

Peripheral higher education in the Nordics Why? How? For whom?

POLICY BRIEF 2024:3



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Introduction

In the past 50 years, higher education systems in the Nordics have undergone significant transformations. Once focused on educating a select intellectual elite, they have evolved into diverse and inclusive institutions designed to serve a broad spectrum of the population with various educational and professional aspirations. This transformation was marked by the geographic expansion of higher education into more peripheral regions, with the purpose of providing more diverse and accessible educational opportunities, reducing geographic and social imbalances in recruitment to higher education, and thereby fostering regional growth and innovation.

This policy brief explores the current status, key characteristics, and distribution of peripheral higher education institutions located in smaller towns and rural regions across the Nordic countries. It aims to increase knowledge about the types of students who are attracted to these institutions and the factors influencing their choices. The analysis in this policy brief draws on statistical data, a literature review, results from focus group discussions, and a survey conducted among young adults in the Nordic countries.



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Peripheral higher education institutions (PHEIs) at a glance

"Despite the proliferation of hybrid and remote study options, it is essential for small localities to preserve a campus—a tangible space where individuals can come together. Such environments are vital as they often serve as the birthplaces for development projects and as incubators for generating insights into regional development."
(Jakobstadsregionens Utvecklingsbolag Concordia, Finland).

Regionalisation of higher education

Efforts to expand educational institutions to new, often rural, locations and demographics in the Nordic countries began in the 1960s. Notable milestones include Sweden's 1977 reform of the higher education system and the establishment of "district colleges" in those Norwegian counties which did not have a university between 1971 and 1979 (Lindbekk, 2015). Despite a wave of institutional consolidations in tertiary education in the Nordic countries during the 1990 and 2000s which involved merging or restructuring higher education institutions (HEIs)

aiming to reduce the total number of campuses and create more streamlined, efficient, and competitive entities geographic distribution of higher education still remains relevant today. Denmark is a good example of this, with its 2021 parliamentary agreement aimed at enhancing educational access nationwide. This agreement focuses on diversifying educational opportunities across the country and creating new educational initiatives outside Denmark's four largest cities (Eurydice, 2023).

Peripheral higher education institutions

In this research, we define peripheral higher education institutions (PHEIs) as either independent institutions or satellite campuses of major universities, offering higher education at levels 6 and 7 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Located in regional centers or small towns, PHEIs are distinct from their counterparts in major or historic university cities. While there is no strict definition, we explore the concept of peripherality in terms of both geography—such as specific distances to urban centers and socio-spatial relationships (Kühn, 2015)—and institutional characteristics relative to old and well-established traditional institutions. These parameters include the institution's size, location, regional context, year of establishment, and organizational structure.

BOX 1.

For this policy brief the following methods have been used:

- Desk research encompassing academic and grey literature on rural education and youth migration within the Nordic countries.
- Descriptive analysis of survey data from the [Early Career Mobility Project](#)
- Data collection for the maps.
- Focus group interviews primarily conducted with local authorities specializing in educational issues: Holbæk Uddannelses- og Studiecenter in Denmark, Jakobstadsregionens Utvecklingsbolag Concordia in Finland, the government of Åland, Sundsvall municipality in Sweden, and Nesna municipality and Nord University in Norway.

Key characteristics

PHEIs exhibit a wide range of differences, including various funding and organisational models, focal areas, and the types of degrees and programs they offer. Common to many of the PHEIs, such as university colleges and polytechnics, is that they offer a vocational orientation that caters primarily to the needs of local communities and employers. These institutions often tailor their educational goals to local labour market demands and welfare systems (Fonseca & Nieth, 2021). Additionally, some emphasise a 'third mission' of external engagement, focusing on societal outreach and closely aligning with regional needs (Kohoutek et al., 2017).

The complex context for peripheral higher education institutions

PHEIs are often more recently established than their older urban counterparts and often navigate in a complex context (Eder & Döringer, 2022). In contrast to older, more traditional educational institutions, many PHEIs operate in environments that are 'in flux' and are influenced by shifting political agendas (Pinheir et al., 2019). These institutions' reliance on the geographical context and collaboration with local entities often leads to conflicting goals. For example, prioritizing research excellence can limit their capacity to engage effectively in local and regional outreach (Atta-Owusu et al., 2021).

Research and grey literature indicate that small-scale challenges and resource shortages often hinder the success of PHEIs. These issues are particularly evident in activities that benefit from economies of scale, such as participating in research projects or maintaining a diverse academic portfolio (Charles, 2016).

