



# Rationale for international cooperation in an increasingly polarised world



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## Preface

The world is changing rapidly and becoming increasingly polarised, complex, and uncertain. These changes are affecting many aspects of academia, and academic internationalisation in particular. To understand these trends and related challenges as well as opportunities, STINT in 2020 established an International Advisory Board comprising both Swedish and international experts on higher education and research.

The role of the Advisory Board is to provide expert recommendations on current issues and discuss future developments of relevance to STINT's mission. These recommendations cover academic developments within education and research, but also relevant non-academic aspects that will impact academia at large.

In 2020, the Advisory Board was tasked by the STINT's Board of Directors to compile a foresight study, *Foresight 2030*, on the role of academic internationalisation in the next decade. Since the release of the report, geopolitical polarisation has intensified further, leading to increased scrutiny and questioning of international academic cooperation.

There is a concern that framing research as a security issue may undermine global research collaboration and hamper the rapid development of science seen in recent decades. This happens at a stage when international academic cooperation is needed more than ever to solve the global challenges faced by the world. Thus, the Advisory Board has been tasked by STINT to address the rationale for international cooperation in an increasingly polarised world.

This report presents the discussions of the Advisory Board, which consists of

- Dr Agneta Bladh, former Chair, Swedish Research Council
- Prof. Bertil Andersson, former President, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
- Prof. Jason E. Lane, President and Chief Executive Officer, National Association of System Heads (NASH), USA
- Dr Nelson Torto, former Executive Director, the African Academy of Sciences, Kenya, and now Senior Government Official, Government of Botswana, Botswana
- Prof. William Brustein, former Vice President for Global Strategies and International Affairs, West Virginia University, USA.

The Advisory Board is chaired by Dr Bladh. Mr Albin Gaunt, Policy Manager, STINT, has served as the Advisory Board's secretary.

The analysis, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the Advisory Board and STINT does not take a position on these. It is our hope that this report may serve as a point of departure for discussions among the scientific community, university leaderships, and policy makers in Sweden and abroad.

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*Stockholm, February, 2024*

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## The global context

The world continues to experience significant changes in international collaboration and attitudes towards academia, as observed in the past decade. A number of global challenges of varying kinds deeply affect societies across the world, including academia. Environmental concerns and the COVID-19 pandemic have limited the desire to travel. On the other hand, rapid technological development has provided tools facilitating frequent contact across the globe for those with access to such technology. Global dynamics previously dominated by the USA have been reshaped by geopolitical and economic developments. These include the rise of China in several fields, for example its establishment as a strong research nation, and the formation of a multipolar, but not multilateral, world order. The logic of international collaboration as providing a way to more effectively solve common challenges has, to some extent, been replaced by a zero-sum rationale. Populist and nationalistic sentiments, partly in reaction to migration patterns, are negatively affecting international collaboration and mobility in various countries. For the first time in decades, there is war in Europe with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

There is a new multipolarity in geopolitics. We are witnessing the coalescing of nations into at least two major geopolitical alignments: a China-led bloc, and a US/Western bloc. At least two decades saw the rise of Western hegemony under the guise of globalisation, with nations such as Russia and China seeking to engage within that structure. However, that globalisation is fracturing. China is developing an extensive trade consortium and invests globally in infrastructure as part of what is called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Many countries, including those involved in the initiative, are sending increasing numbers of students to China to study. In fact, China is currently home to the largest number of international branch campuses in the world, thereby using other nations' academic capital to educate its own students and recruit more foreign students to its shores. In addition, China is also exporting its own higher education system to strategically important areas, particularly across nations that are focal points for the BRI, by establishing branch campuses and other forms of transnational education. Interestingly, the Western bloc seems to use the G7 as a platform for discussing academic values and norms.<sup>1</sup>

A loosely affiliated group of nations, not bound by specific alliances, often pursue their individual self-interest and occasionally align with one or the other of the

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<sup>1</sup> 2023 G7 Science and Technology Ministers' Meeting in Sendai (cao.go.jp)

major blocs. Key players in this non-aligned group are India, Indonesia, South Africa, Nigeria, and Brazil. Some of these states are members of the growing BRICS+ organisation which some view as a geopolitical rival to the G7.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and claim to a new security order with random loyal states comparable to the days of the Soviet Union, along with the USA's uncertain support of NATO, has contributed to geopolitical shifts within Europe as well. The European Union has sharpened its focus on defence matters and supporting Ukraine. NATO has come to the fore in supporting Ukraine, with Finland and probably Sweden joining the alliance. Such geopolitical shifts have implications for academic and research collaborations both within the EU and NATO as well as outside these alliances. The current circumstances pose challenges to scientific inquiry and international collaboration.

