

# Public Diplomacy and Academic Mobility in Sweden

The Swedish Institute and  
Scholarship Programs for Foreign  
Academics, 1938–2010

Andreas Åkerlund

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*Andreas Åkerlund*  
Uppsala, May 2016

# Introduction

The internationalization of higher education and research has developed into an important topic in education politics. The Bologna Process, the European Union's exchange programs, and the possibility to finance research through the European Commission's funding schemes, taken with the recent decision by the Swedish Government to charge international students tuition fees, have made internationalization a central concern for Swedish universities. The internationalization of universities is in fact a crucial factor for future development. Or, as the Swedish Higher Education Authority has put it, "Increased internationalization is considered a prerequisite for a positive development of the global economy."<sup>1</sup>

Within the vast field of possible internationalizations, scholarly mobility stands out as especially important. It is linked to scientific progress, largely because it is defined as a necessity for the exchange of knowledge. It is a common argument in Sweden that, because of its size, the country should pursue an active policy for the internationalization of the sciences in order to keep pace with international development and competition.<sup>2</sup> The competition angle is also evident in the Swedish policy to charge foreign students from outside the EU to study at Swedish universities. The underlying assumption in both cases is the existence of an international market in education and research.

The main problem with this market-oriented perspective is the assumption that the rationale behind the internationalization of universities—and, more specifically, international mobility—is supply and demand. The mantra in state policy documents and university prospectuses is that they want to attract the best students and researchers, and that this in turn will raise the quality of education

and research.<sup>3</sup> In a similar fashion, it is argued that Swedish researchers going abroad tend to choose the best universities or best research groups.<sup>4</sup> Yet another perspective is related to the labor market, where recruiting international students is seen as a way of attracting highly educated specialists into the Swedish workforce.<sup>5</sup>

Any critique of this picture of market-driven mobility has to start by questioning the element of choice. To what extent is it actually possible to choose where to go? Research and study abroad are costly undertakings and need to be funded.<sup>6</sup> This simple fact means that it is interesting to research the organizations that fund and administrate international mobility. Anyone who has searched for funding opportunities knows that there is anything but a free market. Scholarship offers normally come with well-defined rules on eligibility attached, and they are often concentrated on certain academic areas or for applicants from certain countries.

This means that scholarship-giving organizations not only make mobility possible, but they also structure the international flows of researchers and students. Inderjeet Parmar states that the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations in the US act as gatekeepers, deciding who can go where and who cannot.<sup>7</sup> Parmar's point is important because it directs attention towards the reasons for funding international mobility and the organizations' scholarship-giving practices. The briefest of surveys reveals that there is a variety of organizations—national and transnational, public and private—all with their own missions and rationales. It is clear, however, that a great many of these organizations do not only, or even primarily, exist to push back the barriers of science or to help researchers or students to a place at the most appropriate university. Not that they do not do this, but in many cases the primary aim is something else: promoting world peace through exchange, to “dominate the hearts and minds of the people of the world” as was the case during the Cold War,<sup>8</sup> or promoting international contacts between nations in general in a hearts and minds exercise, as a part of what is normally called public diplomacy. Looking back, it is therefore questionable whether the notion of an international education market or of global competition for the best researchers has been such a dominant idea. There have been plenty of reasons for promoting international mobility, not necessarily con-

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nected to the advancement of science or strengthening a country's position in a global education market. And even though the market may well dominate today, there is still the question of history, of path dependencies and institutional frames. Many existing organizations and scholarship schemes have their origin in other times, when other ideals dominated and when the political agenda differed from today's. The various forms taken by international academic exchange historically affect the way it is done today. And, moreover, the academic contacts and collaboration patterns established historically may very well still be relevant today.

To explain the existence and function of exchange schemes and scholarship programs is therefore at the same time to explain an important prerequisite for establishing and maintaining international contacts in academia. Unlike the works of Parmar—whose concerns are the actions of private foundations—this book deals with state-funded programs, but the idea of viewing exchange organizations as gatekeepers is similar. A focus on government programs is slightly different than looking at private interests, however, since government policies and politics probably have a more direct impact on how exchanges are carried out. In particular, what is generally referred to as public diplomacy—that is, the uses of culture and education as a foreign policy tool—and how this part of foreign policy functions in practice, is of great importance when understanding this phenomenon. The main aim of this book can therefore be said to be *to explain the impact of public diplomacy on international academic exchange*.

