PILOT PROJECT STAY: COMPREHENSIVE INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

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FOREWORD

In the following pages you will find an analysis of the interviews conducted between January and May 2026 by members of project group STAY (Leona Achtenhagen, Sumaya Hashim, Lucia Pizzichini, Philippa Joy Berglund, Anastasia Shklyar, and Darko Pantelić).

We reached out to students and alumni from Jönköping University, to collect their experiences and life story, from the application to the university to the outcome of their journey – ultimately staying or leaving the region. The sample was convenient, and self-selected – as the participants made a choice to participate in the research. Note: *given that the research team was from the business school, and lukewarm response of official university alumni networks, relaying on the personal contacts with alumni led to the sample being dominantly from the business school.*

The respondents were mainly recruited through posting an open call to participate through different channels. It is worth mentioning that personal networks were the main recruiting avenue. Responses through calls through official university alumni networks were, at the most, modest.

For aligning the approach for the data collection, we developed interview guidelines. The intention was to make sure that, in semi-structured interviews, we cover all important topics with minimum involvement from the interviewees – letting the participants to tell their life story and describe the journey from the moment they decided to come to Sweden (for international), through the choice of the study program, and all the way to understanding where the journey led them: staying or leaving the region/Sweden.

Table #1: Interview guidelines

Themes	Follow-up topics
Biographical data	*year and program from which they graduated, country of origin, country of current residence, employment status, self-identification (intended vs not intended and stayed vs left.*
Arrival	*background of arriving to studies in Sweden/Jonkoping.*
Job search	*experiences and reflections on searching for employment in Sweden/Jonkoping.*
University experience	*extent of exposure to practice and work-life in Sweden; activities to assist students in finding employment in Sweden/Jonkoping.*
Workplace experience	*experiences in work environment, support, fair treatment, language.*
Swedish authorities	*experiences with tax agency, migration agency, labor agency or any other public agency they interacted with in the process of settling in Sweden.*
Living in Sweden	*social life, quality of life, befriending people in Sweden, feeling of belonging, discrimination.*
Location/town	*a reflection on the place of living/Jonkoping; pros and cons; assets.*
Wrap-up	*critical factors that influenced their decision to stay/leave, recommendations.*

Source: Authors

To make data analysis easier through the interviews collected, we divided them into the five following categories:

Table #2: Respondents categories

	Group	*Definition*	*Respondents*
1.	*EU proximity*	*Western countries with perceived low cultural or psychic distance (e.g. Germany, Netherlands, Scandinavia)*	18
2.	*EU peripheral*	*The countries that are geographically in Europe, yet the cultural or psychic distance is higher (e.g. Hungary, Turkey, South-East Europe)*	14
3.	*Non-EU*	*Students from any country outside Europe.*	23
4.	*Swedish*	*Students that identify themselves as Swedish.*	23
5.	*New-Swedish*	*Students that spent majority of their lives living in Sweden, with Swedish citizenship, yet have parents that originate from other countries (first generation Swedish).*	12

Source: Authors.

The interviews span from 30 to 80 minutes; they were transcribed and we conducted several rounds of analysis. First covering each group individually, and at the end conducting overall analysis of synthesis across all the groups.

We conducted thematic analysis, structuring each section in a similar format, with intention, of being able to perform summative analysis across all the respondents and all categories.

For readers of this report, it is important to consider several following points:

A) Every single story is unique, given that is personal and interpreted from the perspective of individual.
B) All stories have overlapping elements and similarities anchored in the common theme: experience of studying and living in Sweden.
C) It is wrong to assume that every single student/graduate has a desire to stay; regardless of what the stakeholders can do or offer, there will be always people that have no intention of staying. (*One place cannot be everything to everyone.*)

Overall, we collected around 110 interviews across the different groups – decision to not perform more interviews was made with conducting analysis in several checkpoints as we progressed through the data collection. The two meetings with stakeholders, gave us an opportunity to present findings from 35 interviews (February) and 75 interviews (April/May) – the consistent patterns led us to conclude that the saturation point was reached, and that adding more interviews was not resulting in new discoveries, themes or findings.

Disclaimer. *Our primary motivation was not to collect specific statistical data from our respondents, the focus was on their perceptions and interpretations, in the way they experienced searching for educational opportunities, choosing Sweden, arriving and studying here, and ultimately deciding to give a try to stay in Sweden. Therefore, when reading the following pages bear in mind that the quantitative data might not be complete or can contain approximations and interpretations of researchers.*

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I. EU PROXIMITY

The group consists of alumni from European countries that have low cultural distance (psychic distance) and are neighboring or geographically close cultures.

The chapter will start with short pragmatic statistics (within limitations of the data set). After that we will provide the journey mapping alongside major identified themes. For the end, we will reflect on the implications for stakeholders, as well as brief summary.

I.1 Brief group summary

The group consisted of 18 participants, mainly from Germany, and several respondents from the Netherlands and Austria, as well as a student that has one Swedish parent, but was born and raised in Germany. This also, quite accurately represents foreign student population at Jönköping International Business School (*as the most international school in the context of our university*) and therefore Jönköping University, in broader sense. The graduation year spans from 2015 to 2025; with the vast majority concentrated in the 2020 to 2025 window.

Table #3: EU close proximity stay/left matrix

Initial intention	*Stayed*	*Left*	*Total*
Intended to stay	*4*	*7*	*11*
Did not intended to stay	*3*	*2*	*5*
Ambivalent	*0*	*2*	*2*
Total	*7*	*11*	*18*

Source: Authors

The findings suggest that there is a strong cultural connection between students in this category, they mainly arrive at intention to stay during their studies, so there is a development of that idea during studies. From the beginning they have exploratory attitude and the quote *"I never planned to stay but then I considered it,"* or *"I didn't originally plan to stay, but during my studies I started imagining a future here."* illustrate this attitude.

I.2 Mapping the journey with thematic analysis

We mapped the journey of students coming from the countries labeled as neighboring or low cultural distance countries. They come driven by strong cultural bounds, previous exposure to Swedish culture, with "lets-give-it-a-try-attitude". This can be explained that they are not driven by need to leave their countries or are not necessarily searching for better life conditions (*like some other groups*). Fortified by the feeling of similarity and comfortable with the local culture, without pressure to migrate due to generally good conditions within own country these respondents have casual and relaxed approach to possibility to settle in Sweden.

The identified stages in the journey are stereotypical – and the journey map is depicted in Illustration #1, ranging from interest in Scandinavia, particularly Sweden, over choice of the study program and study experience, ending in, for some successful, and for some less successful transition to Sweden.

Illustration #1: visualization of the journey map with critical steps



Source: Authors

Table #4 summarizes the identified themes with the journey mapping and offers an overview of the experiences of EU high proximity graduates.

We will follow briefly on a couple of themes that are either part of the journey or have significance for the respondents in their decision making.

Theme 1. ***Sweden has a strong, attractive image*** in this group, and frequently the first associations are connected to, somewhat "mythical" qualities that they attribute to the country. A lot of these relate to the expected or desired lifestyle: quality of life; equality; work-life balance, safety, as well as genuine appreciation for Swedish culture and lush nature.

It is important to emphasize that the strong positive brand equity of Sweden, has also a spillover effect, the more positive the person is about one aspect of the country or culture, the more likely is that these positive feelings will be transferred to another dimension. For instance, there is an overarching positive view on the Swedish education system, even before the respondents had any experience with it.

That said they are primarily attracted to Sweden, and not necessarily Jönköping as a destination.

Theme 2. Jönköping is not a chosen destination, but rather accessible entry point. The studies at JU are seen as a convenient entry point to Sweden, due to simple, accessible, fully online application, but before that with the fact that education is free (for EU citizens), programs are attractive and offered in English language. Guaranteed accommodation for international students makes it even more attractive.

