

L'attractivité doctorale et postdoctorale de la France

Current situation

The process of globalisation has led to an increasing need for an international dimension of education and training. Traditional roles have changed as knowledge-based economies have placed emphasis on human capital. International companies seek internationally-competent workers who speak several foreign languages and are able to interact with international partners. Tertiary education can thus broaden the horizons of students. Labour markets have also become more international for high-skilled workers in some professions. Therefore, there is a growing importance of internationally-recognised qualifications. In turn, the internationalisation of the labour market for high-skilled workers requires more university-educated workers for the new economy (Santiago et al. 2008).¹ Hence countries have increasingly engaged in competition for foreign students. France is no exception. The question remains how well the country does in comparison with other countries and how it can attract more students.

Based on statistics from the French government, about 216,376 foreign students were enrolled in French universities in the 2006/2007 academic year. The number increased to 263,126 students when other types of institutions were considered (e.g. business schools, engineering schools, preparatory courses for grandes écoles). France was ranked fourth in international comparisons, behind the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, but ahead of Germany.² In addition, France's retention rate is good – about 32 percent of foreign graduates stay on by changing their status for employment, family or humanitarian reasons.³ In 2005, the proportion of foreign students in France was 11.6 percent (vis-a-vis 7.1 percent in 1998).⁴ Between 1998 and 2005, the increase was more significant for master's (+90.6%) and doctorate degrees (+80.2%) than for bachelor's degrees (+65.7%). A higher number of foreign students were enrolled in doctorate degrees than French students (33% vs. 18% in the whole university population).⁵

Key factors

Individuals make their choices based on what they perceive as most rewarding for them (Mahroum 1999).⁶ Growing evidence demonstrates that the quality of the enrolment institution and the after-training opportunities in the host country influence the decision of graduate students the most. There are, however, other factors for choosing a host country. First, as mentioned above, there is the reputation of international institutions. Such

¹ Santiago, P., Tremblay, K., Basri, E. and Arnal, E. (2008), *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society: Volume 1*. Paris: OECD.

² http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/de/frankreich_3/in-frankreich-studieren_309/auslandische-studenten-in-frankreich-zahlen-und-fakten_2110/index.html

³ Estimates for all countries range between about 15 and 35 percent, and France is at the high end. More precise data will be published by the OECD in June 2010.

⁴ <http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/25/7/4257.pdf>

⁵ The choice of subject areas varied according to national origin. In 2005-2006, six out of ten North American students were enrolled in social sciences. Foreign students from Europe, Oceania and Asia made similar choices, whereas Chinese, Vietnamese and African students enrolled more in economics and science programmes. Algerian, Tunisian and Middle-Eastern students were highly represented in master's and doctorate degrees, often in scientific and medical subject areas.

⁶ Mahroum, S. (1999), 'Highly skilled globetrotters: the international migration of human capital', available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/35/6/2100652.pdf>

institutions often serve as signals of the overall quality of the university system and can be a magnet for attracting foreign students (Santiago et al. 2008). Second, the accreditation and recognition of foreign qualifications, as well as the establishment of credit transfer schemes are key for attracting foreign students and facilitating the inflow and outflow of skills (Mahroum 1999). Third, obtaining funding for the duration of the PhD course or postdoctoral position is also an issue for students. Fourth, the possibility to stay in the host country after graduation is another factor. A number of countries have changed their immigration regulations to allow foreign students to stay in the country after graduation in order to find a job. Since the 2005 new Immigration Law in Germany, it is possible for foreign students to stay on for another year following their graduation in order to find a job. Fifth, the right for a spouse of a student to join the applicant and take up employment in the host country is important (Mahroum 1999).

Propositions

1) In order for France as a place to study to become more attractive, it should increase its marketing effort by developing a brand/identity for the international market. Graduate students are in particular interested in research performance and global rankings (Santiago et al. 2008). Therefore, the creation of centres of excellence and the development of traditional expertise in some disciplines are significant. Instead of having many smaller universities, Paris should combine departments and build a brand, such as London School of Economics. This would allow universities to specialise on certain subjects and combine world-class researchers from several Parisian institutions. Recent examples include the Paris School of Economics (PSE), which was created in December 2006. Its goal is to rank among the world's best institutions in economics. PSE is not the only project in France; in fact, twelve other foundations for scientific research were announced by the government.

Building a brand requires information and accessibility. Therefore, France should use diplomatic, economic and educational ways to publicise the brand. It should create information brochures or websites for prospective foreign students, support marketing efforts abroad through diplomatic representations or specific organisations/agencies. Doctoral and postdoctoral positions should be advertised on major international academic websites.⁷

2) France should also seek the accreditation of their major programmes and establish credit transfer schemes. There are already such mechanisms in place for European Union students through the Bologna process.

3) Universities in France are said to be underfunded and there is very little cooperation between universities and private enterprises, which is desirable for sciences and engineering in order to provide funding for research, increase competitiveness and productivity. French universities need to diversify their income and become less reliant on public sources of finance, such as through student fees, competition for French, European and International Research Funding from foundations, research bodies and governments and through building private sector partnerships. While having no university fees can attract foreign students, some research shows that students are willing to pay fees in return for higher quality education and return on their investment. France should consider this option. Foundations can offer another way for funding foreign students' doctoral and postdoctoral positions (e.g. Max Planck,

⁷ E.g. www.jobs.ac.uk in the United Kingdom, www.academics.de in Germany, websites of professional associations - APSA for political scientists in the United States (www.apsanet.org)

Humboldt in Germany). While private sector partnerships are common in countries such as the United States, few examples exist in France. Nevertheless, a 2005 agreement between universities in Toulouse, CNRS and Airbus provides for common laboratories and research among scientists and engineers.⁸

4) Procedures in immigration policy must be complementary to university policy, easing access for potential students. For instance, the main spousal benefits in France only apply to high-skilled workers coming under the talent and competence visa or other work-related programmes. Changes should be implemented to propose spousal benefits for doctoral and postdoctoral students.

5) While there is particular interest in English-speaking instruction, France benefit from its widely-read and spoken language. There is also a growing trend to offer programmes in foreign languages (in particular English) in Nordic countries, but also Belgium, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain (Santiago et al. 2008).⁹ Some countries (e.g. New Zealand) offer free language training for students and employ coordinators at universities to help foreign students to settle in, find accommodation, deal with immigration regulations etc.¹⁰ France should offer preparatory courses, such as language and culture classes for foreign students to facilitate integration into the labour market and overall population upon completion of their training.

There will always be some personal factors (e.g. family context, established networks, language issues) that are significant for an individual's decision for the choice of host country. Some difficulties to attract foreign students have to do with broader structural conditions in the university system and labour market. To increase France's attractiveness for doctoral and postdoctoral students, more significant changes will have to be implemented in the medium to long-term. In this regard, France can exploit many niche markets; it should build on its unique strengths and position itself as a key centre of learning in the next century.

⁸ <http://www.auf.org/communication-information/actualites/le-cnrs-et-airbus-france-signent-un-accord-de-cooperation-scientifique.html>

⁹ The Czech Republic has implemented a policy, under which foreign students who follow a degree course in Czech pay the same (small) fee as Czech students. In an English-language degree course, the fees are higher.

¹⁰ Comprehensive codes of practice for the pastoral care of international students exist in the Netherlands and New Zealand (Santiago et al. 2008).