Additional challenges for PHEIs may include difficulties in attracting staff and students, securing third-party funding, as well as managing constraints associated with the lack of capacities and expertise of local businesses (Eder & Döringer, 2022). Furthermore, the perceived prestige of PHEIs can influence student preferences and their overall attractiveness (Haley, 2020). These challenges, which sometimes involve conflicting focuses, underline the urgency and potential for comparative learning across Nordic PHEIs.



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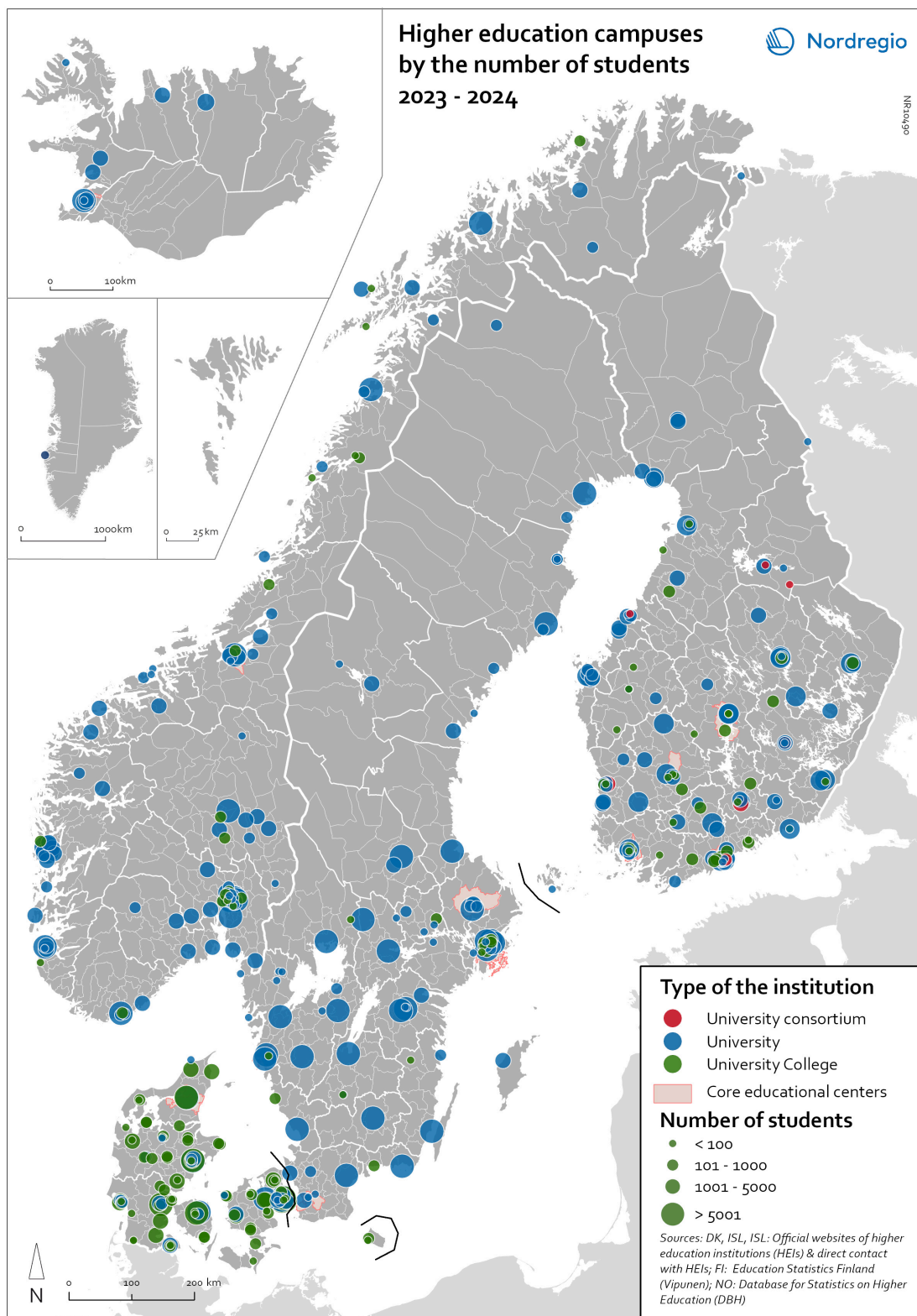
What is the current landscape of Nordic peripheral higher education?

"We are a municipality of 1,800 inhabitants. Those who were educated with us often choose to stay, or they come from small communities and remain in small communities. Over time, those who chose to work in such places have made a significant difference."