It is not the geographical location or attractiveness of location itself, the primary desirability of the location is created by the university (educational offering).

Theme 3. Strong early social and emotional integration is built on the onboarding experience (kick-off week at the University), vibrant international student community, that extends to study years.

The university performs relatively well in creating belonging during studies, leading to emotional and place attachment, further fortifying positive identification with Sweden.

Theme 4. ***Intentions to stay, in most cases, develop over studies***. Experience during studies largely matters, and so far, we can say that the university performs in this dimension in a satisfactory way.

This is significant since it also implies that retention can be induced, retention intentions are also dynamic and change over time.

Theme 5. ***The student-to-employment transition*** is the critical theme and decisive point in the journey. Both categories, those who stayed, and those who left, emphasized the difficulty transitioning from student life into the Swedish labor market.

Unsuccessful job searches, lack of professional networks, limited opportunities in smaller cities, realization of necessity of local language are part of the attempts to integrate professionally.

Here is where we become painfully aware that attraction and retention are structurally disconnected.

Theme 6. Swedish language is, after all, very important; graduates repeatedly bring it to the focus as a major barrier. Many participants underestimated the labor-market importance of Swedish and critically - language barriers became most visible AFTER studies.

Theme 7. ***Emotional attachment does not guarantee retention*** – by the words of one of the respondents *"I loved living there, but love doesn't pay rent."*

At the same time, it also proves that people do not leave because they do not like it here, it is a pragmatic, professionally motivated move.

It is worth noting that the city itself is seen as attractive (in most cases), yet as a limiting factor, respondents emphasize professional development and career opportunities, that are largely missing.

Theme 8. Employment is the main anchoring mechanism this is the most important factor.

People who stayed usually had internships during studies (as the most meaningful interaction with employers according to this group), managed to develop local networks, and succeeded in landing a job. In some cases, partners (especially local) proved to be a strong anchoring point.

Theme 9. Our respondents identify themselves as ***internationally mobile and flexible***. This is an important finding that explains that not all attracted students will be temporary or permanently retained.

The interviews consistently suggest that: student integration is relatively successful, while post-graduation structural integration to work life and society is much weaker.

Table #4: EU close proximity journey stages across different outcomes with illustrative quotes

	JOURNEY STAGE			
	Dominant theme	**Stayed**	**Left**	**Illustrative quotes**
I	**Pre arrival**			
	Sweden as aspiration rather than Jönköping itself	*Often arrived already emotionally attracted to Scandinavian life and open to building a future there*	*Also highly attracted to Sweden, but often framed the stay as exploratory or temporary from the beginning*	*From "I always had the intention to be in Sweden before I even applied to university there." to "Let's see how it goes."*
II	**Choosing Jonkoping**			
	Jönköping as accessible opportunity	*Saw JU as an entry point into Sweden and Nordic life*	*Frequently ended up in Jönköping through pragmatic decisions rather than destination commitment*	*"Jönköping was the first university accepting my application." or "It was the one I got."*
III	**Early settlement**			
	Strong student integration experience	*Built social belonging early through kickoff, housing, student life, clubs*	*Also overwhelmingly positive about initial integration and student environment*	*"I felt really welcomed." and "The kickoff was one of the turning points where I really, really liked it here."*
IV	**Growing attachment**			
	Sweden becomes emotionally meaningful	*Began imagining long-term life in Sweden*	*Many also developed stronger intentions to stay during studies*	*"During the first months in Sweden, I really enjoyed my time… I felt really happy there." stretching to: "The possibility of working in Sweden grew bigger when I studied."*
V	**Lifestyle appreciation**			
	Work-life balance, nature, calmness, social culture	*Saw Sweden as aligned with preferred lifestyle and values*	*Also strongly appreciated Swedish lifestyle even when later leaving*	*"I loved the working culture… the nature… the environment." / "It's a beautiful country to live in."*
VI	**Language realization**			
	Swedish language as integration threshold	*Those who stayed often accepted language learning as long-term investment or had anchoring factors compensating for weaker Swedish*	*Those who left frequently experienced language expectations as structural exclusion*	*"You need to learn the language as soon as you can." / "It was not easy finding something… especially because I don't speak Swedish."*

(*continues on the next page*)

Table #4: EU close proximity journey stages across different outcomes with illustrative quotes (continuing)

	JOURNEY STAGE			
	Dominant theme	**Stayed**	**Left**	**Illustrative quotes**
VII	**Student to work transition**			
	The decisive bottleneck	*Usually secured employment, internships, relationships, or networks early*	*Often failed to convert student integration into labor-market integration*	*"With studying there, you build up a network there and it's an easier step in." / "I didn't find a job."*
VIII	**Employment process**			
	International employability challenges	*Employment created anchoring and permanence*	*Lack of opportunities pushed people out despite emotional attachment*	*"They were willing to employ me afterwards." / "There were no job opportunities. That's why I left."*
IX	**Post-graduation trajectories**			
	Pragmatic mobility	*Stayed through anchoring factors (job, partner, network); Sweden becomes home or semi-home*	*Left pragmatically, not emotionally rejecting Sweden; Many leavers still imagine returning someday*	*"I came with a certain intention to stay." / "I wanted to stay… but because the company situation changed, we returned to Germany." "I can imagine going back." / "If the right opportunity appeared, I would absolutely consider returning."*

Source: Authors

I.4 Implications for stakeholders

The starting point of this section is stressing out that the main challenge is not attraction. The university already attracts highly motivated international students; however, the main challenge is long-term professional integration. The graduates leave because employment pathways remain unclear or inaccessible.

In the following page, in the table #5 we emphasize some of the identified issues, alongside the possible avenues for searching for concrete ideas and suggestions, on how to mobilize different stakeholders in transforming attraction into retention.

Table #5 Identified issues with recommendations for stakeholders

Issue	*How the Issue Arises*	*Recommended Solutions*	*Key Stakeholders*
Employers hesitant to hire internationals	*SMEs often lack experience recruiting international talent*	*Create employer education, onboarding support, and hiring incentives*	*Chamber of Commerce, Municipality*
Unrealistic expectations	*Students often imagine Sweden as internationally accessible professionally*	*Provide transparent labor-market information early in studies*	*JU*
Weak transition from studies to employment	*Lack of structured support between graduation and first job; weak employer connections*	*Graduate Transition Programs; internship-to-employment pathways; mentorship programs*	*JU, Municipality, Employers, Chamber of Commerce*
Limited employment opportunities for internationals	*Few entry-level international-friendly jobs and limited regional labor market*	*Regional Talent Compact; incentivized trainee programs; diversity hiring support*	*Municipality, Employers, Regional Development Agencies*
Swedish language as a professional barrier	*Language requirements become critical after graduation; students underestimate importance*	*Profession-specific Swedish courses; workplace language coaching; employer education*	*JU, Employers, Language Providers*
Weak professional integration	*International students lack access to Swedish professional networks and informal hiring systems*	*Mentorship programs; employer partnerships; alumni networking initiatives*	*JU, Alumni, Employers*
Overreliance on individual luck	*Success often depends on chance encounters, relationships, or personal persistence*	*Institutionalized retention support and formal career pathways*	*JU, Municipality, Employers*
Insufficient long-term retention strategy	*Focus placed more on attraction and onboarding than post-graduation retention*	*Structured retention policies and long-term integration support*	*JU, Municipality, Regional Agencies*
Smaller labor market in Jönköping	*Fewer international employers and weaker professional ecosystems than Stockholm*	*Remote/hybrid work strategies; improved regional mobility infrastructure*	*Municipality, Employers, Regional Transport Agencies*
Weak return pathways for former students	*International alumni relationships are not systematically maintained*	*Return-to-Jönköping initiatives; alumni job newsletters; relocation support*	*JU, Alumni Networks, Employers*
Limited early career anchoring	*Students arrive open-minded but without strong career integration into local labor market*	*Earlier internships; employer exposure from semester 1; alumni mentorship*	*JU, Employers*

