Medfinansieras av Europeiska unionen

MED STÖD AV REGION JÖNKÖPINGS LÄN

JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY

How does Jönköping support graduate retention: Mapping the ecosystem and student journeys

Leona Achtenhagen (corresponding author: acle@ju.se)

Philippa Berglund

Sumaya Hashim

Darko Pantelic

Lucia Pizzichini

Anastasia Shklyar

Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping University

This report was compiled as deliverable of Working Package 3 of the pilot project *Att kartlägga (internationella) studenters önskemål och hindren för att stanna kvar i regionen* (abbreviated as project STAY), financed by Europeiska regionala utvecklingsfonden and Region Jönköpings Län in May 2026. Project leader: Leona Achtenhagen (acle@ju.se).

1. Introduction

This report focuses on understanding how different actors, services and support structures influence whether Jönköping University students establish themselves in Jönköping Region after graduation. It is based on the results of a work package examining how students experience the wider regional ecosystem across different stages of their journey, from arrival to long-term establishment. Student experiences develop over time through interactions with Jönköping University's schools and services, employers, housing systems, public authorities, social networks and everyday life in the region. The quality of coordination between these actors often becomes just as important as the individual services themselves.

To better understand these processes, we combined ecosystem mapping with a student journey approach. The purpose was not only to identify which actors exist within the regional ecosystem, but also to examine where students encounter friction, uncertainty or disconnected support during key transition periods. The ecosystem mapping and student journey analysis were developed iteratively through stakeholder dialogue meetings, workshops, document analysis, interview findings and discussions within the project's reference group. Representatives from Jönköping University, Jönköping Municipality, regional organisations, employers, public agencies and support actors contributed perspectives on how students move through the regional system and where coordination challenges emerge.

These discussions were particularly important in identifying transition points, overlaps between actors, fragmented support structures and areas where responsibilities remain unclear. The stakeholder mapping highlighted that the ecosystem extends beyond the university itself to include municipalities, employers, public agencies, civil society organisations, entrepreneurial support structures, and informal community networks. The mapping also showed that **many organisations provide valuable support individually, but coordination between actors is often uneven**. This became especially evident during the transition from studies to employment, where students often need to navigate several partially connected systems simultaneously. Through the stakeholder dialogues, it became clear that **no single actor has overall responsibility for the transition from studies into long-term establishment**. The ecosystem perspective, therefore, became an important foundation for the student journey analysis presented in the following sections.

