



HARNESSING TALENT IN EUROPE'S REGIONS



Exploring Drivers and Policy Approaches of Student Migration in the EU

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Title of the article

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Introduction

The international migration of young people seeking tertiary education has been steadily growing over the past few decades. Studying at foreign universities equips students with invaluable life experiences but also bolsters their competitiveness in the global labour market. As of 2021, more than 1.5 million international students were enrolled in tertiary institutions in 27 European Union (EU) member states (Eurostat, 2023). Within Europe, there are substantial disparities when certain regions experience a surge in international student numbers in recent years (e.g., Croatia, Malta, Portugal, and Slovenia), while others have observed stable or even diminishing student enrolment numbers (e.g., Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Finland, France, and Italy). Notably, Germany boasts the largest population of international students (accounting for 25% of the total international student population within the EU), followed by France (17%) and the Netherlands (9%). In the majority of EU member states, international students constitute at least 10% of the overall tertiary education enrolment, with Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Spain representing exceptions with comparatively lower international student proportions. Approximately one-quarter of student migration is within the EU, reflecting a significant intra-European mobility trend. However, the majority of international students originate from non-EU countries notably China, India, Ukraine, Morocco, the Russian Federation, Brazil, Algeria, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and the United States.

International students are becoming increasingly important in the context of globalised knowledge and the global race for talented students. The high mobility of international students presents a unique opportunity for European regions to attract the best talent from around the world. Many international students initiate their careers during their studies, thus economically contributing to local labour markets. This article examines some key institutional policies within EU member states that play a crucial role in the attraction and retention of international students.

Drivers and rationales behind international student migration

The rationale for student migration is primarily economic but political, personal and social factors also play a significant role. The literature suggests that student mobility is positively associated with several factors, including the quality of higher education institutions, cultural proximity, favourable immigration and visa policies, financial sponsorship initiatives, as well as career opportunities. By removing barriers that hinder student mobility and proactively facilitate the integration of these students, there is a potential to attract a greater number of highly talented individuals. Additionally, this can boost the overall appeal of Europe's regions and incentivise many international students to stay in the host country once their studies are finished.

The selection of a destination country by prospective students is largely influenced by the presence of a diaspora community and language environment. Countries that share (or have shared) official languages exchange more students (Donkor, 2020). Additionally, the availability of English-taught

academic programmes attracts more international students (Kahanec & Králiková, 2011; Abbott & Silles, 2015). A prime example of this is the Netherlands that offers over 2,000 study programmes conducted in English, and currently is one of the top student destinations in Europe (Upgrad Abroad, 2023).

The cost of education plays an important role in deciding to study abroad for many students. While variations in living costs among countries are relatively modest (Erudera, 2023), it is often the tuition fees that pose the most substantial financial hurdle for students considering studying abroad. Approximately half of the EU member states do not charge tuition fees to EU nationals or to students enrolled in programmes conducted in the host country's language. For instance, Czechia, Finland, Luxembourg, Poland, and Slovakia follow this practice. Conversely, tuition fees for English-taught programmes and for students from outside the EU generally fall within the range of EUR 1,000 to 6,000 per academic year (Erudera, 2023). Germany is one of very few countries that offers free education to all international students. Norway has provided tuition-free education until recently, but starting from August 1, 2023 a fee of EUR 8,000 applies to newly enrolled international students. The introduction of tuition fees in Norway is expected to reduce the number of new students by 80% (Study.eu, 2023). Ultimately, universities that offer affordable tuition fees, scholarships, and various financial aid opportunities tend to be more appealing to international students.

In pursue of tertiary education, students are inherently drawn to universities and colleges with a strong reputation for academic excellence and quality education. Accordingly, universities must continually enhance their standing in international rankings, and actively seek accreditation from reputable educational accrediting bodies. Europe has 225 universities in the Top 500 based on the recent *Times Higher Education* ranking. Approximately 80% of the top universities in Europe are located in regions that are relatively far away from the capital city. This presents an opportunity for such regions to transform into dynamic talent-driven locations. Strengthening policies aimed at increasing the recruitment and retention of international students can effectively increase talent supply. The inflow of foreign students can increase the size and improve the skills of workforces in these regions and help address the economic consequences of a shrinking workforce. In addition, the presence of international students enhances the reputation of the university both nationally and globally and contributes to a more diverse learning environment.

