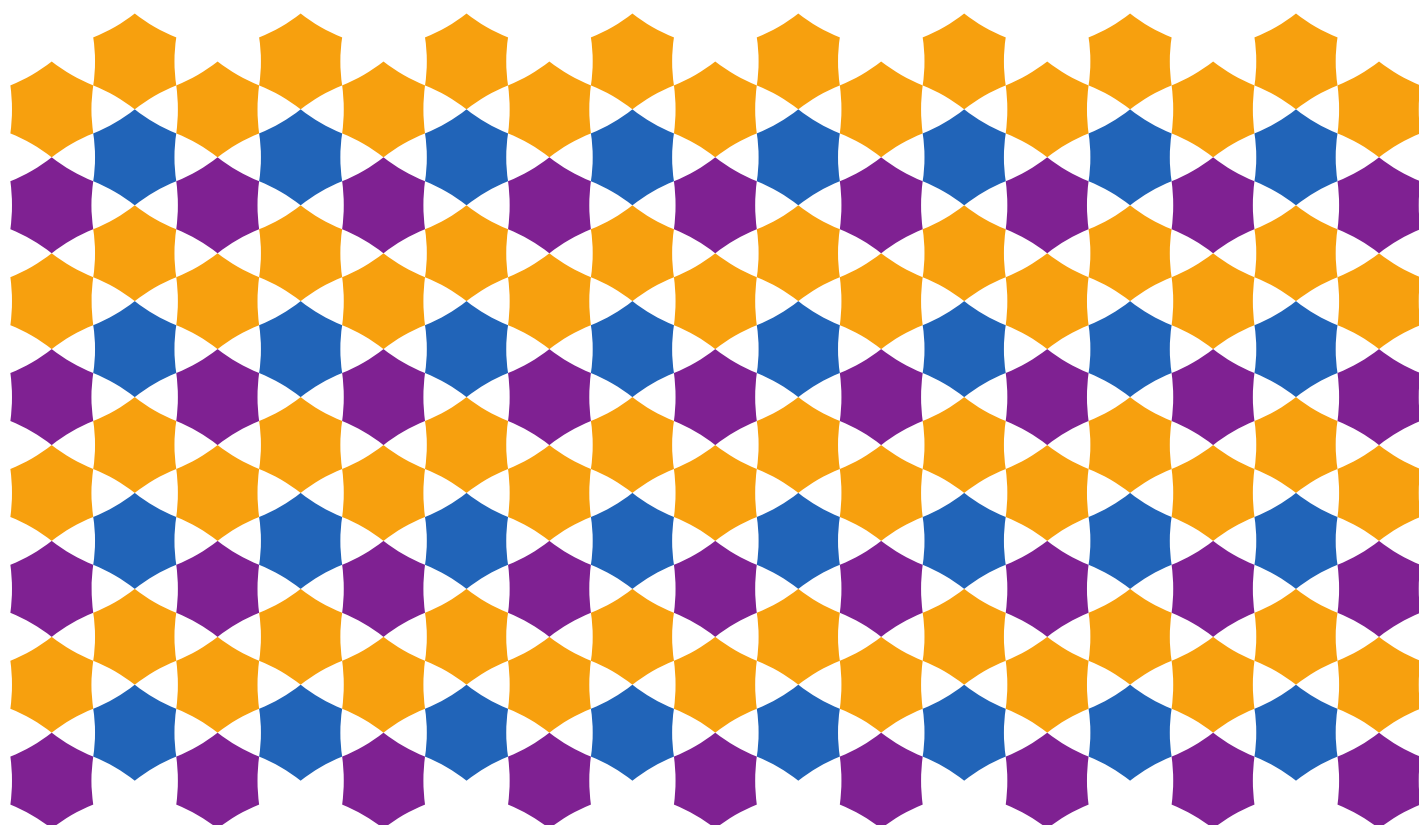


# Early higher education drop-out rates in Sweden

Analyses of throughput rates of  
ten large study programmes



The extent to which students who have begun a study programme also carry out and complete the programme has an impact on the use of resources at higher education institutions. A high drop-out rate leads to significant resources, early in the programme, being spent on students who will never graduate. A high drop-out rate can also be a sign of inadequate quality. From the student perspective, they may invest time and money in a study programme that may not be completed.

