

By **Saad Rahman**

In the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistani students faced long security clearances and a myriad of other problems in obtaining student visas for the US and the UK. This led many of them to explore other avenues of higher education, including many European countries. Initially, among the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, which then offered free education to foreign students, was the first choice of many students. But after Denmark started charging foreign students in 2006, many turned towards Sweden, which also offers free education to both, local and foreign students. Since then, Sweden has become one of the more popular destinations among Pakistani students. According to the statistics, about 1,177 Pakistani students were granted visas to Sweden for the academic year 2006-07. A large number of students from India and China are also pursuing higher education in Sweden.

And it isn't just the lucrative prospect of obtaining a masters degree or a doctorate free of cost that is attracting foreigners to Sweden – the educational opportunities on offer are of an international standard, a fact that was highlighted by *Time* magazine's World University Rankings in 2007, which listed four Swedish universities in the top 200. Faheem Khan, who studies at Chalmers University in Gotenburg, says, "The prospect of high-quality, free education was definitely the greatest driving force behind my decision to come to Sweden." For others, the prospect of getting a job within the Schengen coun-



A NEW DESTINATION

Despite the high cost of living and the language barrier, Sweden has become an attractive option for Pakistani students.



Home away from home:
The Pakistani students community in Sweden is tightly-knit.

tries after completing their education holds more value than the quality of the universities.

For many Muslims, the absence of racism and few security checks by the police are major positives to studying

in Sweden. Imran Hakam, a student at Linkoping University, says, "I feel more comfortable and secure in Sweden, especially in Linkoping. There are no 'random' checks by the police and we are not seen with any suspicion." There are very few instances of someone being attacked or targeted on the basis of their religion.

Although the number of students moving to Sweden has steadily increased over the years, most students from Pakistan still study the same subject – Information Technology – largely because it offers better employment opportunities. "Nowadays a lot of international students are getting hired and all of them have their work permits. Last week, I met the manager of Telecom City,



of studying here is that you can't improve your English nor will you learn how to speak fluent Swedish, especially if you are here just for studies. And not knowing the language means you have very little chance of gaining entry in the Swedish job market," says Saad bin Shams, a student at KTH.

Student accommodations are easily available and for those wanting to live in apartments, the rent varies from city to city. However, like many Pakistani students who are living on a low budget in the US or the

bedroom with another Pakistani student to minimise costs. The Swedish people here believe we are gay, and it's very difficult to explain it to them," says Khan.

Although the cost of education is free, living in Sweden proves to be costly. A meal for two at McDonalds costs anywhere from SEK150-200 (approx. Rs.1500). Hence, eating out is considered a luxury by many students. Some students try to gain part-time employment to help with the rent and living costs, but job opportunities are few and many feel they cannot cope with work as well as studies. "Finding a part-time job while studying is extremely difficult when compared to other countries like the UK, US, Australia and Canada," says S. Mohammed Ali, who works for Ericsson Systems. But the good news for students who have a one-year visa to Sweden is that they are entitled to medical facilities and can see a general physician at subsidised rates, approximately SEK100 per visit.

The statistics for the number of

who emphasised how a work permit wasn't an issue and that I could easily obtain one once I had a job," says Naveed Abbas Memon, a student at Blekinge Tekniska, Högskola.

The language barrier proves minimal when interacting on campus since all courses are taught in English. However, outside the campus it's a different story: all road signs, advertisements, newspapers and documents, such as apartment contracts, are in Swedish. "A few days ago I received a letter in Swedish from the Tele2 Company regarding my Internet connection. I had to get it translated by a Swede in order to understand what they required," says Wilayat Khan, a student at The Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Stockholm. Which is why, given the large number of international students in Sweden, some universities also offer basic language courses so that students can get around the city. Many students also use free web-based translators to familiarise themselves with the language.

Some students are also of the opinion that they do not get a chance to improve their English. "One of the negative aspects

Unlike in the US or the UK, the concept of two or more people sharing a one-bedroom apartment is seen by the Swedes as eccentric and some Pakistani students do not like to reveal their living conditions to fellow colleagues or students. "I can't afford to live on my own, so I share a bedroom with another Pakistani student to minimise costs. The Swedish people here believe we are gay, and it's very difficult to explain it to them," says Khan.

UK, as many as two or three people share a one-bedroom apartment in order to save money. As simple as it sounds, the concept of two or more people sharing a one-bedroom apartment is seen by the Swedes as eccentric and some Pakistani students do not like to reveal their living conditions to fellow colleagues or students. "I can't afford to live on my own, so I share a

Pakistani students in Sweden are steadily growing each year; however, most of these students are men. Very few women pursue degrees in Sweden and if they do, it is because they have accompanied their husbands to Sweden after marriage. Although a popular destination for men, it remains to be seen whether these dynamics will change over the course of the years. ■