(NESNA municipality, Norway)

Map 1 shows the distribution of higher education campuses across the Nordic region in 2023-2024, categorized by type of institution and student numbers, revealing a broad geographical spread with noticeable sparsity in the northernmost parts of Sweden and Finland. The higher education landscape comprises both universities and university colleges, with university colleges being more prevalent in Denmark and Finland. Notably, Finland features university consortia—collaborative networks that operate regional campuses through several universities. UiT The Arctic University of Norway and VIA University College in Denmark have the largest number of campuses, each operating 10 sites.

The number of students at these campuses varies significantly, from as few as 10 at some smaller campuses in Norway and Finland to over ten thousand at larger sites. This disparity is mainly attributed to whether campuses are located in urban or rural areas and the variety of academic programs they offer. Additionally, variations in the methods used to count students at national and organisational levels also account for these differences.



Map 1: The locations of higher education institutions offering programs at ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) levels 6 and 7, by the number of students in the Nordic countries in 2023-2024. The dots represent campus locations, not legal entities. Core educational areas in Finland include the Helsinki capital region, Tampere, Turku, and Jyväskylä. In Sweden, these areas are Stockholm region, Uppsala, Gothenburg, Malmö, and Lund. In Denmark: the Copenhagen region, Aarhus, Odense, and Aalborg. In Iceland: the Reykjavik municipality. Note that data for Greenland and the Faroe Islands were not collected.



Photo: Bewakoof.com official / unsplash.com

Factors influencing young people's educational mobility

"Young people in school today are accustomed to a rapidly changing world. Therefore, the education system should not remain as it was during my school days; it must adapt to meet the current needs of young people."

(Holbæk, municipality, Denmark)

Research underscores the significant role of education in the mobility decisions of young adults (Finn & Holton, 2019). PHEIs can enable for young people in rural areas to either remain local or move shorter distances. However, many PHEIs struggle to attract students to their campuses. In this section, we present key insights from a literature review and a survey conducted among young adults in the Nordic countries, exploring the factors that influence young people's educational mobility.

Why are students (not) choosing for PHEIs?

Gender

Within migration research, gender is usually cited as one of the primary factors in the outmigration from rural areas, particularly in relation to education. Women increasingly attend universities and frequently outnumber men (Berger & Frey, 2016), with many preferring urban education settings for their greater cultural and entertainment options (Niedomysl & Hansen, 2010). In a Nordic context, Faber et al. (2015) found a strong correlation between educational choices and outmigration of young women from rural areas, influenced by gender norms, patriarchal structures, and gender segregation in rural labour markets. Swedish research found that women are more likely to move for higher education, whereas men may choose not to pursue higher education if not locally available (Johanson, 2016).

Place of origin: Rural and urban youth

The geographical origin of young people—whether from rural or urban areas—significantly influences their migration decisions. Rural youth often relocate driven by aspirations and the appeal of urban lifestyles (Corbett & Forsey, 2017). Moreover, structural inequalities of rural areas, such as jobs scarcity (Haugen & Villa, 2006) and perceived symbolic inequalities also play a crucial role. Young people may view living in rural areas as boring or “uncool” (Pedersen & Gram, 2018), or they may stay because they feel they have “failed to leave” (Looker & Naylor, 2009). However, research from Sweden shows that staying in rural can be seen as a privilege, supported by educational and employment opportunities either locally or nearby (Forsberg, 2019).

Box 2.

A typical student profile at PHEIs (Foster & Main, 2018; Pedersen & Gram, 2018; Seyfrit et al., 2010) includes individuals who are:

- Older than the average student;
- More attracted to smaller student cities than to large ones;
- Have lower upper-secondary grades;
- Originating from the local region;
- From families with no or limited history of higher education;
- Responsible for caring for family member(s);
- Married or living with a partner,
- Choosing their study program based on proximity to their home.

Social background and grades

PHEIs are known for attracting a notably diverse body of students (see Box 2). In Sweden, a study by Haley (2020) highlighted the impact of students' grades, parental education levels, and geographical origin on higher education choices. It revealed that rural youth with high upper-secondary grades and well-educated parents are more inclined to pursue higher education in urban areas. Conversely, rural youth with lower upper-secondary grades often attend PHEIs, potentially due to less competitive admission requirements.

