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## **France to Allow Work Visas for More Graduates**

**By PALKO KARASZ**

PARIS — French officials are planning to soften their stance on limiting working permits to foreign college graduates and to reconsider recently rejected work-visa applications after criticism from students and heads of universities, the Education Ministry said Thursday.

“Local prefects will be advised to examine students’ applications in a positive way,” a spokesman with the Ministry of Higher Education said in a telephone interview. “Cases where the application has been rejected will be examined to try and find a solution,” he added, refusing to give his name, following ministry practice.

This autumn, non-European Union students were subjected to stricter work-visa procedures, making it increasingly hard for them to pursue job opportunities after graduation in [France](#). A memo dated May 31 and issued by the ministries of Interior and Labor called on the local authorities and [immigration](#) offices to apply existing regulations “rigorously” to limit legal immigration. “Priority should be given to the professional insertion of job seekers already present on our territory, both of French and foreign nationalities, residing legally in France,” the memo read.

In addition, a government decree issued on Sept. 6 strengthened the conditions of residency for students.

At a meeting of government officials and university representatives on Tuesday, the higher education minister, Laurent Wauquiez, pledged to “correct” the carrying out of immigration rules for students and said that the government and universities would start talks to address the issue of graduates who wish to stay in France to work.

“France wishes to attract the best students in the world,” as they could become “ambassadors for our country,” Mr. Wauquiez was quoted as saying in *Le Figaro*. “There is no policy of closure” directed at foreign graduates, he added.

Louis Vogel, head of the University Presidents’ Conference, who was present at the meeting, welcomed the talks in an interview on Wednesday. Nevertheless, he remained cautious about the outcome, saying, “The reaction was good but we have to wait and see the results in practice.”

In late September, he was among the first to react to the visa refusals, saying that they could compromise deals with partner universities worldwide.

“The consequences of this memo on international students have been underestimated,” Mr. Vogel said Wednesday.

Lenient legislation and a stated intention to attract international students increased the number of foreigners in the French higher education system in recent years. Their numbers rose to 218,364 from 137,505 in the past decade, according to ministry figures.

At the same time, the government under President Nicolas Sarkozy has been trying to curb immigration. In April, Interior Minister Claude Guéant announced that he wanted to reduce all legal immigration to the country by 20,000 to 180,000.

While the quotas were not directed at students, academics said they were the first affected.

“From a statistical point of view, cutting down on foreign students has a more immediate and visible effect, as opposed to family migration, for instance,” said Serge Slama, an assistant professor at the University of Evry-Val d’Essonne, south of Paris.

A group of students called the May 31 Collective started registering cases of work-permit refusal in September. A founder of the movement is Hajer Gorgi, a Tunisian student who graduated from Ensae, an engineering school, this past summer. Before even graduating, she said, she had been considered by a leading company for a position as a consultant. But, for the authorities, “consultant” was not a valid job description so she feared that they would refuse her permit, she said.

“A whole generation is being sacrificed,” Ms. Gorgi said. She said about 200 students had contacted the collective, of which about 70 were refused visas.

Asked about the softening of measures, Vincent Chauvet, a French student at l’Institut d’études politiques de Paris and co-founder of the collective, said Thursday that they were only partially satisfied.

“We haven’t seen any written engagement — we only have Mr. Wauquiez’s word,” he said in an interview, adding that they were still hoping the original memo would be withdrawn.

To reinforce their demands, the collective planned to demonstrate in front of the Sorbonne University on Thursday.

“We want to go public to show that these students are not hiding, illegal immigrants,” Mr. Chauvet said.

This year, several Western nations including Australia, Britain and Sweden, decided to restrict access to their higher education systems for foreign students. Britain and Australia tightened visa and immigration policies, while Sweden introduced tuition fees for some foreign students, a first in its modern history.

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