Another critical factor influencing student migration is visa and immigration policies. For example, in the Czech Republic the majority of foreign students (83%) perceived visa processing as excessively time-consuming and administratively burdensome (Kudrnáčová et al. 2020). Furthermore, half of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the accessibility of consular services, and many consider the financial fees associated with visa applications to be relatively high. Addressing these challenges, in 2017, the *Regime student program* established a fast track for student visa interviews at consular services and simplified the visa process for students who have been accepted to study at Czech universities. It is clear that the complicated and time-consuming visa processes act as deterrents, discouraging students from applying to study in specific member states. By contrast, countries with straightforward visa application procedures gain a competitive advantage in the global education market.

Policies to attract and retain foreign students after graduation

Citizenship, migration, and integration policies can support or hinder an immigrants' assimilation into the host society. The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) monitors the integration of immigrants encompassing aspects such as legal status, residence rights, citizenship, and equal access to rights, goods, and services (Solano & Huddleston, 2020). A good example of a comprehensive approach to integration, which ensures equal rights for immigrants across all domains can be found in Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden (Table 1). Conversely, the least favourable policies that provide only basic rights for immigrants tend to be prevalent in Central and Eastern European countries, with exceptions such as Czechia, Estonia and Slovenia. Research conducted by Guzi, Kahanec, and Kureková (2018, 2020) demonstrates that EU countries with more favourable integration policies towards immigrants are more successful in addressing existing skill gaps in the labour market and exhibit lower unemployment rates among non-EU nationals. Furthermore, existing literature underscores that inclusive policies towards immigrants yield higher levels of social trust, which leads to more positive attitudes and interactions between natives and immigrants. Ultimately, countries characterised by less fear of immigrants can become more successful in attracting a greater number of international students (Gorinas & Pytliková, 2017).

A welcoming attitude towards international students is one important aspect. Governments can establish support programmes to assist international students in adapting to the local culture and academic environment. A survey that explores the studying and living in the Czech Republic from the perspectives of foreign students, found that the majority of foreign students are satisfied and rate their studies positively in terms of value for money (Kudrnáčová et al., 2020). However, more than half (54%) of foreign students reported not feeling integrated among Czech students and considered pursuing their career in a different foreign country in the future. This case reinforces the fact that programmes need to support international students by having them feel valued and respected.

Attracting foreign students is highly desirable from a policy perspective since they enlarge the pool of skilled workers within the local job market. International students that have a valid student permit are allowed to take jobs during their studies, but working limits for students differ among the EU countries. Typically, students from non-EU countries face more restrictions in the labour market. In most EU countries, students are permitted to engage in part-time employment, with working hours capped at a range of 16 to 24 hours per week (Table 1). Few countries such as Czechia, Estonia, Germany, and Lithuania, allow students to take on full-time work alongside their studies. The many students who combine their studies with paid work do so primarily to cover their living expenses and gain valuable working experience (Gwosc, 2021). The combination of study and work helps students to familiarise themselves with the cultural norms and values of the host nation. Consequently, their integration into the local workforce after completion of their studies becomes smoother when compared to recent migrants just arriving from other countries.

