring prospective labour immigrants to achieve a "good standard of living" (god försörjning) through their employment in Sweden (Govt Bill 2021/22:284). This is now regulated in Chapter 6, Section 2 (1) of the Aliens Act. In line with this change, the Aliens Ordinance was amended to specify that a "good standard of living" means a monthly salary that amounts to at least 80% of the median salary (Justitiedepartementet 2023), which amounted to SEK 29,680 in 2025.¹⁷

In 2024, a Government inquiry proposed an increase in the pay threshold to 100% of the median wage (SOU 2024:15), and the Government tasked the Swedish Migration Agency with providing it with a list of occupations to be exempted from this salary requirement. These would be occupations with needs that cannot be met by workers within Sweden, but with pay lower than the median wage.¹⁸ As a result of criticism by many relevant stakeholders, including employer organisations and trade unions (Svenskt Näringsliv 2024; LO 2024), the Government announced instead that the pay threshold for labour immigration would be set at 90% of the median wage. This new approach envisages exemptions from the pay requirement where necessary, and possibility to exclude migrant workers in specific occupations from being granted a work permit altogether (Regeringskansliet 2025c).

¹⁵ Before 2008, the Employment Agency (Arbetsförmedlingen) was required to conduct a labour market test before an employer was allowed to recruit from outside the EU.

¹⁶ It needs to be stressed, however, that law enforcement agencies, the Tax Agency and the Swedish Work Environment Authority also have certain control tasks with regards to, for example, the prevention and sanctioning of irregular employment, and making sure employers respect work environment regulations.

¹⁷ The median salary is calculated by Statistics Sweden and published each year in June.

¹⁸ The Migration Agency eventually presented a list of 152 such professions (Migrationsverket 2025f).

The labour immigration system has also become more selective and restrictive as a result of other legal and policy changes. Following reports of abuse, increased controls have been introduced. Since 2022, a prospective labour immigrant needs a (legally binding) employment contract ("anställningsavtal", see Chapter 6, Section 2 of the Aliens Act) to be granted a residence and work permit, while before that, a non-binding job offer was sufficient. It is also no longer possible for labour immigrants to be accompanied by, or reunite with, family members without being able to financially support them (Govt Bill 2021/22:134).

Finally, in 2025, as mentioned earlier, Sweden abolished the possibility for asylum seekers with unsuccessful claims to 'change track' and stay in the country on employment grounds. This used to be possible if they were already working and met other eligibility criteria (Govt Bill 2024/25:92).

4.3 Special rules for certain categories of workers

Several categories of third country nationals are exempted from work permit requirements in Sweden; mostly people who obtain a residence permit issued for other purposes and are allowed to work, such as a permit for university studies (Chapter 5 of the Aliens Ordinance). There are also types of work for which no work permit is required, such as diplomatic or consular officials, artists, technicians and other tour staff (for short stays); and researchers staying in Sweden for short periods.¹⁹ There are also cases where third country nationals do not need a visa or residence permit to be admitted to Sweden but must apply for a work permit to be allowed to work (see for instance Chapter 6c, Section 1(1) of the Aliens Act, regulating seasonal work). This applies, for example, to third country nationals from visa-free countries who would like to work in Sweden for a short time (up to three months) and need a work permit for this. There is also a general exemption for people with permanent residence permits (Chapter 2, Section 8c(2) of the Aliens Act).

In 2022, Sweden introduced a new type of residence permit to allow highly-skilled people to be admitted to Sweden for up to nine months to look for work or explore the possibilities of starting their own business (Chapter 5, Section 9 of the Aliens Act).²⁰ They must have completed second-cycle studies (at least a

¹⁹ Depending on their nationality, they might need a visa or residence permit, however.

²⁰ Chapter 5, Section 5 of the Aliens Act provides an alternative to this, regulating the admission of third country nationals migrating to Sweden for self-employment purposes, to start their own businesses or transfer an existing business to Sweden, who need a residence permit, but not a work permit. The number of residence permits granted for such purposes has tended to be small however (Parusel 2020: 41).

60 credit Master's degree or equivalent), prove that they can support themselves during their stay, and be covered by comprehensive health insurance.²¹

There are also specific legal arrangements for different types of seasonal workers, mostly stemming from EU law (see Section 4.5). Seasonal work is common in Sweden, particularly in agriculture, horticulture, forestry, hotels and restaurants, golf and ski resorts, tourism, and amusement parks. Seasonal workers from third countries are exempt from the pay threshold that applies to other incoming labour migrants. The former pay threshold of SEK 13,000 per month still applies to them but (unlike other workers) they also have to demonstrate that they have access to appropriate housing in line with the EU Seasonal Workers Directive²² (see Chapter 6c, Section 2(4) of the Aliens Act). They need to also have health insurance, but are exempted from life insurance, industrial injuries insurance, and occupational pension insurance, which are obligatory for other migrant workers (Chapter 6c, Section 2 (3) of the Aliens Act).

In addition, berry pickers have been a particularly important group of seasonal workers in Sweden for a long time.²³ Since 2024, the admission of berry pickers from third countries has virtually stopped as they were not exempted from the higher pay threshold for labour migrants.²⁴

4.4 Application process and residence

Employers who need foreign workers are obliged to advertise their vacancies publicly through the Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen) and the EU job mobility portal EURES for ten days. This is meant to satisfy the EU principle of community preference but does not represent a fully-fledged labour market

²¹ The number of residence permits granted for this purpose has so far remained relatively small, with around 250 permits issued in 2024, and 180 in 2023 (Migrationsverket 2025d).

²² Directive 2014/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on the conditions of entry and stay of third-country nationals for the purpose of employment as seasonal workers, [2014] OJ L 94.

²³ Incoming berry pickers, predominantly from Thailand, who were formally employed by foreign work placement agencies, often faced precarious working conditions as they were not covered by collective agreements and were paid on the basis of the quantity of berries picked and delivered rather than on the basis of agreed salaries. This often led to harsh and exploitative working conditions (Herrfeldt Olsson 2018). While more than 5,000 individuals had been granted a permit for berry picking in 2023, this number was zero in 2024 and 89 in 2025 (Migrationsverket 2025e).

²⁴ The reason for this is that these seasonal workers are not covered by Chapter 6c of the Aliens Act, since they are posted to Sweden and employed by a temporary work agency in Thailand. Chapter 6c requires that the seasonal worker is employed by a Swedish employer in Sweden (see Chapter 6c, Section 1(1) of the Aliens Act).

needs test (see Chapter 6, Section 2(2) of the Aliens Act). If there is no response to the advertised vacancy, or if an employer still prefers to recruit somebody from abroad, they may hire an applicant from any country in the world. It is then the prospective employee who formally applies for a permit from abroad at a Swedish mission abroad, or electronically from the Swedish Migration Agency.²⁵ Only when the permit is issued and the person receives a residence permit card (or for short stays, a visa), may they enter Sweden.

There are quite a few exceptions to this main rule (see Chapter 5, Section 18 of the Aliens Act), notably for people who have legally entered Sweden (with a visa or visa-free) to visit an employer and then apply for a permit to work in an occupation which is in high demand. Exceptions also apply to people who already have a work permit but need to apply for a new one because they want to change occupation or employer; people who have a residence permit for studies or for looking for work after the completion of studies; and highly qualified individuals with a job-seeking permit lasting up to nine months (see above).

While Swedish law differentiates between residence permits (Chapter 5 of the Aliens Act) and work permits (Chapter 6 of the Aliens Act), the Swedish Migration Agency examines applications for residence and work permits in a single procedure, in line with the EU Single Permit Directive²⁶ (Justitiedepartementet 2025).

Residence and work permits are granted for the period covered by the work contract, or – if the position is permanent – for a maximum of two years with the possibility of extension (see Chapter 6, Sections 1 and 2a of the Aliens Act). During the first two years, the residence permit is linked to a specific employer and a clearly defined occupation, which means that if a work permit holder changes their job, or if their employer changes (even if this change is beyond the control of the employee, e.g., through a company takeover), they must apply for a new permit. After the initial two years, the foreign worker may change employer, but not occupation (Chapter 6, Sections 2a(2) of the

²⁵ Among the requirements that prospective employees need to fulfil are to have a valid passport; a work contract, terms of employment and a salary in line with the Swedish collective agreements for the occupation at hand, or which are customary within the relevant occupation or industry; salary as high as 80 percent of the median salary (SEK 29,680); health insurance, life insurance, industrial injuries insurance, and occupational pension insurance. In practice, employers need to start the work permit application for the person they want to employ by providing information to the Migration Agency via their e-service. Once this is done, the prospective employee receives a link to the e-service, where they can submit their application.

²⁶ Directive (EU) 2024/1233 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on a single application procedure for a single permit for third-country nationals to reside and work in the territory of a Member State and on a common set of rights for third-country workers legally residing in a Member State (recast), [2024] OJ 30 April.

Aliens Act). Only after a total period of four years (within a seven-year period), can a permanent residence permit be granted, which then allows for full, unconditional access to the labour market (Chapter 2, Section 8c(3) of the Aliens Act). The seven-year qualification period for permanent residence (Chapter 5, Section 5 of the Aliens Act) was introduced to make it easier for migrants to spend certain periods of time abroad and circulate between different countries and still be able to obtain permanent residency status in Sweden (on circular migration, see Vankova 2020).

People admitted to Sweden under the labour immigration system may be accompanied by close family members, i.e., their wife, husband, cohabiting partner, registered partner and unmarried children under the age of 21, in line with the EU Family Reunification Directive²⁷ (see Aliens Ordinance, Chapter 4, Section 4a/b). While there used to be no financial support requirement for accompanying family members, at present work permit applicants who want to be admitted to Sweden with their partner must demonstrate that they have a monthly income of SEK 10,219 left for living after tax and after paying their monthly rent (heating included) (Section 4c of the Aliens Ordinance). For each child, SEK 3,306 to SEK 5,290 is added to this amount, depending on the age of the child. A residence permit for a family member is normally issued for the same period as the permit for the labour immigrant, and they are normally permitted to work as well.

After arrival in Sweden, in principle third country nationals have access to free language courses (organised by municipalities), and if they are granted a residence permit for one year or longer, they have access to welfare, healthcare and other services under the same conditions as Swedish nationals (Ahlén and Palme 2020).

4.5 Impact of EU law and policy

In addition to changes that were mainly driven by domestic debate, given that Sweden is a Member State of the EU, its labour immigration rules have also changed as a result of EU law-making (Calleman and Herzfeld Olsson 2015; Engdahl and Sjödin 2024, p. 62-63).

Earlier research has found that Sweden has often adopted a cautious stance on EU policies on legal migration (Parusel 2020). While the Government used to advocate close cooperation, harmonisation and burden-sharing at EU level concerning irregular migration and asylum before the restrictive turn

²⁷ Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification, [2003] OJ L 251.

mentioned above (Government Offices 2018; Parusel 2023b), it has been more reluctant regarding the development of binding, common EU rules on labour and study migration. A general, albeit not always stated, orientation has been to limit the impact of EU legal migration directives on national approaches. Some EU legal migration directives were implemented late, sometimes after the deadline for transposition into national law had passed, and they often did not have major impacts on the number of people admitted to Sweden.

For example, the EU rules on highly skilled migrants (Blue Card Directive),²⁸ adopted in 2009, initially had very limited effect in Sweden as work permits under the pre-existing national rules remained more attractive and easier to access (Kolb 2017; Parusel 2020). Over the period 2013–2015, almost no Blue Cards were issued in Sweden at all. Around 20 or 30 such cards were issued per year in 2017–2020. Only since 2021 has the number of Swedish Blue Cards been a bit higher, and yet just over 100 were issued in 2023 (Eurostat 2025). This trend can be explained in part by the fact that the national rules had become stricter, which increased the relative attractiveness of the Blue Card. Also, the new version of the Blue Card Directive, which was adopted in 2021 and subsequently transposed into Swedish law, made this status somewhat more accessible (due to the changes brought by the Recast; see De Lange and Vankova 2022).

The EU Seasonal Workers Directive was implemented in Swedish law in 2018. This EU-regulated type of seasonal work permit is relevant for third country nationals who apply to be admitted to work in Sweden in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, the hotel and restaurant trade, and tourism. Sweden has also implemented the EU Directive on intra-corporate transferees (ICT),²⁹ which deals with third country nationals who are transferred from one country to another while working for the same company. Other relevant provisions in Swedish law stem from the recast EU Students and Researchers Directive.³⁰

²⁸ Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2021 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purpose of highly qualified employment, and repealing Council Directive 2009/50/EC, [2021] OJ L 382. With a Directive adopted in 2009 and recast in 2021, the EU established common rules for the entry and residence of highly qualified non-EU nationals. The residence permit such persons can acquire is called the EU Blue Card, which is why the Directive itself has been labelled the Blue Card Directive.

