



Final report
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“From possibility to reality –

Student experiences of

”Scholarship program for sustainable health”

Final report 260427

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This report summarizes experiences from recipients of the Erling Persson Scholarship at the Master's Programme in Public Health and its specializations at Umeå University. The aim is to highlight how the scholarship has affected the students' opportunity to study at the university, how it has shaped their personal and professional development, and which moments or events best represent their overall experience of the education. The responses come from students with widely varying backgrounds, often from low- and middle-income countries or societies characterized by conflict and economic instability. Through their stories, a clear picture emerges of the scholarship as a crucial life opportunity—both academically, personally and socially.

There were 46 students who received scholarships over the years, 25 women and 21 men. Some received them for two years of study and others for one year of study. One student interrupted his studies due to the war in Sudan.

The students come from 20 different countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

For this report, we have managed to get hold of 25 who responded to a digital survey. The report author has had contact with another 8, which means that we know what 32 of the 46 students are currently doing. Six of them are doctoral students at six different universities in Sweden, the USA, Vietnam and Thailand. Six are still students and will complete their education in 2026. Four people work in Sweden in the healthcare sector.

The report shows that it is difficult to imagine a better investment than this program funded by the Erling Persson Foundation.

The opportunity to study at Umeå University

In almost all responses, the students emphasize that the Erling Persson scholarship was the direct and necessary reason for them being able to start or continue their studies at Umeå University. For many, financial obstacles were so extensive that studying in Sweden would otherwise have been completely impossible. They describe that the costs of tuition fees, accommodation and living expenses were far beyond their or their families' financial means. “*Without the scholarship, I cannot study at Umeå University,*” expresses one student, thus reflecting a sentiment that recurs in many responses.



In several cases, students only had funding for the first year of study, often through the Swedish Institute or national scholarships. When this funding could not be extended, the Erling Persson scholarship became crucial for completing a two-year degree. One student describes this very clearly: “*Continuing without new support was impossible.*” For these students, the scholarship is not about making studies easier, but about enabling them.

In addition to the direct financial aspects, many emphasize that the scholarship gave them invaluable study peace. Several express that otherwise they would have had to work in parallel or forgo courses and learning opportunities. The scholarship meant an opportunity to focus entirely on their studies, develop academically and participate in research projects, seminars and group work without being dominated by worries about finances. In many cases, this has resulted in excellent study results and a stronger connection to academic and professional networks.

Personal and professional development

The effects of the scholarship extend far beyond the financial dimension and shape both the students’ personal development and their future careers. Many describe how the scholarship gave them stronger self-confidence and a feeling that their potential was recognized and valued. One student puts it this way: “*It made me confident as a person. My capabilities were identified and awarded.*” For several students, this was the first time an institution had shown such strong faith in their abilities, which became a driving force to perform and develop.



Studying in a new culture and in an international environment also provided significant personal development. Students report increased independence, improved ability to cope with new environments, and a growing personal ability to deal with stress and difficult changes. Many highlight how they learned to navigate different social and cultural contexts, and how these experiences strengthened them both as individuals and future professionals.

Professionally, the scholarship has created opportunities that extend far beyond their time at Umeå University. Students describe how the education gave them advanced skills in global health, epidemiology, statistics, health economics and scientific methodology, and how these skills led to careers in international organizations, research institutions and government agencies. One student summarizes the development by describing how they went from being “curious but unsure how to start” to becoming a “confident student ready to pursue research”. Several reports that they have had scientific articles published, been offered doctoral positions and have been given significant roles in public health work in their home countries and internationally..

Students' most important experiences: Academic, personal, and social moments



When students describe defining moments of their experiences in Umeå, common themes of intellectual freedom, personal maturity, and strong social community emerge. Many stories revolve around academic situations where a new way of thinking opened doors to deeper understanding. A frequently recurring memory concerns classroom discussions where students first experienced a pedagogy that encouraged critical thinking and reflection. A

student from Vietnam described the liberating feeling when a professor said: “There is no right or wrong answer, only how well you can reason your perspective.” This kind of openness and respect for argumentation is reported as one of the most formative parts of the education.

Many students also highlight specific academic achievements as memorable highlights—for example, when they passed a difficult course, they had previously failed, presented their first research idea, or published their first scientific paper. These moments are associated with pride, relief, and a sense of growth both as a researcher and as a person.



On a personal level, students often describe memories of deep significance, sometimes directly related to their life journeys and backgrounds. One student tells how the work of writing the dedication in his master's thesis became a moment of reflection on family, losses in his homeland and the desire to contribute to society. Others describe how the scholarship gave them the courage to make difficult but important decisions, such as returning to public health work in their home countries.

Socially, almost all students create an image of Umeå as a warm and inclusive environment. They talk about group work, where cultural encounters became a source of new knowledge, about joint holiday celebrations where international students built a kind of new family, and about teachers and administrators who made them feel seen and supported. A recurring motif is the feeling of a “home beyond home.”

Summary

“I have grown from someone curious but unsure how to start, to a confident student ready to pursue research.”

Reading the students’ stories about the Erling Persson scholarship is a bit like browsing through an anthology of life journeys: some courageous, some heartbreaking, some funny – and all deeply human. The scholarship has not only helped the students cross the financial threshold to successful studies at Umeå University; for many, it has also been a catapult to a new future, complete with academic immersion, personal development and several cultural shocks (often related to snow or dark winter days). The academic knowledge has changed not only the students themselves but also public health work in many places around the world.

What begins with sentences like “Without the scholarship, I cannot study at Umeå University” grows in the stories into something much bigger. The scholarship became a respite from financial worries, a free ticket to concentration, and a kind of academic superpower that made courses that at first felt impossible – like the course in biostatistics, the eternal big-bad guy – suddenly possible to master. One student summed it up elegantly: “I failed Biostatistics in the first year... then it became my easiest course.” That gives us all hope.

But the development was not just about statistics and theories. Many describe their first encounter with the ideals of Swedish education – where the most important thing was not to have the right answer but to be able to reason. One student describes a turning point: “That’s when I realized that I actually had to think for myself.”

On a personal level, the scholarship became a door to friendships across continents, tie-dye parties with stronger flavors than any course teacher could have imagined, and Christmas celebrations where new traditions were created in the glitter of snow outside the student corridors. Some stories are deeply moving, like the student who wrote the dedication to his late father and described his journey with the words: “Persistence is a key in my journey.” Others are mundanely charming – like the student who said that his career, life and even future marriage began when he moved to Sweden thanks to the scholarship. It’s hard to beat that as an “impact indicator”.

Overall, the students’ voices demonstrate a critical enablement of studies, but also something much bigger than academic achievements: they show what happens when financial barriers are removed and people are given the opportunity to use their abilities to the fullest. They show how global competence is built – not just through course literature and method seminars, but through meetings, shifts in perspective and the courage to set out into the world with a bag full of dreams and a semester fee that is finally paid.

And if you are to believe their own words, the scholarship is not just financial support. It is confidence. A lift. A reminder: “You can do anything. Just work hard and take the right steps at the right time.”

With this report, we from the Department of Global Health at Umeå University would like to thank you for the opportunities that the scholarship program has given us and many of our students.