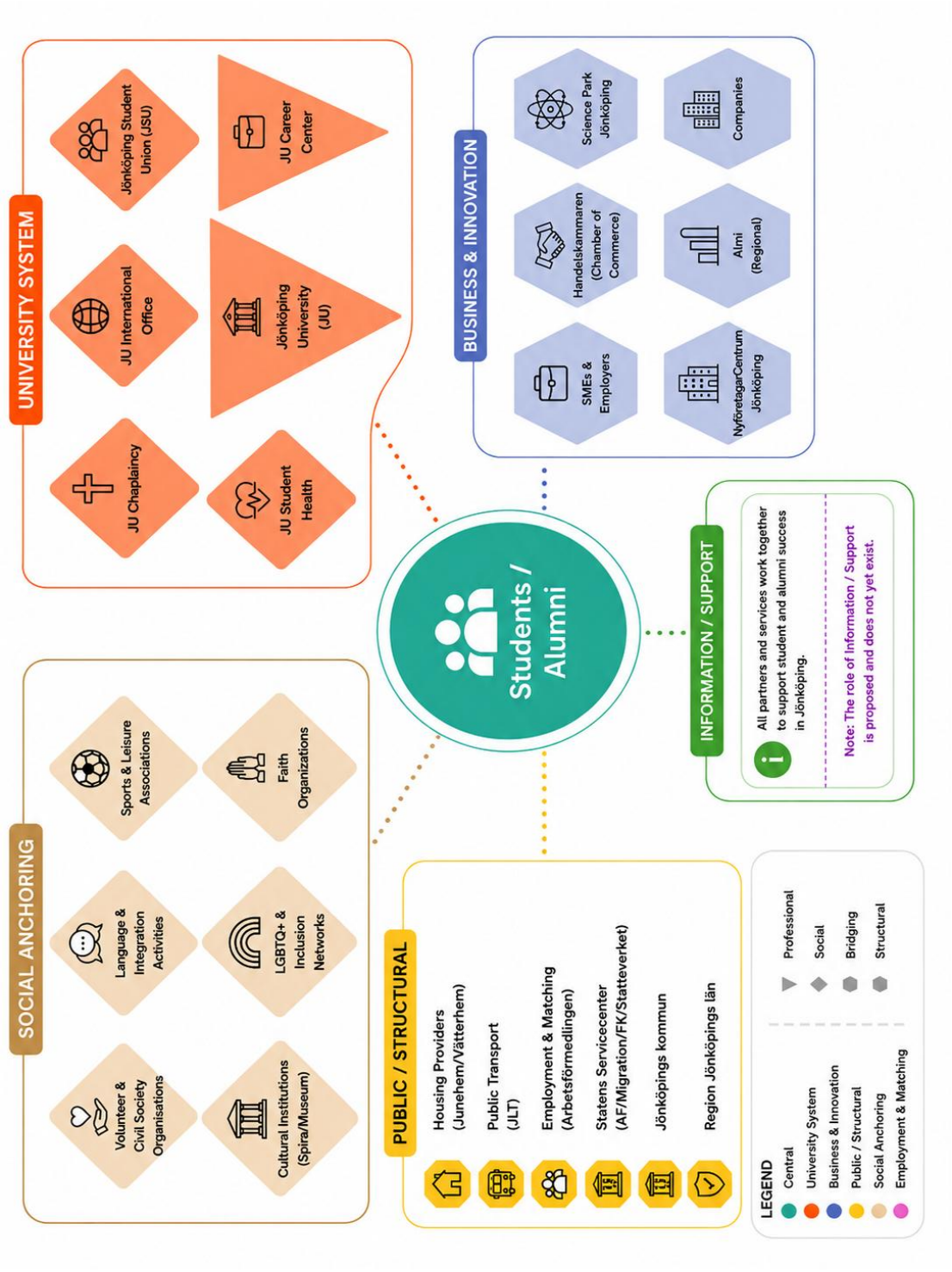


Figure 1: The ecosystem from a student perspective (Source: authors)

2. The Student Journey

The student journey visualisation was developed to illustrate how retention gradually increases over time. Rather than focusing solely on the decision to stay after graduation, we package explored the broader process by which students move from attraction and arrival to employment and longer-term establishment in the region.

Five broad phases were identified:

1. Choosing Jönköping
2. Getting Started
3. Finding My Place
4. Finding My Future
5. Deciding to Stay

The mapping process showed that students do not always move through these phases in a linear way: Experiences during earlier stages often shape later decisions, particularly during the transition from studies into working life. A recurring pattern was that **students generally experience strong support within the university environment, but weaker coordination between the university and the wider regional ecosystem**. This becomes **particularly visible at transition points related to housing, labour market entry, and longer-term settlement**.