²⁹ Directive 2014/66/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals in the framework of an intra-corporate transfer [2014] OJ L 157.

³⁰ Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing, [2016] OJ L 132.

Chapter 5b of the Aliens Act provides the specific conditions for researchers. These conditions are more attractive than for other categories of workers because researchers can be granted a residence permit for up to four years at a time and the pay threshold for labour immigrants does not apply to them. On the other hand, in line with the EU Students and Researchers Directive, they have to meet specific requirements, such as having a hosting agreement with a recognised research principal in Sweden (a university for example) and devoting at least half of their working hours to research.

In addition, the 2011 Single Permit Directive introduced a simplified application procedure for a single permit (not several permits) to both work and reside in the EU. At the time of writing, a recast version of this Directive, adopted in 2024, had not yet been transposed in Sweden, but the Swedish Ministry of Justice had started drafting changes to Swedish immigration law to implement it. In line with the recast Directive, the Ministry proposed that work permits should no longer be tied to a specific employer and type of work. Instead, migrant workers should be required to inform the authorities if they change their employer or employment. In addition, a third country worker who has had a permit for more than two years, and who loses their job, should have six months to find a new one, instead of three, if they can financially support themselves during the period of unemployment (Justitiedepartementet 2025).

5. The Swedish system for study immigration

Sweden's legislation and policies in the area of study immigration have generally been more stable than in the area of labour immigration. The immigration rules applicable to students from third countries are primarily found in Chapter 5b of the Aliens Act, which also deals with researchers, trainees, volunteers and au pairs. Further details are found in Chapter 4a of the Aliens Ordinance. Changes in the law in recent years were mainly due to the transposition of EU law, such as allowing for a longer period during which international students and researchers can stay in Sweden after the completion of their studies and look for work or business opportunities. This used to be six months, but it is now one year in line with the EU Students and Researchers Directive. Another major change, which resulted from debates within Sweden, was the introduction of tuition fees for free movers (students who come to Sweden without participating in organised exchange programmes) from third countries in 2011. This has had both qualitative (countries of origin) and quantitative (lower numbers) effects, even if the admission numbers increased again after a while. Before the fees were introduced, studying in Sweden was entirely free for people already residing in the country and for newcomers.

Sweden has long endeavoured to be an attractive destination for international students, doctoral students and researchers, and over time, Swedish higher education institutions (HEIs) have managed to attract increasing numbers. Politically, the admission of students has mostly been viewed positively, as part of an ambition to internationalise the higher education system and attract talent. However, there has not been a dedicated strategy to retain international students after their graduation. Recently, political views on international students have shifted focus towards abuse of the system to a certain extent, i.e., international students using their study-based residence permits for working (Migrationsverket 2022). Furthermore, Sweden's attractiveness as a destination for students is negatively impacted by factors such as a relatively high cost of living and the statutory requirement for students from third countries to be able to support themselves during their time in the country. This limits the admission of students from poorer households or countries. Research has shown that the introduction of tuition fees in 2011 has further limited opportunities for students from the Global South (Bryntesson and Börjesson 2019).

As the data demonstrated in Section 3.4, compared to labour migration, study migration has not served as a major alternative route for people in need of protection (Parusel 2020).

5.1 The application process and residence

Residence permits for studies at a Swedish HEI are granted in accordance with Chapter 5b, Section 3 of the Aliens Act. To obtain a permit, applicants from third countries must hold a valid passport; be admitted to a course of full-time study at a HEI;³¹ be able to support themselves during the foreseen study period in Sweden, with a maintenance requirement of SEK 10,584 per month in 2025; and have comprehensive health insurance.³²

Residence permits are often granted for a maximum of one or two years, depending on which HEI a person will study at. However, permits can also have durations shorter than one year if a student only intends to spend one academic semester in Sweden. Conditions are essentially the same for doctoral students, but for them, there is normally no tuition fee, and, in many cases, they will be employed and receive a salary. Residence permits for doctoral students can be granted for up to two years at a time.

5.2 Status change from studies to work

People who have a residence permit for higher education in Sweden, and have completed their studies, can be granted a residence permit to look for work or explore the possibilities of starting their own business. Such permits can be granted for a maximum of one year, i.e., three months longer than the nine-month period that the EU Students and Researchers Directive requires. An important requirement is that such persons can demonstrate that they can support themselves while looking for work. They are exempted from the requirement to hold a work permit, which means that they can take jobs within this one-year period without asking for special permission. Once they find a job in Sweden, however, they have to apply for a work permit.

³¹ Applicants who have to pay a tuition fee are not considered admitted to studies in Sweden until the fee is paid to the relevant higher education institution. Once the fee is paid, the higher education institution in Sweden notifies the Swedish Migration Agency.

³² Health insurance is not necessary if the period of study is one year or longer, because in such cases, the student can be registered in the Swedish population register and get access to the general healthcare system on that basis.

6. Refugee resettlement and complementary pathways in Sweden

For several decades, the main legal pathway for people in need of protection in Sweden has been state-organised resettlement. As this chapter demonstrates, Sweden has also some experience with the development of complementary pathways, albeit small-scale and not officially labelled as such.

6.1 The Swedish refugee resettlement system

Sweden has a long tradition of receiving refugees via official, state-managed resettlement (Parusel and Bengtsson 2016). The Government sets an annual resettlement quota and on this basis, the Swedish Migration Agency, in cooperation with UNHCR, selects refugees in countries of origin or transit countries for protection and residence in Sweden. Selections are carried out by conducting selection missions, for example to refugee camps abroad, and by 'dossier selection', which means that the Migration Agency makes resettlement decisions remotely on the basis of dossiers submitted by UNHCR.

Before the selected refugees arrive, they receive a cultural orientation in life in Sweden, at least in those cases where people are selected via selection missions. The refugees are then distributed across the Swedish municipalities based on a distribution key. Until 2016, this distribution was more flexible in the sense that municipalities could indicate whether or not, and if so, how many, resettlement refugees they wanted to admit. Remoter regions of Sweden that are sparsely populated and often facing de-population – mainly in the north and northwest of the country – used to be especially active in accommodating resettlement refugees (Parusel and Bengtsson 2016).

Over many years up until 2016, the annual resettlement quota was 1,900. In response to the asylum situation in 2015, as a way of compensating for a more restrictive asylum policy, the quota was raised to 3,400 people in 2017 and 5,000 in 2018. The number of actual resettlement transfers to Sweden has fluctuated around these numbers.

After a change of government in 2022, the quota was cut to 900 people per year. Priority is given to women, girls and LGBTQI persons. Since 2023, the Migration Agency has also been instructed to apply additional selection criteria that are

not linked to the individuals' vulnerability or need for protection. One of these criteria is their "integration potential" in Sweden, which means that the Migration Agency is expected to take into account skills and characteristics that are important for "having good conditions for integration" into Swedish society, including labour-market integration (Emilsson 2025). Furthermore, persons who have previously fought with armed groups, expressed anti-democratic values or participated in organisations where various forms of extremism are present are excluded from resettlement (Regeringskansliet 2025b).

6.2 Existing complementary pathways

Apart from resettlement, Sweden has not been active in creating additional legal pathways to immigration for people in need of protection, such as humanitarian admission or complementary pathways. However, there are some small-scale programmes that could be regarded as complementary pathways because they link protection aspects to work or research in the country.

6.2.1 Scholars at Risk

Scholars at Risk is an international network of HEIs and individuals whose mission it is to protect scholars and promote academic freedom. By arranging temporary academic positions, Scholars at Risk offers safety to scholars facing grave threats to ensure that their ideas are not lost and that they can keep working until conditions improve and they are able to return to their country of origin.³³ The network also provides advisory services for scholars and hosts, campaigns for the release of scholars who are imprisoned or otherwise silenced, monitors attacks on higher education communities worldwide, and provides leadership in deploying new tools and strategies for promoting academic freedom and improving respect for higher education values everywhere.

The Sweden Section of Scholars at Risk includes 28 HEIs and 4 associate partner organisations. Members include both new and old universities, as well as other HEIs. The national network aims to raise awareness in Sweden and attract funding to be able to offer scholars at risk temporary positions in Sweden. Since the start of Scholars at Risk in Sweden, around 70 placements of scholars have been organised. According to an expert interviewed for this study (Interview 2), admission to Sweden is normally arranged under the legal provisions for researchers (see Section 4.5), which is based on the EU Students and Researchers Directive.

³³ See <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/about/>.

6.2.2 Cities of refuge

All cities, regions and municipalities in Sweden that want to promote freedom of expression for writers, musicians and artists can become Cities of Refuge as part of the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN).

There are currently 25 cities of refuge in Sweden that are members of ICORN. Members include municipalities and a few regions. Twenty-two of the members have recently received sanctuary artists, normally one at a time. Some cities of refuge (such as Stockholm, Örebro and Umeå) have two or more places for artists active in different fields of art. Sanctuary artists can be journalists, artists, poets, writers, bloggers, musicians, actors, or photographers.

People who are offered sanctuary through this initiative have to apply for a residence permit to be admitted to Sweden on the basis of Chapter 5, Section 5(2) of the Aliens Act. This provision allows a residence permit to be granted to individuals who have their maintenance arranged by means other than employment. This provision is generally used for granting residence permits to third country nationals who want to start a business in Sweden. This means that incoming sanctuary artists are allowed to carry out their artistic activity in Sweden, and any tasks directly related to it. But the right to take up employment is not included. The permit is normally granted for two years, and extensions are possible.³⁴

³⁴ To promote the reception of sanctuary artists, the Swedish Arts Council has published a handbook in Swedish and English (Swedish Arts Council 2025).

7. Existing challenges related to legal pathways into Sweden

Based on the stakeholder and expert interviews, as well as existing research, this chapter identifies a number of **legal** and **non-legal barriers** that would need to be addressed in order to facilitate access to legal pathways for migrants and refugees.

7.1 Pay thresholds and exempted occupations

As already mentioned in Section 4.2, the Swedish Government raised the pay threshold for prospective labour migrants to 80% of the Swedish median wage in 2023 and proposed a further increase to 90% of the median wage in October 2025, to come into force from June 2026 (Lagrådsremiss 2025). It also intends to grant exemptions from the pay requirement if considered necessary, and to exclude specific occupations from the possibility of being granted a work permit (Regeringskansliet 2025c).

Swedish employer organisations have opposed the higher pay thresholds (Johansson and Henriksson 2023). Trade unions welcomed the introduction of the 80% median wage threshold as a means to reduce immigration into low-wage jobs and the risk of wage-dumping, but opposed the idea of raising it to 100% (Interview 14; see also LO 2024).

Stakeholders interviewed for this study also voiced concerns over the lists of occupations to be exempted from the pay threshold. Such lists, especially if they were to change over time, could make it difficult for companies to plan their recruitment strategies in the long term. As an expert from an immigration service provider explained, companies often want to recruit people for more than just one or two years. Whether an occupation is added to or removed from a list of exempted occupations can have an impact on pay and other working conditions, which are important factors for companies in the recruitment process from third countries and could impact its feasibility (Interview 7).

Some of the interviewees shared that some regions would be negatively impacted by increasing pay thresholds as it could further complicate the recruitment of doctors and nurses, which is already difficult because they are

regulated professions. Thresholds would add yet another requirement that could be difficult for applicants to satisfy, as their starting salaries in the public sector can be lower than the threshold requirement (Interview 7).³⁵ In addition, even though migrants are allowed to change employer after two years and can have several different contracts with different employers, they need to pass the pay threshold with one employer, i.e., the employment contract that the permit is based on (Interview 12).

Interviewees representing employer organisations generally described pay thresholds as unpopular (Interviews 4, 5 and 8). One aspect that an interviewee from a migrant-led organisation mentioned as particularly problematic is that changes in the law (such as changing the pay thresholds) sometimes not only affect companies' future recruitment but also workers who are already in Sweden, and who risk losing their permits if they do not meet the new or changed criteria (Interview 12). This might lead to new 'talent expulsions', a problem Sweden has struggled with before (Lindsay 2019), and which has been partially resolved (Vankova 2022b). In summary, while the pay threshold could be seen as an obstacle in the context of legal pathways, hindering access to Sweden for occupations that are not exempted, it becomes even more problematic when it is frequently adjusted, as this undermines legal certainty for migrants and refugees, as well as employers, as discussed below.

7.2 Frequent changes to immigration law

One of the interviewed experts from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) stressed that the fact that Swedish immigration law is frequently amended is a challenge in itself. To develop and implement recruitment strategies, companies need a stable and predictable framework that guides them about their options. Following and understanding changes in the law and their impacts is difficult for non-experts, and this can result in employers refraining from recruiting from abroad (Interview 4). Trade unions have also criticised the Swedish labour immigration system as an "increasingly confusing patchwork quilt", which has made it difficult for both recruiting companies and migrant workers to understand what rules apply, when permit approvals can be expected and when work in Sweden can begin (LO 2024; Interview 14). According to the Swedish Trade Union Confederation

³⁵ As mentioned earlier, the requirement to obtain a work permit is divided into two parts. Applicants need pay levels not worse than those in collective agreements, and income levels to support themselves (SEK 13,000 before the change, now around SEK 33,000). The collective agreements and/or median pay for these occupations are higher than this. Yet there can be problems in practice, for instance employers might want to employ them on a part-time basis and because of that they might not meet the new pay threshold.