Arguably governments care about academic internationalisation for three main reasons: economic development, public diplomacy, and national security. Many governments increasingly view internationalisation efforts through the lens of national and economic security. However, allowing national security concerns to overshadow the positive aspects of international collaboration may restrict researchers' access to the research front, jeopardise the viability of the innovation ecosystem, and diminish the role of academia in public diplomacy efforts.

## The Swedish context

Internationally and historically, Sweden has been lauded for its commitment to multilateralism and human rights as well as humanistic and solidaric values. The country has been an active participant in organisations such as the United Nations, for example by serving on the UN Security Council and being deeply involved in various UN missions. The nation also prioritises humanitarianism and has been ranked among the top global donors of development aid relative to its gross national income. Furthermore, its advocacy for human rights, gender equality, and climate sustainability has positioned Sweden as a progressive voice on the global stage. However, Sweden's reputation has lately undergone significant changes, especially in the Muslim world.<sup>2</sup> This, together with a probable NATO membership, marks a departure from its former image as an open, tolerant, and neutral nation.

As a medium-sized country Sweden punches above its weight economically. The country has been highly dependent on exports stemming from innovations and inventions as well as processing of its natural resources. Brands like IKEA, Spotify, and Volvo give it substantial global influence. A considerable share of internationally successful entrepreneurs from Sweden have started their businesses in, or in close association with, academic environments.

Sweden's EU membership influences its international standing. The EU has emerged as a strong driving force for international cooperation in research. Its Global Approach to Research and Innovation<sup>3</sup> sets out a strategy for international cooperation focusing on fundamental values and principles arguing for a level playing field in the international context.<sup>4</sup> For Sweden and Swedish universities the importance of EU instruments and actions will likely increase as means for international collaboration.

Close collaboration with its Nordic neighbours through the Nordic Council further solidifies Sweden's regional influence, making the country a key player both in Europe and on the global stage. Nordic cohesiveness will probably be further strengthened when all Nordic countries are NATO members.

Sweden has also long been a leader in advancing engagement in and respect for scientific inquiry around the world. The primary objective of internationalisation,

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<sup>2</sup> A large percentage of recent immigrants to Sweden are Muslims. However, certain individuals have misused Sweden's freedom of speech and religion to humiliate Muslims, which in turn has led to strong reactions in several Middle Eastern countries. <https://si.se/sverigebylden-i-mellanostern-nordafrika-och-asien-har-forsamrats-men-en-majoritet-ar-fortsatt-positiv/>

<sup>3</sup> Global approach to research and innovation – European Commission (europa.eu)

<sup>4</sup> International cooperation in research and innovation (europa.eu)



as stipulated by the Swedish Higher Education Act, is to ensure and increase the quality of higher education and research. Being connected to the research front is critical to improving the quality of higher education and research. Sweden already stands out for the number of research publications produced involving international collaborators, and thus has a solid foundation for strengthening and diversifying collaboration patterns.

The most notable asset in this area may be the Nobel Prize, which is the best-known global recognition of scientific inquiry. Why does the Nobel Prize enjoy prime status among academic rewards? One answer may be that it was the first truly international prize. The UK Royal Society primarily extends awards to scholars from the UK and the Commonwealth, while the French Academy mainly awards French scholars. Alfred Nobel's 1895 will stipulated that the prize should be awarded to the worthiest recipient, irrespective of whether he/she was Scandinavian.<sup>5</sup> Today, the Nobel Prize is firmly established as the top international award, thus putting Sweden on the global science map.

From business and industry to international relations to academic engagement, Sweden has benefited from and been a significant leader in many internationalisation efforts. It is with this understanding of Sweden's history that we present our arguments for the ongoing importance of internationalisation in general and for Sweden in particular.