Fragmented stakeholder coordination	*Retention requires coordination across education, labor market, and municipal systems*	*Cross-sector retention strategy and governance structures*	*JU, Municipality, Employers, Regional Agencies*

Table #5 Identified issues with recommendations for stakeholders (continuous)

Issue	*How the Issue Arises*	*Recommended Solutions*	*Key Stakeholders*
Limited awareness among employers of international talent value	*Employers may underestimate graduates' international competence*	*Promote success stories and employer engagement campaigns*	*Chamber of Commerce, Municipality, JU*
Difficulty accessing Swedish professional culture	*Workplace norms and hiring expectations are often implicit; Internationals struggle navigating recruitment culture*	*Offer workplace culture coaching and employer mentorship*	*JU, Employers*
Administrative systems difficult to navigate	*BankID, personnummer, banking, and bureaucracy can be confusing*	*Improve onboarding guidance and administrative support*	*JU, Municipality*
Professional opportunities perceived as stronger elsewhere	*Larger cities and home countries offer clearer career progression*	*Position Jönköping as both lifestyle and career destination*	*Everyone*

I.4 Conclusion

The EU proximity group consists mainly of students from culturally and geographically close European countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria. These students were strongly attracted to Sweden because of its image of high quality of life, equality, safety, work-life balance, and connection to nature. Most participants did not initially plan to stay permanently, but many developed stronger attachments to Sweden during their studies through positive student experiences, social integration, and emotional connection to the country.

The study shows that the main challenge for this group is the transition from student life into the Swedish labor market. While participants generally viewed Sweden and Jönköping positively, difficulties finding employment, limited professional opportunities, and the importance of Swedish language skills often influenced the decision to leave. Those who stayed usually had internships, professional networks, or personal relationships that helped them establish long-term roots in Sweden.

The next group we will analyze is the group of students from Europe, but with larger cultural or geographical distance. In order to avoid redundances – we will focus only on new themes and significant differences.

II. EUROPE PERIPHERAL

This group consist of the students that are either culturally more distant from Sweden (psychic distance) or at greater geographical (physical) distance. This group consist mainly of respondents from countries that are formally part of the EU (like Hungary, Croatia or Spain, Greece), but also two respondents from Turkey and Ukraine, countries that are outside the EU. This creates slightly different dynamics in this group, since the later group, also needs to deal with administrative burden of arriving, studying and staying in Sweden.

However, the economic conditions in both groups of countries result in them equally seeing Sweden as a desirable destination.

After presenting the available statistics for this group and visualizing their journey, we will attempt to focus only on identifying:

A) Significant differences in the interpretation of already defined themes from content analysis of the interviews (juxtaposed against the findings from EU proximity group);
B) Newly identified themes in the data set Europe peripheral.

II.1 Brief group summary

This group consists of 14 interviews – the intention outcome matrix you can see as Table #6. Here, more people stayed than left – which can be justified with, aforementioned, discrepancies in level of economic development and prosperity. Eight respondents graduated from JIBS, four from HLK and two from JTH, bringing a bit of diversity in the data.

Table #6: EU peripheral stay/left matrix

Initial intention	*Stayed*	*Left*	*Total*
Intended to stay	*2*	*2*	*4*
Did not intended to stay	*4*	*3*	*7*
Ambivalent	*3*	*0*	*3*
Total	*9*	*5*	*14*

Source: Authors

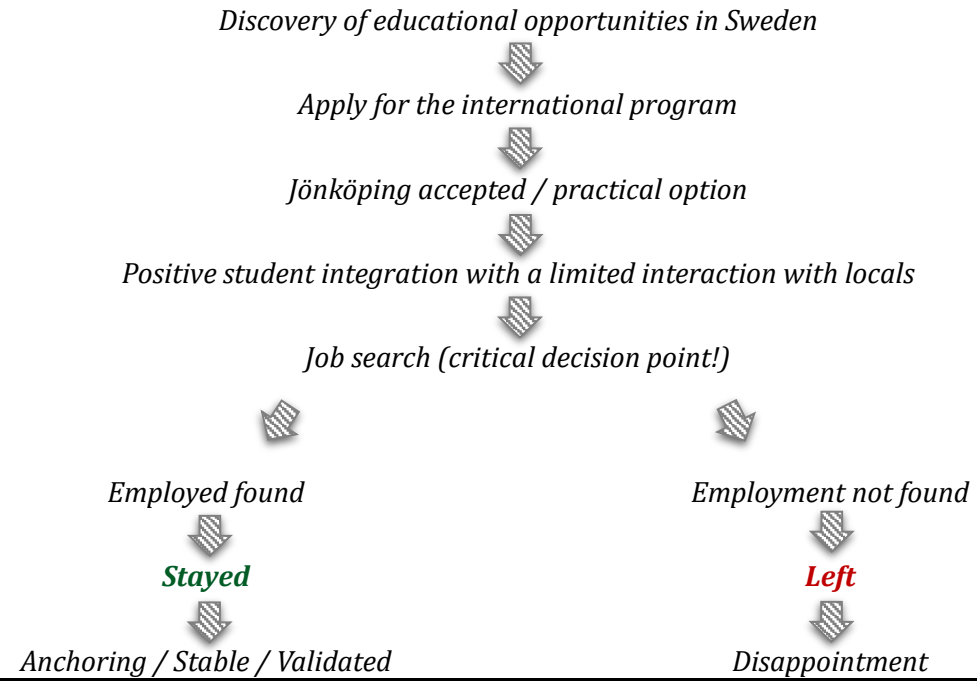
We will try to focus on novelties and differences. For example, in this group we can confirm challenges in transitioning to a workplace and small-city limitations with job opportunities; these we already encountered. However, this group, being culturally more distant, brings more to the focus issue of social integration, and as a complete novelty – weather/ climate (cold, darkness) as factors. The weather/climate is also extended to emotional sphere and social contact.

This group proved to be resilient, and persistent in pursuing opportunities, but as expected for some it did not work - *"On paper they will never choose you as international student."*, while others had a completely different perspective *"There were way more opportunities here to be in associations and organizations than I thought."*

II.2 Mapping the journey with thematic analysis

The journey of the Europe peripheral graduates does not look much different from the journey map of EU proximity students (see Illustration #2).

Illustration #2: visualization of the journey map with critical steps



Source: Authors

Interestingly, within this group in the positive student integration – surfaces out the perception about difficulties creating deeper contact with Swedish students (this could be interpreted as misalignment between cultures related to social interactions and friendship).

If we focus on the thematic analysis we are moving in the predictable, already discovered realm. The key points being:

1. Students are attracted to Sweden rather than the town. International reputation of the country, affordability (free for EU students), teaching in English and promise of international environment (community) worked well for attracting these candidates. Although the cultural distance is greater there is still positive ring to quality of life, sustainability, and values.
2. The university provided positive and consistent experience to the graduates from this group.
3. The critical issue remains to be gap between student life and meaningful employment.
4. In this group, earlier issues are also part of having insufficient or no command over the local language.

Another emergency topic is related to the importance of networks, mentorship, and informal connections; this can be argued as a cultural trait where there is a greater emphasis on relationships and people (*mentors, professors, personal referrals, or direct employer relationships*).

Internships are still seen as a critical factor, since they provide more interactions with potential employers.

The critical outlook to Jönköping also emerges, alongside calmness, nature, and perfect size, more tones where the city is seen as small, professionally limiting and socially narrow. See table #7 for more details.