(LO), there is also widespread uncertainty about which rules apply and what assessments are made when a person applies for a work permit extension (LO 2024).

7.3 Language requirements for regulated professions

A good command of Swedish is a requirement for some regulated professions and is also generally needed in order to find a job in many sectors (Interview 10; Vankova 2022b). An interviewee from an immigration and recruitment service provider stressed that many people who apply for regulated profession jobs already know Swedish, as advances in digital technologies allow people to study foreign languages abroad through their phones or computers (Interview 7). However, others – who are not engaged in high-skilled occupations – might need facilitated access to language training. Furthermore, there are requirements for certification in advanced Swedish (e.g., for doctors and nurses), which is currently only accessible in a few countries abroad, according to the interviewees.

7.4 Recognition of qualifications in regulated professions

As discussed above, one of the biggest labour shortages in Sweden in the first quarter of 2025 was in the areas of human health and social work. When asked about professions with severe shortages, interviewees from the SALAR spoke in general about doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, and healthcare and care of older people staff (Interviews 4 and 5). Among these occupations, medical doctors and nurses are in short supply throughout the EU with very few exceptions, which means that EU countries are increasingly competing to attract such specialists from within the EU as well as from third countries (EC 2023; EC 2024).

Yet the data collected for this study demonstrates that in Sweden, when it comes to medical doctors and nurses, the only group of foreigners that could easily apply for such jobs from outside the country are EU citizens, as they benefit from EU legislation that facilitates the recognition process and allows for free movement of workers. By contrast, the current Swedish legislation makes it impossible for someone who is not already residing in Sweden to even start the recognition process, which requires assessment of the person's academic qualifications as a first step (Interviews 8 and 10). The same applies to applications for recognition of training in vocational occupations, many of which are also often in high demand (Interviews 8 and 10). An interviewee from the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) explained that applications by non-

EU citizens from abroad who do not satisfy the above-mentioned requirements are rejected – even those from highly qualified applicants, such as surgeons (Interview 10).

Apart from the assessment of academic qualifications, other requirements include demonstrating an advanced level of Swedish (see above), passing theoretical and practical exams or knowledge tests in medicine for doctors, finding and self-funding a six-month long internship at a medical establishment, taking an online course on the Swedish regulations in the medical area, and submitting all these documents to the Swedish Medical Association to apply for a licence to practice. It is only when all these requirements are met – which can take up to 8 years according to one interviewee, as there are waiting lists and waiting times even for online courses, and a lot of self-funding is required – that doctors can start applying for jobs in Sweden (Interviews 10 and 13). A number of interviewees also reported that the recognition process is detached from the immigration process, which means that a person cannot satisfy these conditions from outside Sweden while at the same time they need recognition to get a job offer (Interviews 10 and 13). In practice, only people who are inside the country (e.g., recognised refugees) or those who were able to enter the country on different grounds, such as for studies, can start the recognition process. From an immigration law point of view, this means that doctors from abroad are staying on temporary permits, which require new applications at regular intervals and a transition to a work permit for the internship, a process that is impacted by long processing times and delays (see below). One interviewee shared that even when doctors managed to go through the recognition and immigration processes and found a job, they were required to exit the country to be able to apply for a new work permit, which in some cases was not ultimately granted (Interview 13).

Furthermore, even though the EU Blue Card Directive aims to attract highly-skilled workers, including people in the medical field, and allows applicants to benefit from facilitated recognition of qualifications,³⁶ the way that Sweden has transposed this Directive can render it inaccessible for medical doctors due to the high pay threshold that is required for admission (at the time of writing approximately SEK 52,000 in line with the pay threshold requirement of the Recast EU Blue Card Directive). This is difficult to satisfy when a third country national's first position in Sweden is an internship or generally when it is the person's first job in Sweden.

³⁶ Qualifications acquired in a third country should be taken into account in accordance with Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications. See recitals 7, 48, 23 as well as Article 16 (1) (d) of the Recast EU Blue Card Directive.

According to one interviewee, the only exception to these cumbersome rules is the new immigration provision allowing persons with completed studies equivalent to a second-cycle qualification to apply for a permit for look for work or to start a business, mentioned in Section 4.3. (Interview 10). This could potentially make it easier for people to meet the requirements for some regulated professions, such as teachers (Interview 10). Overall, however, restrictive legislation may be preventing Sweden from attracting crucial specialists effectively, such as healthcare professionals. The labour needs in the healthcare sector are expected to further intensify in the coming years due to the ageing of the current healthcare workforce (EPRS 2025).

7.5 (In)security of status and limited status change opportunities

Migrants are granted temporary permits that they need to renew until they are eligible for permanent residence or an EU long-term residence permit,³⁷ which happens after four and five years, respectively, at the earliest. Several interviewees described the temporariness of work contracts or the short-term duration of residence permits for studies and work as a major problem (Interviews 1, 3 and 9). Two suggested that for foreign university graduates in Sweden, this was a bigger problem than the pay threshold (Interviews 1 and 3).

As one expert from an immigration service provider noted, Swedish immigration legislation treats moving or switching between different immigration tracks as something “wrong” (Interview 7). Because of this, only a few categories of visa or residence permit holders can change their immigration status from within the country: Schengen visa holders who apply for work in shortage occupations; persons with a residence permit to look for work in Sweden; and students. Students, researchers and highly qualified third country nationals holding a national residence permit can also switch to an EU Blue Card from inside the country, provided that they meet the EU Blue Card Directive’s requirements.

Furthermore, at the time of writing, Swedish immigration law only allows a three-month long period of unemployment before a labour immigrant risks permit withdrawal. This short period is likely to be increased to six months as part of the implementation of the Recast EU Single Permit Directive, but only for people who have already resided in the country for two years. This means that labour immigrants who lose their jobs (or want to change employer because of poor working conditions or other reasons), face considerable

³⁷ Council Directive 2003/109/EC of 25 November 2003 concerning the status of third country nationals who are long-term residents, [2003] OJ L 16.

pressures if they do not intend to leave the country. Some might feel forced to accept poor working conditions until they achieve permanent residency (Interview 12). The immigration status precariousness of many labour immigrants also means that they might refrain from reporting rogue or criminal enterprises to the law enforcement authorities. To make it easier for labour immigrants who are being subjected to exploitative working conditions, Sweden's Building Maintenance Workers' Union has started a project called Nätverk mot arbetslivskriminalitet in the west of Sweden that aims to help labour immigrants who work as cleaners to find new jobs if they leave exploitative employers and report them (Fastighetsanställdas förbund 2025; Interview 14).

Finally, another legal barrier stems from the approach of the Swedish Government to limit the impact of EU legal migration directives, which in practice means that some of these instruments, such as the EU Blue Card Directive, have not been actively promoted and have not often been accessed by third country nationals (Parusel 2020; Kolb 2017). This limits the possibilities of labour immigrants to benefit from the rights entailed in these instruments. For instance, the Recast EU Blue Card Directive allows more categories of migrant workers to apply for and benefit from Blue Card status, also enabling them to accumulate residence periods in different EU Member States that can – taken together – lead to EU long-term residence status (Vankova 2024).

7.6 Non-legal barriers

The report has also identified non-legal barriers that would need to be addressed to facilitate access to legal pathways for both migrants and refugees. Long processing times for work and residence permits is a non-legal barrier acknowledged by interviewees from an immigration service provider and from a migrant-led organisation (Interviews 7 and 12). Sweden used to have a certified employer scheme that provided for fast-track processing, but it was abolished. Even though the Migration Agency has aimed to reduce processing times, the strict case-by-case assessment of employers' applications – even for those big companies who regularly employ workers from outside Sweden – reportedly often lead to delays of several months in cases of missing documents or minor irregularities (Interview 7). This can discourage employers from recruiting non-EU workers as most businesses want to recruit people who can start working as soon as possible (Interview 7). Long processing times not only apply to first-time permits but also applications for their extension, and in such cases create uncertainty among migrants about their prospects of being allowed to stay (Interview 12).

Another non-legal barrier concerns one of the requirements for issuing a residence permit, namely that the prospective employers must have arranged health insurance, life insurance, industrial injuries insurance, and occupational pension insurance. These requirements create a significant financial burden for small companies as they often cannot buy these insurance policies for only one person but need to arrange them for all employees. Employees are not allowed to arrange such insurance for themselves, which makes them more dependent on their employers until they achieve permanent resident status (Interview 12).

In addition, interviewees, especially those from migrant- and refugee-led organisations, stressed that the attitude of certain employers in Sweden, and to some degree society as a whole, concerning the integration of newcomers needs to change if new legal pathways were to be opened (Interview 9). They felt that Sweden generally has not sufficiently recognised immigration as a benefit to the country, with public discourse recently focusing mainly on problematic aspects and immigration as a burden instead of as a win-win (Interviews 1, 6 and 12). An academic working on the introduction of study-based pathways shared that integration was often treated as a difficult endeavour, legally, as well as practically and emotionally (Interview 3). A representative from a refugee-led organisation stressed that there was systemic discrimination in the labour market (Interview 6). Discriminatory hiring practices are also well-documented in the research (Aslan Akay and Cheung 2024; Bursell and Bygren 2023). Another interviewee from a regional development initiative said that values such as solidarity and helping people in need of protection needed greater traction again (Interview 1). Overall, the recent political climate regarding migration and protection was not considered conducive to the introduction of new or the expansion of existing pathways (Interviews 1, 3 and 6). Interviewees mentioned that Swedish actors could become better at taking care of and integrating immigrants, both those already in the country and newcomers (Interviews 9 and 1).

In the context of recent policy developments in the area of migration, asylum and integration, another issue that could serve as a non-legal barrier to the introduction of new legal pathways for migrants and complementary pathways for refugees pertains to the mixed or contradictory messages to the outside world. With a large number of restrictive changes in immigration law since the refugee arrivals in 2015, Sweden has been trying to convey the message that asylum seekers and people migrating irregularly should stay away. At the same time, Sweden tries to portray itself as an attractive destination for highly skilled people, students and researchers. Research shows that nation branding is important in attracting talent (Vinyals-Mirabent et al. 2025), and

the Government has recently been trying to improve the reputation of Sweden as an attractive destination for “top talent” (Forsell et al. 2025). For example, in 2024, the Government tasked eleven government agencies with strengthening their coordination to improve Sweden’s possibilities to attract and retain highly qualified international talent and other foreign labour that is important for Sweden’s competitiveness (Regeringen 2024). However, as one interviewed expert from the Swedish Institute explained, it is challenging to convey entirely different messages to different groups of potential migrants (Interview 9). This implies that negative branding aiming to deter one group could unintentionally spill over and also deter others, including people who Sweden still wants to attract.

8. Designing legal pathways to Sweden: opportunities, challenges and added value

The previous chapters of the report elaborated on Sweden's demographic trends and labour market needs, the relevant provisions in the law and the legal and non-legal obstacles and barriers that need to be considered when developing new legal pathways for migrants and refugees. Building on this, this chapter starts with a brief review of the international standards for migrants and refugees that must be adhered to when new legal and complementary pathways are designed. It then moves on to provide concrete guidance on how legal pathways into Sweden for both migrants and refugees could be developed. This includes a detailed, step-by-step guide for piloting work- and study-based complementary pathways.

8.1 Applicable protection standards for refugees and migrants

As already mentioned, legal pathways accessible for people in need of protection are an important remedy to the absence of explicit rules and consistent state practice on access to protection in state parties to the Refugee Convention (Goodwin-Gill et al. 2021, pp. 298–99; Davitti and Vankova 2024; Kraler and Vankova forthcoming). In 2018, states committed to engage with legal pathways as part of the implementation of the United Nations Global Compacts on Migration (UN 2018a) and Refugees (UN 2018b), which means that such pathways need to be established in respect of existing international refugee law and human rights standards, as well as other rights enshrined in international and EU law (Guild and Grundler 2024).

