

## **Polycrisis and securitisation in Higher Education: Rethinking internationalisation and academic mobility in Sweden**

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### **Abstract**

*This article presents an analysis of responses to some of the mutually reinforcing challenges facing European higher education (HE) systems. In a context of 'polycrises', defined by European Commission President Juncker (2016) along the lines of economic, financial, social, and security challenges across different policy domains, HE responses have been varied and reflecting the peculiarities of national contexts. We focus on Swedish shifts in discourses and practices in relation to HE internationalisation, as a response to the perceived geopolitical and security threats. These crises have produced policies with distinct effects on universities, and on individual academics. The article does two things: First, it presents a critical analysis of the crisis context across European HE policy and in the national and HE context of Sweden. Second, drawing on large qualitative research, it discusses the consequences of these crises on academic identities, with a particular focus on academic mobility. The article contributes to knowledge on the experience of individual academics who develop careers in often difficult circumstances and highlights the need to integrate individual experiences and perceptions with HE-wide policies and discourses.*

### **Keywords**

*Academic mobility, higher education, internationalization, polycrisis, securitization, Sweden.*

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## Introduction

Higher education (HE) plays a crucial role in generating and disseminating knowledge through high-quality research and teaching, preparing the future workforce, and contributing to economic growth and development of regions and whole countries (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2019; Parreira do Amaral 2024). It is increasingly seen as an important sector contributing to political, social, as well as economic and geopolitical goals across (mainly) the global North (Dakowska & Velarde, 2018; von der Leyen, 2025), and increasingly, the South. It is expected, among other, to increase productivity through significant investment in the human capital of the population which is also seen as a way to reduce poverty and inequality and increase social mobility (Carnoy 2007), contribute to sustainability goals (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021), innovation, research and development (Akcigit et al. 2020). In addition, universities are expected to contribute to democratic good governance and maintain their traditional mission as seats of learning that still explore the “great questions of what it is to be human” (Carney, 2024:26; Zgaga, 2005). Internationalisation is regarded as a mechanism through which universities fulfill their social responsibilities (de Wit et al., 2015), and a means of advancing such multiple goals attributed to HE, with academic mobility one of its key components.

The changes that the sector went through over the past fifty years have reconfigured the significance of internationalisation as a university and national policy objective, and mobility as a driver for professional development. So, the significant expansion of HE across all European countries, has seen the emergence of a 'global mega-science' (Baker & Powell, 2024:2) accompanied by competitiveness, performativity, quality assurance pressures and changing definitions of academic work (Gouvias, 2020; Sarakinioti & Philippou, 2020; Marques et al., 2024).

These are evolving demands and policy frameworks that introduce fresh expectations for HE. But, in addition to these, during the last 15 years, there have been serious and unexpected geopolitical events that have brought new financial, social and security challenges. Former President of the European Commission Juncker called this ‘a polycrisis’ (Juncker, 2016), and it has certainly added complexity to the governance, management and financing of HE in Europe, as well as the ways academics view their careers. The financial crisis of the 2000s and its aftermath, several waves of refugees, the war in Ukraine, tensions between ‘the West’ and China, an uneven economic

development within the European Union, have produced unstable politics and the rise of Eurosceptic and far-right discourses exemplified perhaps best by Brexit. These contexts have often led to reconfiguring internationalisation as a policy objective and practice in many national HE systems in Europe. In addition to the national and institutional effects, there has been evidence of profound changes in the work conditions of academics as well as in their professional identities.

The pressures on HE systems from these geopolitics, funding and governance shifting contexts, are impacting academic identities that are being reshaped as a result of increased fragmentation and diversification of academic roles. Traditional notions of academics as autonomous members of disciplinary communities are being challenged by competitive funding environments, casualized employment, and new managerial practices that may put pressures on disciplinary commitment, self-regulation and academic freedom (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). In this context, academic mobility has become more significant for the making of careers and more problematic in times of uncertain economic conditions and security constraints. Tightly connected to the concept of academic identity, the practice of mobility reflects the ways researchers define their professional selves, and the meaning of being an academic in today's contemporary HE (Henkel, 2005).