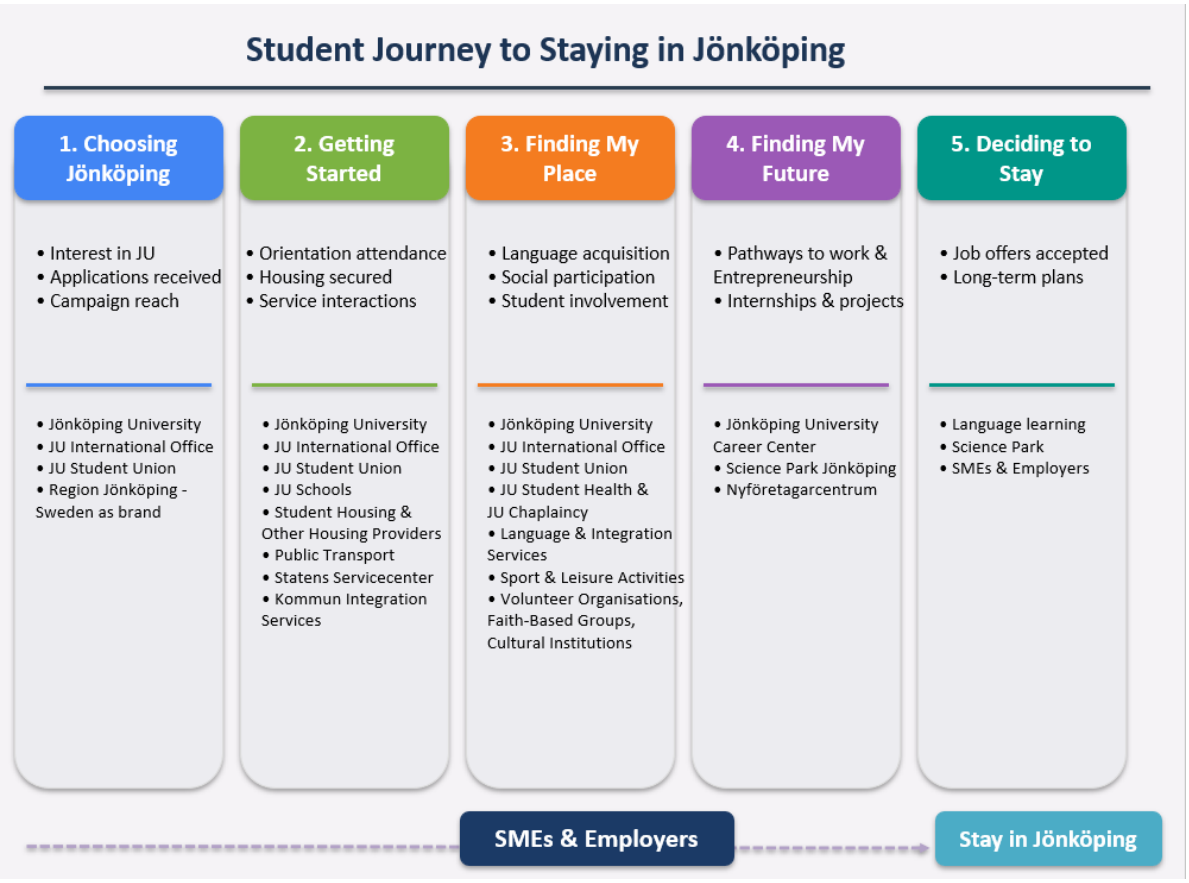


Figure 2: Student journey to staying in Jönköping (Source: authors)

2.1 Choosing Jönköping

The first phase examines how students initially encounter Jönköping University and the region. This includes programme marketing, application processes and early expectations about studying and living in Sweden.

Students generally described JU as accessible, welcoming and internationally oriented. Sweden's broader international reputation also played an important role in attracting students, particularly regarding safety, sustainability, and quality of life. At the same time, many students arrived in Jönköping with a limited understanding of the regional labour market or the types of long-term career opportunities available outside Sweden's larger metropolitan areas. The region was often viewed primarily as a place to study rather than somewhere to build a longer-term professional future.

