

Attracting and retaining foreign students: Workshop overview and conclusions

EMN Annual Conference in 2017 'The EU in the global race for talents: Challenges and solutions in strengthening the EU's competitiveness'¹

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Introduction

European leaders at all levels are facing a number of **labour market challenges**, from ageing population, the sustainability of welfare systems, as well as companies' growing struggles to find skilled workforce. Migration is increasingly viewed as a possible way to tackle these problems, especially the arrival of skilled persons from third countries. European Migration Network's Annual Conference, entitled 'The EU in the global race for talents: Challenges and solutions in strengthening the EU's competitiveness', sought to tackle these issues in Tallinn on 21-22 September 2017.

The workshop strand on 'Attracting and retaining foreign students' focused in particular on the role of students in talent migration. Top universities in Europe and elsewhere have always attracted the world's best talent, benefitting and driving innovation in their respective countries. In parallel, EU MSs and many European institutions are also working on several comprehensive strategies to **enhance the attractiveness of Europe's higher education landscape**. As pointed out in the recast Directive 2016/801, "Immigration from outside the Union is one source of highly skilled people and students and researchers are in particular increasingly sought after. They play an important role in forming the Union's key asset, **human capital**, and in ensuring **smart, sustainable and inclusive growth**, and therefore contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy."

Session I focused on **attraction measures**. It gave an overview of the priorities of the European Commission on student migration, introduced a case study on higher education internationalisa-

tion activities from France and offered insights into the ways in which third-country national (TCN) students decide when and where to move next.

The goal, however, is not simply attracting foreign students to the EU, but also incorporating them after they graduate. Hence, **session II** focused on **student retention**. Issues raised in this session included what is European Commission and what are the MSs currently doing to retain their international graduates? Who should take action to keep them? Participants were also given an overview of the Dutch and Estonian national approaches to foreign student retention².

Key takeaways

- While the EU is already an attractive destination for TCN students, **TCN graduates' retention rates are rather modest**.
- International students **contribute considerably to the EU's economy**, for instance through housing and food costs, tuition fees, part-time participation in the labour market, as well as travel-related costs, including their families' and friends' visits to Europe.
- Differences in participation rates in the labour market between local and TCN graduates disappear after few years. The same is true, when we compare income and taxes paid.
- However, most international graduates leave Europe. Thus, TCN students, remain a **largely untapped and unknown pool of talent** for many employers and start-up entrepreneurs when they look to recruit new employees.
- Considering their **human capital** as well as the **high potential for integration** of the foreign students that have graduated from European higher education institutions (HEIs), MSs should

¹ EMN Annual Conference was held in the framework of the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU at Tallinn University on 21-22 September 2017. For further information about the event, including the programme, speaker bios, presentations, photos and videos, please visit the EMN website: <http://emn.ee/race4talents/>

² Students strand of the EMN Annual Conference was organised by the Archimedes Foundation, Tallinn University and the Estonian National Contact Point for the European Migration Network (EMN).

consider developing stronger policies to retain them.

- ▶ **A strategic and a holistic approach** to international student recruitment is needed, that is, promoting study programmes and careers together, devoting specific attention to those specialisations offering good career prospects.
- ▶ Governments, other public sector agencies, HEIs and employers should work together to develop and implement both national and regional strategies to attract and retain TCN students. **Ambitious national approaches involving all stakeholders pay off.**
- ▶ Yet, retention should not be viewed exclusively in terms of remaining physically in the MS, but TCN graduates may also continue to have ties with the MS and act as its unofficial ambassadors. **Active alumni networks** provide MSs with a **transnational pool of labour force** as well as **international trade opportunities**.
- ▶ A discursive turn is taking place – previously, the focus was on brain drain, now more attention is paid on the advantages of **brain circulation** and **knowledge transfer**.

Summary of session I: Attracting foreign students

In order to facilitate TCNs' immigration to the EU for the purpose of studying, as well as their stay in the MSs after graduating from European HEIs, a new students and researchers directive³ was adopted in May 2016.

The recast directive allows MSs to introduce an **approval procedure for HEIs** that wish to host TCN students. TCNs' applications to HEIs that have been approved by the MS will be facilitated, and processed in maximum of 60 days instead of max 90 days. While the general conditions for students such as travel documents, insurance etc. still apply, they will be exempt from presenting some of the documents acquired normally⁴.