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<sup>5</sup> Much like today, this was an era of growing nationalism. Upset by its giving money to foreigners, the Swedish king stated that the Nobel Foundation had acted unpatriotically and therefore boycotted the first Nobel ceremony awards. The Nobel Foundation ignored the royal protests.

## Examples of crucial international academic cooperation

The COVID-19 pandemic brought us many things. A particular highlight was that it showcased the important effects of internationalisation. It highlighted how a global challenge, such as the pandemic, could impact all nations, leaving no part of the world untouched. More importantly, it also underscored the power of international cooperation, with political leaders and scientists joining forces to battle the pandemic. This collaborative effort aimed to ensure widespread (though, at times, inequitable) access to shared data and the collaborative development of tests, vaccines, and pharmaceuticals. In fact, research has shown significant international engagement in COVID-19; scientists in at least 128 countries published papers on the topic, with international collaboration (measured by joint publications) increasing significantly as the pandemic progressed.<sup>6</sup> This willingness to collaborate across national borders allowed the rapid development of medical and public health responses to counter the outbreak.

For nearly a millennium internationalisation has been a hallmark of higher education. Students and scholars would travel between countries to pursue advanced learning at the small number of universities scattered across Europe, the Middle East and beyond. The earlier aims of internationalisation were primarily academic, focusing on expanding academic opportunities and enriching educational experiences. Yet inventions are seldom the products of isolation, as evidenced by a few historical examples:

- In the 13th century, the Maragheh Observatory served as a hub for scholars from the Islamic world specialising in mathematics, science, and astronomy. Through collaborative research, these individuals contributed to advancements in the Ptolemaic system.
- In the mid-15th century, Johannes Gutenberg revolutionised printing by combining several innovations: movable metal type (inspired by 13th-century block printing on wood), papermaking from China (transmitted via Arabs to 12th-century Spain), the Flemish technique of oil painting (providing printers' ink), and the German practice of casting and locking metal type into a wooden press.
- The Struve Geodetic Arc, a collaborative effort between Russian, Swedish, and Norwegian scientists from 1816 to 1855, involved a series of geodetic measurements. These measurements significantly contributed to a more precise understanding of the Earth's shape and size.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8250802/>

- The Solvay Conferences, starting in 1911, are global gatherings where leading physicists convene to discuss and advance fundamental questions in physics. These conferences have been of profound scientific importance, fostering collaborations among scientists such as Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Niels Bohr, and Robert Oppenheimer and thereby contributing significantly to key advancements in modern physics.

Today, Europe remains a locus of international mobility and international research collaboration both within the EU and across the world. However, the aims are often broader, encompassing social justice and human rights issues, economic competitiveness, employability, citizenship, space, science, and diplomatic relations. Higher education institutions are increasingly seen as actors for advancing these aims and contributing to the resolution of complex international challenges such as climate change, public health, and social inequality.

- Many universities worldwide engage in collaborative doctoral programmes where a PhD candidate is jointly supervised by faculty members from different institutions. These programmes encourage the exchange of expertise and resources by providing doctoral students with diverse academic experiences. Such collaborations often result in joint degrees and research outputs that contribute to global knowledge sharing.
- The Bologna Process is a collaborative European effort to create a common higher education area. It aims to facilitate student mobility, improve the quality of higher education, and enhance cooperation among universities. The process involves the adoption of comparable degree structures, credit systems, and quality assurance standards across participating countries.
- National Research and Education Networks (NRENs)<sup>7</sup> have been established and offer subsidised internet services dedicated to supporting research and education needs. These networks are for example grouped geographically: East and Southern Africa, North Africa, West and Central Africa, Asia Pacific, North America, Canada, Caribbean, Europe, the Nordic countries, the Middle East, and Central Asia.
- The COVID-19 pandemic could be handled successfully because of cooperation, communication, and data sharing between researchers across the world.
- Governments and international organisations are adopting a unified approach that recognises the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., the Swedish University Computer Network (SUNET).

health. In early 2021, the World Health Organization and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization initiated a One Health High-Level Expert Panel to guide partners and inform evidence-based decision-making on related matters. Global collaboration in One Health aims to curb the spread of zoonotic diseases, which constitute over half of emerging infectious diseases.

