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France Moves to Lift a Barrier to Jobs for Foreign Graduates

Foreign students in France get a break on work permits

French officials have instructed the local authorities to review work-permit applications from foreign college graduates following criticism from students, heads of schools and companies that immigration rules were forcing highly qualified graduates to leave the country.

A joint memo from the ministries of Interior, Higher Education and Labor last week called on local prefects to “re-examine” requests filed while stricter rules stated in a previous memo, issued on May 31 of last year, were in place. All expulsion procedures against applicants whose papers were rejected under those rules are to be suspended, the memo said.

Non-European holders of at least a French master’s degree or equivalent will have six months after graduation to find a “first work experience” and apply for working papers. They can also file for a regular work permit.

New elements of their résumés such as academic excellence, French state scholarships or French high school diplomas will be taken into account.

The new memo “corrects difficulties and errors that we made,” the higher education minister, Laurent Wauquiez, said on RMC radio. “Yes, France wants to control its immigration policy,” he said, but added, “No, France doesn’t close its doors to foreign students.”

Strict application of immigration rules on foreign graduates sparked fears that the country could become less attractive for students.

“France strongly affirms its willingness to host foreign students,” Pierre Tapie, chairman of the Conférence des Grandes Ecoles, a grouping of some of the country’s most prestigious schools, said in a phone interview last Friday.

The May 31st Collective, a group that campaigned against working-permit refusals, welcomed the new memo, but said it remained worried about the government’s anti-immigration stance.

“It comes too late for some of our friends who already had to leave the country,” said Vincent Chauvet, head of the collective. He said the group had counted up to 1,000 cases of foreign graduates who had encountered problems. The Interior Ministry said in an e-mail that it knew of 674 cases of graduates affected by the original memo. — *PALKO KARASZ*

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