Against a polycrisis context, it is interesting and timely to examine the responses of states, institutions and individual academics. Universities in Europe enjoy significant degrees of autonomy regarding their discretion to decide on what is important (Maassen, Gornitzka, Fumasoli, 2017) and individual academics still have (in most cases) degrees of freedom to govern their teaching, research and career development (Maassen et al., 2022). Still, such freedoms are under pressure in systems where budget strains and competitive conditions create new insecurities, and the perpetual expectation for higher academic productivity. This article selectively addresses some of these dimensions of the HE crises with a focus on internationalisation and mobility, and asks the following research questions:

- What are the core discourses and policies around 'internationalisation' and 'securitisation' in Sweden and how do they frame academic mobility?
- What are the mobility experiences of academics in large Swedish universities and how do they reflect institutional and national HE contexts?

The empirical part of the article examines HE policy responses to specific global and national contexts, and, individual academic responses to mobility as a practice and

identity. In their mutual framing, they describe the outcomes of interactions between the Swedish national context and individual academic experiences.

### **1. Internationalisation and securitisation in European higher education**

Internationalisation policies and practices in HE have been the product of growing inter-connections of research and science networks at a global scale, but also a result of rising expectations that universities contribute to economic growth, as well as to democratic and inclusive political agendas (Bedenlier et al., 2018). Even though most universities across the globe engage in some form of internationalisation, the underlying rationales shaping strategies and policies vary across national and HE contexts (Alexiadou & Rönnerberg, 2022; Seeber et al., 2016). In most cases, internationalisation agendas aim at gaining competitive advantage through attracting talent (students and researchers), strengthening research productivity and scoring high in international league tables, and, in the contexts where HE is an important national industry these are complemented by commercial rationales and generation of revenue (Chankseliani 2018). Despite the increasing critiques towards internationalisation practices for widening knowledge inequalities, promoting colonial models of knowledge production (Bamberger & Morris, 2024) and glossing over inherent conflicts over academic, economic and socio-cultural issues in practice (Bulut-Sahin & Kondakci, 2022; Stein, 2021), internationalisation has been associated with several positive outcomes for individuals, universities and nations (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). The (still) most common definition of internationalisation comes from Jane Knight (2003) who defines it as the process of intentional integration of ‘an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education’ (p.2), with subsequent definitions highlighting the comprehensive nature of internationalisation that needs to permeate all aspects of university functioning including its ethos and values (Hudzik, 2011).

The outcomes of intense internationalisation over the last 15 years across European HE include substantial scientific collaborations across borders, and a huge rise in the mobility of academic staff and students (Aksnes & Sivertsen, 2023) that is seen to be a positive practice for both researchers and their universities (Bojica et al., 2023). Still, there are problematic aspects of academic mobility that include growing work precarity for highly mobile post-doctoral researchers and the compulsion to constantly move (Courtois & O’Keefe, 2024), facing the risks of being ‘locked out’ of one’s home HE

system (Pustelnikovaite, 2021), not being fully integrated in new systems (Behtoui & Leivestad, 2019), dealing with difficult emotional decisions when leaving one's country (Tzanakou, 2021), and facing gender-related inequalities both in the decision-making process and the practice of mobility (Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2018). "Mobility is rarely without a cost", and even when it has positive transformative effects there are experiences of tension and strain (Alexiadou et al. (2025:11).

Over the last 15 years, due to multiple world conflicts and crises, there are responses to internationalising HE that represent a backlash to established views around internationalisation and its benefits. Across different countries, a rise in nationalist discourses is accompanied by degrees of closure or protectionism in HE, as the examples of Denmark and the Netherlands show (Brogger, 2023; Dutch News, 2024). In this context, a number of perceived threats are formulated across HE and national discourses around research integrity, losing technological advantage over competitors, national security risks regarding sensitive research areas, cyber threats and cross-border data management (European Commission, 2024). These fears have led to growing 'securitisation', defined as "a set of interrelated practices, and the processes of their production, diffusion, and reception/translation that bring threats into being" (Balzacq, 2011, p.xiii). Perceived and 'real', risks and threats lead to securitisation discourses around science and research that are increasingly present across several European contexts with significant potential to affect HE policies and practices.

In the next sections we explore how these discourses, contexts and expectations manifest themselves in the case of HE in Sweden and how they frame academic mobility.

## **2. National responses to internationalisation expectations: pressures, opportunities, threats**

Sweden has a developed HE system consisting of 39 universities and university colleges, offering tuition-free education to Swedish and EU citizens, while charging fees to students from outside the EU (Lundin, 2025). HE operates under a large-scale public framework, characterised by significant government funding and high student enrollment. The country has been proactive in internationalising HE since the early 1970s, setting a national policy goal to promote understandings of international contexts within the HE legislation. That early goal is still part of the Higher Education Act (1994:1434) and was significantly institutionalised when Sweden joined the EU in 1995, and in later reforms

to the sector in order to adjust to the Bologna process (Govt. Bill 2004/05:162). More recently, a comprehensive new national strategy was proposed (SOU 2018:3; SOU 2018:78) arguing for a “more assertive discursive positioning of the sector at the international scene” (Alexiadou & Rönnlund, 2022, p.515). In a recent government proposition (Gov. Bill 2024/25:60), there are explicit references to the country building prosperity and competitiveness on human capital, attracting the best international talent, internationalisation and innovation to support independent, high quality research and education.