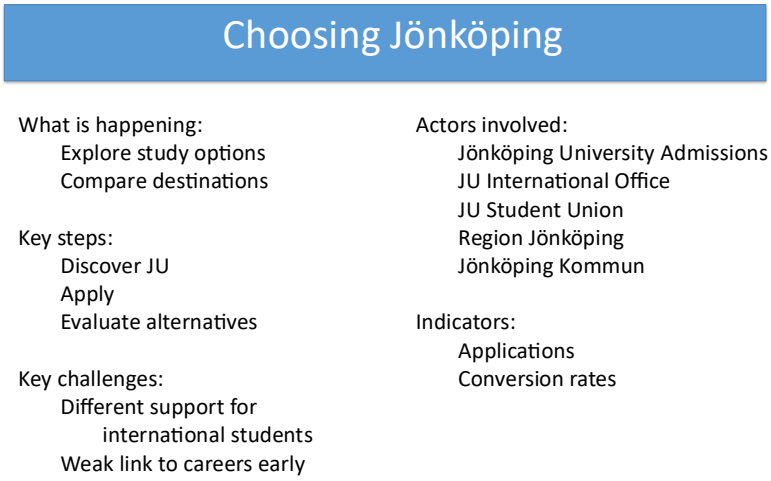


Figure 3: Choosing Jönköping (Source: authors)

Several stakeholders also noted that the pre-arrival phase involves simultaneous interaction with many different actors, including the university, housing providers, and migration-related authorities. While support structures generally function well on their own, the overall process can still feel fragmented and overwhelming during relocation and arrival.

For international students, the JU International Office is a particularly important actor during this phase, both in recruitment and in providing practical support upon arrival. Stakeholders highlighted that services such as guaranteed housing placements and organised pick-up arrangements at Jönköping Station help reduce uncertainty during the transition into student life. At the same time, regional actors and employers currently have a limited visible role within the recruitment and onboarding process, meaning that information about long-term career pathways in the region often remains hidden at this stage.

Actor	Support Offered	Student Experience	System Weakness	Intervention Opportunity
Jönköping University	English-language programme marketing, admissions support, digital communication	JU is perceived as accessible and welcoming	Career pathways are not visible early enough	Integrate employability messaging into recruitment
JU International Office	Pre-arrival information, onboarding communication	Students feel practically supported before arrival	Information overload before arrival	Create staged onboarding communication
Region Jönköping / Sweden branding	International image of Sweden (safety, sustainability, quality of life)	Sweden is often the main attraction rather than Jönköping itself	Weak regional differentiation	Position Jönköping as a "career + lifestyle" destination
Housing Providers	Housing guarantees / accommodation access	Housing reduces relocation anxiety	Students often know little about local geography or long-term housing market	Introduce "living in Jönköping" orientation earlier

Figure 4: Ecosystem assessment of students' choice of coming to Jönköping

2.2 Getting Started

The second phase concerns arrival and settlement. This includes orientation activities, housing, registration processes, transportation and the practical transition into everyday life in Sweden.

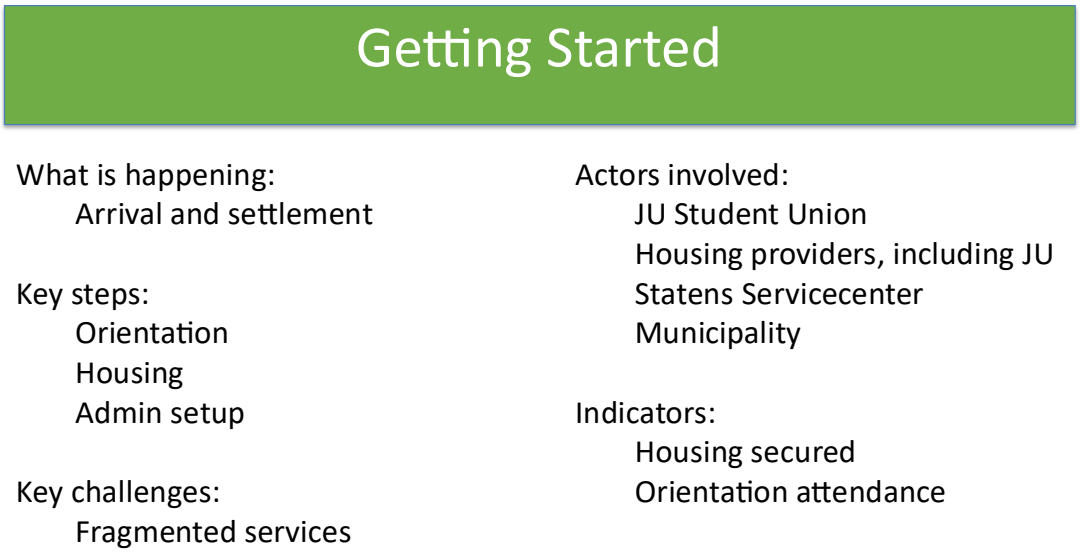


Figure 5: Getting started at JU

Many students highlighted the social onboarding provided by the JU International Office and the JU Student Union as an important strength during the arrival phase. Orientation activities and student events helped foster an early sense of belonging and reduced anxiety during the first weeks after arrival.