The empirical investigation was carried out on the scholarship schemes for foreign students and researchers managed by the Swedish entity for public diplomacy, the Swedish Institute (SI). Although Sweden must be considered a small and fairly peripheral state in international terms, its size is an advantage when it comes to carrying out a long-term quantitative evaluation of both policy and practice, as is the intent of this book. The relative smallness of the country, along with the fact that the same entity, the SI, has handled the government scholarship programs since 1945 and continues to do so now, makes it possible to grasp the overall development of scholarship programs as well as the long-term changes in the population of scholarship holders, without losing detail. Although specific to Sweden, the results of

the combined study of policy and practice, as well as how these two factors form specific groups of foreign academics, will surely be of interest to anyone interested in public diplomacy or academic internationalization in general and their mutual relationship in particular.

This book is thus a historical study of the state funding of academic exchange through scholarships for foreigners, distributed through the Swedish organization for public diplomacy, the SI. It is an attempt to historicize international academic exchange and to tie the international flow of students and scholars to the organizational structures that fund mobility. The main aim of the investigation is to show how these flows have changed over time, in accordance with the changes in institutional policy and state politics. This approach makes the relationship between the internationalization of academia and foreign policy visible, and makes it possible to discuss and investigate this relationship over time.

## Internationalization of higher education and research

### *Descriptive and normative internationalization*

One initial remark has to be made regarding the term “internationalization”. This buzzword has a double function when it comes to higher education and research. On the one hand, it describes “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education.”<sup>9</sup> One could reasonably add “and research” to that definition, but what is important is that this is a mere description of an ongoing process. The subject of the present book, scholarship programs, is just one of many aspects of this phenomenon. Following Jane Knight’s definition quoted above, one could differentiate between international, transnational, and global dimensions. The difference between the three is described as follows:

The term *international* emphasizes the notion of nation and refers to the relationship between and among different nations and countries. *Transnational* is used in the sense of across nations and does not specifically address the notion of relationships. *Transnational* is often used interchangeably and in the same way as *cross border*. *Global* on

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the other hand, refers to the worldwide in scope and substance and does not highlight the concept of nation.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the word internationalization is by no means neutral in present or historical discussions on the aims and ideals of higher education and research. As will become clear over the course of this book, a higher degree of internationalization in higher education, however defined, has normally been, and still is, regarded a positive development and something to actively work for. The term thus has a double function. It is used both analytically, describing the ongoing process of integrating an international dimension into higher education and research, and normatively, as any movement towards adding international dimensions is per se declared as being positive and desirable.<sup>11</sup> As a political buzzword, internationalization is especially important on the national level, both as a rhetorical tool for raising funds or political support, and as an umbrella term for a variety of politically desirable reforms in higher education and research.<sup>12</sup>

This last observation highlights that the idea of academic internationalization being of great importance for higher education and research is part of a national discussion. Mikael Börjesson has pointed out that the existence of internationalization measures in the university sector can be understood as reflecting a conflict between social groups and institutions on a national level.<sup>13</sup> This not only strengthens the view of internationalization as a way to bolster one's own position in the national field of higher education (which in itself is sufficient motivation for doing so), but it also points towards the importance of researching subnational spaces, such as universities or research facilities, in order to understand globalization processes. To follow Saskia Sassen, the process of globalization serves to strengthen relationships or cross-border connections between the subnational and the supranational.<sup>14</sup> Sassen illustrates this with her investigation of the "global city", but one could just as well focus on the idea and practices of the "global university".

The present study does not focus on the subnational level, although Swedish exchange programs have probably had an important function in the formation of cross-border contacts and stable international networks in and between academic institutions. Instead, the primary

concern is with the state level. Although globalization or internationalization might have led to a strengthening of subnational entities, the state still plays an important role as it both makes international contacts possible and organizes them in a certain way. Sassen refers to the state, in relation to globalization, as an “interface between national and supranational forces”,<sup>15</sup> and Broady and Börjesson recommend using the term “international” in cases where the nation-state legitimizes—or one could say, actively contributes to the existence of—the international order. Meanwhile, “transnational” would refer to cross-border phenomena taking place without the interference of nation-states.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, the present study concerns international contacts rather than transnational contacts. Government-organized exchange programs and state-funded scholarships are clearly a case where a state, in this case Sweden, is working actively for the cross-border movement of persons.

### *Historical perspectives on internationalization*

Research on the internationalization of higher education is a vast field. One of the reasons for this is that any number of themes and practices can fit under this umbrella term. Language and language teaching is one of them, the transfer of educational concepts and methods another,<sup>17</sup> and the international experiences of students and staff a third.<sup>18</sup> The central topic of this book is the international mobility of students and researchers.