8.1.1 Right to seek asylum and protection against refoulement

In most cases, complementary pathways that are based on the existing immigration legislation do not provide a durable solution in the first instance. Even though they target people in need of protection – some of them with recognised refugee status and others with(out) a registration with UNHCR in first countries of asylum – beneficiaries of such pathways obtain a work or a student permit upon arrival (see further Vankova 2022). Such permits are

usually temporary and require applications for extensions at regular intervals that are contingent on ongoing fulfilment of the admission requirements or transition to a different status (such as job-seeking or a work permit in the case of students). If beneficiaries fail to extend their permits due to loss or inability to find a job within the time period regulated by each of the national frameworks and cannot return to their country of first asylum, they should be guaranteed the right to seek asylum and protection against refoulement, which is enshrined in several human rights treaties³⁸ and EU law.³⁹ It needs to be stressed that such beneficiaries would be inclined to fall back on the asylum system as 'a last resort measure only', as track switching between immigration and asylum law carries risks of an uncertain outcome, especially in the Swedish context (Vankova 2024). Those who can return to their country of first asylum, where they are protected from refoulement and enjoy the same rights and status as before departure, should be given access to multi-trip, machine-readable refugee travel documents and the option to renew them at the embassies of the issuing countries (UNHCR 2024b, p. 19).

8.1.2 Additionality

The idea of promoting more legal pathways for people in need of protection is to increase their access overall to third country solutions available globally, and not to replace protection granted through the asylum system or resettlement (UNHCR 2024b, p. 20). Therefore, such pathways are conceived as 'complementary' or additional to the existing protection channels and should not be used to decrease the available resettlement quotas, which are reserved for those who are most vulnerable and whose needs cannot be addressed in the countries of first asylum.

³⁸ See Article 14(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), UNGA Res. 217 A (III), 10 December 1948; and Article 33 on prohibition of expulsion or return ("refoulement") of the Refugee Convention. Articles 6 and 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), UNGA Res. 2200 A (XXI), 16 December 1966, and Article 3(1) of the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment also contain protections against refoulement.

³⁹ See Article 18 and Article 19(2) of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights (EUCFR); Article 13 and 18 of the Directive 2011/95/EU on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast), [2011] OJ L 337 (Qualification Directive); and Articles 4(4)(b), 5 and 9(1)(a) of the Directive 2008/115/EC on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, [2008] OJ L 348 (Return Directive).

8.1.3 Right to family life

Legal and complementary pathways should respect the right to family life⁴⁰ and allow future workers and students to travel with their families or reunite with them shortly after arrival in the host country on the basis of the EU Family Reunification Directive and the EU's legal migration directives, which provide more favourable rules for highly skilled categories of migrants, such as Blue Card holders and researchers.

8.1.4 Non-discrimination

The long-term aim of establishing complementary pathways is to create a level playing field for refugees in the context of regular migration, so that they can have equal access to different legal channels for migration without discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status (UNHCR 2024b, p. 20).⁴¹ The guidelines of the Global Taskforce for Refugee Labour Mobility (GTRLM) stress that even though initial pilots could focus on particular sectors or occupations and target specific geographical regions, in the long term complementary pathways should strive to "increase equality of access geographically, in a variety of occupations with differing educational/training requirements, in both developed and developing countries, and to seek gender equality" (GTRLM 2024). Inclusive and effective recognition of skills and qualification procedures could have a key place in making this a reality.

8.1.5 Pathway to a durable solution

As already elaborated above, complementary pathways for work or study give the right to either permanent or temporary residence (UNHCR 2019). With some exceptions, such as the refugee mobility schemes in Canada and Australia, most Western countries provide for initial entry on a temporary basis only (Vankova 2024). Therefore, an additional protection standard that needs to be considered when developing complementary pathways is the provision of a clear pathway to permanent residence to ensure durability in the long run (Vankova 2022a; Vankova 2024).⁴²

⁴⁰ On the international standards, see Lambert 2014.

⁴¹ See further Articles 2(1) ICCPR, Article 26 ICCPR and Article 2(2) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, UNGA Res 2200 A (XXI), 16 December 1966.

⁴² As mentioned earlier, the EU long-term Residence Directive provides the general rule in this respect.

8.1.6 Rights related to access to the labour market and protection from exploitation

Workers and students coming to Sweden via legal or complementary pathways have the right to work⁴³ enshrined in international and regional human rights instruments,⁴⁴ as well as the EU Charter,⁴⁵ and should also benefit from equality of treatment and non-discrimination in areas such as working conditions and pay, forming and joining trade unions, and social security entitlements (Vankova 2022a).⁴⁶ The 2016 International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Guiding principles on the access of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons to the labour market provides detailed guidance to national governments. Furthermore, work-based pathways need to be in line with ethical recruitment principles.⁴⁷

8.1.7 Other human rights applicable to 'people on the move'

Even though different rules apply to migrants and refugees, as they are governed by separate legal frameworks, they have the same human rights and fundamental freedoms, and while being on the move, face similar risks and vulnerabilities (New York Declaration, para. 6). Therefore, there is a body of scholarship that examines the human rights of 'people on the move' (Hathaway 1991; Guild, Grant and Groenendijk 2018). Pijnenburg and Rijken (2020) engage with some of these human rights standards that also apply to the special situation of beneficiaries of complementary pathways:

1. The right to move freely within a state and the freedom to choose residence for everyone lawfully within the territory of a state (Article 12(1), ICCPR).
2. The freedom to leave any country, including one's own, which applies to everyone (Article 12(2), ICCPR).

⁴³ Article 23 UDHR; Article 6 ICCPR. See also UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 18: The Right to Work (Article 6), 6 February 2006, E/C.12/GC/18, para. 23; Recognised refugees benefit also from Articles 17–19 of the Refugee Convention.

⁴⁴ See Article 1 of the European Social Charter (Revised), ETS No163, 3 May 1996. See further Costello and O'Cinnéide 2021.

⁴⁵ Article 15(1) EUCFR.

⁴⁶ See Article 6(1) of Convention concerning Migration for Employment (Revised 1949), C097, 1 July 1949, and Article 10 of Convention concerning Migrations in Abusive Conditions and the Promotion of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Migrant Workers, C143, 24 June 1975. On international standards, see further Olney and Cholewinski 2014. On EU law, see Article 15(3) EUCFR and Mantouvalou and Frantzou 2021.

⁴⁷ See further <https://www.iom.int/ethical-recruitment>.

3. Rights related to human dignity, such as the rights to social security (Article 9), an adequate standard of living (Article 11), health (Article 12), and education (Articles 13 and 14) in the ICESCR.
4. The right to equality before the law and equal protection by the law, without any discrimination.⁴⁸

8.2 Designing and expanding legal pathways for migrants

As already mentioned, UNHCR is promoting 'a route-based approach' that addresses the challenges arising from mixed movements of refugees and migrants who often use the same routes and face similar risks (see Chapter 2). In line with this, states are called upon to engage with innovative approaches that ensure international protection for those in need of protection and at the same time provide rights-based opportunities for migrants along key routes (UNHCR 2024a). Employing such an approach means that safe, regular and complementary pathways – including for labour migration – are made accessible to both refugees and migrants as an alternative to dangerous routes (Pillar 5).

The analysis of the current Swedish system in Chapter 7 demonstrated that there are persisting challenges related to access to legal pathways and security of status for all non-EU citizens, including refugees and migrants. Furthermore, even though refugees could use the existing immigration system on their own accord, the data presented in Section 3.4 shows that, due to the restrictive turn in Swedish migration policy, this is generally not a viable option anymore.

The GCM commits states to enhance the availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration (Objective 5), which requires among other things that states:

- review and revise existing options for regular migration in order to improve skills matching in labour markets and to address demographic developments;
- evaluate the efficacy of labour migration policies in order to ensure marketresponsive contractual labour mobility through regular pathways;
- foster efficient and effective skills matching programmes by reducing visa and permit processing timeframes for standard employment permits, and by offering accelerated and facilitated visa and permit processing for employers with a track record of compliance; and

⁴⁸ General Comment No. 32: Article 14, Right to Equality before Courts and Tribunals and to Fair Trial. 23 August. UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/32, para. 9.

- facilitate cross-regional labour mobility through bilateral cooperation arrangements such as labour mobility cooperation frameworks, in accordance with national priorities, local market needs and skills supply.

Using these GCM actions as a starting point could support Sweden in taking stock of its current and future labour market needs and adjusting the existing system accordingly. They include not only reviewing the existing national provisions but also the transposition of EU law in the area of labour migration, such as the EU Blue Card Directive, which gives EU Member States ample flexibility to attract the foreign workers they need.

As a next step, it could also mean engaging in some innovative approaches that have not been tested in Sweden before. These could include piloting bilateral labour agreements with third countries, engaging with the EU talent pool, and talent partnerships. It also includes taking inspiration from good practice in other EU countries, allowing specific tailor-made legal pathways that enable persons with occupations in demand to enter the country, e.g., the vocational training residence permit in Germany⁴⁹ or the residence permit to obtain a Danish authorisation for foreign doctors in Denmark.⁵⁰ Finally, this could also mean piloting sector-specific labour mobility agreements with third countries, allowing not only citizens of this country but also refugees and migrants residing there to get matched with employers with persisting labour shortages.⁵¹ However as demonstrated below, including refugees in labour and student migration schemes requires specific facilitation measures.

8.3 Designing work-based complementary pathways for refugees step-by-step

In her work on work-based pathways for people in need of protection, Vankova identified essential elements that need to be in place in order to establish such legal channels (2022a/b; 2024). These include identifying existing shortages and needs for foreign labour in destination countries; political will on behalf of states to remove existing barriers; forming national partner coalitions; incentivising employers to engage in such pathways;

⁴⁹ § 17 (1) Aufenthaltsgesetz (AufenthG)/German Residence Act. See further the Kenya-Germany Vocational Training Program for Refugees and Kenyans, focusing on nurses and nursing assistants: <https://malengo.org/kenya-germany-program/about-program/>.

⁵⁰ See application for a residence permit in Denmark in order to obtain a Danish authorisation (XG1/2), currently subjected to quota: <https://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-GB/You-want-to-apply/Work/Authorisation/Authorisation>.

⁵¹ See the Italian pilots as part of the implementation of Law 50/2023), such as <https://www.readyforit-laborpathways.it/en>.

identifying and informing potential beneficiaries of complementary pathways in first countries of asylum; providing matching options; and piloting projects in specific sectors/occupations in order to achieve a proof of concept, backed up by (initial) targeted funding. The following section will focus on these essential elements in the Swedish context in order to provide a step-by-step guide on how to design a work-based complementary pathway.

8.3.1 Identifying labour market shortages and needs of foreign workers in Sweden

In the words of the Global Taskforce for Refugee Labour Mobility, “employer demand is the engine that powers refugee labour mobility programmes” (GTRLM 2024, p. 12). Therefore, such pathways should be developed as part of Sweden’s strategy to address its labour market needs, especially when it comes to shortages in occupations and sectors that cannot be met locally. These occupations in demand were listed in Section 3.2. and include occupations in the healthcare and social work sector, mining and quarrying, the construction industry, engineers and other professionals with technical specialisations in fields such as automation, electrification and sustainable technology, as well as information and communication. Such an approach is also crucial to ensuring public support, respecting the local workforce, and achieving sustainability and scalability over time (GTRLM 2024, p. 12).

8.3.2 Removing existing labour migration barriers and facilitating access for refugees

The measures needed here are threefold. Firstly, there is a need to overcome ‘thinking in silos’ – reflecting the prevailing refugee–migrant binary – and to engage in an analysis of the existing obstacles in the current legal migration framework that make it inaccessible for people in need of protection. Secondly, a formal separation of people with and those without protection needs means in practice that there are different government agencies and units within them involved in the refugee and migration policy domains, and these do not necessarily work together. To overcome this, the UNHCR calls for the establishment of effective internal coordination mechanisms (UNHCR 2024b, p. 27). This could be achieved in practice through the establishment of working groups that bring together several ministries and other stakeholders, as is the case in Italy and Germany.⁵² Finally, there is also a need to introduce specific measures that facilitate equitable access to the immigration system for people in need of protection, in order to “level the playing field” (GTRLM 2024).

⁵² <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/gcr-action/countries/italy>.

Legal empirical work conducted between 2020 and 2021 revealed that the Swedish Government did not have any plans to engage in the establishment of such pathways (Vankova 2022b). The idea was discussed in a Swedish Government inquiry on legal pathways to protection, but it was decided to prioritise resettlement instead (SOU 2017:103, pp. 74–80). One of the main reasons for resistance to the introduction of such pathways was the reluctance of the Swedish Government to link its asylum and labour migration frameworks, as this was seen as eroding the right to asylum (Vankova 2022b). This perception, and the fact that track switching opportunities were considered to send mixed messages to asylum seekers with rejected claims regarding compliance with return decisions (Malm Lindberg 2020) contributed to the abolition of certain 'track switching' provisions in 2025 (see Section 4.2).

However, as mentioned in Section 6.1, Sweden already links these two frameworks, for instance by assessing whether resettlement candidates have 'good conditions for integration', which usually refers to education, experience, and skills that contribute to labour market integration. The Swedish resettlement system today is no longer merely an instrument for protecting the most vulnerable people. Furthermore, in line with the Refugee Convention, all people with refugee status are bound to eventually join the labour market of the host country and become workers, which also requires some interaction between asylum law and labour migration law (Vankova 2022b).

