



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, February 2021

(Im)mobility precariousness during the COVID-19 pandemic: migration policy and the prioritisation of economic profit over public health in Swedish universities

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Abstract

The ambiguous policy of the Swedish Migration Agency regarding non-European students' resident permits and the decentralised decision-making process created uncertainties for both students and universities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

international students, Sweden, COVID-19, visa policy, uncertainty, online teaching, tuition fees, higher education, deportation

Theme

Securitizing mobility

To be quoted as:

Gemma, Gloria. 2021. (Im)mobility precariousness during the COVID-19 pandemic: migration policy and the prioritisation of economic profit over public health in Swedish universities. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.9266

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Sweden's strategy against COVID-19 has been remarkably different from other European nations', relying mainly on voluntary measures to reduce the spread of the virus.² At the beginning of the pandemic, the switch of university courses from in-person to virtual represented one of the few compulsive measures instituted by the Swedish government to prevent the spread of the virus. However, the decision was not enacted within a strict national plan, and its long-term implementation has been ambiguous at best: in late May, the government withdrew its recommendation for remote learning.³

Reopening strategies were left up to the discretion of universities, resulting in a considerable number of approaches. Gothenburg University and Malmö University quickly turned to remote teaching for the upcoming autumn semester,⁴ while other universities opted for a more gradual reopening during the spring or autumn terms.⁵ In addition to the pandemic itself, the lack of a systematic national plan for campus reopening led international, and especially non-European students, to experience a strong feeling of uncertainty regarding their right to stay in Sweden. Nearly a week before the end of the spring semester, the already precarious situation took an unexpected turn when the Swedish Migration Agency announced that residence permits would no longer be guaranteed to those international students whose programmes had gone online.⁶

This announcement had an impact on both international students and Swedish educational institutions. Non-European students who were already admitted and in the midst of moving to Sweden watched as their academic and personal futures were thrown into jeopardy. Meanwhile, non-European students already residing in Sweden found themselves at risk of not having their visas renewed for the upcoming year. Their precariousness can be expressed as a double-sided (im)mobility: as holders of an unstable, soon-to-be-expired visa during a global pandemic, international students were prevented both from returning to their home countries due to COVID-19 travel bans and, potentially, from staying in Sweden if their visa was not renewed.

Non-European students were hence left in a state of precariousness and deportability⁷ by the Swedish government. *Deportability* does not refer to the reception of an order of deportation itself, but rather denotes the legal production by immigration law of the precarious status of a deportable subject. This status leads to the possibility of receiving a deportation order, which would forcibly remove the subject from their social networks and everyday life on short notice. In this sense, non-

² Vogel, Gretchen. 2020. 'It's been so, so surreal.' Critics of Sweden's lax pandemic policies face fierce backlash. *Science*. Available online at: <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/10/it-s-been-so-so-surreal-critics-sweden-s-lax-pandemic-policies-face-fierce-backlash>. Last accessed 3 February 2021.

³ KrisInformation. 2020. The Government: Upper secondary schools can reopen. Available online at: <https://www.krisinformation.se/en/news/2020/may/upper-secondary-schools-can-reopen>. Last accessed 3 February 2021.

⁴ University of Gothenburg. 2020. The University of Gothenburg starts the autumn 2020 term remotely. Available online at: <https://medarbetarportalen.gu.se/aktuellt/coronaviruset/nyheter/nyheter-detalj/goteborgs-universitet-inleder-hosten-2020-digital.cid1685494?languageId=100001>. Last accessed 3 February 2021; and University of Malmö. 2020. Digital start to autumn semester. Available online at: <https://mau.se/en/news/digital-start-to-autumn-semester/>. Last accessed 3 February 2021.

⁵ Valentinsson, Anna. 2020. Welcome back to campus this autumn. Linköping University. Available online at: <https://liu.se/en/news-item/valkommen-tillbaka-till-campus-i-host>. Last accessed 3 February 2021.

⁶ Swedish Migration Agency. 2020. Studier på campus avgörande för höstens utländska studenter [Studies on campus crucial for this autumn's foreign students]. Available online at: <https://www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Pressrum/Nyhetsarkiv/Nyhetsarkiv-2020/2020-05-29-Studier-pa-campus-avgorande-for-hostens-utlandska-studenter.html>. Last accessed 3 February 2021.

See also Löfgren, Emma. 2020. What do Sweden's new university guidelines mean for foreign students? *The Local* (Swedish edition). Available online at: <https://www.thelocal.se/20200529/what-does-swedens-eased-university-guidelines-mean-for-foreign-students>. Last accessed 3 February 2021.

⁷ De Genova, Nicholas P. 2002. Migrant 'illegality' and deportability in everyday life. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 419-447.

European students in Sweden found themselves in a situation whose outcomes were highly uncertain. Until the autumn semester, international students whose programmes did not guarantee enough campus hours lived in limbo, waiting for their pending visa. The possibility of being forcibly deported to their country of origin and leaving behind a university career on which they have invested both time and money added to the fear of the current global pandemic.