For this to happen, the Proposition argues for higher degrees of competition between institutions and researchers for research funding, used as instrument to maximize competitiveness of research groups, and (assumed) strengthening of quality. But, it also acknowledges the importance of internationalisation for academic recruitment and promotions, as well as international research collaborations to retain and increase overall quality. Therefore, internationalisation is a keyword in the government HE policies and one that permeates the majority of policy initiatives. The government attempts to combine official narratives of neo-liberal and humanism-rooted ‘scientific globalism’ that views research and science as a universal good beyond national borders, with ‘scientific nationalism’ (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018:151). The latter promotes a competitiveness argument and the ways Swedish HE policy can maximise advantages from scientific research in the global race for knowledge-driven growth (ibid). Internationalisation is crucial for the political ambition to become a ‘knowledge nation’, especially important for a ‘small country’ with a very diverse economy and the ambition to foster innovation, and with a clear recognition that “in light of the new geopolitical landscape” international collaborations and research need to be conducted with caution (Gov. Bill 2024/25:60; SOU 2018:78).

Against this background the research funding agencies adopted a “responsible internationalisation” set of principles, originally developed by four HE actors (Shih, et al., 2020), intending to address challenges of an educational, ethical, leadership and administrative nature. Despite the increasing attention post-2019 to security threats regarding industrial/research espionage and concerns around infringements of academic freedom in Chinese-Swedish collaborations, Shih et al. (2023) find that official national policy remains fairly open. The management and control of international collaborations are the responsibility of individual HEIs, consistent with Swedish traditions of academic and institutional freedoms from state interference (ibid). The same applies to academic

staff mobility and the recruitment of international researchers who work in science fields, including the fields deemed sensitive for technological, medical, and military innovations.

The well-funded academic environment of Swedish HE is marked by rather limited outgoing mobility and moderate levels of incoming postdoctoral and staff mobility, and high shares of incoming doctoral researchers (and increasingly) ‘foreign born’ staff (UKÄ, 2025). Despite the policy ambitions for openness and excellence, Silander & Pietliä (2023) find a “contained diversity” among university staff in Sweden. The more prestigious academic positions remain homogeneous and more international/migrant staff are found in non-permanent staff categories (p.82). A reported preference for insular hiring practices where internal candidates end-up recruited to academic jobs hinders openness and internationalisation, and potentially also rigs employment law (Bienenstock et al., 2014; Myklebust, 2020).

Research on academic staff mobility in Sweden is rather scarce but, on the rise. Some studies examine the experience of mobility by disciplinary affiliation (Alexiadou et al., 2025; Öhländer et al., 2020) and there is reporting on the degree of inclusivity of Swedish academia to those international academics who are of diverse background in terms of race and ethnicity (Behtoui & Leivestad, 2019; Silander & Pietliä, 2023). Most of these studies report difficulties for international academics to establish careers in Swedish academia especially in the ‘soft’ research fields of social sciences and humanities, partly because of language barriers (Povrzanovic Frykman et al., 2023) and lack of existing social and research networks. But, all studies report challenges for ‘outsiders’ in relation to career advancement and progression, with particular added difficulties and subtle (and not so subtle) discrimination practices for academics of color (Behtoui & Leivestad, 2019).

These studies throw in sharp relief the tensions between open national and institutional discourses on mobility/internationalisation and the realities of mobility experiences of academics. The increasing securitisation of HE and wider politics adds to these tensions, but as our research suggests, opens up some new opportunities as well.

### **3. Methodology**

This article selectively draws on a large qualitative research study on internationalisation and academic mobility<sup>i</sup> that examined mobility and immobility decisions and experiences

in Swedish universities. The empirical material consists of in-depth interviews with 66 academics in the social and natural sciences (35 and 31 respectively), in two large comprehensive and research-intensive universities, sampling from the universities' social and natural science faculties. Drawing on the literature, our premise was that disciplinary affiliation, university location and characteristics influence career decisions related to mobility (Bojica et al., 2023; Tzanakou, 2021). Accordingly, we employed a cluster sampling strategy to capture these dimensions, resulting in a balanced sample of academics from across disciplinary and university contexts. We focused on individuals who had already earned a PhD and included participants at early, mid, and senior career stages. Within each disciplinary group, we selected both 'local' and 'international' academics, aiming for a roughly equal representation of male and female participants, as detailed in the table below.

