Forum for Internationalisation organised a hearing in Gothenburg on the 2 December 2015 with the intention to collect ideas for more flexible and effective solutions for studying at HEIs in Sweden. Discussions covered topics from admission processes to social life on and off campus. Conclusions from the hearing serve as a basis for continued work of the Forum on improved conditions for foreign students in Sweden.

Keynote speaker was Bharat Konka, a software engineer from Combine Ltd, previously a Master’s student at the University of Gothenburg and Chalmers.

Bharat Konka came to Gothenburg in 2009 to follow a Master’s programme in Computer Science. Six years later, he is still in Sweden working on the test programme for Volvo Cars.

Bharat found his own ways into the Swedish community. His interest in Swedish rock music was one of the reasons he considered studying in Sweden. Once settled, he soon found other musicians to play with. Adult educational organisation Medborgarskolan arranged “coffee with senior citizens” (fika med pensionär). The activity provided a good learning opportunity to spoken Swedish.

Leisure activities are a good way of building a social network!

Higher education institutions, HEIs, in cooperation with other authorities and organisations need to develop the reception and integration of international students. More scholarships, easier access to accommodation and improved management of residence permits should be priority areas as results from the hearing clearly indicate. There is considerable confusion on insurance matters, the possibility to open a bank account and access to dental and medical care.

Coming to Sweden to study – a hearing on conditions for international students in Sweden

I encountered the same problems like many others. The application for a residence permit and to open a bank account were time-consuming processes. The students’ union provided only limited effort to include international students in their activities. However, many aspects were positive. Problem-based learning applied by the university serves as good preparation for working life. A particularly positive aspect was the possibility for students to conduct their thesis work at a company or organisation.
Conclusions from group discussions

Following Bharat’s inspiring introduction, the students were divided into seven groups. Each group were assigned a specific topic for discussion. The results are summarised below.

Application, admission and scholarships

POSITIVE
The admission process works well and responses to raised questions are quick. There is good information available in many different languages. Regarding courses on offer, more of them should be given in English. There are not enough scholarships available to meet the demand.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
• The need to submit original documents is perceived as an unnecessary risk.
• Quicker responses to scholarship questions and also possibility to apply for scholarships after the first year.
• A completed language test in English is often stipulated as an entry requirement, but is not always respected. Make sure the same rules apply for all students.
• Opportunity to summer activity – e.g. jobs through better cooperation between HEIs and companies or organisations.
• More scholarship programmes.

Arrival in Sweden – practicalities and introduction at institution

POSITIVE
The reception at the HEI usually works well. Especially appreciated is the system referred to as “Student Buddies”, where other students take care of those who are newly arrived. It is a shame, however, that it is mostly other international students who are willing to serve as “Buddies. Swedish mentors would provide further opportunity for integration.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
• Difficulty in finding accommodation leads to problems in applying for a bank account or for a national registration number.
• Unclear information about procedures for submitting biometric information to Swedish embassies.
• The routines for extension of residence permit need to be more flexible with decisions made more rapidly.
• More of the practical information required by recently arrived students should be available in English.
• Decisions on residence permits should be communicated in English.
• Better information is needed on the subject of householders’ comprehensive insurance.

“It took 6 months to get extension on my residence permit so could not visit my homeland during urgent necessities.”

“Sometimes, in the same bank, different clerk may give you different response.”
Study in Sweden – academic culture and relation to professors

POSITIVE
Swedish university lecturers are easy to get on with, friendly and accessible. In comparison with many other countries, Swedish teaching consists largely of group assignments and discussions. Common lunch rooms for students create opportunities for positive meetings.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
• The need for better information on study culture and teacher-student relations in Sweden.
• Group work should serve to mix Swedish and international students and provide better support in making the intercultural cooperation function.
• More extended mentor system.
• More social activities in English through student unions.

Health and wellbeing, access to health care

POSITIVE
International students experience difficulty in accessing the Swedish health care system. Certain HEIs offer student health care with limited opening hours. An international student may suffer from homesickness, which is perhaps made worse by the long hours of darkness during winter. An active social life makes life easier in a foreign country.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
• Inform international students that the Swedish general health help-line is available in English.
• Problems with homesickness and depression should be observed by HEIs.
• Better information on health insurance policies.