As discussed above, the current immigration system imposes numerous obstacles, which make it generally difficult for non-EU citizens to access legal pathways into Sweden. Making the system work for people in need of protection requires not only overcoming these obstacles but also allowing for more flexibility in the existing legislation. Here are some examples.

The UNHCR's Operational Guidelines on how to develop complementary pathways stress that visa-specific requirements are very often an obstacle that makes the existing pathways based on immigration law inaccessible for refugees (UNHCR 2024b, p. 30). Challenges include lack of access to bank accounts and financial history, proof of intention to return to the country of first asylum, as well as requirements for passports or other valid travel documents, which is by far the most prevalent obstacle in practice.⁵³ Furthermore, according to one interviewee, what could be problematic in the Swedish context is that the Migration Agency's organisational culture has become increasingly control-driven. Since there is no established practice for handling such cases at present, this may result in additional inquiries and longer processing times (Interview 7), or/and lead to a negative decision. In

⁵³ See further <https://help.unhcr.org/global/travel-documents/>.

practice, this means that when facilitating access for refugees to the migration system, it is important to work with the consulates in the (first) countries of asylum, which need to be instructed that such people will be applying for student or worker visas. It is also important to designate a focal point in the Migration Agency for processing these applications centrally in Sweden to avoid delays and rejections.

Research has identified Swedish language knowledge as an obstacle to implementing complementary pathways for people in need of protection (Vankova 2022b). Opening opportunities to study Swedish digitally at different levels from abroad would allow people in need of protection to become job-ready while still in their countries of first asylum. This would save time for both employers and employees in the process of hiring and job commencement. Good practice includes using the digital platform Duolingo, not only to learn a foreign language but also for language certification purposes.⁵⁴ It currently works only for English, but it could potentially be adapted to any language. Another option would be to provide legal pathways for internships, apprenticeships or vocational training in Sweden, where foreigners would be allowed to start working and at the same time learn Swedish on the job. Such options exist in some other countries such as Germany (Vankova 2022b) and Italy, where the current training pilots require only A1 level of Italian before entering the country.⁵⁵

Another obstacle is the temporariness of residence permits, which means that long-term, durable protection cannot be guaranteed to those admitted to Sweden. Interviewees mentioned that ethical dilemmas could arise if Sweden admits vulnerable people – such as from refugee camps abroad – under work- or study-based complementary pathways and these people are then not able to stay permanently, e.g., if they lose their job or are unable to find a job after graduating. The existing literature has identified three different legal mechanisms that increase durability in the context of work-based complementary pathways through measures providing extensions of residence periods and legality of stay (Vankova, 2024). These include immigration law provisions that allow transition to a different status, allowing a sufficiently long period of unemployment to look for alternative employment before permit withdrawal, and the possibility of intra-EU mobility on the basis of EU labour migration law statuses. As demonstrated above, apart from the pending extension of the unemployment period allowed to look for a new job,

⁵⁴ See further <https://blog.englishtest.duolingo.com/duolingo-prepares-refugee-scholars-for-university/>.

⁵⁵ Minimum 100 hours, 75% in person. See for instance <https://www.readyforit-laborpathways.it/en>.

the rest of the mechanisms do not really support any transition to a more durable solution in the Swedish case. It must be stressed, however, that programme design can minimise these risks in practice through a careful selection of potential beneficiaries and post-arrival support. For instance, Talent Beyond Boundaries' data demonstrates that the retention rate for beneficiaries of refugee work-based pathways is high, with 90% of them working with the same employer one year after arrival (TBB 2025).

Some of the interviewees in this study suggested that as long as Swedish immigration law does not guarantee people admitted under complementary pathways a secure and long-term status, candidates who are in need of protection would have to be selected in, and admitted from, first countries of asylum that are safe for them to return to once their stay in Sweden ends. While this could indeed be a way forward, it would certainly limit the positive contribution that Sweden could make to the protection of refugees because people would not be selected in places where the need for resettlement or other legal pathways is most pressing, such as in Jordan, where access to meaningful local integration is limited (Davitti and Vankova, 2024, p. 84).

Apart from removing the above-mentioned obstacles in the immigration system, the establishment of complementary pathways also requires certain measures to allow access for refugees, which should be understood as facilitation to meet existing requirements and not lowering of standards. These are specific to each immigration system but can generally include accepting or providing (refugee) travel documents, employing a flexible approach to how background checks are conducted, providing more accessible skills assessment and recognition of qualification procedures for refugees, or establishing dedicated or tailored visa and work permit processing channels in place (GTRLM 2024). For example, as part of its Economic Mobility Pathways Project (EMPP) the Canadian Government waives application and biometric fees, covers expenses for medical examinations, provides shorter processing times, pre-departure training, and options for loans or other funding to cover travel and immigration costs (see Box 1). The best way to determine what precise adjustments are needed in the Swedish case is to develop a pilot (see Section 8.3.6).

Box 1: The Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP)

This pilot helps skilled refugees and other displaced people immigrate to Canada.

Through the EMPP, we'll:

- waive application and biometric fees for you and your dependants
- review and process your application in 6 months or less (in most cases)
- cover the cost of medical exams through the Interim Federal Health Program
- let you access the Immigration Loans Program (ILP), if we approve your application, to help with
- travel costs, some pre-arrival travel services from the International Organization for Migration,
- the right of permanent residence fee
- let you access the EMPP-specific Canadian Orientation Abroad Programme to help you settle in Canada.

Source: Government of Canada, <http://canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/economic-mobility-pathways-pilot/immigrate/about-empp.html>.

8.3.3 Building a partner coalition at the national level

The practice of establishing work-based complementary pathways so far shows that building a national partner coalition is an essential element in making this a success (Vankova 2022b). Such a coalition could include responsible state bodies, international organisations such as UNHCR, IOM and ILO, civil society actors, employer organisations, trade unions, integration actors, law firms and other private actors and organisations that have networks in first countries of asylum. International experience shows that the most important function of such a coalition (or working group) is to ensure inter-ministerial coordination (Interview 15). In Sweden, this would likely be the Ministry of Justice – including its units working on international protection and labour migration – the Ministry of Employment, and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. As mentioned above, currently different bodies involved in employment matters, professional recognition, immigration-related procedures, and visa and refugee matters, are dispersed across different ministries and government agencies. Therefore, when building national coalitions, it is important to include representatives of all relevant

government⁵⁶ bodies. This is the only way to achieve enhanced coordination and succeed with building flexible mechanisms into the existing legal frameworks to ensure that they become accessible for refugees (UNHCR 2024b, p. 27).

Furthermore, liaising with the relevant authorities in countries of first asylum might also be essential, as they are responsible for issuing travel documents, exit permits or facilitating a possible return after an individual has completed their employment contract (UNHCR 2024b, p. 27). National coalitions are also key in ensuring that there is sufficient support to pilot new pathways and make them available in a more organised and sustainable way after the pilot phase.

Civil society organisations, especially refugee-led organisations, can be key in ensuring both admission and integration at the design and pilot phase (see Section 8.3.6). They can help with the identification of potential candidates in first countries of asylum and inform them about existing opportunities, supporting them through the administrative processes both pre- and post-arrival. Furthermore, international NGOs, such as Talent Beyond Boundaries, RefugePoint and JumpStart Refugee Talent, that are specialised in promoting such pathways, could support matching (see below). Private law firms working pro bono or commercially are another key actor that can conduct a baseline assessment, identifying potential obstacles for refugees to access existing migration channels and suggesting specific adaptations, ensuring admission and supporting candidates throughout the entire immigration process, as well as building the capacity of other actors to provide legal aid and/or information to potential candidates (UNHCR 2024b, p. 27). Good practice from Italy shows that such national coalitions can also be formalised through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (see Box 2).

⁵⁶ On the roles and responsibilities of different actors, see <https://displacedtalenthub.org/knowledge-base/roles-and-responsibilities-in-the-end-to-end-process-of-refugee-labour-mobility/>.

Box 2: Good practice example from Italy

Italy's Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Ministry of Labour, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Diaconia Valdese, Pathways International, and Talent Beyond Boundaries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 11 June 2025. It will allow selected refugees living abroad to enter Italy through Labour Mobility Corridors for Refugees on the basis of Law 50/2023. The programme facilitates the recruitment and training of skilled refugees in third countries for regular entry into the Italian labour market.

Source: UNHCR, Europe: <https://www.unhcr.org/europe/news/press-releases/memorandum-understanding-signed-labor-pathways-refugees-and-stateless-persons>

8.3.4 Incentivising employers to hire refugees

It goes without saying that a work-based complementary pathway cannot be established without the active engagement of employers who are willing to hire refugees, not least because potential beneficiaries need a work contract in order to be able to start the application process for admission.

Furthermore, their participation is key as they can “communicate the business case for hiring refugees and the diversity advantage to other employers” (UNHCR 2019, p. 31). Yet research in the Swedish context has demonstrated that employers need to be incentivised in order to consider such an option (Vankova 2022b). Most of them did not think that they could find people in refugee camps with the right skills and with the mental capacity to start working. Furthermore, they considered that providing safe pathways for refugees is a state responsibility.

Advocacy and awareness-raising measures among employer organisations could address these issues, for instance by showcasing successful pilots in different countries, and informing them about the process and the actors involved. Well-designed complementary pathways with governmental buy-in could also serve as a measure to incentivise other employers on their own, as it could provide them with access to relevant candidates (e.g., through the TBB Talent Catalogues), match them to ready-to-go, pre-selected and vetted talent, and offer them instruments that reduce the risk of upfront investment (Interview 15; see also Dorst et al. 2024, p. 22).⁵⁷ Wage subsidies from the state were mentioned as a good incentive for employers as such subsidies have successfully supported unemployed refugees to start working in Sweden (Interview 5; see also Dorst et al. 2024, p.17).

⁵⁷ E.g., where employers pay only after one year if they are satisfied with the candidate.

One of the interviewees in this study also stressed that employers should focus on the skills that refugees could bring and not on their (immigration) status (Interview 7) or, in other words, see them as qualified candidates with a few specificities, which is the approach that international NGOs use to promote such pathways (Interview 15). Another interviewee said that regional public employers would most likely be interested in recruiting people under complementary pathways if the Swedish state provided a formalised system and support (Interview 4).

Another concern identified in the literature (Ruhs 2019; Vankova 2022b), as well as among the interviewees who took part in this study, was that apart from identifying people with the right skills, businesses were interested in initiatives that are efficient in recruiting people and that are predictable. This means that the immigration system should allow for such people to come to Sweden and the businesses should be able to know how long it will take to bring someone from abroad (Interview 7). As already discussed above, this cannot be achieved without central government involvement as it requires political will and targeted efforts to remove existing labour migration obstacles and facilitate access for refugees, including by making the immigration system more efficient, e.g., by addressing unnecessary delays.

8.3.5 Identification of candidates and matching mechanisms

The Global Taskforce for Refugee Labour Mobility's guiding principles recommend that governments set up work-based pathways by employing a flexible approach to identifying potential beneficiaries (GTRLM 2024, p. 12). What this means in practice is that such pathways should have broad eligibility criteria that allow for all people in need of protection who have skills in demand to apply (see Box 3). These include those who have received a positive refugee status determination from UNHCR or a refugee-hosting country, those registered with UNHCR or UNRWA as a person of concern, those with proof of temporary protection status, as well as those who cannot present any of these documents. The current practice shows that the latter can be included in the eligibility criteria by giving them an opportunity to work with a 'trusted partner', usually a non-governmental organisation, that can assess their eligibility as a refugee or displaced person, and issue a 'referral letter' that proves their refugee eligibility if they meet the criteria (see Government of Canada 2025). TBB's Talent Catalogue, for instance, requires only two criteria from potential candidates: to be outside of their country of origin and to lack access to another lasting solution to resolve their displacement.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See further: <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/talentcatalog>. For the different requirements in the EU Member States involved in such pilots, see <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/tbbeurope>.

Box 3: Eligibility for complementary pathways

States should try to avoid eligibility criteria that place onerous requirements on refugees, stateless persons, or UNHCR, or which create significant bottlenecks in registration or referral processes. States are encouraged to be flexible when confirming eligibility for complementary pathways, which may include developing internal assessment mechanisms for independent applicants; and/or broadening the types of documentation they accept from applicants as proof of being a refugee or in need of international protection; and/or working with referring partners.

Source: Global Taskforce for Refugee Labour Mobility's guiding principles (2024)

Such a broad approach reflects the realities on the ground and practical challenges related to status determination due to a lack of sufficient resources and delays in the case of large-scale displacement situations, all of which make it impossible for many people to get a formal recognition of their protection needs (Vankova 2022a). Furthermore, such an approach is in line with refugee law standards that provide that refugee status is declaratory and one does not need to go through a refugee status determination procedure to be considered a refugee, if the person meets the definition of a refugee (UNHCR 1977, para. 5). It is also in line with the EU's approach of promoting such pathways (Vankova 2022a).