**Table 1:** *Sample of interviews*

	University North (31 interviews)	University South (32 interviews)	Interviews by discipline
Natural Sciences	15 (10 Intern/ 7 women)	16 (7 Intern/ 9 women)	31 (Biology & Plant Science, Chemistry, Geology, Engineering, Physics)
Social Sciences	19 (10 Intern/ 9 women)	16 (6 Intern/ 8 women)	35 (Economics, Education, Management, Politics, Social Work, Sociology)
Total	66 academics		

The interviews explored the trajectories and patterns of cross-border and domestic mobility, career-decisions, personal and family considerations, and the rationales underpinning academics' decisions to be mobile, immobile, or return to their country of origin. These narratives were examined in relation to the national, institutional and discipline-specific contexts that frame mobility decisions and career development. The analytical process began with an inductive approach, identifying first-order themes that captured mobility experiences across different disciplines and universities. This initial coding was applied to a subset of transcripts and informed the development of second-order themes, more abstract units that built upon and synthesized the first-order findings. Subsequently, a more deductive phase followed, in which these second-order themes were systematically examined across the remaining transcripts to assess their relevance



and consistency. Examples of such second-order themes are: ‘nature of mobility’, ‘pull/push factors’, ‘disciplinary considerations’, ‘family and personal issues’, ‘career building’, ‘academic work environments’, among others (see also Alexiadou et al., 2025).

In the next and final stage of the analysis, the second-order themes were connected to the literature on mobility and incorporated in larger thematic constructions. For this article, I draw on three thematics that speak to the article’s focus on internationalisation and mobility in times of crises and securitization.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Building a career and professional learning

For most interviewees, both Swedish and international ones, academic mobility has been an important part of their career, usually during the PhD or postdoctoral stages, but also when mid-career academics consolidate their research careers. There is overall recognition that mobility is important and positive for the instrumental reason of constructing a good CV, especially important given the competitive nature of academic positions. Many of the interviewees highlighted the more substantial benefits of being mobile. These refer to two main areas of professional learning. First, *learning in relation to the discipline* itself: several academics describe new learning(s) around different dimensions of science, theory, and (mostly) methodology, formative in shaping academics’ research approach and thinking of how to be a scientist. Participating in specialised courses, post-doc projects and seminars, interacting with international researchers, and being an organic part of active, ‘top-tier’ academic communities, are discussed as having career-long benefits in research careers:

“I built-up my toolbox, learned different methodological approaches from the best in their field. That trip to California seriously enhanced my research” (Valentin, Social Science)

“Spending 3 years at Stanford was not just a career move, it was a career-defining move...

The way that I write, the way I do my data collection now, the way I analyze data is fundamentally different, and the way I theorize is different than what it was three years ago... also, that changed how I understand myself as part of the broader ecosystem in academia, the way I see myself as an academic, and, how I relate to practice” (Andreas, Social Science)

The second important part of learning concerns a wider understanding of *how to be an academic*, construct academic collaborative cultures, and how universities in different

national contexts operate. This provides a critical and reflective lens when academics compare their own ‘home’ institutional experiences to how things are done abroad. This is often described as a more diffuse or intangible form of learning but one that has important dimensions of organisational learning that may shape individual approaches to research, teaching or management, and potentially consequences for whole labs, departments or even larger units:

“Going for an extended period of time to other universities and laboratories you realize that the things you learned were not because they naturally had to be like that, they were just because this is what we always did” (Henrik, Natural Science)

“I have a much better understanding of the university as an institution. Right now, I’m running a program that includes five different institutions... I don’t think that I would be doing this as well if I didn’t understand how different places do things differently” (Agneta, Social Science)

“Meteorology is a small subject. I got a lot of collaborations and learning tools... also (learnt) how research, education, funding are organised elsewhere” (Greta, Natural Science)