Table 1 Integration Policies and Work-Study Regulations Across EU Countries

Country	MIPEX (1)	Tuition		Work limits for Non-EU		Post-study work permit (months) (6)
		EU (2)	Non-EU (3)	hours per week (4)	Full-time (5)	
Austria	46	0	762	20	0	12
Belgium	69	835	2500	20	0	12
Bulgaria	40	300	1750	20	0	9
Croatia	39	1000	1000	20	0	12
Cyprus	41	0	6834	20	0	2
Czech Republic	50	0	2000	40	1	9
Denmark	49	0	6000	20	0	6
Estonia	50	1600	1600	40	1	9
Finland	85	0	4000	30	0	24
France	56	170	2770	20	0	12
Germany	58	0	0	20	1	18
Greece	46	0	1500	20	0	12
Hungary	43	1200	3000	24	0	9
Ireland	64	0	4000	20	0	12
Italy	58	900	1800	20	0	12
Latvia	37	1200	2500	40	0	12
Lithuania	37	1300	1300	7	1	9
Luxembourg	64	1200	1200	20	0	6
Malta	48	0	1080	16	0	12
Netherlands	57	2300	6000	20	0	12
Poland	40	0	2000	20	0	9
Portugal	81	550	550	20	0	12
Romania	49	1000	2000	20	0	9
Slovakia	39	0	2000	20	0	9
Slovenia	48	0	2000	20	0	12
Spain	60	1200	1800	20	0	12
Sweden	86	0	7500	20	0	12

Source: Erudera (2023), Mipex.eu

Note: The MIPEX (Migrant Integration Policy Index) measures the quality of policies related to migrant integration (Column 1). A score of 100 indicates that migrants are treated equally to nationals in terms of policy measures. Average tuition fees per academic year for EU and non-EU students (in Column 2 and 3 respectively) are expressed in Euros. Work limits refer to the maximum number of hours per week (Column 4) and eligibility for full-time employment (Column 5) for non-EU students during their studies. The duration of the post-study work permit for non-EU students is expressed in months (Column 6).

Conclusion

The presence of international students has a positive impact on the economies of host countries and contributes significantly to their labour markets (Kamm, Liebig & Boffi, 2022). In the EU, approximately one-third of international students combine their study and work. Hence many students accumulate valuable work experience and gain insights into local labour markets, providing them with a competitive advantage over other migrants. Based on rough estimates derived from EU permit statistics, one in three international students still holds a valid permit in their host country five years after receiving their initial education permit. A positive finding is that countries are improving their strategies for retaining students as the number of students remaining in the host country after graduation is larger among more recent cohorts.

The retention of international students in the host country after their graduation presents an opportunity to address regional labour market and population needs, which is particularly crucial for regions outside major cities that have traditionally attracted smaller numbers of immigrants. Non-EU students are granted opportunities to remain in the host country and seek employment upon the completion of their studies. The duration of this post-graduation work visa varies, with most countries permitting students to stay for a period ranging from 9 to 12 months (Table 1). Notably, Cyprus and Malta enforce more restrictive limits, while Germany and Finland take a more liberal approach, granting students 18 and 24 months, respectively. Countries that offer opportunities for post-graduation work and potential pathways to permanent residency tend to be more appealing to international students.

Retaining international students in the labour market can play a vital role in alleviating talent shortages in specific industries or professions. For instance, the Dutch government has taken a proactive stance in supporting international students by granting them a one-year residence permit and providing language training (Government of the Netherlands, 2023). Teaching students the local language not only enhances their employment prospects in the labour market, but also increases the chance that they will choose (and be able) to remain in the host country after finishing their studies. Proficiency in the host country's language is widely recognised as a crucial prerequisite for the successful integration of migrants. To further increase the integration of students in the labour market, the Dutch government plans to engage in *targeted recruitment of international students* for academic programmes that address shortages in the regional labour market.

In essence, to attract prospective foreign students and facilitate their smooth transition into the local job market, countries and regions must establish welcoming and inclusive environments. International students not only contribute to the multicultural atmosphere of European higher education institutions but also play a significant role in the development of the host country. It's noteworthy that 80% of people in the EU reside within a 45-minute drive of the main campus of at least one university (Poelman and Dijkstra, 2018). This implies that benefits derived from the integration of students into the local labour markets can have a positive ripple effect, ultimately impacting the well-being and prosperity of the entire EU population.

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