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European Countries Compete to Attract, and Retain, Foreign Students

By CHRISTOPHER F. SCHUETZE

THE HAGUE — British graduates looking to work at the supermarket chain Tesco might be surprised to learn that speaking Mandarin fluently and being open to a move to China can go a long way toward getting a good job with the company.

“The fact that someone has a foreign cultural background can be advantageous,” said Nannette Ripmeester, who runs Expertise in Labor Mobility, an international job-matching company based in the Netherlands.

Europe, like the rest of the global economy, increasingly needs highly educated workers. And like Tesco, a British company, many European businesses see value in workers who hold a domestic degree but bring an international background to the job.

Despite the elimination of a visa program in Britain, a call to enforce visa rules strictly in France, and tuition fee increases in Britain and Sweden in recent years, experts say that most European countries are trying to attract foreign students in the hope that once trained they will stay and join the work force.

As in the rest of the world, student migration is booming in Europe. In 2010, just under 850,000 non-Europeans were studying there, up from almost 660,000 in 2005, according to Unesco figures.

European countries, however, have a harder time retaining foreign students after they graduate than “destination” countries like Australia, Canada and the United States, in part because the path to citizenship is seen as easier there and opportunities for social mobility are greater.

“A lot of students are going abroad as a part of strategic career planning,” said Wei Shen, who is associate dean for China at Essca, a management school in France, and studies student migration. “They are not interested in permanent settlement in Europe.”

Though some European nations naturally attract students from specific countries — France, for example, enjoys popularity among Africans from French-speaking nations — other countries are trying to increase their popularity among foreigners.

A study released this year by the Migration Policy Group, a nonprofit organization, compared the strategies and success rates of five European countries — Germany, France, Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden — in attracting and retaining non-European students.

The Netherlands, for example, was found to do well in retaining students in comparison with the other countries, not only because of its respected postsecondary institutions and relative good value of degrees, but also because bureaucratic forms were easily available and because English is widely spoken in the country, facilitating integration into society.

“The language is not a barrier,” said Hans de Wit, a professor at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and an adviser on the study. “It is a positive factor in the Netherlands.”

Of the five countries profiled, the Netherlands was least likely to be the first choice among foreign students who ended up studying there, with only 59.4 percent of respondents saying the country had been their preference.

When doctoral students were asked whether they would be staying in their host country of choice, those who answered from the Netherlands were more likely to want to stay than those answering in France or Britain.

The level of language proficiency among incoming students was much higher in Britain, France and Germany than in the Netherlands or Sweden, because the first three countries’ languages are more commonly spoken around the world. And, while all five countries offer programs entirely in English, living in Germany or France tends to be more difficult without a working knowledge of the national languages.

Germany was found to have the highest percentage of students willing to say for the long term, with 12.5 percent predicting that they would stay five or more years after finishing their study. While the investment many make in learning the German language before or during study plays a role, a strong job market, especially in the engineering sector, also contributes to Germany’s success in retaining foreign graduates, said Ludger Pries, the chairman of the sociology department at the Ruhr-University in Bochum.

“Germany got a lot from globalization,” he said, “and now there’s a big push to bring globalization to German firms.”

Under a new law, Germany gives recently graduated foreigners more time to find employment — 18 months rather than 12 — and has made obtaining permanent residency easier for them, especially if they are fluent in German.

Overall, however, a vast majority of students said that the quality or reputation of the university and study program was the most important factor in determining where to go.

“All these countries want to market themselves as a leading student destination,” said Mr. Shen, who was an academic adviser on the study.

While European officials and academics adjust postgraduate programs, language course subsidies and the availability of information in English, a change in national policy can quickly undo years of progress.

For example, a memorandum released in May 2011, known as the circulaire Guéant after the interior minister who issued it, instructed French officials to adhere more strictly to regulations when processing work-visa requests. Stories of foreign students in France waiting vainly for their work visas affected France’s reputation as an attractive study destination.

A year after the directive was issued, [a new French government rescinded it](#).

“It is very damaging for the country,” Mr. Shen said of the directive. “The perception of the students is very important.”

Similarly, last April’s elimination of the Tier 1 visa in Britain, which allowed a two-year work permit for foreign graduates of British universities, had a negative effect on postgraduate integration.

In June, the McKinsey Global Institute published a study predicting that the global economy would need an additional 38 million to 40 million [college-educated workers by 2020](#). [While many of these new jobs will be in Asia, Europe will need at least 16 million to 18 million more highly skilled workers, the study predicted.](#)

As the need for highly trained workers and the desire for multinational backgrounds increase, European governments and universities will continue to compete to attract foreign students and keep them in the country.

Tesco, on the other hand, promises a permanent move to China after six months' training in Hertfordshire, England.

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