Table #7: EU close proximity journey stages across different outcomes with illustrative quotes

	JOURNEY STAGE			
	Dominant theme	**Stayed**	**Left**	**Illustrative quotes**
I	**Discovery & Attraction**			
	Sweden and JU were primarily attractive because of international reputation, English-language education, and accessibility.	*Often open to long-term possibilities from the beginning, even if not explicitly planning to stay.*	*Often saw studies as a temporary mobility experience.*	*Stayed: "Sweden became more of an option for me because I had a really a great experience in Jönköping mainly." Left: "I specifically came to study."*
II	**Arrival and settlement**			
	Settlement process was overwhelmingly described as smooth and welcoming.	*Positive onboarding strengthened attachment to Sweden.*	*Positive onboarding did not necessarily translate into long-term retention.*	*"It was a very smooth process." "I was quite surprised by how easy everything was."*
III	**Academic experience**			
	Students consistently valued JU's international and practical learning environment.	*Practical orientation sometimes facilitated labor-market confidence.*	*Positive academic experiences alone were insufficient to ensure staying.*	*"The program met my expectations." "The university is so modern."*
IV	**Career exposure during studies**			
	Career support existed but experiences differed strongly	*Students who stayed more often benefited from mentors, internships, professors, or direct employer contact.*	*Students who left often perceived employer engagement as symbolic or inaccessible.*	*Stayed: "I got some tips about my CV and about looking for a job." Stayed: "The internship slowly evolved into permanent employment." Left: "It felt unattainable to get a job there."*
V	**Swedish language**			
	Swedish language emerged as one of the strongest structural barriers.	*Students who stayed either learned Swedish or found English-speaking professional niches.*	*Students who left often experienced Swedish as limiting access to qualified work.*	*"This is why I took the courses… and this is why now I know how to speak Swedish." Left: "Every time I tried to apply for a Swedish school… I never heard back."*

Source: Authors

JU succeeds strongly in attraction and student integration, but long-term retention depends heavily on labor-market transition. If access to the labor market is closed departure is the only option.

II.3 Implications for stakeholders

Addressing the issues already presented (see I.3) will respond to a lot of shared issues or obstacles these students are facing.

Shared issues include:

- strong attraction versus weak retention;
- student bubble – overreliance on international community and English language;
- late realization of importance of Swedish language;

Here are some additional challenges that materialize within this group (Table #8).

Table #8 Identified issues with recommendations for stakeholders

Issue	*How the Issue Arises*	*Recommended Solutions*	*Key Stakeholders*
Limited access to internships and qualified entry-level jobs	*Many students rely on personal initiative rather than formal university pathways. Internship opportunities appear uneven across programs.*	*Increase mandatory/practical placements; Build structured internship agreements with companies; Incentivize companies to host internationals*	*JU schools/programs, employers, industry networks*
Limited social integration with Swedish students/community	*International and Swedish students often socialize separately. Cultural distance and language differences reinforce separation.*	*Increase mixed-group activities; Support intercultural programs; Encourage longer-term interaction beyond introduction weeks*	*Student Union, JU, student associations*
Psychological uncertainty about belonging and future	*Students' intentions evolve during studies; many remain undecided until late in their education.*	*Begin retention and career discussions earlier; Provide long-term settlement guidance already during first year*	*JU, student services, career services*
Climate and darkness affecting well-being	*Several students from Southern/Central Europe described difficulties adapting to winter darkness and isolation.*	*Strengthen social/community activities during winter; Provide well-being and adaptation support for internationals*	*Student Health, Student Union, Municipality*
Uneven employer openness toward internationals	*Some firms are highly international and flexible, while others implicitly prioritize Swedish speaking/local candidates.*	*Promote diversity and international competence among employers; Showcase successful international hires as examples*	*Employers, Chamber of Commerce, Region*

II.4 Conclusion

Experiences of students that we categorized as Europe peripheral are very similar to the experiences and journey of students from close EU countries. While many students were initially attracted by Sweden's international reputation, English-language education, affordability, and quality of life, the study highlights that long-term retention depends heavily on successful integration into the labor market. Students in this group generally reported positive experiences with Jönköping University (JU), including smooth settlement and supportive academic environments, but many struggled to transition from student life into meaningful employment. Swedish language requirements, limited access to internships, and employer preference for local candidates emerged as major barriers, despite some students successfully finding opportunities through internships, mentorships, and networking.

The report also emphasizes the social and emotional dimensions of integration for these students. Compared to students from culturally closer European countries, this group experienced greater challenges in building deeper relationships with Swedish students and adapting to Sweden's climate, darkness, and social norms. The study identifies several stakeholder recommendations, including improving structured internship pathways, increasing intercultural activities between Swedish and international students, providing earlier career and settlement guidance, and strengthening support systems for wellbeing during winter months. Overall, the findings suggest that JU performs strongly in attracting and integrating international students academically, but retention after graduation remains strongly tied to labor-market accessibility and social inclusion.

III. OUTSIDE EU

The group consists of alumni from all over the world, excluding Europe – and is, therefore, offering a new angle, from more distant cultures, facing the obstacles of obtaining visas, finances and greater geographical and cultural distance.

III.1 Brief group summary

The group consists of alumni from all over the world, excluding Europe, and it is quite diverse group of respondents. Students from Asia and Middle East have a strong representation, while several participants were from South America, only one from Africa, and no representation of North America.

The respondent graduated from three sister schools at JU, excluding School of Health and Welfare. The group, compared with the European groups (proximity and peripheral) has higher degree of ambiguity related to retention patterns, making sometimes difficult to relate intentions and outcomes, as many of them are still to find justification to stay (both to themselves and authorities). Also, as one of the respondents stated, *"My plans changed several times during my studies."* – making it difficult to understand the intention. This is the group that is relevant for understanding the administrative burden of securing visas and residence.

Table #9: Outside Europe stay/left matrix

Initial intention	*Stayed*	*Left*	*Total*
Intended to stay	*9*	*4*	*13*
Did not intended to stay	*5*	*5*	*10*
Total	*14*	*9*	*23*

Source: Authors

The table presented is approximation, based on interpretations of ambiguous positions of our respondents, yet it is sufficient to understand the dynamics. Given that we already concluded that intention does not mean, automatically, stay – we can say that for illustrative purposes approximation is acceptable. Also, several participants are still in Sweden, but dependent on the decisions of migration agency, therefore the status is not clear.

Illustrative quotes range from *"My plan was always to find a job and continue living in Sweden if possible."* to *"It was difficult to see a future here without Swedish language and local contacts."* As with previous groups – intention to stay and ultimately retention can be boiled down to *"I originally came only for education, but during my studies I started considering st*aying. In the end, everything depended on whether I could build a professional future here."