The new directive also improves employment opportunities for TCN students whilst studying. **LAURA CORRADO (DG HOME, European Commission)** emphasised that with the transposition of the recast directive all TCN students – regardless of the specific level of their degree or studies – will have an **easier access to the labour market**. While the



Image 1. Attendees of the workshop

previous directive allowed them to work minimum 10 hours per week, the new directive extends this right to minimum of 15 hours a week while studying. MSs can restrict this right only in exceptional circumstances such as high unemployment rates.

Improvements are also made with regards to facilitating TCN students' **intra-EU mobility**. Foreign students enrolled in different EU mobility programmes (e.g. Erasmus+) or who are enrolled in a HEI in a MS that has a mobility agreement with another HEI in another MS, are now able to transfer to the second MS for up to 360 days by issuing a **simple notification**. Instead of applying for a new visa, competent authorities in both MSs have to be simply notified by either the student or the HEIs. The second MS may require the notification to include some documents and information⁵, and it can still reject TCN student's wish to enter, but that would be a rare case.

The recast students and researchers directive also addresses **retention of TCN students in the EU** after the completion of their studies. According to the new rules, TCNs that are able to present evidence of having obtained formal qualifications **may stay in the MS to search for job or set up a business** at least nine months after finishing their studies⁶.

Developments in the recast students and researchers directive include:

- (1) **faster procedure for looking through TCNs' application to study in the EU;**
- (2) **extended rights to combine studying with work;**
- (3) **improved intra-EU mobility rights;**
- (4) **a possibility to stay in the MS to look for a job/set up a business after graduating.**

3 The full version of the Directive 2016/801/EU (OJ L 132, 21.5.2016) can be found from: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ET/ALL/?uri=OJ%3A2016%3A132%3ATOC>

4 Such as a proofs of: having paid fees for the handling of application that the HEIs may require; language skills; the capability to sustain oneself economically while studying; (a temporary) address in the MS territory.

5 E.g. evidence that the student carries out part of the studies in the second MS in the framework of a Union or multilateral programme that comprises mobility measures or of an agreement between two or more HEIs; evidence that the student has been accepted by a HEI in the second MS; the planned duration and dates of the mobility; evidence that the student has sickness insurance; evidence of sufficient resources to cover subsistence costs; evidence that the fees charged by the HEI have been paid, where applicable. The second MS may also require the student to provide, before the start of mobility, the address of the student in the territory of the second MS.

6 After 3 months, MS can check if they have a genuine chance (e.g. actively seeking for job) of being engaged or of launching a business. MSs may require that the employment the TCN is seeking or the business he or she is in the process of setting up correspond to the level of research or of studies completed.



Image 2. Laura Corrado

While the European Commission is striving to improve and harmonise minimum legal standards for welcoming international students, it is MSs' duty to put those general policies locally into practice by developing national systems.

France is one of the EU leaders in attracting international students. The coordinating body in these efforts is Campus France, who have 255 offices in 125 countries worldwide. They use a **mix of different promotional activities**, but JOHANNA HELLWIG (Campus France) highlighted the importance of three in particular:

- **Ensuring the availability of up-to date and accessible information online.** In addition to the main website⁷, Campus France runs 80 local websites in 30 different languages. These websites have **search engines** to help TCNs with finding out about degree programmes, scholarships or short courses in France.
- **Having an active social media presence.** While Campus France's Facebook and Twitter accounts are managed from Paris, offices abroad have also their own web channels. Moreover, Campus France also gets TCN students involved in this, for instance, by encouraging them to become '**e-Ambassadors**' and blogging about their daily lives in France. The peer-to-peer approach helps to produce more relatable content and to reach target groups better.
- **Not forgetting about more traditional events and materials.** Last year Campus France's local offices organised more than 50 events. Although the number of virtual fairs has increased, students often wish to talk to representatives from specific HEIs in person to commit to migration. Usually many French universities participate



Image 3. Eero Loonurm and Johanna Hellwig

in a single Campus France fair. **Printed promotional materials**, such as flyers on study fields and programmes, are also still appreciated and hence distributed in these events.

Campus France also manages the **French Alumni Network**. This network was launched in 2014 and is currently active in 86 countries, bringing together around 65,000 graduates through online forums as well as face-to-face events. Notwithstanding their physical location, all graduates remain unofficial **ambassadors for France** promoting France as a country to visit, study, live and to do business with, explained Ms Hellwig.

Alongside the numerous activities coordinated by Campus France, there are also other reasons why France is one of the most attractive EU destinations for TCN students. Besides the existence of a significant francophone population outside France, France also has a policy of **low or no tuition fees in public universities** for all students no matter their citizenship. France also encourages **TCN students to work during their studies**, easing TCNs' long-term labour market integration. Indeed, some master programmes have even made internships an obligatory part of the degree. France also allows TCN graduates to remain in the country for up to 12 months to look for employment or to establish a business.