When it comes to identifying employers who are willing to hire people in need of protection, the Displaced Talent Hub (2024d) has come up with key characteristics that could indicate whether employers would be willing to engage with such complementary pathways. These include employers:

- with previous experience of hiring internationally;
- in industries with persistent skills shortages or booming industries, such as technology and green energy;
- situated in locations with demographic challenges;
- experiencing a consistent and regular need for employees and/or with more time flexibility to fill available vacancies;
- with the ability to hire non-EU nationals and candidates from refugee-producing countries.

The data collected as part of this study suggests that the experience of Swedish employers with international recruitment has varied (Interview 4). While some employers reportedly devoted considerable resources to this and have developed well-functioning strategies – including the use of commercial recruitment actors – others did not have formalised procedures and acted on

a “learn by doing” basis (Interview 4). For example, they sometimes recruited staff on the basis of individual tips for suitable candidates or relied on one recruited professional suggesting another. An interviewed international expert confirmed that previous experience with hiring internationally is indeed key to the success of such pilots, and that large, national public or private companies are a good place to start (Interview 15).

The experience gained from work-based complementary pathways pilots demonstrates once again the importance of cooperating with international NGOs, which have the expertise and the partner networks in countries of first asylum that allow them to match interested employers with potential candidates in third countries, and thus incentivise them to recruit untapped displaced talent. For instance, Talent Beyond Boundaries has developed a talent catalogue with more than 130,000 displaced job seekers. The catalogue contains detailed information about their qualifications, skills and work experience.⁵⁹ These skills profiles are then used to connect them with international employment opportunities, either through self-nomination or through matching done by the organisation. When a suitable job vacancy is found, refugees are offered a job description and their CV is sent to the prospective employer, subject to their consent. In cases where there is a good match, candidates are invited to an interview. If there is a job offer, the candidates are assisted with their subsequent visa application and relocation.

Other possible options in the EU context include using the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals which supports skills profiling of potential candidates (ICMPD 2025). Furthermore, the EU has piloted a “Talent Pool” to facilitate matching Ukrainians fleeing the Russian war who were interested in working in the EU, with employers in the Member States. The EU is now working on a general Talent Pool platform to simplify the recruitment of skilled workers from non-EU countries by employers across its 27 Member States. Among other things, interested candidates in third countries should be able to upload their CVs to the Talent Pool, and employers in the EU can use the Talent Pool to look for workers (De Groot and Faucheur 2024). The Talent Pool is expected to be operational by 2027.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/talentcatalog>.

⁶⁰ <https://www.jobbatical.com/blog/eu-talent-pool-what-should-member-states-expect>.

Sweden could also use the “talent partnership” framework developed and promoted by the EU, which might also open up the possibility of EU funding of efforts to find suitable workers abroad.⁶¹ The idea behind talent partnerships is to match employers in the EU with workers outside the Union, and to combine mobility programmes for workers or students with training and capacity-building measures in migrants’ home countries. In concrete terms, partnerships of this kind can mean that countries that need foreign workers can invest in finding, and if necessary, training, interested people while they are still living in their home country; workers can then be admitted, live and work in the country of destination on a temporary or permanent basis. Parusel (2023c) has argued that with their bilateral cooperation approach, talent partnerships appear to be something that Sweden is not used to in the area of labour migration. Sweden does not organise labour immigration through government-to-government contacts or recruitment agreements with selected foreign countries. However, talent partnerships could nevertheless become an interesting option as a consequence of the increasing selectiveness and restrictiveness of Sweden’s labour migration policy, which has led to a decrease in labour immigration. Several EU Member States already have experience with concluding talent partnership agreements with third countries that Sweden could learn from (Stefanescu 2020). As there is currently no willingness among EU Member States to include displaced person candidates in their talent partnership agreements, another EU framework that could be a promising alternative avenue is the ‘Union of Skills’ (Interview 15; EC 2025).

Another approach for Sweden would be to use selection missions, similar to the way it often identifies refugees for resettlement. This means that a group of officials would travel to refugee-hosting states and interview people on the ground. Such missions would have to include not only the Swedish Migration Agency, but also employers with hiring needs and representatives from bodies tasked with the recognition of foreign skills and qualifications. However, such government-led approaches could be expensive, and difficult to sustain and scale in the long term (Interview 15).⁶²

⁶¹ EU Member States and other actors can apply for EU funding for labour migration projects and mobility schemes under the Migration Partnerships Facility (MPF). EU Member States can use the AMIF National programmes to support the implementation of Talent Partnerships. NDICI-Global Europe also supports the implementation of Talent Partnerships, funding skills development and training programmes, as well as mobility schemes. See https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-resettlement/talent-partnerships_en.

⁶² See for instance the EMPP, which currently has extremely long processing times: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/bakx-empp-wait-times-refugee-9.6979625>

8.3.6 Pilot programmes focusing on specific sectors and proof of concept

The 2019 UNHCR's Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways includes pilot programmes as part of the enabling actions that can create more complementary pathways (UNHCR, 2019, p. 23). They are a good way to test coordination between national partners and actors based in sending countries, identify and address obstacles to access, and inform the policymaking process. Sector-specific pilots could also create a proof of concept, indicating the most suitable approach at a national level (Vankova 2022b). In addition, they need to address the following issues related to the design of the pilots:

- facilitation of the matching of labour market needs to potential job applicants;
- support for candidates through the application process and awareness raising about the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing entry as labour migrants;
- access to organisations in the first country of asylum that can work with potential beneficiaries, support their selection by employers or intermediaries, and support their admission to the receiving country (Vankova, 2022a);
- integration support after admission and the facilitation of durability, e.g., by supporting job searching in case of unemployment as job loss often means loss of a person's residence permit after a certain period of time.

The report's review of demographic developments in different parts of Sweden, and of regional needs for foreign workers, demonstrates that employers from the regions in the north of the country, such as Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Västernorrland or Jämtland, could be inclined to participate in new legal pathway pilots. Some of these areas have important industries, such as forestry and mining. There are ongoing developments in green energy and battery production that have been described as a new industrial revolution. Related to this, there are also vast needs for workers in sectors offering services to these industries and the general population, not least in the healthcare and care of older people sectors. In the past, parts of northern Sweden have been very active in taking in and integrating resettled refugees, which means that there are institutional memories of how to receive and integrate newcomers. More recently, municipalities and regions have been active in developing services for incoming foreign workers in emerging industries, which is also an asset.

Another idea would be to launch a pilot for the healthcare and care of older people sectors in a municipality or region with particularly acute needs (Interview 5). Even though this might be a difficult undertaking as it would require many adjustments to the existing system, Sweden could benefit from the experience of the UK Healthcare Pilot⁶³ and the Kenya–Germany Vocational Training Program for Refugees and Kenyans, focusing on nurses and nursing assistants.⁶⁴ Alternatively, as one interviewed expert suggested, a pilot could start in the Skåne region or West Sweden area because regional authorities and networks there already have considerable experience with hiring from abroad and new methods (Interview 4).

Each pilot needs to consider at least three phases for establishing work-based pathways: recruitment, visa processing and relocation (Displaced Talent Hub, 2024b). Depending on the specific pilot and the occupation in focus, the pre-departure period could be used strategically to train candidates. Yet one needs to distinguish between two models: those that start with the candidate's skills and match them with specific jobs ('one-on-one' models), and those that entail the training of cohorts ('hire-train-move' programmes) (Interview 15). Altogether, we can distinguish between four different types of training:

- training that is necessary to get hired;
- training required to meet visa requirements;
- training required by the employer after hiring; and
- add-on training (cultural orientation, career development, soft skills, etc.).

An example of the first type of training is the work-based pathway pilot for Afghan professionals implemented by Caritas Italiana in 2023, which provided online Italian language classes and career coaching for potential candidates who were still in Pakistan for a period of 9 months (De Lorenzo-Cáceres Cantero 2024). Caritas cooperated with the civil society organisation Consorzio Communitas, which also helped to validate their skills and recognise their qualifications. The CVs of the candidates were shared with several Italian employers only after these trainings and led to the hiring of some of the displaced person candidates.

⁶³ This pilot uses the UK's Health and Care Worker Stream for Skilled Worker Visa to recruit mostly nurses: <https://displacedtalenthub.org/knowledge-base/united-kingdom/>.

⁶⁴ Kenya–Germany Vocational Training Program for Refugees and Kenyans, focusing on nurses and nursing assistants: <https://malengo.org/kenya-germany-program/about-program/>.

The language skills requirement to obtain a visa in some countries also necessitates training, such as B1/2 level of German as a requirement to access a vocational education and training (VET) permit. The Italian law 50/23, on the other hand, stipulates occupational training and culture orientation. For those who have already been offered a job, apart from working on their language skills, the pre-departure period could also serve as time for additional skills-building using materials provided by employers (Displaced Talent Hub 2024c). Furthermore, as part of the Italian pilots 'Ready for IT' and 'Sailing to the Future', the pre-departure period is used not only to train but also to test potential candidates who are still in countries of first asylum.⁶⁵

Any pilot needs to also consider the post-arrival phase, which requires local integration support that is usually organised in cooperation with existing integration actors and employers. Pilots also establish links with existing community sponsorship programmes (see for instance the Neighbours for Newcomers programme that supported nurses arriving through the Displaced Healthcare Pilot/Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot in the UK).⁶⁶ Sweden has already piloted a model of community support that can also be used in the development of work-based pathways.⁶⁷ One interviewed expert suggested that employers should focus more on the post-arrival situation of workers recruited abroad, helping them with ongoing training, language learning on the job and assistance in tackling the practical challenges of everyday life (Interview 5). Yet this is also among the responsibilities of regional and municipal actors. One of the interviewees pointed out that some places in Sweden already have "Welcome Houses" focusing on helping newcomers (Interview 9). Another expert stressed that even though post-arrival support structures offering help with everyday problems and cultural issues could be costly, they could minimise problems in the long run (Interview 5).

Another essential element that every pilot needs to include is ensuring financial support for candidates to meet their administrative and relocation costs. The Global Taskforce for Refugee Labour Mobility's guiding principles recommend that such costs could be met through grants, loans, public funds and other mechanisms such as contributions by employers, as employers would usually pay for the talent recruitment (GTRLM 2024). Such external sources of funding

⁶⁵ Information provided to the authors by TBB.

⁶⁶ The nurses were supported by groups of up to 5 volunteers who helped their new neighbours to settle into their new homes and establish their lives there: <https://www.resetuk.org/who-we-are/research/#changes>. More examples can be found here: <https://www.eupassworld.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/How-Are-Communities-Supporting-Employers-Hiring-Displaced-Workers-1.pdf>.

⁶⁷ See further <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/about/our-work-community-sponsorship-programmes>.

are needed at least initially, as the long-term goal of such complementary pathways is to be self-sustaining, meaning that the cost should be covered by beneficiaries and employers. Mechanisms that have been used so far are income share agreements or microloans for workers, and revolving loan funds for employers where they only pay back into the fund if they are content with the new hire after one year (Interview 15). Funding is also needed for building national coalitions, enabling skills matching, capacity-building and advocacy.

Finally, the pilots should also include mechanisms to monitor and evaluate their impact, including through feedback from the refugees and employers involved, which can inform future policymaking.

8.4 Designing study-based complementary pathways for refugees step-by-step

As concerns study-based pathways, a report by the UNHCR has found that there was a “strong interest among many core stakeholders, including the education institutions, in being able to provide opportunities for refugees to access tertiary education in Nordic and Baltic countries” (UNHCR 2022b). The interviews conducted for this study confirmed this but showed that there are also many obstacles to overcome. The following section outlines these obstacles and presents ideas for establishing new education and training pathways to Sweden on a step-by-step basis. Further guidance can be found in the minimum standards for study-based complementary pathways developed by the Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways (2021) and EU-Passworld’s report Transforming Futures: Why and How Your Institution Should Champion Refugee Education Pathways (2025).

8.4.1 Building a partner coalition at national level

As with the work-based complementary pathways, an important starting point would be to build a coalition of actors to work on the promotion, design and implementation of a new study-based pathway for persons with protection needs. There are already structures and networks in Sweden that deal with different aspects of the admission of foreign students and scholars, and could facilitate and coordinate new pathways. In West Sweden, for example, there is an informal association of several universities that are working together, and engaging with many regional and national partners, with the intention of piloting an education pathway to Sweden for students with protection needs (Interview 1). Swedish HEIs also have regular meetings to share information with the Migration Agency regarding practical difficulties with granting residence permits for third country students. Another cooperation example is

the Swedish Section of Scholars at Risk that has been active in finding placements for foreign scholars, as discussed in Section 6.2.1 above.