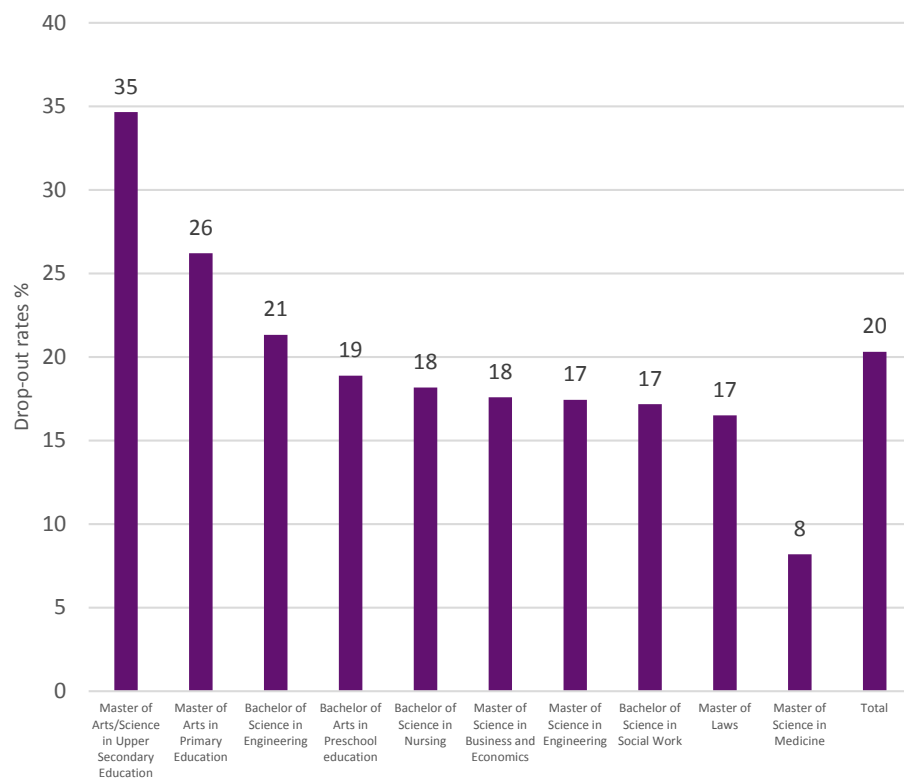
In addition, drop-out rates play an important role in the recent discussion on broadened recruitment and broadened participation. The Higher Education Act (1992:1434) requires HEIs to actively promote and broaden recruitment to higher education<sup>1</sup>, which means they are to work actively for the student population to reflect the population at large as much as possible. The broadened recruitment discourse has often been to view it as a problem for HEIs, forcing them to require less of their students to keep the drop-out rate down. This study explores how students' social background together with factors such as gender and age impact the risk of dropping out.

This register study analyses student completion using two measures, *early drop-out* and *retention semesters 1 to 6*, of the ten largest programmes leading to professional qualifications, for new entrants in autumn semester 2012 through spring semester 2014.

Early drop-out means that in academic year two, the student is no longer registered in the programme where he or she entered. Early drop-out rates vary broadly – from 8 per cent in study programmes in medicine to 35 per cent in study programmes training secondary and upper-secondary school teachers. In most study programmes, around 20 per cent of students drop out early on. The significant drop-out rates of two of the three teacher education programmes we have studied is especially problematic, since there is a shortage of trained teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/hogskolelag-19921434\\_sfs-1992-1434](https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/hogskolelag-19921434_sfs-1992-1434)



Percentage of new entrants who drop out early on from the ten programmes that lead to a professional qualification.

The relationship of early drop-out rates to student gender, age, Swedish or non-Swedish background, social background and final school grades has been studied. The analyses show that men drop out to a greater extent than women. This is particularly evident in female-dominated study programmes, for example programmes training preschool teachers and nurses. Age at the start of study also affects the risk of dropping out: overall, a slightly higher percentage of younger rather than older entrants drop out. In certain programmes, a non-Swedish background increases the risk of dropping out; this is clearest in study programmes training secondary, primary and preschool teachers. Final school grades have a significant impact on the tendency to drop out: low final school grades increase the risk of dropping out of all study programmes except for the social work programme.

Social background was measured here as the education level of the most highly educated parent. Students with highly educated parents have a much higher rate of transition from upper-secondary school to higher education. From higher education, however, students whose parents have little education drop out to roughly the same extent as students whose parents have more education. Only in the master's programme in engineering can a connection between social background and drop-out rate be detected. If instead retention between semesters 1 and 6 is analysed by professional qualification programme, three programmes stand out: medicine, which

has the highest total retention of the semesters we have studied, and the secondary and primary teacher education programmes, which have the lowest retention overall.



Total retention frequency semesters 1–6 for the ten programmes that lead to a professional qualification.

Retention semesters 1 to 6 was also studied by HEI. Each programme has significant variation in retention between HEIs. An HEI may have high retention in study programmes leading to one qualification, but low retention in study programmes leading to another. As a result, no HEI stands out as negative or positive.

This study shows that for most of the ten largest programmes that lead to a professional qualification, there is an overall connection between drop-out rates and final school grades, gender, and age, and that having a Swedish or non-Swedish background is of significance to some study programmes. However, the results of this study indicate that students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds do not have a greater tendency to drop out compared with groups that have traditionally been overrepresented in higher education. The implication of this is that broadened recruitment measures should focus on potential students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds with good grades. If broader recruitment is successful, it should result in an increase, rather than a decrease, in the prior knowledge of entrants as a group. Successfully broadening recruitment with this approach may therefore be considered necessary for higher education aiming for both high quality and quantity.

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