At the same time, several administrative systems—particularly those outside the university environment—were often experienced as difficult to navigate. Processes related to identity numbers, banking, housing, and state authorities frequently required students to navigate several organisations independently and with limited guidance.

A recurring issue raised during workshops and stakeholder discussions was that support structures generally exist, but are not always well coordinated from the student perspective. Different organisations often operate effectively within their own responsibilities, while students themselves are left to navigate the gaps between systems. This was particularly evident in situations where university support transitioned to municipal, state, or private-sector processes.

Many students remain strongly campus- and student housing-centred during the early phase of their studies. While this creates security and familiarity, it can also delay integration into the wider region, local communities and labour market—and, in result, often leads to a lack of understanding of the importance of starting to learn Swedish as early as possible.

Actor	Support Offered	Student Experience	System Weakness	Intervention Opportunity
JU Student Union	Kickoff, student activities, social onboarding	Strong early belonging and peer connection	Integration remains primarily international / student bubble	Increase mixed Swedish/international activities
JU Schools	Programme introduction and academic support	Students adapt quickly academically	Weak labour-market orientation early in studies	Embed employability from semester one
Statens Servicecenter	Personal number, state systems, identity registration	Necessary but administratively stressful	System feels fragmented and difficult to navigate	Create coordinated “newcomer pathway”
Public Transport (JLT)	Mobility and regional access	Students gain independence quickly	Students remain campus-centred	Encourage exploration of region and employers
Municipality Integration Services	Guidance and referrals	Support often unclear to students	Low visibility among international students	Improve communication between municipality and JU

Figure 6: Ecosystem assessment of students’ getting started in Jönköping (Source: authors)

2.3 Finding My Place

The third phase focuses on social integration, belonging and participation beyond academic life. This includes language learning, friendships, community participation, and the development of everyday routines within the region.



Figure 7: Students finding their place in Jönköping

Across stakeholder interviews and workshops, social belonging emerged as an important factor influencing whether students could imagine building a future in Jönköping after graduation. Students who developed stronger local connections often described a greater sense of stability, confidence and attachment to the region. At the same time, many international students described difficulties building relationships outside international student networks. Several stakeholders referred to a "student bubble", where international students primarily socialise with other internationals rather than developing broader local networks and connections within Swedish society.

Language also became increasingly important over time. While many students manage well academically in English-speaking environments, Swedish language skills become more significant later on for employment, workplace confidence, and broader social participation.

The ecosystem mapping identified a wide range of integration opportunities through sports clubs, volunteer organisations, faith-based groups and cultural activities. However, these opportunities are often unevenly visible and rely heavily on individual initiative rather than coordinated pathways between the university and wider community organisations. Several stakeholders also noted that many integration activities remain socially oriented, while stronger connections between social integration and professional integration are less developed. As a result, **students may feel socially comfortable within the university environment while still lacking confidence regarding their longer-term future in the region**.