Completion of studies – career guidance, alumni activities, stay to work in Sweden

POSITIVE
Several, but not all of the HEIs have alumni programmes and some offer the opportunity to conduct thesis work at workplaces. Both these opportunities should be provided at all institutions. Many of the students at the hearing would like to take part in an alumni programme and maintain contact with the Swedish HEI on completion of their studies.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
• Better information is needed on the opportunities to stay in Sweden to work after completion of studies.
• Extend the possibilities of remaining in Sweden after completion of studies from six to twelve months.
• All HEIs should offer career guidance.
• Create platforms for interaction between students and alumni
• More contact with small and medium-sized enterprises.

"Finding your way through the healthcare system is very hard for students not speaking Swedish."
Live in Sweden – social life on and off campus

POSITIVE
Most HEIs provide good and interesting introduction programmes. Much of what is on offer is only available in Swedish. There is much to take part in via student unions, sports associations, cultural societies and language cafés. However, each individual has the responsibility to involve him/herself in these activities.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
- Courses in Swedish should be more focused on conversation skills.
- Introductory information is often designed for students at Bachelor level. Students at Master’s and PhD level should also be addressed.
- Associations for sports and leisure activities usually welcome foreign students even though their website information is in Swedish.

International students as a resource in teaching and research

POSITIVE
Even though examples are few, at least some students have got the opportunity to share their international experience and specific knowledge in the lecture room. Generally however, international students are a much under-used resource both in teaching and research. Some international students have met up with Swedish students for conversation training.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
- Introduce the international perspective into course development.
- HEIs should make a more distinct use of international students as a resource in teaching, training and research.
- Match international students with Swedish students who are studying their language for a mutual exchange of language.

Conclusions from application questionnaires

Applying for residence permits and bank accounts are frequently recognised problem areas for non-European students in Sweden. Gaining access to accommodation is a further obstacle which is also shared by students from the EU/EEC. We chose to extract these problem areas from the group discussions and instead deal with them in a questionnaire the students answered in conjunction with their applications. 79 students registered at the hearing and thus answered the questions.

Residence permit
From a total of 60 students who needed to apply for a residence permit, 26 felt that the process was slow, 13 that it was difficult and 13 that it was expensive. 33 answered that the process was OK. Those

“‘It’s not convenient to live in Sweden without a personal number.’”

![Photos: Johan Wiborg, University of Gothenburg](image-url)
who considered the process expensive most likely referred to the difficulty in providing biometry at the nearest Swedish foreign authority. This might entail time-consuming and expensive travel, especially when there is no Swedish representation in the student’s home country. The actual application fee (currently SEK 1000) may certainly be a minor overhead under the circumstances. From those who expanded on their answers, nine emphasised difficulty in extending the residence permit. It may take a long time to receive an answer, which delays the chances for the student to leave and return to Sweden. Delays also affect first-time applicants so that they could be late for the start of a semester, especially if they need to submit complementary information.

**Accommodation**

The majority of the students had accommodation arranged in Sweden upon arrival. 26 percent did not have accommodation arranged upon arrival. For a significant number of students it is apparent that the housing question is a long-drawn procedure with constantly new challenges. Some students stay with friends, but even among those with somewhere to live, the feeling is expressed that their accommodation is congested, expensive and uncertain. It appears that the accommodation situation for international students in Sweden is either no problem at all or it is extremely problematic.

**Bank account**

Open an account in a Swedish bank is by no means a trivial matter for students coming from a non-European country. It is especially troublesome for students still lacking a permanent residence address in Sweden. Banks sometimes require from a student a social security number, a Swedish ID card or even a certificate from a bank in the student’s home country, allowing the student to open a bank account in Sweden. These are requirements that go beyond recommendations from the Swedish Bankers’ Association. Helping foreigners to apply for a Swedish bank account is for most bank employees not a routine task, which appears to lead to uncertainty concerning requirements. However, it entails problems for those students whose applications are rejected on dubious grounds.

"I don’t know how to find proper accommodation for myself and my 11 year son. I am really upset about this issue."

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**The Forum for Internationalisation**

was established in 2008 at the initiative of the Government in order to improve coordination between Swedish authorities and organisations that are affected by and influence the internationalisation of HEIs. The Forum is a venue for the exchange of experience and opportunities. The work is coordinated by the Swedish Council for Higher Education, www.uhr.se.

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