The decision of the Swedish Migration Agency encountered opposition. Swedish universities shifted their strategy towards a return to on-campus teaching for the autumn semester,⁸ in order, on one hand, to facilitate the stay of international students. On the other hand, the decision allowed universities and other student-related services, such as accommodation houses, to ensure themselves a steady income despite the pandemic. What should be acknowledged here is that universities have an economic interest in having their students obtaining residence permits: the expensive tuition required from fee-paying (i.e. non-European) students represents, in fact, one of the key income sources for international programmes.⁹

The priority given to newcomer students provides a notable example of this double motivation. As some campuses reopened, Swedish higher education institutions gave priority to first-year students for in-person teaching. Although their stated purpose was to safeguard the learning process of one of the most vulnerable groups of students, this move also guaranteed economic stability to the programmes, and therefore to the universities themselves. Newly enrolled international students would probably have been less prone to move to Sweden if their courses were going to be held online, or would have at least questioned if they were worth investing hundreds of thousands of Swedish *krona*, without the possibility of having a residence permit. Potentially, these students would have then turned their interest and financial resources towards countries that offered more generous conditions. Contrary to that, the decision to limit the on-campus presence of second-year students had a smaller impact on their potential return, since they already created social ties and working expectations in the country.

Nevertheless, the approach used by the Swedish government and universities has been at least muddled from the viewpoint of international students: the recommendations issued by the government were constantly updated and changed, as were the specific implementations in each university. A final and clear-cut decision on the re-opening of campuses was first delayed and then never arrived, preventing students from making informed decisions about their stay in the country. The option of missing a semester or moving back and forth to Sweden every few months, in case campuses would reopen again after the students had moved outside the Nordic country, seemed a worse option than staying in the country hoping for the universities to remain open. Predictably, two months from the beginning of the autumn semester, university campuses closed again, after having enrolled a good number of fee-paying students to secure fixed incomes for the universities and for the services that surround the university system (i.e., housing, food, public transportation).

⁸ The Local (Swedish edition). 2020. On campus or distance learning? Here's what Sweden's universities have planned for autumn. Available online at: <https://www.thelocal.se/20200731/on-campus-or-distance-learning-heres-what-swedens-universities-have-planned-for-autumn-2020-coronavirus>. Last accessed 3 February 2021.

⁹ Universitetskanslersämbetet [Swedish Higher Education Authority]. 2017. Rapport 2017:2: Kartläggning av studieavgifter. [Report 2017:2: Survey of student tuition fees]. Available online at: <https://www.uka.se/download/18.28e93fee15a38a64f878f738/1487841871771/rapport-2017-01-19-kartlaggning-studieavgifter.pdf>. Last accessed 3 February 2021.

This dilemma is the result of the position taken by the Swedish Migration Agency. With its decision not to extend the visas of students who did not have access to campus lectures, the Swedish Migration Agency inadvertently forced the hand of the Swedish universities to overlook public health to keep non-European tuition fees. Educational institutions found themselves in the position of having to choose between either guaranteeing stronger health security for their staff and students by completely shifting their activities online, as most European countries did, and ensuring their income by offering mandatory on-campus courses so that fee-paying students can remain in Sweden.

The two options appear to be incompatible under the perspective of health security. The choice made by the Swedish institutions highlights how academia and higher education are increasingly embedded into the neoliberal system of academic capitalism. Through the marketisation of higher education,¹⁰ universities and higher education institutions are becoming more profit-oriented. Rather than striving for education equality, academic capitalism reproduces and exacerbates social, racial, economic, and colonial inequities. The current circumstances in Sweden furthermore enhance the exceptional intersecting vulnerabilities of non-European students with precarious (im)mobility rights, all during a global pandemic.

The restrictions on residence permits are likely to make the Swedish education system a less attractive option for non-European students. After the introduction of onerous administrative fees in 2011 exclusively targeting non-European students,¹¹ the new stricter policy regarding student visas represents the most aggressive measure against the enrolment of international students in Scandinavian universities. As some non-European students stated,¹² those who held non-Western passports faced more barriers with the Swedish Migration Agency in seeing their visa renovated. The policy choices and overall anti-immigrant political approach of the Swedish Migration Agency come at the expense of the stability of non-European students.

The competing interests of the Swedish Migration Agency, aiming to restrict the entry of non-EU students, and Swedish universities, which hold a financial stake in keeping international students enrolled, have created a climate of academic, legal, and economic uncertainty for those who come to Sweden to pursue higher education. In prioritising economic profit and restrictive migration policies, the country has ultimately turned its back on international students during the pandemic.

¹⁰ Lynch, Kathleen. 2006. Neo-Liberalism and Marketisation: The Implications for Higher Education. *European Educational Research Journal* 5(1): 1-17.

¹¹ The Local (Swedish edition). 2012. Tuition fees change Sweden's student population. Available online at: <https://www.thelocal.se/20120106/38368>. Last accessed on 3 February 2021.

¹² Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations conducted with non-EU students enrolled in a masters degree in the Östergötland region, Sweden, between May 2020 and November 2020.