In this light it is especially important to sustain collaborations with large research actors such as China. We must remember what is gained through such collaborations and what might be lost if they were halted. Even now, there are countless examples of collaborations between Europe and China in areas such as clean energy, neurology, space, and water and soil conservation.

## Challenges and opportunities facing Swedish international academic cooperation

As Sweden is a country deeply emerged in globalisation, it is also profoundly affected by the shifting geopolitical trends described above. These trends, which in some ways signify a break with globalisation, have led to a certain hesitancy or reluctance regarding collaboration with countries that differ politically or culturally from Sweden. The war in Ukraine has led to restrictions on collaboration with Russia and Belarus. Similarly, the media have focused on national security regarding cooperation with China, leading researchers to feel that it is too complicated or risky to work with Chinese partners. While we understand why such engagements are being questioned, cooperation (albeit responsibly) with the best research environments is paramount. Higher education has long been an avenue for continuing engagements with nations when other avenues are obstructed.

The current politically polarised and complex domestic climate affects universities. The focus on external risks and security considerations may lead universities and researchers to reduce international cooperation with certain countries. International scientific networks will contract, subsequently impeding scientific progress. This will have adverse effects on scientific quality and development, as international cooperation in science is crucial for solving global challenges.

Since it produces less than 2% of world publications it is especially important for Sweden to remain open to international collaboration with many other countries, as it exponentially expands Sweden's research capacity and productivity, which increases its economic stability. These efforts require the establishment and sustenance of robust links with both longstanding partners with strong research capacities and new partners with evolving and growing research capacity. Additionally, collaborating with partners that bring different perspectives and innovations is essential in renewing and upgrading Sweden's own innovation system. Arguably internationalisation maximises investments in research through synergies and by sharing ideas and resources.

Restricting internationalisation to like-minded countries in the West will limit Sweden's capacity as a knowledge nation. Therefore, it is vital to reaffirm the importance of internationalisation in economic development and public diplomacy.

### **Academic internationalisation boosts the economy**

The internationalisation of higher education plays an important role in fostering Sweden's economic competitiveness. Extensive evidence exists to show that

knowledge economies are built on the intellectual talent of the nation, including the ability to advance new innovations. The recruitment of international students and scholars adds new net intellectual capacity to the innovation system and they also serve as important intermediaries between nations. International research partnerships expand Sweden's capacity to innovate and advance new lines of research. Such cooperation reaches beyond academia – the business and industry sectors benefit both from research directly impacting their activities and from indirect research impact through innovations and life-saving discoveries that also create jobs and improve livelihoods.

Emphasising internationalisation can contribute to international understanding as well as cultural enrichment. The knowledge, cultural understanding and broader perspectives students and scholars obtain when studying or working in another country are valuable not only to themselves but also to their universities as well as future employees and employers.

Because of Sweden's high export dependence – exports constitute more than 50% of GDP – companies need employees with international competence and mindsets. Large multinational companies recruit staff from around the world while many small and medium-sized Swedish companies also have strong international links. To date there has been little coordination between the needs of these businesses and the internationalisation strategies of universities. In fact, the country's business sector is profoundly globalised, much more so than its higher education sector. Internationalisation should be higher on the Swedish higher educational agenda than at present, included both on curricula and in the form of mobility, thus promoting multicultural intelligence. Increased academic collaboration, particularly with countries strategically important to Swedish companies, might support and strengthen Sweden as a nation. It is therefore worth considering business and industry as partners in promoting internationalisation in research.

It is crucial to develop forward-looking strategies that emphasise the value-added contributions of international collaboration. Moreover, higher education must prioritise civic responsibility. Higher education leaders can and should make the case that international education can play a key role in addressing local and regional community challenges while providing new growth opportunities. Institutions need to commit to and promote an inclusive, multilayered network of community, where business and industry, non-profit organisations, and other university partners are dedicated to addressing critical local and global issues through focused, multidimensional engagement and collaboration in research, teaching, and service on a global stage. There are several examples of civic partnerships in the Eu-

ropean University Alliances around Europe. Many Swedish universities are part of these alliances, and these could help facilitate a broader international development in Sweden. Universities might also improve their local and regional communities by partnering with institutions with a similar local and regional context.

