



Academic mobility and Swedish scholarships

A study on scholarship holders within the Swedish Institute's Visby Programme

Beside labour migration and migration resulting from war and disasters, education is one of the main reasons why people move. Historically, studies abroad have been reserved for a small well-off group in society. Today scholarships are often an important factor in enabling academic mobility. One of the largest Swedish state scholarship programmes is the Visby Programme, which is aimed at the countries of Eastern Europe. The programme was initiated in 1997 and is administered by the public agency the Swedish Institute.

This report presents the results from an empirical study on the role and importance of the Visby Programme seen from the perspective of Sweden, the academicians and their home countries.

Background

The Swedish Institute was founded in 1945 and has, since then, been Sweden's main organisation for public diplomacy, i.e. promotion of Sweden abroad. Initially the Visby Programme had a clear focus on export, trade and development aid, and its explicit purpose was to contribute to economic growth both in Sweden and in partner countries by building net-

works in the Baltic Sea region. Over time the aim of the Visby programme has changed from export and trade, official development assistance (ODA) and economic growth towards regional collaboration, detente and social development. Thus, the programme belongs to three political fields, namely a) ODA, b) internationalization of higher education, and c) public diplomacy and promoting Sweden and Swedish trade.

Purpose and questions

This report provides answers to several questions, such as what importance these studies have had for the students' careers, what type of capital the education has generated and how the students assess their stay in Sweden. The study is also touching upon questions such as the extent to which the scholarship holders still are connected with Sweden and contributed to the development of their home country, either economically, politically or within academia.

The report draws empirical evidence from a questionnaire directed to former long-term scholarship holders in the Visby Programme. A total of 482 persons responded to the questionnaire. In addition, annual reports and internal evaluations from the Swedish Institute form the empirical basis of the report.

Results

The results show that the composition of the scholarship group has changed since the Visby Programme was introduced in 1997. Initially scholarship holders mainly came from the Baltic States, Poland and Russia. Today they mostly come from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus as well as the Caucasus region, such as Moldova and Georgia. Consequently, the geographical recruitment area of the Visby programme has shifted eastwards. The results also reveal a change in the disciplinary specialisation of scholarship holders from engineering and natural sciences towards social sciences and humanities. A possible explanation of these changes is that the initial focus on trade and economic

growth within the Visby Programme is now replaced by security politics and ODA. A politically formulated scholarship program such as the Visby Programme and an intermediary like the Swedish Institute, seem to be of some importance for what international student and researcher mobility looks like and how it varies over time.

Furthermore, the results show that the most important reasons for applying for a scholarship were to increase the applicant's own educational capital assets, and to thereby gain international experience and contacts. Being awarded a scholarship was the most important reason for applying to Sweden, ahead of international experience, educational quality and better labour market prospects.

A substantial majority of the scholarship holders also stressed that their time in Sweden have had a positive impact on their careers, by building knowledge and valuable professional networks. A majority of those who moved from Sweden retained their contact with Sweden, mainly through personal networks and Swedish universities. By acting as knowledge brokers, mainly between their home country and Sweden, a majority of the scholarship holders also considered that they contributed to the development of their home country. The scholarship holders viewed themselves as brokers both of disciplinary knowledge and of knowledge of the culture and values of another society.

Furthermore, roughly about half of the scholarship holders moved back to their home country after the scholarship ended, while 27 per cent stayed in Sweden and about 23 per cent settled in a third country.

Scholarship holders' present country of residence by how long they stayed in Sweden after their scholarship period

Stayed in Sweden after scholarship period	Number	In Sweden	In home country	In other country	Total
< 1 month	264	5%	66%	29%	100%
1–12 months	43	14%	60%	26%	100%
1 year–10 years	54	65%	19%	17%	100%
Have been staying in Sweden since scholarship period	67	100%	-	-	100%
Total	428	28%	49%	23%	100%

Most scholarship holders settled in a Western European country or the United States. A smaller part returned to Eastern Europe. The same pattern is found regarding the countries where scholarship holders stayed for a short period after their scholarship period. In other words, studies in Sweden seems to generate educational capital of value not only in Sweden but also in other western countries. In this way, the scholarship holders can probably function as an important part of a socially ascending and, in geographical terms, west-oriented mobility movement that goes from Eastern Europe via Sweden to Western Europe and the United States.

Policy recommendations

This study discloses the link between politically motivated and formulated scholarship programmes such as the Visby Programme and academic mobility. How the Visby Programme is organised and financed is, thus, of importance for who are given the financial possibility of spending a lengthy period of time in Sweden. From the perspective of policy-makers, large scholar-

ship programmes offer a tangible possibility of governing the inflow of foreign academics to the Swedish higher education and, ultimately, perhaps also to the Swedish labour market.

However, the migration pattern of the former Visby scholarship holders – with more than half returning, a quarter staying in Sweden and a quarter migrating elsewhere – raises the question of a need to illuminate the political ambitions for officially financed scholarships to foreign academics.

Another result that deserves to be highlighted is that several of the former scholarship holders state that they contribute to the development of their home countries, especially through the transfer of knowledge. This applies, in the first place, to those who had moved back to their home country or stayed in Sweden. It is clear that the scholarships have a contact-making and bridge-building function, so there is reason to consider further efforts in this direction. But more knowledge is also required here about the art and outcome of this benefits. Is it possible to demonstrate that scholarship holders act as multipliers of knowledge about, for example,

Sweden or human rights in their own home countries? A proof of that would be important for the legitimacy of these programmes as part of development assistance and other forms of international political cooperation.

Finally, it can be concluded that the recipients of the scholarship judged the value of a Swedish scholarship to be very high. The Visby scholarships were assigned great importance for their individual careers. One type

of question that future studies should illuminate is why so many of the scholarship holders choose to leave Sweden after the end of their scholarship period. Are they, in the first place, appealed by the opportunities in other countries, or are there structural problems in the Swedish system of higher education or in the Swedish labour market that makes Sweden a less attractive country to build a future in? The answers regarding these questions are of great importance for future decisions related to the labour market.



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