Session I also included a discussion on the **motivations of mobile students themselves**. This discussion was led by **HAKAN KARAOGLU**, a Turkish national, who has previously lived and studied in Turkey, Finland and Germany, but works as the **International Communication and Marketing Coordinator** at **Tallinn University of Technology**. He conceptualised the often circular mobility of skilled

⁷ Please see <http://www.campusfrance.org/en>



Figure 1. Drivers of student mobility. Source: author's compilation

TCNs as 'building one's mobile portfolio', which is an outcome of **personal and cultural aspirations and structural constraints**.

Mobility decisions are often influenced by some kind of **personal touch**, Mr Karaoglu explained. A TCN might get to know someone who comes from a specific country of who has studied in specific city or university, for example. In parallel, **cultural ideas of success**, and how to become successful, (such as 'the German Dream' among Turks), channel student's interest towards different locations. Next, more **technical matters** such as countries' visa policies, as well as availability of student exchange programmes and scholarships play a part in the mobility decisions of young persons. As one gets older, and after having moved around for some years and developed one's mobile portfolio, one might start calculating more seriously what does one or the other country or a region have on offer for his or her future. This middle- of long-term view includes **pathways to residency and citizenship**, as well as **career prospective**. A decision to stay for longer also depends on the **quality of daily life** in one's current location. Mobile and highly educated TCNs are likely to look for a rich social life, societal tolerance as well as exciting cultural environment, explained Mr Karaoglu. Thus, all these different motivations should be kept in mind while trying to improve student attraction and retention policies on the Union, MS and a city levels⁸.

8 For migrants' decision-making processes beyond economic drivers, please see: Mosneaga, A. and Winther, L. (2013). Emerging Talents? International Students Before and After Their Career Start in Denmark. *Population, Space and Place* (19): 181-195.

Summary of session II: Retaining foreign students

The focus in the second session shifted from attraction to retention of those already in the EU. While the EU is already an attractive destination for international students, with over 0.6 million first residence permits issued for the purpose of education activities in 2016⁹, merely 16% to 30% (depending on the MS) of graduates stay in the EU¹⁰.

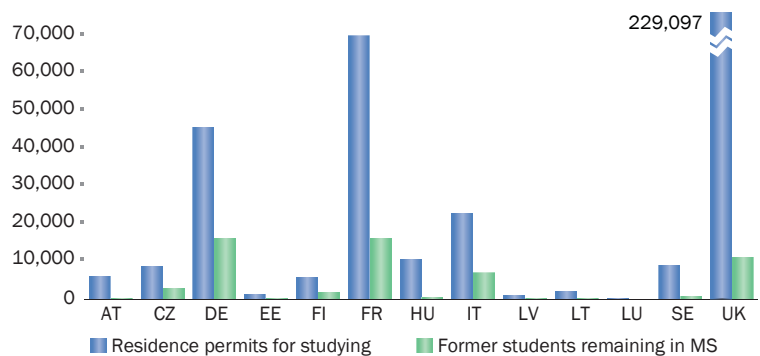


Figure 2. Number of residence permits granted to TCNs for studying purposes compared to the number of former TCN students remaining in the MS in 2015 (after a change from status from education to another reason of stay)¹¹. Source: EMN Inform 2017, 'Retaining TCN students in the EU'

TCN graduates, however, have **considerable human capital** to offer to MSs. Not only are their qualifications and degrees recognised, but also significant investments have been generally made by both individuals themselves and universities into their adaptation and integration. Currently, however, student retention is a relatively new field in many MSs. **NORMA ROSE** from the **European Migration Network** gave a brief overview of retention practices across Europe¹², highlighting some **special incentives** in place in MSs to keep international students:

- **Simplified application procedures** for an authorisation to stay for work or business (AT, EE, FI, FR, IT, LT, LU, SK).

9 Eurostat, (migr_resfirst), accessed 24 August 2017. Data for IE not yet available.

10 OECD (2016), 'How attractive is the European Union to skilled migrants?' in *Recruiting Immigrant Workers: Europe 2016*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

11 Statistics not available for BE, CY, HR, IE, NL, PT and SK. The figure on students remaining in SE only includes former students who were granted a residence permit for job seeking or employment. See also Appendix 1.