HEIs interested in admitting and providing accommodation for incoming foreign students are key actors in the national partner coalition. It can also include the government agencies responsible for the admission of migrants and the processing of residence permit applications (the Migration Agency and Swedish missions abroad); the government agencies responsible for the assessment of qualifications; Swedish language testers; employers and employer associations (ideally); and regional administrations and integration actors, such as NGOs and municipalities. When it comes to reaching out to suitable candidates, one interviewee suggested that international university networks and international partnerships that Swedish universities belong to could be a good place to start (Interview 1). In addition, international organisations such as UNHCR or IOM or recruiters could also be involved in the outreach and selection phase.

8.4.2 Ensuring funding and political support

Several interviewees identified the lack of funding opportunities as the biggest challenge regarding the piloting of new study pathways (Interviews 1, 2, 3 and 11). The Swedish Institute does offer a number of scholarship programmes with a global development focus, and these could be expanded if additional resources were made available. But as one expert interviewed for this study indicated, there are no Swedish Institute scholarships that are based on humanitarian considerations or aimed at students with a refugee background. In principle, this could be done if the Swedish Institute were tasked by the Government with introducing such scholarships (Interview 9). A similar approach was adopted by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Germany, which ran two scholarship programmes for leaders in Africa and Syria with funding from the German Federal Foreign Office.⁶⁸

According to Sabchev et al. (2023), so far there have been three general approaches to funding study pathways in countries that have experience with such programmes:

- Government funding through state scholarships, which cover study and living expenses;

⁶⁸ <https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/intersecting-dimensions-topics/sustainable-development/funding-programmes/funding-programmes-for-students-a-z/leadership-for-africa/>; https://www2.daad.de/medien/microsites/the-other-one-percent/poster_daad_leadership_for_syria_pia_schauerte_.pdf.

- University-led funding through dedicated contributions by universities, which includes waiving of tuition fees and administrative costs, and requires cooperation from other organisations that cover accommodation and living expenses (such as foundations or local government);
- Diversified funding that draws on various funding sources to cover the different components of the pathway, such as HEIs, public and private donors, and civil society organisations, including in-kind support and fundraising campaigns, considered to be the most sustainable and scalable by the study.

No matter what approach is employed in Sweden, the funding would have to cover travel and visa-related costs, tuition fees (if these cannot be waived) and the cost of living for individuals, including subsistence costs such as health insurance, local transportation, and accommodation (GTFTCEP 2021). However, the minimum standards developed by the Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways (2021) illustrate that programme developers need to also commit to additional funding for all application-related costs; and the full cost of the study programme (certificate, degree, or other qualification) through full or partial scholarships, tuition fee waivers or other funding models.

While the interviewees indicated that the funding should be primarily something for the Swedish Government to consider, current experience shows that efforts could also be made to find local or regional sponsors such as philanthropists and private donors who already partner with certain universities, and employer organisations. This could open up possibilities for loan-based and employer-sponsored financing (see further Sabchev et al. 2023, pp. 10–22). Finally, funding might also be available from the EU, at least for a limited pilot scheme, through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). In addition, other EU funds could be considered, including opportunities to cooperate within the context of the “talent partnership” pilots undertaken by EU Member States with selected non-EU countries (Parusel 2023c; Stefanescu 2020).

8.4.3 Identifying places and study programmes suitable for people in need of protection

Starting an admission programme for students in need of protection requires the identification of at least one HEI interested in piloting it, as “university ownership is essential” (Interview 15). Starting with a bigger HEIs would have the advantage that they all have experience with, and the structures for, welcoming foreign students (Interview 9). On the other hand, smaller HEIs could have more study programmes to fill, a stronger wish to grow, and therefore be more interested in admitting new students from abroad. Interviewees stressed that if

a pilot project started at one HEI in Sweden, other HEIs would likely be inspired to join it or start similar programmes (Interview 3).

It is advisable to choose programmes that lead to degrees in high demand on the Swedish labour market. A regional approach could be taken in this regard, with HEIs offering places in study programmes that connect to local or regional labour market needs. Some interviewees suggested that second-cycle level programmes would be most suitable for complementary pathways (Interviews 1, 2 and 3), while others said all levels of studies could work (Interview 2 and 3), as long as candidates have the required language skills, e.g., through pre-departure training in Swedish. Another alternative option is to identify programmes suitable for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). This could currently be the “most promising type of post-secondary education” for study-based pathways (Interview 15).

To give students admitted to programmes taught in English a reasonable prospect of remaining in Sweden after their studies, they should be offered intensive Swedish language courses to increase their employability after graduation through pre-departure courses and/or a bridging programme before starting their studies. Admitted students should also be familiarised with the labour market from the outset and be given opportunities to get in touch with possible employers through internships, career advice, mentorships, and networking initiatives. Facilitating students’ transition to the labour market, and to work permits, by engaging early with employers in their respective regions would require additional HEI staff and/or external financial resources however, e.g., to fund NGO actors to support such activities.

8.4.4 Removing existing obstacles and facilitating access to education for refugees

A similar approach to overcoming legal and non-legal obstacles as the ones identified in the context of work-based pathways, outlined in Chapter 7 and Section 8.3, is also required for study-based complementary pathways.

Tuition fees and subsistence requirements imply that students need considerable financial resources and support to access a complementary pathway (see Section 8.4.2. above). Another issue is that young people who have fled their home country might lack the identity documents (see Section 8.3. above) and the documentation of qualifications that is needed to be admitted to a Swedish HEI.⁶⁹ Concerning the latter, the Swedish Council for

⁶⁹ There is a wealth of experience in Europe in this field: <https://www.share-network.eu/erasmusplus/hercon#:~:text=The%20Share%20HERCoN%20project%20is,rate%20in%20higher%20education%20worldwide>.

Higher Education has already developed a system to overcome such problems, and has a rich database of diplomas from refugee-sending countries, which allows them to issue a 'background' paper with a description of their foreign qualifications (Interview 10).

Another potential obstacle is the transition from a study permit to a work permit, which is often difficult for graduates from third countries unless they are working in the IT sector or other highly sought-after sectors (Interview 12). The reasons are mainly of a non-legal nature and include obstacles that need to be overcome at the individual level, such as a lack of Swedish language proficiency or Swedish contacts and references as part of the application process. There are, however, also systemic obstacles already mentioned above, such as the long processing times until a decision is issued by the Migration Agency when switching from a study to a job-seeking permit after graduation (Interview 12). Even though graduates are allowed to stay in the country while their application for a job-seeking permit is being processed, the uncertainty surrounding their future status often prevents them from finding an employer who is willing to hire them while in this limbo situation or without knowing whether they will need to exit the country to reapply for a new permit before taking up an offered position (Interview 12).

Several interviewees said that political support for developing such initiatives would make a big difference. For example, a Scholars at Risk representative in Sweden said that organisations which are part of the Scholars at Risk network in other countries could run much larger programmes because they received clearer support (Interview 3). As migration matters are topical and often controversial in Sweden, HEIs would benefit from official backing by the Swedish Government, even if the Government does not have to be the driving force behind such initiatives (Interview 11).

8.4.5 Outreach and matching

A further challenge that needs to be addressed is how to find and select young people for admission under a new programme. One option is an application system, where interested individuals could express their interest (see Box 4). Scholars at Risk already uses an application system, where interested candidates can apply centrally to the international headquarters of the network, which then tries to find a suitable country or HEI to place them with (Interview 3). One of the experts interviewed for this study suggested that candidate interviews could be conducted online (Interview 1). It is not certain, however, that an application model would reach particularly vulnerable individuals or those who have the most pressing needs for a safe place abroad. An application system should therefore be combined with active

outreach and promotion activities among possible target groups, ideally through channels that are known and accessible to refugees (GTFTCEP 2021).

Another option would be to carry out selection missions, such as in the programmes of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) and DAAD in Germany. In Sweden, such missions could potentially build on the selection missions that the Migration Agency regularly carries out to select refugees for resettlement to Sweden. The exact methods for such missions and the distribution of tasks among different actors involved have undergone some changes over time, but in principle resettlement candidates are often preselected by UNHCR from among refugees in countries of first asylum. Officials from the Migration Agency then carry out interviews, decide on eligibility, approve or reject the legal protection status of candidates and determine where in Sweden the person will be offered resettlement. The travel logistics are then managed by IOM (Parusel and Bengtsson 2016).

For complementary pathways, a similar approach could be employed, but it would require more actors to be involved, such as representatives of the Swedish HEIs where candidates would be enrolled, and the government agencies evaluating the candidates' qualifications and language capabilities. A system based on selection missions could be combined with pre-departure cultural orientation and information about the hosting HEIs.

Yet as mentioned above, such models tend to be exceptionally time-consuming and resource-intensive and difficult to scale up. As one interviewee explained, centralised online application systems led and run by HEIs could also work well and be cheaper (Interview 15). Furthermore, linking study-based complementary pathways to the existing resettlement infrastructure – which in the current political climate is unstable – could be risky (Interview 15).

In addition, as with the work-based pathways, while waiting for their visa application to be processed, prospective students could benefit from an introduction to Sweden and Swedish society as pre-departure training.

Box 4: Application and admission to Education Pathway Programmes

Programmes commit to:

- Designing a non-discriminatory, open and transparent application process with clear eligibility and admissions requirements;
- Ensuring accessibility of application for all students;
- Promoting opportunities through channels that are known by and accessible to refugees;
- Providing reasonable support to applicants throughout the application stage;
- Securing admission of selected students to a higher education institution in receiving country.

Source: Minimum Standards for Complementary Education Pathways
Compiled by the Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathway (2021)

8.4.6 Post-arrival measures and integration support

After their arrival in Sweden, students with a refugee background arriving under complementary pathways will have the same needs as other international students, but might additionally need some specific guidance or assistance. Therefore, the Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways recommends facilitating access to academic and psychosocial support, where necessary, to encourage student retention and success, and ensuring access to local support networks, such as student groups on campus and/or by building a network of students with refugee backgrounds on campus (GTFTCEP 2021). For instance, the UNICORE programme uses student mentors with refugee backgrounds who support incoming students.⁷⁰

As outlined in Section 8.1., residence permits for work and studies are always temporary, which means that there is no guarantee that a person in need of protection admitted for studies would also be allowed to stay in Sweden in the long run. Students who do not want to or cannot move back to the countries they have come from would need to transition to other types of residence permits once their studies have ended, notably permits for job-seeking or work. As already mentioned, HEIs could facilitate this by enabling contacts with local or regional employers through internships or networking events

⁷⁰ There are many good experiences with community sponsorship supporting refugee students in Italy, Belgium and Ireland. For guidance on how to establish a group, see: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61701919c9cd9200cd8e6ccc/t/67d163fbefa9e91ad9628b33/1741775872565/Welcome+Groups+Flyer.pdf> See further: <https://www.share-network.eu/hercon-community-of-practice> and <https://www.eupassworld.eu/>.

during the study programmes. Furthermore, HEIs should also see themselves as employers (Interview 15). In many cases, students stay in the HEI (either employed as staff or to do a doctorate) and this is a practical transition option that works well in practice (Interview 15).

Another fallback option for students who cannot secure grounds for residence after graduation in Sweden could be to move on to other countries. One interviewee suggested that students could also be supported through follow-up stays in other EU countries if they cannot extend their residence in Sweden (Interview 3). Such practice exists and is facilitated by the NGO Migration Miteinander, which supports refugees to find internships or training programmes in other EU Member States by using existing EU funding opportunities.⁷¹

Some former students might want to and be able to return to the country in which they found protection before moving to Sweden. This would be possible when candidates are selected from first countries of asylum that are safe and allow return.

Finally, if none of the options above create a pathway to durability, as already mentioned, former students have the right to apply for asylum, but there is no guarantee of a positive outcome (see further Vankova 2024).

8.4.7 Pilot scheme

The need for piloting complementary pathways has already been explained above. Study-based complementary pathway pilots would need to focus on developing the programme design, building in flexibilities in the application and admission procedures that will allow students with refugee background to access them, and ensuring access to integration and psychosocial support as well as pathways to employment (see further GTFTCEP 2021).

In summary, a pilot scheme would need to include the following components:

- Building a coalition of all relevant stakeholders including at least one or two HEIs that would be ready to host students admitted under complementary pathways;
- Arranging financing modalities and clarifying who finances what (tuition fees, cost of living expenses, administration of the programme, staff and travel costs);

⁷¹ <https://migrationmiteinander.de/>.

