



# Policy Response to International PhD Students' Mobility in France: Immigration, Europeanization, Internationalization

Farkhad Alimukhamedov and Teele Tõnismann

## Abstract

France, among top countries for doctorate abroad, grapples with labor market challenges for its 39 percent international PhD candidates. Despite alignment with EU's strategies, disparities persist, because integration of international PhDs into the domestic labor market involves not only research and development but also migration policies. Policy analysts and decision makers must address this complexity for international PhDs, fostering diversity and knowledge-based economies in the EU and OECD.

France is a major recipient of international PhD students among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. In the 2020–2021 academic year, foreign nationals constituted 39 percent of all doctoral candidates in France, totaling 27,600 individuals. This surpasses the indicator in the United States (25 percent) and Germany (12 percent), though it remains slightly behind the United Kingdom (41 percent). This notable proportion of international PhD candidates aligns with the European Union's research and development (R&D) and innovation policy strategies where the inclusion of foreign (non-EU) doctorate students is employed to evaluate the member states' "international competitiveness of the science base."

However, France faces challenges in integrating international PhD students into the domestic labor market. Unlike many other OECD countries where a PhD is a distinctive qualification, France encounters difficulties ensuring that its doctoral candidates acquire the diverse skills necessary for a successful career in the country. Furthermore, the French example is relevant for the context of other European countries, illustrating that doctoral-level international scientific mobility is not solely a topic within R&D and innovation policies but also within migration policies.

## Europeanization of the "Traditional" Foreign Student Policy in France

As a major receiving country for international PhD students, France is a good example of how contradictory rationales such as attracting best international students and limiting immigration play out in practice. Sociological observations over a long period indicate that international students are less and less seen as students, and more and more categorized as immigrants. Although France is a good example of the global trend of international student circulation from the Global South to the Global North, it remains relatively less attractive to students from the Global North. Most international PhD candidates are from the African continent (around 34 percent) and Asia (31 percent), followed by European Union nationals (18 percent) and North Americans (12 percent). Over the past decades, the French government has aimed to reduce immigration from its former colonies and the Global South through various laws and regulations (such as the Bonnet law in 1977, the Imbert law in 1979, the Pasqua law in 1993, and the Guéant law in 2011), as well as institutional practices. The purpose of these measures is to restrict the prospect of securing a stable and durable stay in France, and they have rendered the status of foreign students extremely vulnerable. Even when in 1998 the French government set up residence permit cards specifically for "scientific researchers," this was a restrictive policy that did not target international PhD candidates and PhDs already in France. It was mainly designed to foster exchange and mobility of researchers working abroad.

In 2006, a significant shift in this "traditional" French migration policy occurred with the introduction of the temporary resident permit (known as APS), allowing non-EU students to stay for up to one year after graduation to seek employment. In fact, it was the result of the alignment of various laws resulting from European Council Directive 2004/114 of December 13, 2004. With this directive, France had to align itself with all the other European Union member states and introduce specific measures to manage the study and employment conditions of international students. Prior to 2006, there were more international students changing their residence status based on family reasons rather

than economic reasons. But after the implementation of these new measures the number of permit changes from “student” toward “salaried work” has become far more significant than changes for family reasons.

This attempt also fits in with French migration policy, which favors “desirable immigration” by selecting students from graduate level onwards and promoting professional immigration. The “competences and talents” card introduced in 2006 allowed graduate students with “skills and talents whose project contributes to the economic development of France and their country of origin” to apply for a three-year residence permit. Subsequently, the 2016 reform replaced the “competences and talents” card with a series of special multiannual “talent passports,” with the aim of “increasing the attractiveness of France”. In line with this approach, the “job seeker/new business creator” card, implemented in 2018, is the most recent addition to the temporary residence card types. Therefore, French migration policy in higher education and research has been moving toward an employer-led system, where eligibility for the visa is determined by assessing the conditions under which applicants can qualify. As a result, PhD candidates and PhD holders can apply for various types of multiannual residence permits, contingent on their income. For example, a gross monthly salary of 2,404.67 euros grants a “talent passport – researcher” permit, an annual gross salary of 38,475 euros entitles the holder to a “talent passport – qualified employee” permit, and an annual gross salary of 53,836.5 euros qualifies for a “talent passport – EU Blue Card” permit.

### Need for More Targeted Policies for Doctoral Students

Nevertheless, there is a dilemma when it comes to what is known as “professional immigration,” and the interface between this and the absorption of international students into the domestic labor market. Current doctoral-level international mobility and job integration statistics highlight important structural disparities. It is estimated that almost two-thirds of international PhDs stay in France for three years after obtaining their degree. Between 2019 and 2020, 9.9 percent of researchers, including PhD candidates, in public institutions were foreign nationals, totaling 16,938 individuals. Nevertheless, the share of non-EU PhD holders in R&D jobs in both public and private sectors is much lower.

For example, in terms of placement in French higher education and research institutions, European Union nationals have a rather high recruitment ratio (50.2 percent for the entire public research sector) compared to PhDs from Asia and Africa (15.9 percent and 13.5 percent respectively). In R&D companies, 7 percent were foreign nationals, totaling 20,700 individuals; again, European Union nationals were the most recruited (38 percent), followed by researchers from Africa (37 percent) and Asia (13 percent). Therefore, while migration policy in the higher education and research arena leans toward an employer-led system with an emphasis on the employability of international PhDs, we can still observe geographical inequalities influencing the actual employment of PhDs in both public and private sector R&D because a PhD obtained in France appears not to offer the same “merit-based immunity” for PhDs from the Global South.

The French example shows that using the number of foreign doctoral students as a sole indicator of innovation is insufficient, as disparities in their integration into the national labor market persist. Despite a significant influx of international PhD holders, enduring structural inequalities in job market assimilation reflect political decisions spanning decades. Integrating PhD candidates into the labor market is, therefore, not solely a matter of R&D policies but also encompasses migration policies. Targeted policies at the national and European Union levels, specifically designed for international PhDs, have the potential to alleviate disparities in career pathways. This complex issue demands attention from policy analysts and decision makers in European Union and OECD countries aiming to enhance diversity in the higher education sector and cultivate knowledge-based economies. ▲

*There is a dilemma when it comes to what is known as “professional immigration,” and the interface between this and the absorption of international students into the domestic labor market.*

*Farkhad Alimukhamedov is postdoc at the Laboratoire des Sciences Sociales du Politique (LaSSP), Sciences Po Toulouse, France. E-mail: [farkhad.alimukhamedov@univ-toulouse.fr](mailto:farkhad.alimukhamedov@univ-toulouse.fr).*

*Teele Tönismann is researcher at the Laboratory of Interdisciplinary studies on the Doctorate at Adoc Talent Management, Paris, France, and member of LaSSP. E-mail: [tonismann@adoc-tm.com](mailto:tonismann@adoc-tm.com).*