Descriptions of the present situation tend to highlight the rapid marketization of higher education that has taken place over the last thirty years or so. One dominant perspective has been that universities compete in an international education market.<sup>19</sup> Especially in countries that accept a large number of international students—above all the US, the UK, and Australia—recruiting students from abroad is a way for universities to compensate for funding deficits, and for states to gain additional revenue. Higher education is increasingly becoming an important export product through the establishment of international branch campuses, while international students contribute to the economies of the countries where they elect to study. It is estimated that foreign students contributed \$18.8 billion to the

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US economy in the academic year 2009–10 alone.<sup>20</sup> Thus at present, higher education is increasingly seen as a commodity which can be traded freely in a global education market to whoever is willing to pay for it.<sup>21</sup> This is a perspective that has also found its advocates in the Swedish government. Here foreigners used to have the same access to higher education as nationals, which, in combination with a large number of courses and programs in English, made the country attractive. However, the introduction of tuition fees for free movers from countries outside the EU in 2010 caused a drop of 73 percent in foreign applications to Swedish Master's programs for the academic year 2011–12.<sup>22</sup> It is obvious that the country lost much of its competitive advantage when students began to pay tuition fees. Sweden is thus a good example of how the marketization of higher education reinforces global inequality, for as Philip G. Altbach puts it:

Open Markets, at least in higher education, reinforce the inequalities that already exist. If educational borders are completely open, the strongest and wealthiest education providers will have unlimited access. Countries and institutions that cannot compete will find it difficult to flourish. This means that developing countries and smaller industrialized nations will be at considerable disadvantage.<sup>23</sup>

Altbach's reflection indicates the importance of history and the existence of inequality before the emergence of a global education market. At the very beginning of this process lie the colonialism and imperialism of the nineteenth century, which not only institutionalized the economic inequalities between the global North and the Global South, but also the large European languages as *lingua franca* for international communication, and thus for education and research. This benefits certain universities and regions to this day.<sup>24</sup> The British Council has projected that in 2020 there will be 5.8 million places for international students in the world, 45 percent of which will be in English-speaking countries.<sup>25</sup> There is also a geographical dimension to this inequality, as students and researchers mainly travel from the Global South to the Global North.<sup>26</sup> This south–north brain drain is nothing new, although the commodification of education has given this problem a new dimension. The brain drain discussion is instead a result of the Cold War, and was first raised in the context of inter-

national aid and support for education systems in less developed countries.<sup>27</sup>

History and historically established hierarchies play an important role in understanding the structure of academic mobility today. It is therefore clear that the processes now called internationalization are not a recent phenomenon. This does not make it necessary to search for the historical roots of present-day mass mobility in ancient Greece, ancient China, or medieval Europe, as some scholars do.<sup>28</sup> There are huge differences between these societies and the modern era, especially in higher education and research. Regarding international mobility, there are some important differences to earlier epochs. The first is the variety in intertwined political, economic, cultural, and scientific rationales that impel internationalization, as described by Hans de Wit.<sup>29</sup> De Wit's model will be discussed in detail further below, but the fact that internationalization has been and still is driven by such distinct forces as foreign and security policy, intra-academic rationales of communication and status, or economic and occupational considerations makes it a stable feature during the twentieth century, which has been of great importance for academic mass mobility. The second is a result of the first, and it is the sheer number of students, teachers, and researchers spending a shorter or longer time at facilities in other countries as a result of these intertwined policies. The third is the resulting establishment of stable structures for mobility. Long-term funding schemes, international organizations promoting and facilitating mobility, and the adaptation of national university systems to foreign students and scholars are all modern phenomena.<sup>30</sup>

This notion is a strong argument for investigating not only the rationale behind internationalization, but more specifically the organizations active in the field of international academic mobility. A closer look reveals that these actors are far from homogenous. There are private foundations, state agencies, and international organizations, all funding and organizing international mobility for students and established scholars alike. In an international perspective it is possible to establish a genesis of this field where North American philanthropic foundations such as the Carnegie Corporation (1911), the Rockefeller Foundation (1913), and the Ford Foundation (1936) were among the earliest initiatives to further international mobility.<sup>31</sup> Of

these, the importance of the Rockefeller Foundation for international contacts in science has been the object of numerous studies.<sup>32</sup> During the Cold War, North American foundations grew to be important global actors in the field of internationalization and knowledge transfer.<sup>33</sup> Philanthropic foundations also play an important role for the Swedish–North American exchange. The US-based American–Scandinavian Foundation (1911) and its equivalent body in Sweden, the Sweden–America Foundation (1919), both grant scholarships for students and researchers.<sup>34</sup>