Norms and narratives

The binary distinction between urban and rural areas recurs in mobility and migration research, where 'being mobile' is associated with ambitious individuals (Nugin, 2014), transition into successful adulthood (Cairns, 2017). Additionally, research often highlights the perceived superiority of higher education institutions located in core urban regions (Finn & Holton, 2019; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2020). However, studies from Denmark and Sweden suggest that PHEIs may appeal to rural youth by offering symbolic mobility capital. This allows them to counter the narrative of being 'stayers' while still being seen as 'leavers' by pursuing higher education close to home, thereby maintaining the insider advantages of their home region (Maersk, 2021). In Finland, a study by Adams & Komu (2022) revealed that some young adults in Finnish Lapland are redefining success by choosing for limited educational and career opportunities that allow them to stay in their rural communities, underscoring the importance of place-specific factors.

Proximity to a higher education institution

The distance to the nearest higher education institution significantly influences young people's decisions regarding their education (Björkum & Basic, 2024). While longer distances generally affect higher education enrolment negatively, Nordic studies also account for additional factors (Haley, 2020). For example, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often choose institutions closer to their homes, whereas those from more privileged backgrounds often seek universities in major cities. Age also plays a role; older students are more likely to prioritize nearby institutions compared to their younger counterparts (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2021).

Box 3.**Key insights from the Nordic survey:**

- On average in the Nordics, when selecting a place of study for post-secondary education, 38% of all young adults prioritise proximity to home. Other important factors include the availability of specific educational programs (27%), closeness to friends and social networks (23%), and a vibrant student life (17%).
- Education ranks among the top three factors influencing the migration decisions of young adults across all Nordic countries, alongside job opportunities, access to social networks, and availability of services.

Survey results

A representative survey was conducted from February to April 2024 as part of the Nordic Early Career Mobility Project¹. It targeted young adults aged 25 to 39 years across the five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – and received over 5,000 responses. The survey focused on exploring migration history, motivations, and future aspirations related to migration.

What factors do young people prioritize in selecting a place to study?

The survey highlighted that proximity to one's home is a crucial factor influencing young people's decisions on where to study. It ranks as the most important factor in all Nordic countries except Iceland, where it is the second most important (Table 1). Other significant factors influencing young people's educational choices include the relevance of the program offered, proximity to friends and social networks, and access to vibrant student life, with the latter scoring particularly high in Denmark and Norway. However, the significance of these factors varies across the Nordic Region (Table 1).

The importance of robust transport links is particularly emphasized in Finland (18%), Norway (17%) and Denmark (15%), but is less significant in Sweden (8%) and Iceland (3%). On average, affordable housing, which accounts for 11% in the Nordic region overall, is considered most important in Norway (16%) and Finland (13%). Factors such as access to hybrid or online learning options, and the area's family-friendly reputation generally have a lesser impact on educational choices across the Nordic countries.

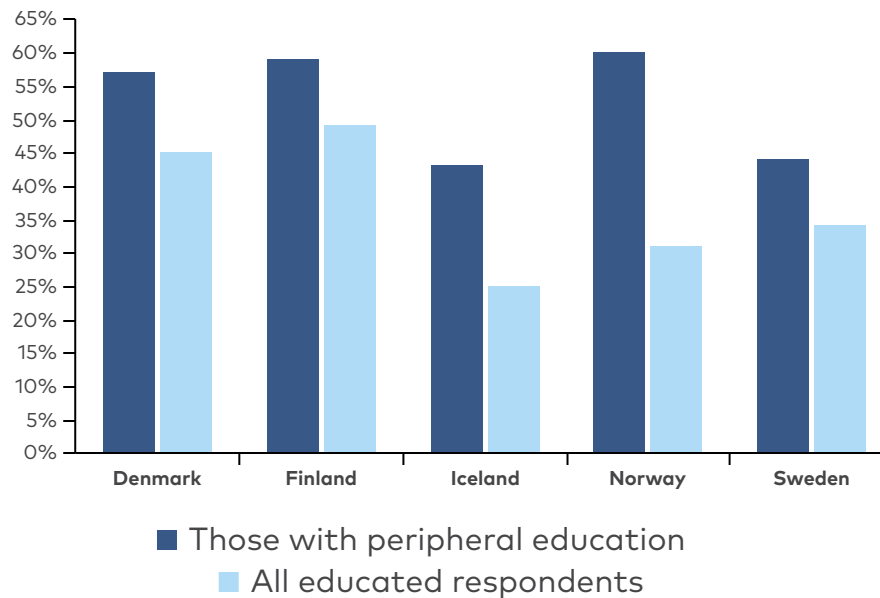
Country	Top-1 factor	Top-2 factor	Top-3 factor
Denmark	Closest place to home (36%)	Friends/networks nearby (29%)	Only place with desired program (24%) / Vibrant student life (24%)
Finland	Closest place to home (49%)	Friends/networks nearby (34%)	Only place with desired program (23%)
Iceland	Only place with desired program (43%)	Closest place to home (27%)	Vibrant student life (17%)
Norway	Closest place to home (45%)	Friends/networks nearby (27%) / Only place with desired program (27%)	Vibrant student life (20%)
Sweden	Closest place to home (32%)	Only place with desired program (19%)	Friends/networks nearby (17%)

