



## EDUCATING THE WORLD

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In these days in which you need to pay even for the smallest services, like getting a glass of tap water in a restaurant or visiting a public toilet at the train station, there is no wonder that people get surprised when they find out that some things are still for free.

One of the most commonly asked questions among international aspirants for the Communication for Development Master Course at Malmö University(ComDev) is how much it costs to follow the program. When they learn that there is no tuition fee, it does not take long before you get an attendant question: why?

Sweden has a long tradition of free education, not only for primary and secondary schools, but all the way through the educational system, including university. It is a well established part of the welfare system that everybody should have the possibility to receive a higher education. Even if the reality shows that students with working class or immigrant background are still less represented at university than other groups, money should not be an issue deterring them from enrolling.

The generous Swedish education system is something that international students can also benefit from; and this is the case with ComDev as well. When the course started five years ago, the international contribution to the group consisted of two Danish students. Each year since then, the number of international applicants has increased. Today, two thirds of all students are of non-Scandinavian origin, and many of them come from countries outside the European Union. The same rules apply for every participant who is accepted on the course: no tuition charge; only a small fee to enroll in the student union, an estimated 20 US dollars per semester, and of course the cost of acquiring literature and eventually travel costs to attend seminars in Malmö.

However, there is an ongoing debate in Sweden as to whether it is fair that Swedish tax payers should support the education of people from all over the world. The leading party, the Social Democracy, has traditionally regarded free education as an important ideological issue. It has been an inviolable principle that the most suitable students, not the ones with the wealthiest parents, should have access to university. However, Social Democrats are beginning to reassess their strong opposition to tuition charges, at least for non-European citizens. Also, an increasing number of

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principals at Swedish universities (all of them struggling with reduced financial means) is in favor of charging foreign students. An official report is now investigating the pros and cons of tuition fees for students who come from countries outside the EU.

The Swedish Student Union is one of the main critics of the intention to charge students. The money gained from tuitions is really a drop in the ocean, they claim. But their main argument against tuition fees for non-European citizens is that it will only be a first step towards a general tuition imposed on universities, also for Swedish students.

The critics also speak on behalf of the international students. The foreign students contribute to the internationalization of Swedish universities. The networks they establish while in Sweden are useful not only for themselves but also for the Swedish students. These arguments especially apply for Communication for Development, a field of research and practice that is yet to be firmly established in Scandinavia. A substantial part of the participants on the course comes from developing countries. Consequently, the ComDev course could be regarded as part of the policy for global development, a specific form of development cooperation with the countries the international students belong to.

The mix of international and Scandinavian students is actually the main asset of Comdev. Culture, globalization, communication and development are central issues in the course. The discussions on the course's dynamic website would be far more one-dimensional and poor if only European citizens and international students who could afford to pay the fees got access to the master program. There is now a world wide web of ComDev students who keep in touch long after having finished the program. As one of the students in the Comdev02 class puts it: "The contacts you make for the future from all over the world is the best thing about ComDev. Lima, Buenos Aires and New Delhi are not thousands of miles away in my mind anymore, they are just around the corner. I think about the world more as my living-room nowadays".

An introduction of tuition fees in Swedish universities would be preceded by a long discussion, and it is unclear for now if such a suggestion will even be put forward in the Swedish parliament. On the while, international students can still peacefully enjoy the chance of obtaining a master education for free, and by so doing, contribute to the vivid and multicultural interaction among Scandinavian and international participants on the course.

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