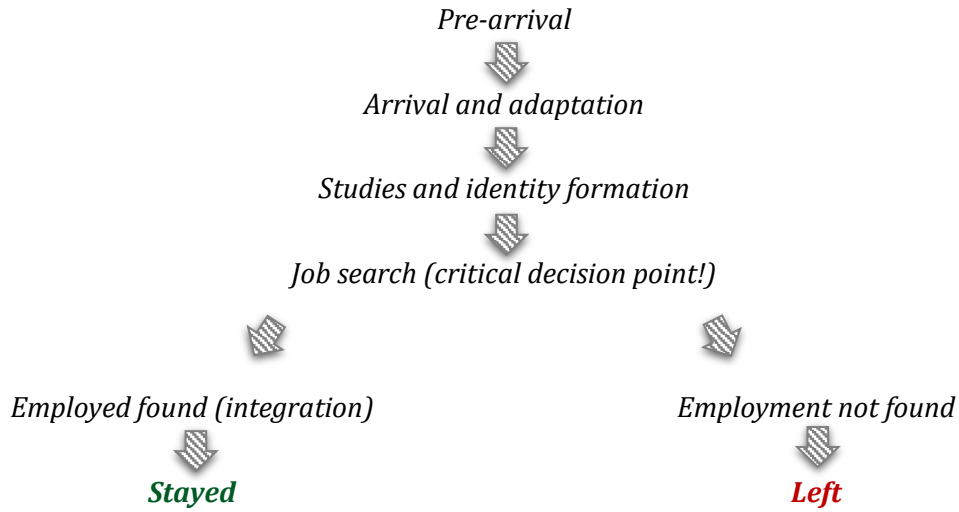
III.2 Mapping the journey with thematic analysis

The graduates in this category can be considered as global opportunity seekers. As much as they are very positive about Sweden, compared with previous groups – Sweden is not

necessarily a dream destination, but more of a practical and rational choice, taking into consideration the costs and accessibility for these people.

The individual often arrives in Sweden primarily for education but gradually reassesses long-term plans based on work opportunities, integration experiences, and quality of life. Their journey, with a bit of a different starting point, circumstances and outcomes, still follows the patter we already identified with the previous groups.

Illustration #3: visualization of the journey map with critical steps



Source: Authors

Stage 1 "pre-arrival" compared with the previous group usually has wider scope, since this group reports investigating multiple countries – in the attempt to find the winning formula. They are taking more countries into consideration, investigating not just educational opportunities, but also administrative requirements and pursuing grants/stipends that can help absorb the financial burdens.

Sweden is seen as: safe (an important issue for this group!), with assumed high quality of education, and if paired with scholarship it becomes easily a plausible choice.

Stage 2 Arrival and Adaptation. This is an important phase – the move to Sweden is perceived as a significant life event; the positive aspects include calmness, safety, organization (or efficiency), and finally – the perception of the flat-hierarchy. However, there are also reports about cultural shock (and loneliness) and issues with dealing with formal structures in obtaining visas/permits.

The idea of possible stay is articulated very early.

Stage 3 studies and identity formation. Respondents report on the academic development; international community that helps them feel as if home; working on group projects and, preferably, secured internships give them opportunity to discover a bit about Swedish work culture.

Stage 4 Job search remains single most important aspect – however, the respondents in this group are describing this process as stressful, uncertain, emotionally difficult.

This is the moment they realize that Swedish language is a must; they find themselves without local network; perplexed that the employers frequently require work experience in Swedish context.

Typically, they send hundreds of applications; struggle with uncertainty about residence permits; and finally, feel excluded from the labor market.

Table #10: Outside Europe journey stages across different outcomes with illustrative quotes

	JOURNEY STAGE			
	Dominant theme	**Stayed**	**Left**	**Illustrative quotes**
I	**Pre arrival**			
	Respondents searched for affordable, high-quality international education and future career opportunities. Sweden was often chosen because of English-taught programs, safety, and reputation.	*Saw Sweden as a place with long-term professional and personal potential.*	*Viewed Sweden mainly as a temporary educational opportunity or steppingstone.*	*"My plan was always to find a job and continue living in Sweden if possible." / "The idea was always to finish the degree and then continue my career somewhere else."*
II	**Arrival and adaptation**			
	Initial excitement mixed with uncertainty, loneliness, bureaucracy, and cultural adjustment. Many experienced social distance and unfamiliarity with Swedish society.	*Initial excitement mixed with uncertainty, loneliness, bureaucracy, and cultural adjustment. Many experienced social distance and unfamiliarity with Swedish society.*	*Felt socially isolated or struggled to connect beyond the international student environment.*	*"People respect your personal space and life feels balanced here." / "Everything was very organized, but at the same time I felt alone in the beginning."*
III	**Studies and identity formation**			
	University became the main arena for building friendships, networks, and impressions of Swedish society. Intentions about staying often remained fluid	*Developed stronger attachment to Sweden during studies and began imagining a future there.*	*Continued feeling uncertain about belonging or viewed the experience as temporary.*	*"People respect your personal space and life feels balanced here." / "Everything was very organized, but at the same time I felt alone in the beginning."*
IV	**Job search**			
	This was the most stressful stage. Respondents faced pressure to secure employment, maintain residence permits, and compete in the labor market.	*Persistence, networking, or internships eventually led to employment opportunities.*	*Difficulties entering the labor market pushed many toward departure.*	*"After graduation the uncertainty became very stressful." / "It was difficult to see a future here without Swedish language and local contacts."*
V	**Swedish language**			

Focusing on those themes identified in the interviews with this group, on the top of already established themes with previous groups, we can single out the most critical topic.

The residence permit and uncertainty. Visa timelines and uncertainty created strong pressure during the post-graduation period. As stated by one of respondents: *"Everything depended on finding work before my permit expired."* It is vicious circle since residence permit id dependent on employment; and willingness of business to employe is dependent on having clear situation with migrations. Residence insecurity amplified uncertainty and accelerated decisions to leave.

Although not a brand-new theme – ***language, networks and employability*** – appeared together, closely intertwined. Employment and growing attachment encouraged long-term settlement - *"After I started working, Sweden started feeling more like home."*, on the other hand the job searching fatigue surface out as a reason to leave *"I wanted to remain in Sweden, but after many unsuccessful job applications I decided to leave."* Frequently the main reason would be summarized as *"Career-wise Sweden is great, but building relationships is much harder."*

III.3 Implications for stakeholders

Following the same idea, to avoid unnecessary redundances – we focus on the issues that were specifically raised by his group, as well, if applicable, on issue (themes) that offer fresh or different angle or recommended solution.

Table #11 Identified issues with recommendations for stakeholders

Issue	*How the Issue Arises*	*Recommended Solutions*	*Key Stakeholders*
Difficulty obtaining first work experience in Sweden	*Employers often prioritize candidates with Swedish work experience or references, creating a "catch-22" for international graduates*	*Expand internship, trainee, and co-op opportunities specifically targeting international students.*	*Employers, JU, Municipality, Regional Development Agencies*
Uncertainty regarding residence permits and post-study stay	*Visa timelines and migration regulations create pressure during the post-graduation transition period.*	*Establish centralized advisory services for residence permits, work permits, and post-study migration pathways.*	*Migration Agency, JU, Municipality*
Social isolation and weak sense of belonging	*International students often remain socially concentrated within international communities and struggle to access local social networks.*	*Develop integration initiatives such as mentorship programs, mixed housing arrangements, cultural activities, and local community engagement projects.*	*JU, Student Union, Municipality, Civil Society Organizations*

Students with unclear or evolving intentions are overlooked	*Retention efforts often focus only on students already committed to staying, despite many changing intentions during studies.*	*Implement continuous engagement strategies that expose students to local career opportunities and community integration throughout their studies.*	*JU, Municipality, Employers*

III.4 Conclusion

An important finding came across the groups and has been confirmed in this group, too. Most of the interviewees see themselves as flexible, cosmopolitan and quite ready and wiling to move between places in search of the best conditions. Therefore, for stakeholders is important to understand that this self-perception will govern their life choices, both of staying, but also treating the stay in Sweden as temporary. That said, it is also clear that if they do not find a "set-up" in Jönköping (region) – they will have no problem moving on.

The analysis highlights that these graduates often viewed Sweden as a practical and strategic destination rather than an idealized one. Still, English-taught programs, and educational quality are important. However, their long-term decisions were strongly shaped by employment opportunities, social integration, and the complexity of residence permit regulations. While many students initially considered staying in Sweden, the transition from studies to employment emerged as the most critical and stressful phase, with difficulties such as lack of Swedish language skills, limited professional networks, and employer demands for local experience frequently pushing graduates to leave.