Table 1. "When selecting your place of study, what factors did you prioritize?" The question is directed at respondents with post-secondary education (either higher education or vocational education and training). The question allowed for multiple responses. The table displays the top three important factors from a list of nine options.

Among those **young adults who pursued higher education or vocational training at PHEIs**, noticeable differences in their priorities emerge compared to all respondents with post-secondary education. On average, across the Nordic countries, 53% of young adults in this group prioritise proximity to home when selecting a place of education, compared to 38% of all educated respondents (Figure 1).

Meanwhile, 17% of young adults who attended PHEIs in the Nordic countries view the availability of specific educational programs as important in their choice of study location. In contrast, this percentage increases to 27% among all educated respondents (Figure 1).

It was the closest to home



Only place with desired programme

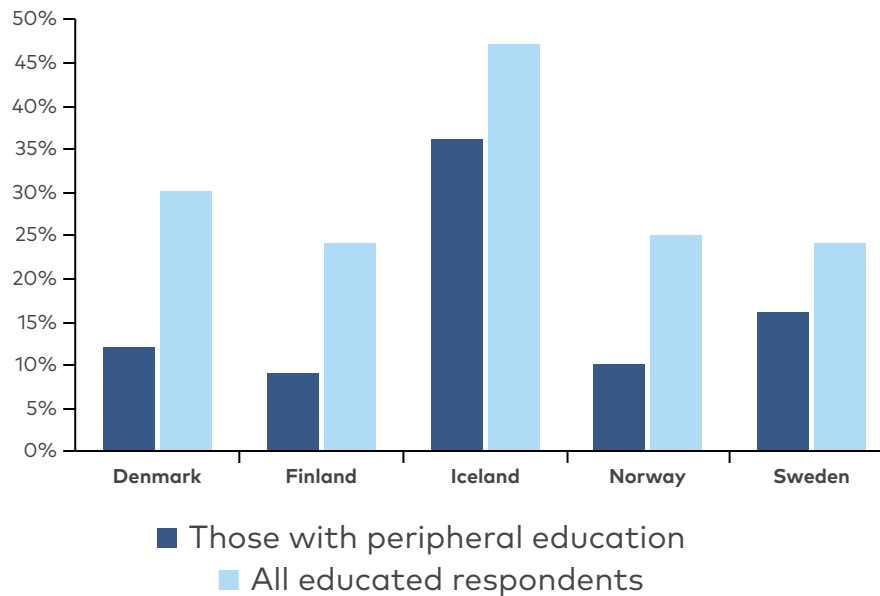


Figure 1. "When selecting your place of study, what factors did you prioritize?" The question is directed at respondents who pursued their post-secondary education at PHEIs. The figure displays two selected factors out of nine.

When survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of various **factors influencing their migration decisions**, access to education consistently ranked among the top three factors across all Nordic countries, scoring between 4,8 and 6,4 on a scale of 1 to 10 (Figure 2). Besides education, the primary considerations for relocation include job opportunities, access to social networks, and availability of services; highlighting the significance of overall place attractiveness in these decisions.