These academic and organisational forms of learning are boosted by networking advantages one accumulates from extended mobilities or frequent shorter ones. These advantages consist of “*gaining international contacts*” (Mats, Natural Science), crucial for keeping up to speed with the latest developments in the field, communicating your own research projects and results, becoming a ‘familiar name’ that is important to potential future job recruitments and reviewing of academic journals, and the ever so important evaluation of research applications. These processes that many academics describe, describe the importance of mobility for developing the right kind of academic habitus and sense of belonging to “*a global community of scientists*” (Christof, Natural Science). Finally, amongst the many benefits of academic mobility, most academics we interviewed talk about development and resilience, both in terms of personal experiences and in connection to being a researcher:

“You need to see yourself out of your bubble, to see yourself in competition with others... to see what other people do, how other people cope with failures, difficulties, challenges. I think it is one of the most important things in research” (Ioanna, Natural Science)

Such comments have clear resonance with research that examines the consequences of an increasingly competitive and challenging global system of HE on the identities of individual academics. Even though they confirm most of the assumptions about positive mobility gains for individual careers, these narratives are moderated by extensive

identification of the ‘*other side*’ of academic mobility (Walter, Social Science), as shown in the next section.

## 4.2 Costs of mobility

The costs of mobility are described in *personal/affective* terms, but also in *professional/academic* ones. First, the most common theme that the mobile academics discuss refers to the anxiety and sense of loss people feel when they spend long time away from family and friends, and particularly in more permanent migration situations. In most cases, this brings the extra costs of frequent travel, and the complex arrangements many academics describe for taking care of elderly parents left behind. The costs are mostly of an emotional nature, as well as having economic and social dimensions, putting the affective into the center of the experience. Similar to research reported by Tzanakou (2021), mobility especially of a long-term nature often involves emotionally difficult decisions and life organisation that constrains academic, personal and social lives:

“...you leave pieces of yourself in different places. When I left Greece, I was missing Greece. Now I miss both Greece and London. So, it's bittersweet, that you always miss something, you can never have everything in the same place” (Ioanna, Natural Science)

“...In summertime, that's when I start really missing Australia because when I'm over there, I can say we'll go to that relative etc. Here I don't know anyone really outside of Stockholm. So, I feel ...what am I doing here? ” (Samantha, Social Science)

The research also identifies a range of professional costs, which vary significantly depending on career stage, the extent to which mobility has led to academic success, and the openness of the host HE environment. In few cases, international academics report feelings of being outsiders and transient in their current Swedish department, even when they have permanent positions. Language and cultural issues are the most common barriers reported, something that causes high anxiety and feelings of marginalisation or even exclusion:

“We still have most of the documents in Swedish. Even figuring out what you're required as a supervisor, you have to ask a lot of questions” (Veronica, Social Science)

“Compared to the Netherlands and Norway, the Swedish academic culture in Astronomy is not so international, although this has now changed quite a lot. When I came I was the first non-Swedish staff member ... all the official paperwork ...the university language is Swedish. And they insisted on this. So that meant for example that during board meetings if you couldn't speak Swedish or not so well, you had a severe disadvantage” (Jeroen, Natural Science)

For few of the interviewees, frequent mobilities is the consequence of job precarity - a feature prominent in the natural sciences organization of research. In some of these cases academics report multiple post-doctoral positions across many countries, and the feelings of *‘being unsettled’*, *‘feeling insecure’*, *‘tired’*, and *‘having no energy’* (Carmen, Ioanna, Natural Science), *‘having sacrificed too much’* (Faizal, Natural Science), including sacrificing the research career of one out of an academic couple (Alena, Frank, Jun, Natural Sciences). I followed some of these academics 2 years after the first interviews, and in most cases these individuals did manage to secure permanent academic positions in their home countries, but not all. The threat of being ‘locked out’ of your home HE setting as a result of early-stage mobility has been reported in the literature (Pustelnikovaite, 2021), and some of our interviewees seem to be very aware of it:

“there is also another danger, the person who goes abroad ends up outside of the groupings or the strategies set-up for those that stay” (Jonna, Social Sciences)

“what you realize is that people who have been always sitting at the university are the ones who get the position” (Carolina, Natural Science)

### 4.3 Global politics, new opportunities and threats

The shifting geopolitical environment over the last 5 years has had strong impacts on HE politics and policies, although its consequences are still not clear. The war in Ukraine, renewed tensions between China, Europe and the US, and the new US administration have produced a context of risks of economic and security nature that the EU and Sweden have connected to loss of strategic autonomy, infringement on intellectual property rights, and weakened competitiveness (Kushnir & Yazgan 2024; Shih et al., 2023). The Swedish government’s responsible internationalisation approach has concluded that *“international activities (in HE) can be conducted in a way that is as open as possible and as safe as necessary”* (UHR 2024). This context begins to be felt within the HE recruitment practices and to affect individual academics’ mobility. In selected repeated interviews from the original sample, and 3 new interviews with international academics, they point to the more negative undertones of such practices, but also to an unexpected field of opportunity:

“My postdoctoral research is on the field of nanotechnology and synthetic biology. They (Swedish university) asked me so many security questions in the interview. I had to reassure people I am not a Chinese spy. That I will not use my knowledge to produce

weapons systems (laughs)... I was surprised they gave me the job at the end” (Bo, Natural Science)

“Now (May 2025), with the Trump administration, we find that we can recruit post-doc researchers from China who in the past would have gone straight to the top US universities. Now, they do not even look at the US recruitment events – they just look to Europe. This is great for me. I am about to recruit a Chinese researcher to my lab, and I really hope she chooses to work with us” (Alena, Natural Science)

It is still too early to evaluate the effects of the new geopolitical realities on academic mobility and international collaboration. Still, this research suggests a possible shift in individual decisions and institutional practices as a result of such realities. This is consistent with von der Leyen’s recent speech to the EU ambassadors in La Sorbonne where she invited world scientists to “choose Europe” for building their careers, accompanied by the EU announcing half a billion euros scheme to attract global talent to Europe (von der Leyen, 2025).

## 5. Conclusion

This article contributes to a growing body of literature examining how universities and individual academics respond to rising expectations for mobility, set against the backdrop of intensifying geopolitical tensions reflected in higher education policy. The Swedish case illustrates how the government discursively frames internationalisation as significant for the country’s future economic prosperity and global standing (Gov. Bill 2024), aiming to transform HE into “a national political asset” (Alexiadou & Rönnberg, 2022:515). At the same time, Sweden seeks to balance this ambition with emerging concerns around security and the need for more responsible internationalisation practices.

While academic mobility remains a cornerstone of Sweden’s internationalisation narrative -central to building a research-intensive, knowledge-driven economy- it increasingly unfolds within a politically charged HE context, now viewed as a strategic knowledge domain (Tröhler, Piattoeva & Pinar, 2021). The interplay between national competitiveness and securitisation risks is shaping mobility in complex ways, with significant implications for both institutions and individual academics. This study’s findings align with research highlighting the benefits of international collaboration, particularly in Sweden-China (Shih & Forsberg, 2023) and Europe-US-Asia partnerships (Dusdal & Powell, 2021), where mobility fosters tangible and lasting academic ties.

However, recent policy shifts and overlapping crises have introduced serious challenges. Academics face mounting pressure to pursue cross-border mobility as a career imperative, yet the rewards, while potentially substantial, are not guaranteed. This article argues that academic mobility is best understood at the intersection of global and national policy developments and individual decision-making. Although mobility can offer professional and intellectual enrichment, it also entails considerable costs, including precarious employment, emotional strain, and professional sacrifices. Moreover, emerging securitisation concerns may lead to tighter, more centralised control over recruitment, even as discourses of ‘brain gain’ suggest new opportunities.

These dynamics have profound implications for scholars’ well-being and long-term career sustainability. In response, this article draws on Carney’s (2024) politics of hope, which envisions a future for HE grounded in alternative worldviews and infused with purpose. The deeper dimensions of internationalisation lie in its potential to enrich curricula, foster intercultural understanding, promote reciprocal knowledge exchange, and engage universities with pressing social and ethical issues (Ambagts-van Rooijen et al., 2024; Becker & Salajan, 2024; Stein, 2021). Beyond its instrumental value, mobility contributes to professional growth, intellectual openness, and the advancement of knowledge.

Importantly, the Swedish case offers valuable lessons for other European contexts. It highlights the need for governments to approach internationalisation not merely as an economic or strategic asset, but as a process that requires concerted policy efforts, policy coherence, and institutional support. Sweden and other countries navigating similar tensions between openness and security should develop reflective HE policies to balance competitiveness with responsibility, and to embed mobility within broader frameworks of academic integrity, social justice, and career sustainability.

Realising this vision requires national and institutional policies that support mobility while regulating exploitative practices such as precarity and insecurity, and resisting cultural marginalisation. This is not a naïve hope, but a strategic imperative for developing HE systems, both in Sweden and across Europe, that meet the social, humanistic, and economic expectations placed upon universities by governments, citizens, and society at large.

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<sup>i</sup> The project is titled ‘Internationalising HE: Challenges and opportunities for Universities and academics in Sweden’ and was supported by the Swedish Research Council (grant number 2017-03434).