IV. SWEDISH STUDENTS

The group primarily takes in the account students that identify themselves as Swedes, compared with the last group we will analyze (please see section V.) who are Swedish by passport, yet have immigrant background. Given that they are not international students, staying and leaving the town/region is differently interpreted.

IV.1 Brief group summary

The group consisted of 23 participants. Most respondents graduated in the last 6-7 years, and the top four reasons to join JU are:

1. attractive programs with reputation
2. geographical proximity to home/family
3. (manageable) size of the city – livable and not overwhelming like large cities.
4. international program (campus).

The choice for the Swedish students is deliberate – within combination of the city and the university. For internationals, choice is primarily on program – and city is a nice add-on. Illustrative quotes *"Both the university life, I would say, but also the way the city is structured and what the city has to offer."* Also, one of the participants juxtaposed with the large metropolitan areas *"Where I'm from it's quite common to go to Gothenburg or Malmö or Stockholm, so it was quite an unusual choice to go to Jönköping."*

Table #12: Swedish stay/left matrix

Stayed	*Left*	*Commute*	*Unclear*	*Total*
10	*7*	*5*	*1*	*23*

Source: Authors

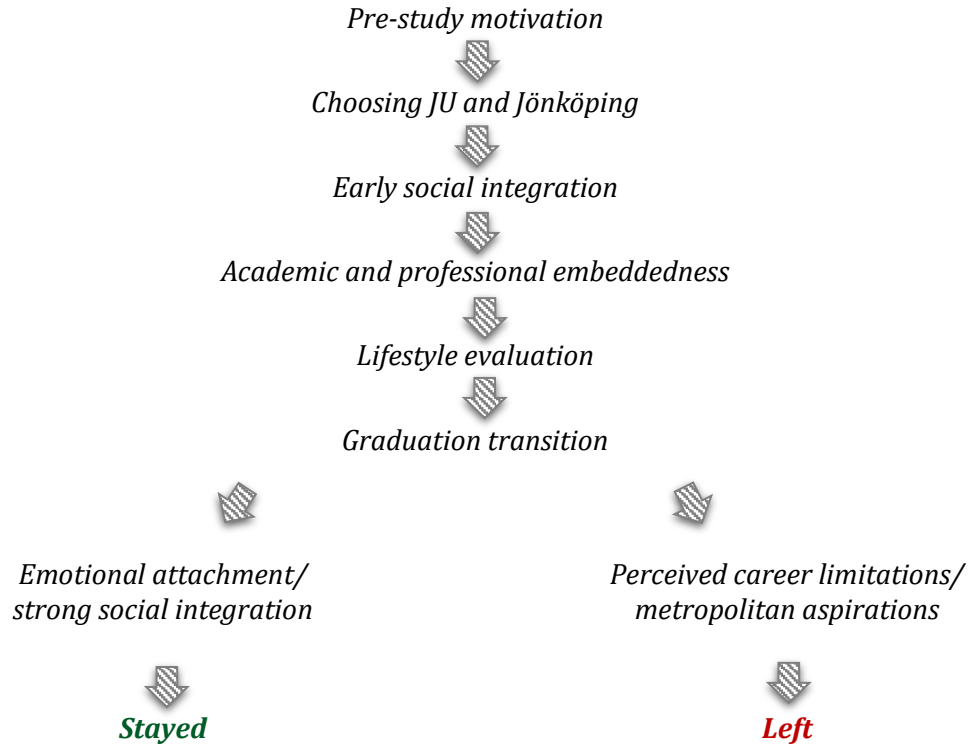
Unique configuration of motives, ties with local community, and being on their "home turf" can give us reasonable justification of creating more nuanced personas to describe our graduates: they are opportunity seekers (emphasizing the quality of education and its practical orientation); lifestyle seekers (emphasizing the lifestyle offered by particular town offering); internationally oriented (pursing studies in international environment, yet still at home); and finally they are also convenience seekers (where the decision is built around the proximity to the center of their life – home, family, friends).

III.2 Mapping the journey with thematic analysis

The journey map looks a bit different, as it does not contain deliberation about choice of the country, but follows the same predictable steps before, during and after graduation. Choosing the JU and Jönköping is strongly influenced by the underlying motivation, that zeros them towards their choice (see Illustration #4).

The intertwined choice of the town and university is visible in the statement *"I want a degree that gives me opportunities, but I also want an environment where I feel comfortable."*

Illustration #4: visualization of the journey map with critical steps



Source: Authors

Pre study motivation, as stated, revolves around: program attractiveness, school reputation, right size of town, and finally convenience.

The major discrepancy is noticeable at the end of the model – since the employment opportunities are important, yet they represent lesser concern compared with international students. Decisions to stay or leave are made in different contexts. This relates to the phase of ***"lifestyle evaluation"*** - leading to ***"graduation transition"***. This can be simple illustrated with following perspective:

Illustration #5: stay/left motivation

Employment *Social embeddedness* *Partner/family* *Quality of life* *Affordability* *City size and convenience*	*Perceived career limitations* *Less opportunities* *Career development* *Limitations of small town* *Metropolitan (or international) ambitions*
Stayed	***Left*** *"I liked Jönköping, but my long-term career required moving."*

"I found both professional and personal stability here."

Source: Authors

We summarized identified themes in the table below:

Table #13: Swedish graduates themes across different outcomes with illustrative quotes

	THEMES			
	Dominant theme	**Stayed**	**Left**	**Illustrative quotes**
I	**Career opportunities**			
		Local opportunities were "good enough" to build a stable future. First jobs and internships often anchored them in the region.	*Felt the labor market was too narrow or lacked specialization/career progression.*	*Stayed: "I got a job here after my studies and then I just stayed." Left: "I liked Jönköping, but there were more opportunities in Stockholm."*
II	**Internships & employer connections**			
		Internships created strong attachment and easier transition into employment.	*Lack of attractive long-term opportunities after internships encouraged mobility.*	*Stayed: "The contacts I got during my studies helped me stay in the region." Left: "It was difficult finding the type of role I wanted here."*
III	**Lifestyle & quality of life**			
		Appreciated calmness, safety, affordability, and work-life balance.	*Felt the city was too small or lacked urban intensity and diversity.*	*Stayed: "Life here is easy and balanced." Left: "After some years, I wanted a bigger city experience."*
IV	**City size**			
		Small-city environment felt manageable and comfortable.	*Smaller size eventually became limiting socially or professionally.*	*Stayed: "You can get everywhere easily and it feels safe." Left: "It's a bit too small if you want more happening around you."*
V	**Social integration**			
		Strong friendships and student networks evolved into long-term attachment.	*Weaker social attachment made relocation easier.*	*Stayed: "Most of my friends stayed here too." Left: "Many people moved away after graduation, so I also left."*
VI	**Partner and family ties**			
		Relationships strongly increased probability of staying.	*Partner opportunities or family elsewhere encouraged leaving.*	*Stayed: "My partner had work here, so we stayed." Left: "My family and network were somewhere else."*
VII	**University experience**			
		Positive study experience strengthened	*Positive university memories remained but*	*Stayed: "The university experience made me feel at home here." Left:*

		emotional connection to the region.	*did not outweigh career mobility.*	*"I really liked studying here, but I never planned to stay forever."*

Table #13: Swedish graduates - themes across different outcomes with illustrative quotes (continuing)

	THEMES			
	Dominant theme	**Stayed**	**Left**	**Illustrative quotes**
VIII	**International orientation**			
		Some international-minded students still stayed because they found a niche locally.	*Highly mobile students often saw JU as one step in a larger international path.*	*Stayed: "Even though it's international, you can still build a career locally." Left: "I always wanted to work abroad or in a larger city."*
IX	**Regional attachment**			
		Developed emotional identification with Jönköping over time.	*Often appreciated the region but felt professionally pulled elsewhere.*	*Stayed: "It started to feel like home." Left: "I still like Jönköping, but my future wasn't here."*
X	**Economic practicality**			
		Affordable housing and manageable living costs supported staying.	*Higher salaries or broader markets elsewhere outweighed affordability.*	*Stayed: "You can actually afford a good life here." Left: "The career possibilities elsewhere were worth moving for."*
XI	**Mobility aspirations**			
		Preferred stability and long-term settlement.	*Wanted exploration, movement, and metropolitan experiences.*	*Stayed: "I was looking for stability." Left: "I wanted to try living somewhere bigger and more international."*

Source: Authors

The overall overview of the themes suggests a different kind of issues and major decision points that the Swedish students are facing. Their choices are driven by decisions related to career management and choice of the lifestyle they want to lead – contrary to them the international groups are primarily driven by finding a meaningful job that is a sole factor that makes staying even an option. This does not mean that this group is not interested in the better connection with labor market and does not have desire for more job opportunities, yet this is not their major discourse.