Overall, the path forward for international education lies in abandoning the sole focus on student mobility and embracing a more comprehensive and proactive approach that highlights broader contributions to society and addresses innovative strategies to demonstrate the value-added contributions of international collaboration. This can be achieved by involving both businesses and local communities in various research and educational efforts, thus giving the public evidence of the societal benefits of international collaboration.

### **The special significance of Africa**

The African continent is unique and diverse in several aspects, including demography, vulnerability to climate change, terrorist activity, huge levels of unemployment, use of ICT, and economic growth that still depends on its natural endowments. By the year 2100, 8 of 10 people in the world will live in either Asia or Africa; however, the African continent has an increasing population, while that of Asia is decreasing.<sup>8</sup> By 2050, about 40% of all children (18 and under) in the world will live in Africa. This may have a profound effect on both cultural and technological development in the future, as young people often are the drivers behind such progress. Technological development is interesting as many countries in Africa have leapfrogged phases experienced by Western countries. Results from such leapfrogging can also contribute to the renewal and upgrading of the Swedish innovation system.

While developmental aid and foreign investment in Africa have traditionally come from the Western world, such as the USA, UK, EU and many EU member states, growing awareness of Africa's future strategic importance has markedly expanded such support from other corners. China has invested heavily in many nations across Africa as part of its BRI and is now the largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the continent as well as Africa's largest trade partner. India has also targeted the extension of its soft power in Africa through expansion of its own FDI in the continent as well as encouraging the establishment of international branch campuses of its well-regarded Indian Institutes of Technology.

At the same time, African countries are asserting their independence and rejecting

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations: World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results. UN DESA/POP/2021/TR/NO.3

external interference in their friendships and alliances, drawing inspiration from Nelson Mandela's stance on self-determination. This has been demonstrated by African countries' support of Russia or their refusal to condemn Russia as an aggressor. France's influence in Africa is waning. Recent West African coups has put France in an unfamiliar position, since African countries clearly desire to cut the umbilical cord. Some nations have even begun to push back against some of the predatory practices of Chinese actors, such as Nigeria's suspension of illegal mining practices. The evolving engagement of Russia, China, India, the USA, the EU, France and others in Africa highlights the need for new types of relationships and collaborations.

The EU sees great potential in the African Union (AU) as a trading and general strategic partner, not least in the fields of research and education. Swedish universities urgently need to grasp opportunities to build on existing relationships and actively contribute to the evolving AU–EU Innovation Agenda. With support from STINT and other Swedish funders, many Swedish universities already have longstanding commitments and infrastructures in Africa. Earlier support of research and research education from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in several African countries has also contributed to academic links between African and Swedish scholars. Swedish universities stand the chance to play a more active role in developing strategic approaches to internationalisation in partnership with African countries that prioritise economic development, job creation, and sustainable growth. Africa's youthful population presents both opportunities and challenges. Collaboration should focus on education and knowledge exchange, address youth unemployment, and foster entrepreneurial skills for self-sustainability.

### **Academia advances public diplomacy and science diplomacy**

The concept of soft power, coined by political scientist Joseph Nye, refers to the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion. Public diplomacy is one way in which a nation may utilise soft power to advance its interests. International education sits at the nexus of soft power and public diplomacy. A university's international activities are an inherent component of a nation's soft power as those activities reflect on the nation's legitimacy, either positively or negatively. In some cases, nations have gone so far as to intentionally leverage such efforts to advance national interests.

Educational exchange programmes, international research collaborations, and cultural interactions fostered by universities can serve as potent tools of soft power, helping to build goodwill and mutual understanding among nations. The



Swedish Institute's scholarship programmes have had these aims since the establishment of its first programme in 1938.<sup>9</sup> These exchanges have proven particularly useful when other forms of collaboration with countries are limited. Sweden for instance sustained academic exchange with South Africa during the boycott, while the USA engaged in collaborative space research with the USSR well before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Higher education contributes to a nation's soft power by helping to build international goodwill and influence. Students who have a positive experience in Sweden may become lifelong ambassadors for the country, for instance by entering business relationships, joining Swedish companies, or promoting Swedish culture and initiatives in their home countries. This extended network can serve Sweden's public diplomacy interests in the long run. Educational exchanges and collaborations can provide Sweden with a platform to promote its values, culture, and global outlook.

