

Getting a PhD in economics at Stockholm University

The program

We admit students to the Stockholm University (SU) program in full, merit-based international competition. If you are admitted to the program, you are guaranteed full funding for the duration of your studies up to five years (with very limited requirements of teaching; extensions to a sixth year also occur but are not automatic). It is entirely a U.S.-style program, with an outline of study as follows:

Year 1: mandatory courses in math/statistics, micro, macro, and econometrics. The typical size of a first-year class is 25. This number includes a group of students from Stockholm School of Economics, with which we share the entire course program. The first year is perceived to be challenging and to involve very hard work.

Year 2: specialized courses, where we have full offerings, always with a full second year of our major fields of specialization (labor, development, macro, political economy), plus a number of other courses such as trade, behavioral, econometrics, public economics, and so on. In recent years, more than 25 different 2nd-year courses were offered each academic year. The second year is less stressful from an exam perspective but is critical in that it is a bridge to the remainder of the PhD years: doing independent research. Some of the courses in year 2 are in fact focused on starting up research projects, and these projects often involve groups of collaborating students (sometimes also including co-authoring faculty).

Years 3 and on: research, where you are free to choose advisors. Three departments at SU participate and offer advisors – the Department of Economics (DE), the Institute for International Economic Studies (IIES), and the Swedish Institute for Social Research (SOFI). After two years' of study, some of the students in the program choose to move from the DE – where all students start out – to one of the other two departments; these moves are usually based on the students' fields of specialization – as the different departments have different strengths – and their choices of advisors, though it is not uncommon to be based in one of the departments and have an advisor in another (the DE and the IIES are literally located together; SOFI is in a nearby building, only minutes away). Overall, there is close cooperation between these departments.

As part of their education, some of our students spend a half to one year abroad, typically at a top U.S. department (the most common choices are Harvard, MIT, Princeton, and Stanford). These visits are normally financed in full, thanks to generous so-called Hedelius grants (the success rate of our students at obtaining these grants is high). Courses that students complete at foreign universities count toward the SU degree. Another attractive feature in the research phase of a PhD at SU is that students have easy access to data sets, including Swedish registry data, and that they can undertake field trips (especially in development economics), all financed by faculty grants or SU funds.

Finishing: to graduate, you need to have passed all the first-year courses and elective second-year courses amounting to 3/4ths of full-time study, in addition to having written a dissertation (usually consisting of 3-4 papers). Prior to graduation, however, the majority of our students go on the international job market, which is a very important activity in itself and one that becomes the defining feature of the last year of graduate school. The preparation for the job market involves many presentations as the student's job-market paper is gradually improved and brought to fruition, practice interviews etc.; this process not only involves the student and his/her advising team but

usually also engages the rest of the faculty, as our job-market candidates are key “products” of the SU economics departments.

The faculty

The economics group is one of the strongest among all fields at Stockholm University. It is a very U.S.-style group, where publication merits are in focus. All in all, there is a total of 90 full-time faculty in economics at SU. Of them, a significant fraction are international scholars (i.e., they are neither Swedish nor educated in Sweden); since decades, our faculty is recruited on the international (American and now also European) job market. Our young faculty work hard on building their research CVs; SU has a tenure-track system, emulating those at leading U.S. institutions, and tenure evaluations are first and foremost based on publications and research impact. In an international comparison, the faculty group is very strong and houses global leaders in several fields.

One of the defining features of our program – and one that we believe makes it rather unique also in the comparison with most U.S. schools – is the close interaction between the faculty and graduate students. Students of course choose what they do their research on – there is no sense in which they have to work on what the faculty works on – but there are of course important connections between the research of students and faculty. Equal partnership co-authoring between students and faculty is also common. The economics faculty is a pride of SU for its achievements in producing frontier research, but arguably its most productive activity is their participation in the teaching and advising of graduate students.

Working at SU

One of the most characteristic features of our departments is a flat hierarchy, where students and faculty have offices door to door, share coffee areas, and so on. English is spoken in all our economics departments not only in class but also in the corridors and common rooms. The administration – who are important for many aspects of students’ working life – is another great asset; they too have offices intermingled with those of students and faculty.

As a graduate student, you are entitled to the standard Swedish benefits packages. These are very generous by any international standard and include, among other things, pension-plan saving, free health care, and generous parental leave policies. The parental-leave system is symmetric with respect to mothers and fathers and allows up to 16 months of leave per child at 80% of the salary. In fact, a non-negligible number of graduate students have children.

Students, faculty, and admin personnel are engaged in a number of sports activities on campus; there are currently a number of coed group events (once or more per week) in bootcamp workouts, badminton, soccer, and “innebandy” (floorball, a “soft” version of ice hockey). There are also many social events and a large share of these are organized in connection with the dissertation defenses of graduate students. All defenses are public and quite formal – they involve a leading scholar invited to critically review the thesis, along with a grading committee that also asks questions during the defense, as well as an audience of faculty, students, family, and friends. The defenses are always followed by a celebration at SU and then, at night, most often also by a large party that is organized by the graduating student. Given the size of the PhD program, therefore, there is no shortage of parties at SU.

Life in Stockholm

Stockholm is a modern and rather large city, and we invite you to consult useful websites to get acquainted with it if you haven't already visited. Whereas apartments are scarce/expensive and one of the biggest obstacles for people who move to Stockholm for work, graduate students at SU benefit from being able to use university-owned apartments around the city at good rates. Broadly speaking, life in Stockholm is easy to adjust to from a practical perspective – public administration works rather efficiently – and the city is quite progressive and broadly accessible: it is multicultural and multi-ethnic, you can speak English with almost everyone, there are lots of restaurants, museums, and so on.

A particularly striking aspect of the city is proximity to nature. There are not only large parks within the city limits but also rather wild forests nearby, along with a lot of water everywhere. The Stockholm archipelago and its many destinations for day trips is particularly appreciated. Swedish law, moreover, allows people to walk anywhere in the nature, pick berries, etc., regardless of who owns the land – the law is called *Allemansrätten* – except for areas right near dwellings.

You should also be aware that Sweden has a number of strikingly different seasons, in terms of weather and sunlight. Winters are cold and dark but summers warm and bright, and fall and spring have their own striking features. If you worry that winter will be too harsh, you should note that Stockholm is about as cold as Boston, less cold than Chicago, and much less cold than Minneapolis. Swedish summers, moreover, are rather dry; in fact, most of Stockholm is not air-conditioned, simply because, due to the lack of significant humidity, there is only very rarely a need for it.

Measures of success

Our PhD program is widely regarded as one of the top handful of programs in Europe and so is our group of economics faculty. The focus on publication in leading international journals – where “leading” tends to be interpreted as at least the best field journals and desirably the top five general-interest journals – has been very successful; not only do our faculty strive and succeed in this ambition but so do graduate students. In fact, most PhD theses lead to at least one excellent publication and in many cases they generate several.

Another sign of success of our program is the ease with which our graduating students get jobs they aspire for. Our homepage lists details; the academic placements are almost all at excellent, research-oriented universities around the world (including the very top ones) but a number of students also successfully pursue jobs in international organizations, leading government agencies, central banks, or in the private sector.

More than anything, we have a firm impression and belief that our students are very happy with our program. Life as a graduate student is occasionally tough – because of demanding coursework or due to the unavoidable regular frustrations of ambitious research – but overall our students are not only very happy after having completed their degrees but also while working towards them.

Ann-Sofie Kolm, Director of Graduate Studies at the Department of Economics
Per Krusell, Graduate Student Coordinator at the IIES