IV.3 Implications for stakeholders

The implication for stakeholders – overlaps with international students only to a certain extent, but even along the same issues that need to be addressed circumstance and starting position, as well as desirable solutions, might not be the same.

Table #14 offers outlook on major issues and implications for stakeholders in the context of the Swedish students, beyond the point of needing more job opportunities and more collaboration between actors in creating desirable career opportunities.

Table #14 Identified issues with recommendations for stakeholders

Issue	*How the Issue Arises*	*Recommended Solutions*	*Key Stakeholders*
Weak transition from student life to adult life	*Students feel socially connected during studies, but experience a gap after graduation when student identity and university structures disappear*	*Create alumni integration programmes; support young-professional communities; improve graduate housing pathways; develop "stay in the region" transition initiatives*	*University, Municipality, Student unions*
Perception of Jönköping as "too small"	*Graduates compare Jönköping with larger metropolitan areas and perceive limited urban, cultural, or professional diversity*	*Strengthen regional branding; promote quality-of-life advantages; expand cultural and networking events; attract knowledge-intensive industries*	*Municipality, Regional government, Employers, Cultural organizations*
Weak social integration for some students	*Students who fail to establish strong friendships or social belonging are less attached to the region and more likely to leave*	*Improve onboarding and mentoring; expand social integration initiatives; strengthen local–international student interaction; support graduate social networks*	*University, Student unions, Municipality, Employers*
International and highly mobile students often leave	*Many internationally oriented students see JU as one step in a larger international or metropolitan career trajectory*	*Develop targeted retention programs; improve pathways into Swedish labor market; support international recruitment; create local-global career opportunities*	*Employers, University, Municipality, National government*
Lack of visible long-term career pathways	*Students may obtain temporary jobs but do not see sustainable long-term futures in the region*	*Promote regional career success stories; improve career progression opportunities; support entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems*	*Employers, Business organizations, Municipality, University*
Lifestyle advantages are not strategically leveraged	*Students value safety, affordability, and work-life balance, but these strengths are not always communicated*	*Build stronger place-branding strategies; market quality-of-life benefits; integrate lifestyle advantages*	*Municipality, Regional branding agencies, University*

	as competitive advantages	*into recruitment and retention strategies*

Source: Authors

IV.4 Conclusion

Graduate outmigration driven by ambition rather than dissatisfaction. Many graduates leave because of career acceleration and metropolitan aspirations, not because they dislike the region, this needs collective efforts of multiple stakeholders to create rewarding environment for work and living. There is an overlap with the activities and strategies that tailor both to international and Swedish students, yet these groups are different in their priorities and prospects.

V. NEW-SWEDISH

The group represents a sub-group of Swedish population, that has an immigrant background. We considered running the analysis separately for this group, with intention to capture, if any, different experiences, perceptions and journeys of this group from choosing the school to finding a workplace. Apparently, this group shares some of the points usually associated with international population and partly points associated with the Swedish group.

V.1 Brief group summary

The group consisted of 12 participants. Majority of them falls into the category of forced migration (e.g. leaving their home countries, like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Palestine) or are childhood migrants. When they describe themselves, we frequently find points like: "in-between," not fully Swedish, not fully from their country of origin anymore, culturally hybrid.

Motivation to joining the university is aligned with the previous groups, however New-Swedes – see education as freedom, empowerment, and studying at JU and Jonkoping, felt like an accessible, international, practical pathway toward rebuilding or advancing their lives in Sweden.

Table #15: New-Swedish stay/left matrix

	Stayed	***Left***	***Unclear***	***Total***
	4	*7*	*1*	*12*

Source: Authors

We can describe them as resilient and ambitious. Frequently they carry, from their families and upbringing, the notion that education is of outmost importance. As in any other group – there are people with a positive attitude *"It's a cute city and I think it's a reliant place. It's a comfortable place to live at."* To those who are less thrilled with the job opportunities *"I had a little plan of staying there, but there was not that many opportunities, so I had to move back."*, or overarching statements like *"There was just nothing."*

V.2 Mapping the journey with thematic analysis

Conversationally, this group feels like being between two worlds (Swedish and international graduates), please see Illustration #6. This means that a lot is shared with both groups, and again with the intention to avoid redundances we focus on a couple of new themes, after we describe their journey.

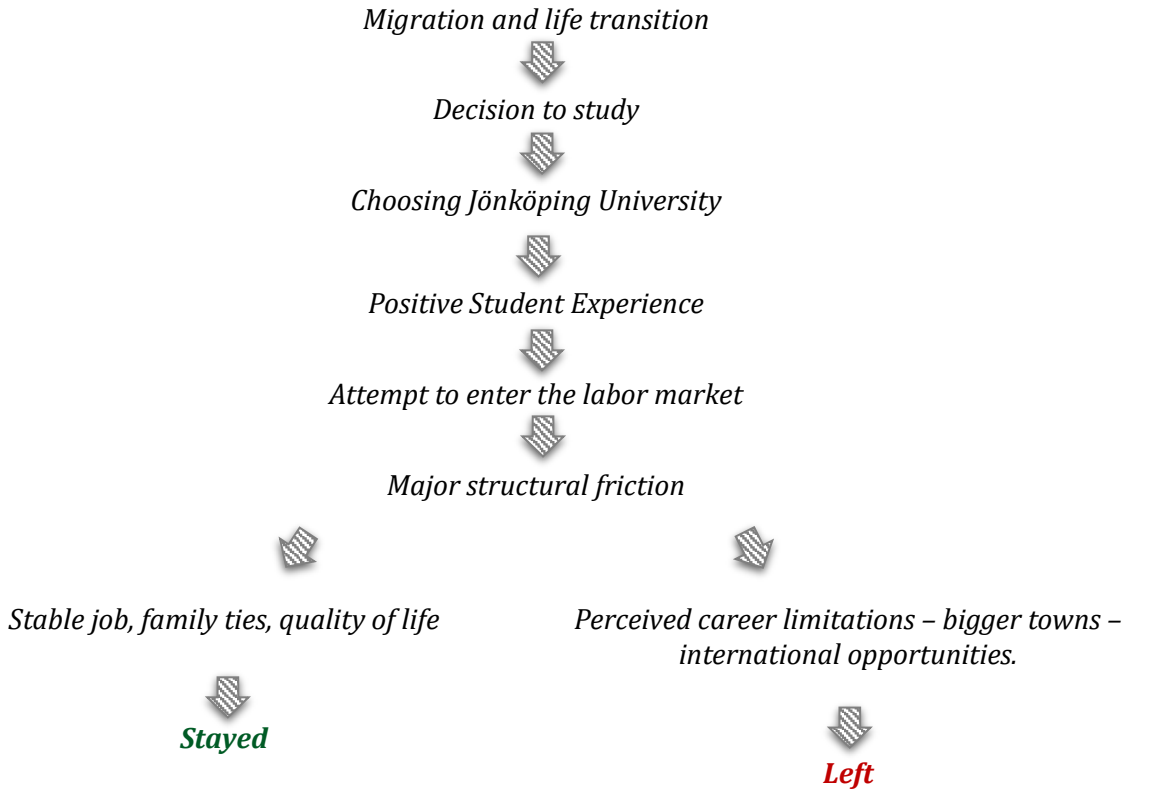
Step 1. Their choices are deeply impacted by ***migration*** and settling in Sweden, this represents a significant part of their identity.