The well-known US-sponsored Fulbright Program, established in 1946 to foster intercultural understanding after World War II, has supported nearly 400,000 participants globally to study, teach, or conduct research abroad. Notably 41 Fulbrighters have served as prime ministers, including the UK's Rishi Sunak, Niger's Mahamadou Ouhoumoudou, and Belgium's Alexander De Croo. The Russian Alexander Yakovlev, who played a significant role in Gorbachev's reform programme of glasnost and perestroika, was also a Fulbright scholarship holder.

Today, Germany's DAAD, the British Council, Russia's Russkiy Mir Foundation, and the Chinese International Education Foundation, which organises the Confucius Institute programme, all serve similar roles in building international relations and extending their nation's culture and influence into foreign environments via educational partnerships. Some of these programmes have faced scrutiny because of geopolitical tensions. Russia for example suspended British Council operations amid tensions between the two countries. More recently, the war in Ukraine and increasing tension with China have led the EU to sanction Russkiy Mir and many Western countries to suspend the operation of Confucius Institutes.

The internationalised campus can be a microcosm of the global village. When students from diverse backgrounds and cultures sit in the same classrooms, debate in the same forums, and collaborate on the same projects, prejudices wane and bridges of understanding may be built. International students bring diversity and different viewpoints to campus, enriching the educational experience for domestic students as well. However, there are also examples where international conflicts are brought onto campus, thereby posing difficult choices for university admin-

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<sup>9</sup>This has been described in Andreas Åkerlund, *Public Diplomacy and Academic Mobility in Sweden* (2016).

istrations on how they are handled.

A core component of academia's role in public diplomacy is science diplomacy. This multifaceted approach can take various forms, such as *Science in Diplomacy*, where scientific expertise informs diplomatic decisions; *Diplomacy for Science*, focusing on diplomatic efforts to foster scientific collaborations; and *Science for Diplomacy*, where science serves as a bridge to improve diplomatic relations. Collaborations like the International Space Station involve multiple nations in scientific research and exemplify how science can transcend geopolitical differences and create platforms for international cooperation. In fact, one of the first formal agreements between the USA and the USSR when they began reducing tensions in the 1970s regarded collaboration on space-related science.

The importance of science diplomacy lies in addressing urgent global issues like climate change, pandemics, and resource scarcity. Significantly, science diplomacy builds trust between nations, enhances soft power, and creates international networks, even in politically sensitive contexts. It further serves to create robust networks of international experts that can be quickly mobilised for advice or assistance in various crisis situations.

Examples like CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, and SESAME, the Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East, as well as ITER, a world facility for fusion research, illustrate the effectiveness of science diplomacy. These platforms bring together scientists and policymakers from various countries to engage in collaborative research, thereby promoting international relations and facilitating technology transfer. The global collaboration among scientists, researchers, and governments to swiftly develop and distribute vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the effectiveness of international scientific cooperation in addressing a shared global challenge. Such initiatives exemplify how science diplomacy can serve as a powerful tool for mutual benefit, enhancing diplomatic relations while simultaneously driving scientific progress.

In conclusion, the internationalisation of higher education can offer multiple avenues for Sweden to strengthen its public diplomacy. It not only enhances national reputation but also fosters economic development, promotes research collaboration, encourages cultural exchange, and builds international networks that can be leveraged for soft power as well as diplomatic gains.

# The way forward

## Responsible internationalisation

In an increasingly conflict-filled world it will be important for higher education institutions in Sweden, which are dependent on knowledge produced abroad, to continue to collaborate globally and build connections with a wide range of partners, including those with disparate beliefs and ideologies. It is crucial that university leaders and faculty have the knowledge and skills to do so successfully.