12 Please see EMN Inform from summer 2017 'Retaining third-country national students in the European Union': <http://ow.ly/b8Bo30gkfC4> for MSs that contributed to this query include AT, BE, CY, CZ, EE, FI, FR, DE, HR, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, LU, NL, PT, SK, SE and UK.

- **Lowered salary requirements** compared to TCNs without a diploma from the MS (AT, EE and UK).
- **Full access to the labour market after graduation** with no restrictions to the field of study/work or working hours (CZ, EE, FI, FR, PT, SE).
- **A possibility for graduates to remain in the MS for a certain time period after graduation for job search or to set up a business** (AT, DE, EE, FI, FR, IE, LT, LV, NL, PT, SE, SK, UK).
- **Additional incentives**, such as shorter residency requirements to qualify for a permanent residence permit (DE, EE) or the exclusion of TCN graduates from immigration quotas (EE, UK for Tier 2). The Netherlands provides TCN graduates with an **orientation year** within three years of graduation. During this year, a graduate is granted free access to the labour market and is entitled to a residence permit.

Despite these legal incentives, the majority of MSs **do not have national strategies for TCN student retention nor designated institutions to centrally develop policies and coordinate initiatives in this field**. Instead, generally a number of different actors such as the Ministries of Interior, Education or Employment, local governments, as well as universities and employers’ organisations are active in retaining TCN graduates, but there is a need for more **coordinated cohesive efforts**.

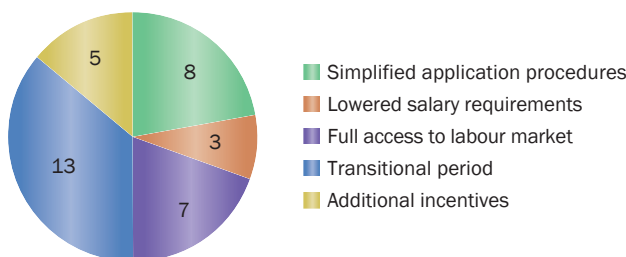


Figure 3. Incentives for TCN graduate retention in place in MSs in 2017. Source: EMN Inform 2017, ‘Retaining TCN students in the EU’

During the workshop, **RAUL RANNE** from the **Higher Education Unit at the Archimedes Foundation** looked more closely at the Estonian national approach. As many other countries, Estonia does not have a separate strategy for international student retention, yet related goals and indicators are integrated into the ‘International marketing strategy of Estonian higher education’. Prospective students are asking themselves **what countries have to offer for them professionally**, which is why attracting students and retaining them cannot be tackled separately, explained Mr Ranne.



Image 3. Hans Lemmens and Raul Ranne

Through its scholarships as well as its comparatively low tuition fees, Estonia invests a lot into international students. This raises the issue of **return on investment**. Thus, Archimedes, who is also responsible for the coordination of the strategy, takes a **dual approach to TCN student retention**:

- 1) **Facilitating their entry to the Estonian labour force as employees and business owners.**
- 2) **Engaging international alumni as Estonian brand ambassadors abroad and maintaining ties at a distance.** They could bring new international students to Estonia and/or collaborate with Estonian companies or work for their branches abroad.

While Estonia is currently keeping **28%** of its international graduates, which is not that bad compared to the EU average, there is still a need for a **more holistic national student retention system involving all stakeholders**, told Mr Ranne. Different governmental agencies as well as universities and employers should work better together to raise prospective students’ interest in Estonia and promote graduates’ continued involvement with Estonia.

Session II continued with a case study of the Netherlands – a leading EU MS in the field of student retention. **KAREN DE MAN** from **Nuffic**, the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education, gave an overview of ‘**Make it in the Netherlands**¹³’, the Dutch national strategy for keeping international graduates. The first period of this strategy ended in 2016 and Nuffic is in the process of developing an even a more ambitious strategy for the future.

There were **five focus areas** in the strategy:

¹³ For a programme for 2013-2016, and a report for 2014-2015 see: <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/study-and-work-in-holland/make-it-in-the-netherlands>

1. **Focus on language.** Traditional Dutch courses in HEIs for students, as well as a language-studying app HoiHolland.
2. **From study to career.** Recruitment to degree programmes was based on labour-market prospects.
3. **Breaking the bubble.** Initiatives to assist international students to connect with the Dutch and to put down roots in the Dutch society, e.g. buddy systems, the internationalisation of student associations, active alumni policies.
4. **From red tape to orange carpet.** Eradicating the administrative obstacles to studying, work placements, part-time jobs and entering the workforce full-time. These improvements were also backed up by Dutch government's legal innovations such as the orientation year¹⁴ and a startup scheme.
5. **Regional approach.** In three different pilot regions HEIs, businesses, government authorities together designed and implemented regional action plans to attract and retain international students.