- Arranging the necessary funding for the student's admission to and stay in Sweden, including tuition fees and cost of living expenses for a reasonable period of time. Funding also needs to be secured for HEIs and partner organisations to build the infrastructure required to find, select, admit and retain candidates. The latter is not needed to start a pilot if HEIs provide scholarships and there is already existing capacity among other actors;
- Creating and training welcome groups led by students and HEI staff (and local community volunteers if possible);
- Determining third countries and localities where interested candidates can be selected;
- Establishing a method for identifying and selecting suitable candidates, including a partner country where students could be selected from;
- Arranging the practicalities of issuing the necessary travel documents and, if necessary, exit permits for the selected candidates in cooperation with relevant actors (the Migration Agency and/or the Swedish missions abroad and authorities in the sending countries) to avoid delays;
- Offering pre-departure information and orientation to selected candidates about their upcoming academic journey, host institutions and receiving localities;
- Planning and arranging the selected candidates' travel to Sweden, including visa and immigration processing, and reception and housing by the host institution;
- Planning mitigating measures for cases where selected students drop out of their studies and for the post-graduation phase, including how the transition from a study permit to another permit can be facilitated, and engaging local networks and employers to facilitate the transition;
- Developing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the impact of the pilot scheme and any follow-up programmes, including feedback from the refugee students involved, which can inform future policy-making.

9. Conclusions and policy recommendations

If designed and implemented with due consideration for the applicable international and EU standards, work-based and study-based legal pathways for migrants and complementary pathways for refugees could bring benefits to all parties involved: they could contribute to mitigating demographic decline and the ageing population in host countries, help to meet their labour needs, contribute to positive narratives about international migration and protection, and present refugees and migrants with safe and legal alternatives to risky, irregular travel. They can also benefit third countries that have a surplus of unemployed workers and support first countries of asylum with responsibility sharing.

This study has demonstrated that Sweden has a need for foreign workers and students as a consequence of demographic trends in the country and from widespread, and likely increasing, labour shortages. Since 2015, however, Sweden has been systematically limiting its legal migration channels in areas such as labour migration, family reunification and resettlement. This has been driven by an overall ambition to control and limit immigration to Sweden and combat the exploitation of foreign workers. Therefore, there has been little political appetite to discuss the design of new or expand existing pathways. Our study shows, however, that many stakeholders including employers, universities, civil society and migrant-led organisations have a strong interest in such pathways, driven by the need for additional workers and students, as well as wanting to support people in need of protection.

The data analysed as part of this study suggests that Sweden would benefit from engaging in new approaches, thereby tapping into new talent pools. This could be done through small-scale pilot schemes at first and then scaled up. To test new approaches, Sweden could learn from other countries with experience in this area, including EU Member States, and use funding available from the EU. Furthermore, the measures contained in the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees can be used as a roadmap to making necessary changes, and technical support can be obtained from members of the Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways and the Global Taskforce for Refugee Labour Mobility.

But to create real added value for potential beneficiaries of legal and complementary pathways, challenges that are contributing to precarity of status such as the persisting risk of 'talent deportations', excessive delays in processing immigration documents, and other obstacles to immigration and security of status, need to be addressed. In line with this, this study identified problematic areas and offered a step-by-step guide on how new legal and complementary pathways could be set up. In addition, there are a number of recommendations that policymakers should consider if they want to engage in establishing new or expanding existing legal pathways to Sweden.

1. When it comes to attracting people to Sweden for work or for studies, and especially people in need of protection who want to use work- and study-based complementary pathways, the **temporariness and precariousness of residence permits** in Sweden is a major problem. Currently, there are many obstacles that prevent non-EU citizens from eventually accessing permanent residency, and this makes it difficult for them to plan their future. The precarity of status characteristic for the Swedish immigration system could disincentivise potential migrants who are considering Sweden as a destination for work or study. This speaks for a need to introduce better safeguards for cases where workers lose their jobs, such as longer periods for them to look for a new job without losing their permits, offering more flexibility when it comes to tying the work permit to a specific employer or occupation, or – at least for some sought-after occupational groups – fast tracks to permanent residence. Initiatives by trade unions or employer organisations to help foreign workers find new jobs when they become unemployed, such as the Nätverk mot arbetslivskriminalitet mentioned in Section 7.5, could also be helpful and should be expanded because they could help Sweden retain the migrant workers it needs and at the same time encourage workers to report exploitative working conditions and rogue employers. While this recommendation applies to all potential labour pathways, those for migrants as well as those for refugees, the temporariness and precariousness of these permits is especially problematic for people with protection needs.
2. Our study identified the (still relatively new) **pay threshold** for labour immigration from third countries as an obstacle to establishing legal and complementary pathways because it can exclude early-career professionals and other people who have low salaries when they take their first jobs. It can also exclude people who have useful qualifications but low pay expectations. High thresholds can also increase other expenses for companies, such as insurance and social security contributions, because these are often based on pay. If a pay threshold is

nevertheless considered necessary, it should be kept at a modest and predictable level. Policymakers should also consider whether the threshold should be fixed at a specific amount or adapted each year in line with the overall median wage in Sweden. While adapting it to the median wage may sound reasonable, this can negatively affect migrant workers with wages close to the median wage. Once their wages do not keep pace with the evolution of the median wage, they risk losing their work permits or not being able to get extensions of their work permits.

3. **Processing times** for residence permits need to be short if Sweden wants to avoid frustrating employers and third country workers. While policymakers and government agencies are certainly aware of this, the stakeholders interviewed for this study still mentioned long processing times as a problem in certain cases. EU law requirements regarding maximum processing times (such as for EU Blue Cards) can provide guidance also for non-EU regulated permits, but there is nothing that prevents Sweden from being even more ambitious as regards fast processing.
4. There is a need for reliable **support structures** that can assist foreign workers, students and other immigrant groups with residence permit matters. There are law firms providing such assistance, but their services are mainly accessible for those who can afford them, which may exclude a wide range of workers as well as students and their family members. Furthermore, NGOs that are well-suited to provide such services for free are reliant on self-funding or voluntary work, or they depend on public funding that can easily be reduced or withdrawn. Safe and stable support structures would not only benefit the individuals that use their services but also help to not overburden the Migration Agency and Migration Courts with incomplete or inadmissible cases. Support structures of this kind should be funded by the state as part of its general spending for migration policy measures.
5. Sweden should consider testing **new migration policy approaches**, such as complementary pathways or talent partnerships. Instead of simply leaving the recruitment of workers from third countries to employers, the state (via the Government or central government agencies) could take a more hands-on approach and consider bilateral cooperation on labour and student migration with selected third countries. As we have discussed above, a step-by-step approach could be taken, starting with the building of coalitions of relevant stakeholders, including companies, to launch new legal and complementary pathways. The interviews conducted for this study suggest that many stakeholders would gladly come on board and that there is already impetus to develop study-based pathways. At the

international level, including in the EU, there is much development towards testing innovative approaches as well. This means that there are lessons that can be learned. Sweden could also join forces, ideally perhaps with other EU Member States, to launch bilateral partnerships and complementary pathways together. Since these types of migration arrangements are strictly managed, there is no risk that they would jeopardise Sweden's doctrine of 'regulated migration' (reglerad invandring).

Over the past ten years, the Swedish Government has focused on restricting immigration flows from third countries. Changes in the law and policy reform concerning immigration, as discussed in Section 4 of this report, have been accompanied by a predominantly negative political narrative about immigration and asylum highlighting problems and challenges (concerning integration, segregation and crime) instead of opportunities and benefits, and emphasising a need for deterrence and control measures. While migration is a complex phenomenon with many societal impacts, one-sided negative messaging is not helpful against the backdrop of Sweden's current demographic trends, labour market needs and international commitments that make immigration a necessity. This means that if new legal and complementary pathways are to be created and promoted, the messaging around migration and protection should be reconsidered. Negative signals about international migration to Sweden as a receiving country risk deterring not only asylum seekers and other people who migrate irregularly, but also foreign workers and students, especially those in non-European countries. In their rhetoric, policymakers should therefore not only emphasise control measures and restrictions, but also acknowledge the past, present and future contributions of migrants to Swedish society. Otherwise, it will be hard to create public acceptance for new and complementary pathways.

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Appendix 1. Interviews

Interview number	Name	Organisation/institution	Date
1	Jan Theliander	Wexus	23 June
2	Karolina Catoni	Scholars at Risk Sweden	26 June
3	Teresa Tomasevic	Malmö University	1 July
4	Anders Barane	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)	3 July
5	Kenneth Forsell	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)	23 July
6	Founder	Refugee-led organisation	25 July
7	Emma Sörensson	Human Entrance	6 August
8	Patrick Joyce	Almega	11 August
9	Malin Wilson	Swedish Institute	12 August
10	Rwaa Ishak	Swedish Council for Higher Education	12 August
11	Carina Carlund	University West	13 August
12	Rafiqul Islam	Work Permit Holders Association, Sweden	21 August
13	Official	Swedish Medical Association	25 August
14	Mattias Schulstad	Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO)	13 October
15	Irene de Lorenzo-Cáceres Cantero	Pathways International	15 November

Appendix 2. Interview guide

Please note that this standard guide was adapted to different interviewees depending on, among other considerations, if they were experts on work-related or study-related pathways.

General questions

1. Could you please describe your work on work- and education/study-related migration to Sweden?
2. What is your perspective on the current preconditions for work- and education-based migration to Sweden? Is the current immigration law and practice suitable, or are changes needed? Any particular advantages or disadvantages of the current system? (Including, for example, rules on transition from study- to work-related stay?)

Specific questions: Work pathways

3. To what extent are there shortages of workers in Sweden today? (In what sectors or regions?) What type of workers are needed? (highly skilled, skilled, low skilled)? How do you think this will develop in the future?
4. Is the current legislation on work-related immigration suitable for addressing current and future shortages, or what would need to change?
5. Do you think Sweden could start admitting refugees/people in need of protection as workers if they have the right qualifications? If yes, what would be needed for this?
6. How could suitable candidates be found and matched to Swedish employers? (For example, use NGOs or international organisations on the ground in third countries, send government officials on selection missions, use the existing quota refugee structures including UNHCR and the Migration Agency, develop a new system, use embassies/consulates/chambers of commerce etc.?)
7. Who should be the main driving force behind new programmes to recruit refugees under work-immigration programmes? (The state or employers, or both?)
8. How could employers be incentivised to recruit refugees? (There could be additional costs, but such measures could also be good for companies' reputation.)

9. Do you see any risks or problems when it comes to bringing in refugees as labour migrants? (people losing their jobs and their residence permits again, unclear protection status, need for integration support, etc.?)
10. What do you think are the main legal, political or practical obstacles/constraints related to the creation of complementary pathways for refugees?
11. Do you have ideas for a suitable industry sector or region for a pilot programme?

Specific questions: Education pathways

12. Could universities be incentivised to attract and recruit refugees/people with protection needs as students or researchers? If so, how? (For example, with more money for scholarships?)
13. Is there/should there be a focus on any specific university course(s) or level of studies (Bachelor/Master/PhD)? Could such a focus or choice be linked to the labour market in Sweden (or a specific region of Sweden)?
14. How could suitable candidates be found and matched? (by using NGOs on the ground in third countries, sending government officials on selection missions, using the existing refugee resettlement system including UNHCR, developing a new system, using international university networks, using Swedish embassies/consulates/chambers of commerce etc.?)
15. To what degree would higher education institutions need support from the Swedish state, or political support, and can they get this support?
16. Do you see any risks or problems when it comes to bringing in refugees/migrants as students or researchers? (for example, risk of people not finding jobs after graduation, need for targeted support structures?)
17. Do you have any suggestions for a suitable university or region for a pilot programme?

List of previous publications

Report and Policy Brief 2014:1, *Radikala högerpartier och attityder till invandring i Europa*, Mikael Hjerm and Andrea Bohman.

Report and Policy Brief 2015:1, *Internationell migration och remitteringar i Etiopien*, Lisa Andersson.

Research Overview 2015:2, *Politiska remitteringar*, Emma Lundgren Jörum and Åsa Lundgren.

Research Overview 2015:3, *Integrationspolitik och arbetsmarknad*, Patrick Joyce.

Research Overview 2015:4, *Migration och företagens internationalisering*, Andreas Hatzigeorgiou and Magnus Lodefalk.

Report and Policy Brief 2015:5, *Svenskt medborgarskap: reglering och förändring i ett skandinaviskt perspektiv*, Mikael Spång.

Report and Policy Brief 2015:6, *Vem blir medborgare och vad händer sen? Naturalisering i Danmark, Norge och Sverige*, Pieter Bevelander, Jonas Helgertz, Bernt Bratsberg and Anna Tegunimataka.

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Report and Policy Brief 2015:8, *Valet och Vägen: Syriska flyktingar i Sverige*, Emma Jörum Lundgren.

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Research Overview 2016:1, *Alla tiders migration!* Dick Harrison.

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The report is authored by Zvezda Vankova, Associate Professor of EU Law and Senior Researcher at the Faculty of Law, Lund University, and Bernd Parusel, PhD, Senior Researcher in Political Science at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS).

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