Already in 2018, STINT, together with Lund University, Karolinska Institutet and KTH Royal Institute of Technology, initiated a report on responsible internationalisation.<sup>10</sup> This was a starting point for considering both ethical and security perspectives when assessing research proposals according to bilateral agreements between Sweden and China.<sup>13</sup>

The STINT report early on played a significant role in highlighting the importance of responsible internationalisation. The report emphasised the responsibility of scholars themselves as well as the leadership of their institutions, without giving specific guidelines. Some countries have national guidelines to codify expectations for research institutions and researchers, which can be helpful in continuing to promote international collaboration. The Swedish government has instructed three agencies to propose guidelines for responsible internationalisation. Such guidelines are only a starting point for more structured work on the possible management of international collaborations. History and numerous studies have shown that universities serve society best when allowed to carry out their missions as autonomous organisations. Finding suitable and enriching international collaborations without explicit directives from authorities is important in maintaining academic freedom. However, fostering a responsible mindset is likewise crucial. Finding a responsible balance between trustful openness on the one hand and risk reduction on the other is a delicate matter. In response to this situation, the EU has shifted its international science policy from the three Os in Open Science, Open Innovation and Open to the World<sup>11</sup> to the more cautious formulation “as open as possible and as closed as necessary.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> STINT, “Responsible internationalisation: Guidelines for reflection on international academic cooperation”, STINT, Stockholm 2020

<sup>11</sup> Open innovation, open science, open to the world | Shaping Europe's digital future (europa.eu)

<sup>12</sup> Council agrees on a global approach to research and innovation – Consilium (europa.eu)

<sup>13</sup> China has emerged as a strong research nation and now produces the largest volume of scientific publications. Additionally,

China has actively sent students, doctoral candidates, and scholars to various Western countries to enhance their skills. Because some research fields have potential applications in the military domain, a debate on supporting China's military capabilities has arisen in Sweden and other nations. This concern is understandable; however, the challenge lies in the absence of clear demarcations between military and non-military research. This ambiguity makes it difficult to assess collaboration in these areas precisely. Nevertheless, China's isolationism and protectionism also deserve mention, as the country is restricting access to data and developing its own strong focus on research security.

Risks associated with international cooperation are neither new nor do they encompass only certain institutions/countries. Contemporary universities are not isolated ivory towers, but organisations based on deep engagement with national and international society and economy. Their role in science, technology and innovation is a core resource in national economy and security. Therefore, it is vital to approach international cooperation responsibly.

Responsible internationalisation relies on proactivity, competence, and an ethical compass at the level of universities and individual researchers. Risks must be competently evaluated when a new collaboration is planned, and ethical and security compasses must be in place when decisions are made. Universities must see the development of competence for responsible internationalisation as their own responsibility, because situations differ and institutions and faculty must act accordingly.

Responsibility for taking the necessary mitigating measures lies first and foremost within institutions, which must also ensure that there is no resulting discrimination or stigmatisation against international students.

Many questions need to be answered, such as the sound delegation of responsibilities, where and how universities draw boundaries, and how a culture of responsibility is promoted beyond simply fulfilling requirements. These aspects are all difficult to address in guidelines. A dialogue between researchers and their academic leadership is necessary to meet possible difficulties in international collaborations.

*Referring to the responsible internationalisation guidelines, the Advisory Board recommends that individual scholars discuss their international endeavours with their colleagues and the academic leadership before starting collaboration to avoid difficulties further on.*

### **Considering multipolar collaboration patterns**

The academic giants in terms of publication volume are the USA and China. International academic collaboration, especially in the STEM fields, is also dominated by US–China partnerships or collaborations involving one of these two countries and other parts of the world.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, the West's share of global scientific publications has been decreasing while there has been a notable increase in the Asian region's contribution. International collaboration is much less intense in social sciences and the humanities.

The rise of China as an academic giant has been accompanied by the academic

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<sup>14</sup> More than 50% of the world's publications in science, technology, and medicine involve contributors from multiple countries, showing the fundamental nature of international collaboration and its contribution to high quality research.

rise of several other nations around the world that also collaborate with each other. Although Singapore is a smaller country, it has shown publication growth similar to that of China. The Middle Eastern countries are also advancing, while scholars from Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and India are expanding their international influence.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, publication patterns will become more varied. However, we know that many of the grand challenges now facing humankind can only be addressed through international research collaboration. Such efforts may also become more fractured, given crumbling Sino–American relations.

*The Advisory Board recognises the importance of bridging roles in such collaborations, both contributing directly to the research and ensuring that global efforts are coordinated and mutually informed.*

### **Meeting erosion of trust and caring about international talent**

Currently the world seems to be in a state of permacrisis – various crises succeed each other, resulting in great instability. The erosion of trust in international relations can be attributed to a combination of factors such as geopolitical tensions, multipolarity, and the questioning of international norms and agreements. The uncertainty and distrust are spilling over into academic relations and greater effort needs to be directed to the rebuilding of trust in order to sustain a high level of international collaboration. International collaboration is built on trust between scholars and between institutions, and a lack of trust decreases international collaboration.