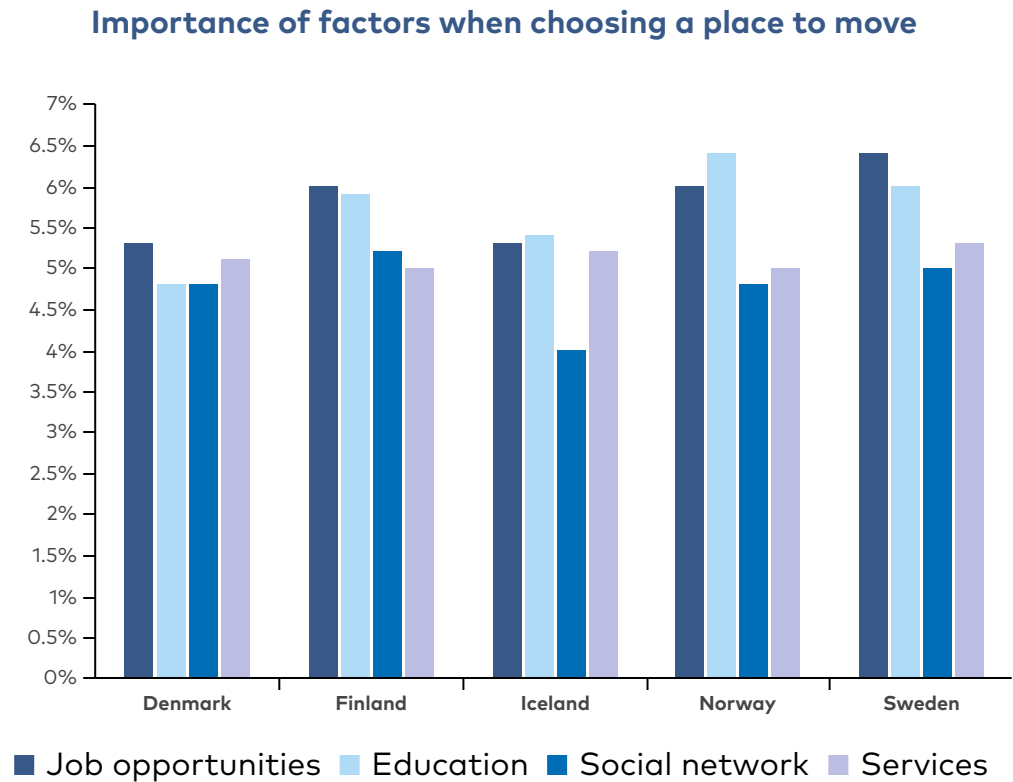


Figure 2. "How significant was this factor in your decision to either relocate from or stay in your place of origin". The question applies to all respondents and uses a rating scale from 1 to 10,



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Nordic learnings for educational providers and authorities

"It is crucial to provide educational opportunities in smaller communities and towns to help retain the local workforce. This approach strengthens the region... If we educate teachers locally, then we have teachers for our local schools."

(Holbæk, municipality, Denmark)

This policy brief highlights the vital role for PHEIs in local and regional development, highlighting their influence as shapers of places and culture. PHEIs complement major university towns and capital regions by enabling rural youth to access education close to home or with minimal travel, ensuring they are not left behind in accessing quality education and opportunities. The findings of this policy brief emphasize that strategic planning for PHEIs must account for the distinct demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the Nordic regions where they operate. Based on a literature review, survey results, and findings from a focus group discussion, **some parameters for the success of PHEIs have been identified:**

1. **Tailor educational offers to align with the needs and preferences of the local youth.** Students at PHEIs are often described as 'non-traditional', characterised by their older age, diverse backgrounds, and likelihood of having children. These factors significantly influence their educational priorities. Survey results show that these students *prioritize proximity to home and, to a lesser extent, the specific academic offerings*. Other significant factors include closeness to friends and social networks, access to vibrant student life, and affordable housing options. It is therefore crucial for PHEIs to tailor their educational programs and student services to meet these diverse needs and preferences.
2. **Attract local students.** Focusing on enrolling students from local areas or regions, including potential returnees, can strengthen local economies and enhance the accessibility of education. This approach engages individuals who might not otherwise consider higher education or who might find it challenging to relocate. Additionally, it contributes to the retention of talent within the region, further bolstering economic and social development. To attract students from larger cities, PHEIs need to offer unique, high-quality programs that are unavailable in other parts of the country.
3. **Align with local labour market needs.** By tailoring educational programs to local labour market demands and collaborating with local employers, PHEIs ensure that their offerings meet local needs and prepare students for the local job markets. This alignment makes programs more attractive to students, who often seek education that mirrors regional employment opportunities. It also increases the likelihood that graduates will stay in the region if they find relevant jobs.
4. **Bring about innovative and dynamic education.** Rapid societal changes, such as green re-industrialization and evolving views on competencies and lifelong learning, pose both challenges and opportunities. PHEIs, with their close labour market ties, small size, and flexibility, are well-positioned to meet these dynamic needs. However, adaptation has been slow. Granting PHEIs more autonomy to develop programs in collaboration with municipalities and labour market actors, along with leveraging innovative, digital, and flexible educational methods, is crucial to accelerating progress. During this transition, it is essential to preserve the campus as a meeting place, even though its role and function may evolve.

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