Actor	Support Offered	Student Experience	System Weakness	Intervention Opportunity
Language & Integration Services	Swedish language learning and integration activities	Swedish is increasingly important over time	Language learning often disconnected from workplace needs	Develop profession-oriented Swedish support
JU Chaplaincy	Informal support, community, wellbeing	Students experience emotional support and inclusion	Limited visibility among some student groups	Expand outreach and cross-cultural programming
Sports & Leisure Associations	Social participation and local engagement	Important for belonging and routine-building	Swedish/local participation remains uneven	Create targeted inclusion pathways
Volunteer Organisations	Civic engagement and social networks	Volunteering creates meaningful local connection	Opportunities are fragmented and informal	Build coordinated volunteer platform for internationals
Faith-Based Groups	Community and continuity	Can reduce loneliness and cultural isolation	Connections often remain within cultural communities	Facilitate broader community bridging
Cultural Institutions	Exposure to local culture and identity	Helps students understand local society	Participation often passive rather than relational	Increase participatory cultural programming

Figure 8: Ecosystem assessment for students finding their way in Jönköping (Source: authors)

2.4 Finding My Future

The transition from studies into employment emerged as the clearest bottleneck within the entire retention process. Experiences during this phase strongly influenced whether students saw realistic long-term opportunities in the region. Many students described **uncertainty about how recruitment processes work in Sweden and how to access regional employers, particularly SMEs**. Several felt they **lacked practical networks, workplace familiarity and clear entry points into the labour market**.

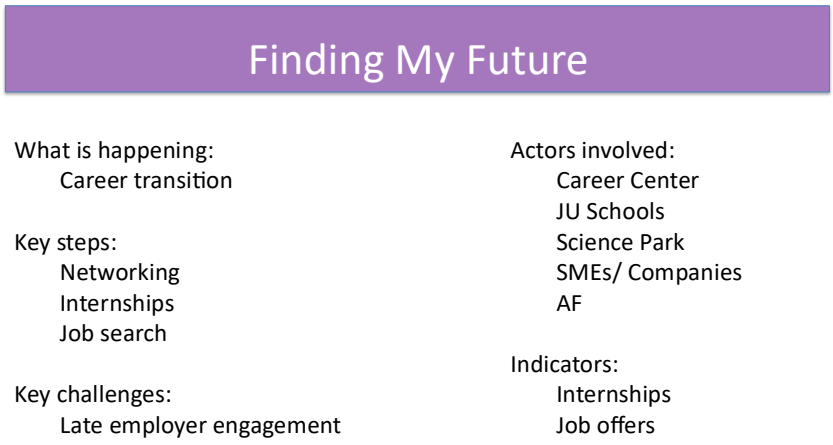


Figure 9: Students finding their future paths (Source: authors)

During this phase, students have the opportunity to engage with a range of support structures linked to employability and labour-market preparation. These include career counselling, CV and interview support, employer presentations, networking events, internships, project collaborations and job fairs organised through Jönköping University's schools, the JU Career Centre, student organisations and

external partners. Entrepreneurship support is also available through actors such as Science Park Jönköping, Co-Drive and Nyföretagarcentrum. However, the stakeholder dialogues showed that labour-market exposure varies significantly between schools and programmes. Some students gain internships, employer contacts and practical collaboration opportunities early in their studies, while others have very limited contact with employers until close to graduation.

SMEs are especially important actors in the regional ecosystem. Still, **many smaller companies lack pathways to connect with Jönköping University and do not have established structures to recruit and support international graduates**. **Employer engagement often depends on individual initiatives rather than long-term coordinated systems**. Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted that **employers themselves often lack confidence in international recruitment, migration-related processes, English-language onboarding, and supporting Swedish language development in the workplace**. Several stakeholders also noted uncertainty regarding the longer-term integration of international employees within smaller organisations.

Similarly, Science Park Jönköping is an important regional strength, particularly for students interested in entrepreneurship and innovation. However, awareness of these opportunities remains uneven across student groups and programmes.

Students consistently requested more direct employer contact, practical workplace exposure, mentoring, internships, and clearer pathways into regional employment. Several stakeholders highlighted that many employability activities function well individually, but that stronger coordination between university services, employers and regional actors remains limited. As a result, students often experience career support, employer engagement and regional integration as separate processes rather than part of a connected transition pathway. Additionally, stakeholders noted that awareness of existing support opportunities remains uneven. **Students often engage with career services, employer events and entrepreneurial ecosystems relatively late in their studies, limiting the long-term impact of these activities**. This phase represented the point where many students began reassessing whether they could realistically remain in the region after graduation.