Current nationalistic trends are hostile to international exchange, as they emphasise the importance of the nation and national security. Russia for example recently blacklisted the Central European University, rendering Russians studying at the institution unwelcome to return to their home country. More and more people question the value and relevance both of a tertiary degree and of support for international engagement. Trust in science and higher education institutions has been eroded, particularly in the USA, leading to concerns about the support of higher education and research.

However, as has been argued in this paper, the higher education sector has the opportunity to assume the mantle as a major catalyst in a new configuration of international engagement and partnerships, benefitting societies at large.

*The Advisory Board stresses the importance of being present in the international arena*

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<sup>15</sup> Martins and Schwaag Serger, 2023; Wagner, C.S. and Cai, X., 2022; STINT R 23:01

*for education and research and attracting valuable international talent critical to excellence and renewal.*

### **Shifting focus from mobility to civic partnerships with international dimensions**

International education and research can address local and regional community challenges while fostering new growth opportunities. This can be done by prioritising civic responsibility and by forming inclusive partnerships with different stakeholders to address critical issues through research, teaching, innovation, and service. Advocacy cannot be a role reserved for academia; other actors are needed to co-drive collaboration in a broader setting. Academia has a very important role to play – together with other stakeholders – in solving issues like global health, climate, and other geopolitical challenges.

The internationalisation of Swedish higher education and research is important well beyond academia. As discussed, Sweden's economic and political strength and stability are contingent upon it. In many ways, Sweden's business sector has excelled in such internationalisation activities, exceeding the engagement of Swedish universities.

*The Advisory Board recommends that institutions intentionally broaden their view of internationalisation beyond seeing it as solely concerning student and faculty mobility and embrace the added value of international education and engagement.*

*The Advisory Board urges institutions to create a community of practice/working group/task force comprising representatives from across these stakeholder groups to develop a strategic perspective on internationalisation that takes advantage of existing resources and aligns higher education with other sectors.*

### **Regionalisation of internationalisation**

In Europe, collaboration programmes such as the European framework programme for research and innovation, the Erasmus programme for student and faculty mobility, and the creation of European University Alliances play a crucial role in fostering increased collaboration within the region. These efforts aim to support the exchange of ideas in higher education and enhance the European added value. This has led to a kind of regionalisation of internationalisation. In other parts of the world, not least in Southeast Asia and Africa, there are similar trends which intensify the regionalisation of internationalisation.

During the last seventy years, the pendulum has swung between either emphasising regional or global collaboration, often reinforced by politics and multina-

tional firms. With the UN a global focus was established, which was later challenged by a larger and stronger EU and the wider Bologna Process, a framework for higher education in Europe. This was followed by global strengthening through Asian – not least Chinese – establishments both in academia and business. In Europe special efforts are made to link other parts of the world, such as the African Union, Canada, Japan, etc., to European programmes.

*The Advisory Board emphasises the need for exchanging ideas beyond regionalisation, but also beyond like-minded countries.*

### **A new approach to internationalisation**

The landscape of international academic collaboration is undergoing a paradigm shift arising from geopolitical transformations, the proliferation of multilateral partnerships, a widening array of partner types, and the crucial role played by higher education and research in national economies and security. These factors contribute to a substantial increase in the complexity of international academic collaboration. This paradigm shift poses a significant challenge for many institutions if they want to sustain a high level of international and global engagement in a responsible manner.

Traditionally, higher education institutions have approached international collaboration as a field requiring promotion, growth, and expansion. However, the evolving global context demands new strategies and the introduction of new and diverse resources.

*To effectively navigate such heightened complexity, the Advisory Board is convinced that institutions must increase their capacity for analysis, international monitoring and awareness, and overall collaboration management.*

STINT, The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education, was set up by the Swedish Government in 1994 with the mission to internationalise Swedish higher education and research.

STINT promotes knowledge and competence development within internationalisation and invests in internationalisation projects proposed by researchers, educators and leaderships at Swedish universities.



**STINT**

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