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Immigration and Higher Education: Competition for Talent

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Abstract
Countries take a variety of approaches to their international students who graduate locally and seek to stay. While some offer significant time horizons to search for and acquire a job, or eliminate needed sponsorship altogether, not all are as generous. Yet in both instances, local graduates acquire experience that gives them inherent advantages, should they desire to stay after completing their studies.

As human capital becomes ever more important in a globalized, technology-driven economy, training beyond secondary school has likewise become critical for both individual and country-level economic advancement. At the same time, in nearly all rich-world economies, local birthrates have slowed to some of the lowest levels in decades or even a century. With new "cohorts" of locally born individuals having shrunk for quite some time across the rich world, higher education systems will have fewer local students to train and graduate into the economy.

The Need for Immigration

Thus, to stay economically competitive, a major factor for many developed countries has become immigration. While international migration is a well-discussed topic, what has been less examined is the direct role that higher education plays in these inflows of people and how higher education has continued to adapt to this reality. International flows of technical and sought-after talent will become increasingly relevant for the success of developed economies across the world. But of the many countries with higher education systems recruiting large populations of international students, which ones incentivize this behavior through policy, and how is this changing? As of now, there is no such comprehensive accounting of how countries approach this increasingly consequential set of policies. Higher education researchers and practitioners should take note of the emerging global trends as they continue to adapt to a changing landscape of policies and student flows.

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Policy-Based Advantages

Many countries have policies allowing international students to stay after completing their studies. Several have formal policies that either extend the legal work residency for graduates of higher education degree programs, or offer specific longer-term residency pathways for graduates. In Canada's province-based immigration system (one of the three Canadian immigration schemes), provincial governments can target prospective workers for high-need industries for long-term residency, including current university students. This means that students studying fields such as engineering may have a special advantage if they decide to apply for long-term residency while enrolled. Notably, the province-based immigration system is the fastest such scheme nationally to gain long-term or permanent residency.

Many countries in the European Union, including Austria, Italy, Spain, and Sweden, among others, allow non-EU graduates one year after studying to find a job that will sponsor them to stay. Germany allows non-EU graduates 18 months to find a job. Also in Sweden, graduates of PhD programs (which function much like full-time jobs) can count their time in the program toward a permanent residence application, reflecting the high-level and often technical nature of their programs. In most of these countries, the poststudy "work-search" visa allows graduates to be employed in the meantime before finding longer-term employment.

Some of the most generous schemes for locally graduated international students include two or more guaranteed years of living and working in the country after graduation, and include some of the most sought-after destinations for international students. The United Kingdom allows graduates of local university programs to legally reside and

work for up to two years after their graduation through the Graduate Route Visa. Doctoral graduates receive one extra year for three years in total. Both routes in the United Kingdom give graduates time to potentially switch to the Skilled Worker Visa, requiring job sponsorship to stay. Australia has a set of visas for graduating international students that allows them to stay for anywhere from 18 months to four years, depending on the region and the qualification that they hold. For some of the most highly needed occupations in Australia, this could be a direct pathway to long-term residency. New Zealand offers a similar scheme, with foreign graduates able to legally reside and work in the country for anywhere from one to three years, depending on which institution they attended and their occupational field. These generous visa benefits may, for some students seeking to stay, justify the extremely high cost of enrolling in higher education in these contexts.

Incidental Advantages

Beyond extended poststudy working or job-search time, incidental advantages to immigration also accrue to graduates of local university programs. Most countries in the European Union require a certain proficiency in the local language before or during the immigration process, especially prior to becoming a citizen. Having time, as a university student, to study these languages through full immersion and local instruction helps to remove a potentially significant barrier to settling long-term. Additional time also allows students to grow accustomed to local administrative processes, access resources, and develop a network of friends, colleagues, and supporters (and potential work sponsors) that would be much harder to get otherwise, all of which can significantly ease the path to long-term resident status.

Other incidental advantages can accrue for graduates as well. The United States, for example, recently extended the Optional Practical Training (OPT) time for graduates of STEM degree programs from one to three years, to allow them to legally reside and work in the country without needing sponsorship. This has both the overt advantage of extended nonsponsored work time, but also a massive incidental advantage: Each year that a recent graduate is in the United States, they can apply for a longer-term residency through an H1-B visa, a costly and complicated process that is rarer for employers to sponsor without thorough knowledge of a job candidate. From H1-B, recipients can apply for permanent residency status, otherwise known as a green card.

Adjusting Strategies

In recent years, both higher education institutions and countries have been adjusting their strategies to attract international students who may seek to stay beyond their studies. In the United States, a wave of MBA programs received the STEM-certification necessary to receive the additional two years on the OPT after the change was formally implemented. And after a collapse of international student enrollment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian government recently proposed extending postgraduation stays for international students, hoping to entice them back.

Of course, some countries offer much more modest policy benefits for foreign university graduates. Switzerland only allows foreigners six months to find a full-time job after completing their degree program. During this period, job seekers can legally work just 15 hours per week. And when they do find a job willing to sponsor them, employers must prove that either the job or the individual is of special economic or scientific importance to receive a work permit. Denmark offers a similar set of conditions. Policies like this may become only more common as migration crises have stretched many countries' immigration systems to the breaking point and caused a widespread backlash. New Zealand, for instance, recently limited the number of poststudy work permits that a graduate could receive to one, and limited eligible nondegree graduates to a set of highly in-demand fields.

Conclusion

Higher education enrollment and graduation are critical components of many immigrants' first experiences of new countries where they may hope to settle. For nearly all new arrivals, receiving a degree is a huge leg up in establishing roots and eventually settling permanently in a new country, should they choose to do so. While currently

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understudied, policy experts should continue to review and understand the wide array of policies and strategies that countries utilize toward local graduates of foreign origin—a topic that will only become more important as the years proceed.