Actor	Support Offered	Student Experience	System Weakness	Intervention Opportunity
JU Career Center	CV support, seminars, career coaching, employer events	Helpful but often perceived as informational	Students want more direct labour-market access	Increase employer-integrated programming
Science Park Jönköping	Entrepreneurship support, innovation ecosystem, startup coaching	Strong bridge for entrepreneurial students	Awareness uneven across student groups	Integrate Science Park earlier into study journey
Nyföretagarcentrum	Business mentoring and startup advice	Valuable for students considering self-employment	Limited visibility among internationals	Create targeted international entrepreneurship pathways
SMEs & Employers	Internships, projects, graduate jobs	Students highly value direct employer contact	SMEs often engage too late or inconsistently	Build structured SME engagement pipelines
Arbetsförmedlingen	Labour-market guidance and employment support	Often perceived as more relevant after graduation	Weak integration into student journey	Develop student-focused labour-market support
Alumni / Mentors	Practical advice and professional translation	Mentors increase confidence and labour-market understanding	Mentoring access inconsistent	Develop structured alumni mentoring systems

Figure 10: Ecosystem assessment for students finding their future paths in Jönköping (Source: authors)

2.5 Deciding to Stay

The final phase concerns the longer-term decision about whether to remain in the region after graduation. Many students expressed a strong emotional attachment to Jönköping and Sweden more broadly. **Quality of life, safety, social stability and positive study experiences all contributed positively to their desire to remain in the region. However, emotional attachment alone was rarely enough. Access to employment, career progression and longer-term professional opportunities ultimately became decisive factors**.

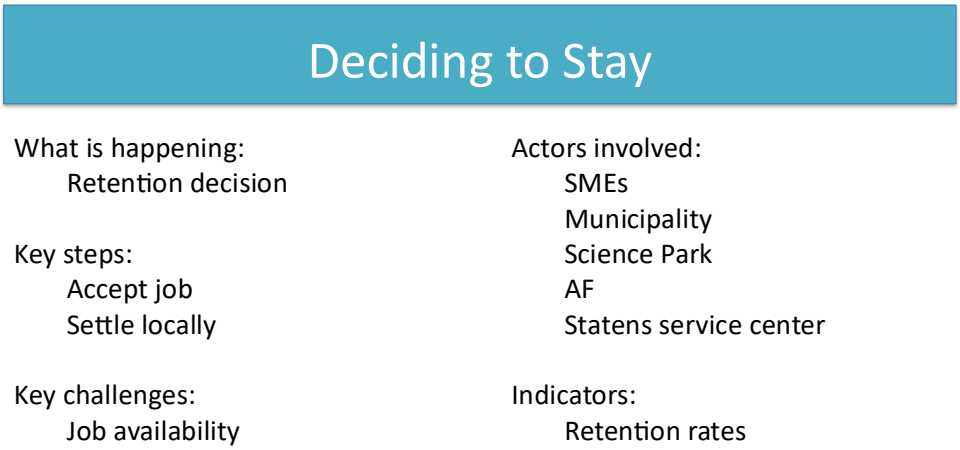


Figure 11: Deciding to stay (Source: authors)

During this phase, students interact with a broader range of actors connected to settlement, employment and longer-term establishment in the region. Employers are becoming increasingly central, particularly in relation to recruitment, workplace integration, and future career opportunities. Municipal actors, public agencies, housing systems, alumni networks and entrepreneurial support organisations may also play an important role during this transition period, particularly for students seeking long-term stability beyond university life.

Several students expressed uncertainty regarding their future development prospects within the region. Larger metropolitan areas were often perceived as offering broader labour markets, clearer career progression and stronger international environments. Stakeholders also noted that students often struggle to understand how different regional actors connect after graduation, particularly once university-based support becomes less central.

The mapping process showed that municipalities and regional actors currently play a relatively limited visible role within students' understanding of the wider support ecosystem. While organisations such as Science Park Jönköping, employer networks and public support services offer valuable initiatives linked to entrepreneurship, employment and settlement, awareness and engagement remain uneven across student groups.