State-funded international exchange also has a long history. One example is Germany, where the funding of academic exchange was organized by the state with the establishment of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung for international exchange in 1925. This foundation was merged with university exchange services to form the DAAD in 1931.<sup>35</sup> However, it was during the Cold War that state-sponsored international exchange programs really took off. The US Fulbright Program is certainly the most famous of these.<sup>36</sup> There are also numerous other programs, such as bilateral German–French or US–German exchange programs<sup>37</sup> or the bilateral US–Soviet “Agreement on Exchanges in Cultural, Technical and Educational fields”, also known as the Lacy–Zarubin agreement.<sup>38</sup>

These examples make it plain that the motives behind state-funded exchange programs and the organizations handling them should be sought in the field of foreign policy and international relations, rather than in the field of higher education and research. According to Volkhard Laitenberger, the aim of the DAAD was to “increase Germany’s national prestige abroad”<sup>39</sup> by inviting foreign academics. This was a clear attempt to mobilize German science for foreign policy purposes. The same can be said about the importance of the Fulbright Program for establishing good relations between the US and other countries,<sup>40</sup> or the importance of US–German exchanges for the transfer of democratic ideals.<sup>41</sup> One motive behind the German–French exchange after 1945 was to normalize relations between the two countries,<sup>42</sup> whereas the Lacy–Zarubin agreement should be understood as a way to normalize strained US–Soviet relations.<sup>43</sup>

In investigating state-funded organizations active in academic exchange, it is thus very important to analyze the political setting

of which they are a part and the foreign policy assignments they are thought to cover. This is crucial for the right understanding of state-sponsored exchange at a given historical time, or as Giles Scott-Smith put it “exchanges, however educational and ‘apolitical’ they might be presented, inescapably operate within the broader political environment of international affairs.”<sup>44</sup>

*The relation between higher education and foreign policy*

The scholarship programs and the public diplomacy organizations investigated in this book are not only interesting in their own right, of course. They also link higher education to foreign policy in a particular way. It is obvious that the physical spaces of the universities and higher education and research as an activity both play a very important role for state-sponsored academic exchange in the public diplomacy context. These are the very places where foreigners are to get to know their host country; where they are supposed to imbibe not only academic knowledge, but also the values and cultural achievements of the country. This calls for a theoretical underpinning for how to understand this relation.

Mitchell G. Ash has in various articles presented the idea that the relationship between modern science and politics should be investigated as an exchange of resources, where state actors who control mainly economic and organizational resources may distribute these in exchange for support from the scientific profession. The resources that may be offered in exchange from academia are cognitive resources, such as legitimization or support for political programs, or personal resources, such as commissioned research or other form of expert roles.<sup>45</sup>

The relationship between academia on the one hand and the state administration and politics on the other can thus be understood as that between two fields in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense. The academic field is in this theoretical perspective the social world of science, in which the actors carry out their conflicts over research results, the nature of scientific knowledge, and what it is legitimate to research and what not.<sup>46</sup> One dominant form of capital in the academic field is ascribed symbolic capital—the ability to conduct science, as seen by others.<sup>47</sup>

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The other dominant form of capital in the academic field is the one of greater importance in the present investigation. The autonomy of the academic field is relative, and therefore dependent on what happens in other fields such as legislation, policymaking, and, of course, the funding of education and research. This other form of capital is what Bourdieu refers to as “institutional scientific capital”—that is, power over the economic and institutional frames, or what can also be understood as the reproduction mechanisms of scholarship. These might be university positions and research grants, but also publishing channels, gatekeeper functions for learned societies and academies, and so on. This capital has what Bourdieu calls a tyrannical function in the academic field, since its origin and accumulation lie outside the field itself.<sup>48</sup>

This asymmetric relationship between universities and state, and its practical outcome for academic exchange, is discussed by Margaret O’Mara in an article on the role of foreign students in a US educational context. She defines US universities during the Cold War as “parastatal agents”, and points to the “permanent streams of state funding for educational exchange”, which in turn benefitted certain organizations such as the Institute of International Education (IIE).<sup>49</sup> This example is a good illustration of the impact that funding and organizational support—in short, the institutional, scholarly capital—have on the structure of universities.

Yet O’Mara’s article also illustrates another important aspect of this model, which is the limited influence of US academia over the exchange programs they were a part of:

By the 1950s international educational exchange had become firmly positioned as a political institution over which a constellation of public and private interests had a controlling stake. Higher education institutions themselves were only one of several in this thicket, and their voices—with the exception of a few high-level administrators who already had the ear of Washington—rarely played a controlling role in setting national policy or shaping the prevailing discourse about the uses of the foreign student. This was left to the presidents and Congresses who authorized such programs, the NGOs and foundations that administrated and funded them, and the policy advocates who