The aim from the beginning was to have a **multidisciplinary and multi-party approach to TCN graduate retention**. Alongside governmental agencies, municipalities and HEIs were also actively involved as well as an organisations dealing with student housing issues and many more. Nuffic strongly advocates for a **national strategy for attracting and retaining international students**: while hard to organise, the payoffs are significant.

The success of the Dutch approach on keeping foreign graduates is also manifested in their **high stay rate**. A study on international student retention commissioned by Nuffic in 2016 revealed that 42% of international graduates remain in the Netherlands 5 years after their graduation and approximately 25%



Image 5. Karen de Man

stay there for life. Moreover, technology, science and medical graduates tend to have higher retention rates, partly due to better employment perspectives.

While more than half of the international alumni leave, this should not be considered a loss for the economy if they maintain some sort of ties, Ms de Man emphasised. In 2009, Nuffic launched the **Holland Alumni Network**, which now has more than 60,000 members worldwide. Here as well the **multilateral approach** has been a precondition for success. Besides graduates, the Holland Alumni Network includes Dutch HEIs, companies and organisations, embassies, who offer content (e.g. internships, job offers, information about events) via interactive platform (hollandalumni.nl).

It has been calculated that international students' and alumni's yearly contribution to the Dutch treasury amounts approximately to **€1.57 billion**. Karen de Man emphasised that it should not be neglected that Netherlands' considerable international talent pool attracts companies to come to the Netherlands to make business there. ■

¹⁴ See a short explanation on this measure on p. 5 under the section 'Additional incentives'.

Appendix 1

Number of residence permits granted to TCN for studying purposes compared to the number of former TCN students remaining in the MS in 2015 (after a change from status from education to another reason of stay)¹⁵.

	Residence permits for studying	Former students remaining in MS
AT	5,905	151
CZ	8,753	2,793
DE	45,774	16,134
EE	1,144	106

	Residence permits for studying	Former students remaining in MS
FI	5,869	1,875
FR	70,023	16,107
HU	10,574	319
IT	22,870	7,050
LV	1,106	97
LT	1,983	284
LU	217	45
SE	9,076	753
UK	229,097	11,144

Appendix 2

Programme of workshop strand I: Attracting and retaining foreign students

Session I: Attracting foreign students. Moderator, **Eero Loonurm**, Head of Communication Department at Archimedes Foundation

- 08:45-08:50 Introduction to the workshop
- 08:50-09:15 Changes in the EU directive 2016/801 regarding attracting and retaining students from the Third Countries, **Laura Corrado**, Head of the Legal Migration and Integration Unit, DG HOME, European Commission
- 09:15-09:55 Higher education promotion activities in France, **Johanna Hellwig**, Chief of Projects, European Projects Services in Campus France
- 09:55-10:15 Talent's perspective: Motivations in choosing a foreign country for studying, and deliberating on staying there/moving on/moving back, **Hakan Karaoglu**, International Communication and Marketing Coordinator at Tallinn University of Technology
- 10:15-10:35 **Coffee break**

Session II: Retaining foreign students. Moderator, **Hans Lemmens**, Coordinator of the National Contact Point of the Netherlands for the EMN

- 10:35-10:40 Introduction to the workshop
- 10:40-11:00 The state of TCN student retention in the EU: Statistics, legal incentives and coordination of retention policies in the Member States, **Norma Rose**, Junior Consultant at EMN/ICF
- 11:00-11:20 Estonian national approach to student retention, **Raul Ranne**, Head of Higher Education Unit at Archimedes Foundation
- 11:20-11:45 The Dutch national approach to student retention, **Karen de Man**, Communications Advisor, Holland Alumni Network at Nuffic
- 11:45-12:05 Work in groups: Opportunities and challenges in building solid student retention policies
- 12:05-12:45 **Lunch and workshop conclusions**

¹⁵ Statistics not available for BE, CY, HR, IE, NL, PT and SK. The figure on students remaining in SE only includes former students who were granted a residence permit for job seeking or employment.



The European Migration Network (EMN), established by the Council of the European Union in 2008 and co-ordinated by the European Commission, is a network for information collection and exchange on migration and asylum issues, comprised of National Contact Points (EMN NCPs) and national networks of relevant stakeholder organisations.

The EMN plays a key role in providing up-to-date, objective, reliable and comparable information on migration and asylum topics to policy makers (at EU and Member State level) and the general public.

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