Several stakeholders highlighted that responsibility becomes increasingly unclear after graduation. **While the university remains the primary coordinating actor during studies, no equivalent structure exists during the transition into longer-term professional and social establishment within the region.** As a result, students often move between multiple partially connected systems involving employers, municipalities, public agencies and regional support actors.

Students and stakeholders alike highlighted the importance of:

- clearer long-term career pathways,
- stronger regional visibility,
- continued networking opportunities after graduation,
- and more coordinated transition support linked to employment, housing and settlement.

This suggests that **stronger coordination between Jönköping University, employers, municipalities and regional actors may be important not only for practical support, but also for creating a clearer sense of long-term possibility within the region**.

Actor	Support Offered	Student Experience	System Weakness	Intervention Opportunity
SMEs & Employers	Employment and workplace integration	Employment is the decisive retention factor	Junior opportunities limited	Develop graduate recruitment initiatives
Jönköping Kommun	Settlement support and regional development initiatives	Students rarely perceive municipality as central actor	Weak visibility in retention ecosystem	Develop municipal talent-retention strategy
Science Park	Entrepreneurship pathways and local ecosystem access	Creates alternative pathway to staying	Ecosystem access limited and uneven	Expand entrepreneurial transition support
Alumni Networks	Long-term belonging and local identity	Alumni often maintain emotional attachment	Alumni engagement underutilised	Develop alumni retention ambassadors
Regional Ecosystem	Combined quality of life + professional opportunity	Students often want to stay emotionally	Professional future often unclear	Coordinate ecosystem-wide retention strategy

Figure 12: Ecosystem assessment for students' decision to stay in Jönköping (Source: authors)

3. Cross-Cutting Challenges and Reflections

Several broader patterns emerged through the ecosystem mapping and student journey analysis.

First, many of the challenges identified were not caused by a lack of activity, but by **weak coordination between existing actors and support structures**. Students and stakeholders alike experienced the wider system as fragmented, particularly during transition periods involving housing, administration and labour-market entry. While many organisations provide valuable support individually, students are frequently required to navigate between systems on their own.

Second, the **transition from studies into employment emerged as the most critical phase within the retention journey**. Students who **established labour-market connections early** through internships, employer contacts, mentoring or project collaboration were significantly more likely to imagine a long-term future in the region. At the same time, uneven access to these opportunities contributed to uncertainty regarding longer-term establishment.

Third, **social belonging and labour-market integration were closely connected** throughout the journey. Students who developed stronger local relationships, professional networks and connections beyond the university environment often described greater confidence about remaining in the region after graduation.

Finally, the mapping highlighted that **retention should be understood as a multifaceted regional issue rather than solely a university responsibility**. Long-term establishment is shaped by

interactions between JU, employers, municipalities, public agencies, civil society organisations and broader regional conditions over time.

4. Intervention Opportunities

Based on the ecosystem mapping, stakeholder dialogues and student journey analysis, several areas emerged as particularly important for future development. One important area concerns earlier and more structured engagement between students and employers, particularly SMEs. Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the need for **clearer, more continuous pathways connecting education, internships, networking opportunities, and employment within the region**.

The analysis also highlighted the importance of **improving coordination** between organisations involved in different phases of the student journey. Several stakeholders described the need for clearer first-step pathways, stronger transition support and more visible referral structures between university services, municipalities, employers and public agencies.

Profession-oriented language support, **expanded mentoring opportunities** and **greater visibility of long-term career pathways** were also identified as important areas for further development. Many students expressed a **desire for stronger connections between social integration, professional integration and regional belonging** throughout their studies.

The ecosystem mapping further suggested that many improvements may not require entirely new organisations or large-scale interventions. In many cases, the **primary challenge concerns coordination, visibility and accessibility within the existing system**. Several stakeholders therefore emphasised the importance of strengthening collaboration among Jönköping University, employers, municipalities, and regional actors to create clearer, more connected pathways throughout the student journey.