Education is significantly connected with their aspirations and hopes and is seen as an important part of the process of securing future.

Step 2. Choice of the university is aligned with the previous groups – perceptions of quality, accessibility, affordability, so, there are no new findings in this perspective. This extends to the positive student experience (***Step 3***).

Step 4. Attempt to enter the labor market – resembles more to experiences of international students, regardless of having the Swedish passport and being in Sweden for a long time (pattern): language command, lack of local networks and lack of opportunities is perceived as critical factors blocking their road towards meaningful employment.

Illustration #6: visualization of the journey map with critical steps



Source: Authors

Driven by the education being, as perceived, only possible course of action, for these graduates the critical (new) themes identified in interviews are listed in table 16. They feel being defined by multicultural identity – hence multicultural environment made a sense as a choice of place to be/study.

Education is instrumental to social mobility – their way of taking place in the new society and receiving recognition and reaching long-term stability. They are also interested in receiving more institutional support – since they feel lonely (part is related to the issue of having limited ties and connections to locals).

Resilience is partly an outcome – partly a needed quality to survive in their position, and they are showing this persistence in pursuing educational goals, and being quite proactive to support their case (*e.g. since the foreign name often bears assumption that the language skills*

are limited – they would be persistent to have an opportunity to talk with potential employer to prove themselves).

Table #16: New-Sweden graduates - themes across different outcomes with illustrative quotes (continuing)

	THEMES			
	Dominant theme	**Stayed**	**Left**	**Illustrative quotes**
I	**International and multicultural identity**			
	Participants often developed hybrid identities and valued international environments.	*Some found multicultural balance and belonging in Jönköping.*	*Others sought larger, more diverse cities with stronger international environments.*	*"I always wanted to be in an international setting." / "There's not a lot of culture."*
II	**Education as social mobility**			
	University represented rebuilding life, security, and upward mobility.	*Staying often meant consolidating that mobility locally.*	*Leaving was often seen as the next necessary step for career advancement.*	*"Education opens the doors to employment."*
III	**Institutional support vs self-reliance**			
	Participants often felt they had to navigate careers independently	*Those who stayed sometimes benefited from local programs, employers, or Science Park support*	*Those who left frequently described weak university-to-job transition systems.*	*"Science Park helped us a lot." / "I never got a support from the university."*
IV	**Resilience and persistence**			
	Participants demonstrated strong adaptability and determination.	*Staying often requires persistence in building local legitimacy and careers.*	*Leaving also reflected strategic resilience — mobility as adaptation.*	*"I went to every company. I knocked the door." / "I applied like 14 times."*

V.3 Implications for stakeholders

The overall similarity with the previous categories and the specific features of this group we presented lead to a quite short list of specific issues that were result of analyzing this particular group and their context. Most of the issues have already been processed and addressing them would be beneficial for this group, too (job opportunities, limited networks, language barriers, need for more/better internships, small city limitations) .

Beyond the already emphasized challenge of psychological insecurity and belonging, their circumstances often amplify housing challenges – since they might not have a same network as Swedish students, and at the same time they are not offered support that is offered to international students. The issue of the housing surfaced several times, in different connotations, and it seems to be solvable with change of strategy or the approach, for greater benefits.

Lastly, this group, for the same reasons – needs more institutional support to overcome lack of deep integration into the Swedish society.

As with all other groups there is a mismatch between educational success and regional retention. The university successfully attracted and educated international talent, but the region struggled to retain them professionally afterward.

Table #17 Identified issues with recommendations for stakeholders

Issue	*How the Issue Arises*	*Recommended Solutions*	*Key Stakeholders*
Psychological insecurity and belonging	*Some participants felt socially "in-between," not fully Swedish yet not fully connected to their country of origin. Experiences of exclusion or subtle discrimination affected confidence and belonging.*	*• Create inclusion and belonging initiatives • Increase intercultural dialogue programs • Support identity-positive student communities • Train employers/managers in inclusion practices*	*University, employers, municipalities, schools, civil society*
Housing and settlement challenges	*Several participants struggled with housing access, especially early in their studies. Housing insecurity affected study continuity and well-being.*	*• Expand student housing • Improve housing guidance for newcomers • Create transitional accommodation support*	*Municipality, housing companies, university, student housing organizations*
Overreliance on individual resilience	*Success often depended on extraordinary personal persistence rather than supportive systems. Participants repeatedly described solving problems alone.*	*• Build stronger institutional support structures • Provide tailored career counseling • Offer individualized transition support for international graduates*	*University, Arbetsförmedlingen, municipalities, employers*

Source: Authors

IV.4 Conclusion

New-Sweden – graduates with immigrant background proved to be a category with needs that span between the international and local students. They are determined and resilient but still suffer from insecurities and need support that can help them stay in the region and feel at home.

VI CROSS-GROUP SUMMATIVE CONCLUSION

The most important finding of the study is that t***he main challenge is not attracting students*** to Jönköping or Sweden, but retaining them after graduation through meaningful professional and social integration. Across all groups — international, Swedish, and New-Swedish graduates — participants generally described ***positive study experiences, strong appreciation for quality of life, and emotional attachment to the region.*** However, the ***transition from student life into employment consistently emerged as the decisive turning point influencing whether graduates stayed or left.*** The findings demonstrate that attraction and retention are structurally disconnected: while the university succeeds in creating belonging and positive educational experiences, the region struggles to provide sufficient pathways into employment, professional networks, and long-term career development.

Several major themes require immediate attention:
First, the student-to-employment transition remains the single most critical bottleneck, particularly for international and New-Swedish graduates, who often struggle to access internships, employer networks, and first professional opportunities.
Second, Swedish language competence functions as a major structural barrier, especially after graduation, when labor-market expectations become more visible.
Third, weak professional and social integration limits long-term attachment to the region, as many students remain concentrated within international or student "bubbles" with limited access to local networks and workplace culture.
Fourth, Jönköping is frequently perceived as professionally limiting due to the relatively small labor market and fewer visible long-term career pathways compared with metropolitan areas.
Finally, fragmented stakeholder coordination weakens retention efforts, as responsibility for attraction, integration, employment, housing, and settlement support remains dispersed across institutions.

The findings suggest that the most important course of action is the development of a coordinated long-term retention strategy that connects e***ducation, labor-market integration, and community belonging***:
A) Jönköping University should strengthen structured transition support through earlier internships, mentorship programs, employer collaboration, profession-specific Swedish language training, and stronger alumni engagement.
B) Employers and business organizations need to increase openness toward international and diverse talent by offering internships, trainee programs, and clearer entry-level pathways.
C) Municipal and regional actors should focus on improving place branding, housing support, networking opportunities, and quality-of-life promotion while simultaneously strengthening the regional professional ecosystem.

Finally, successful retention requires ***coordinated governance across stakeholders*** — including the university, employers, municipality, regional development agencies, student organizations, and alumni networks — in order to transform positive student experiences into sustainable long-term settlement and professional integration in the region.