

Aiming High

France Appeals to International Students

BY DAVID TOBENKIN





KEY FIGURES

International student mobility is going up,
+ 15% in 3 years, + 100% in 12 years.

295,084 international students in France in 2014¹
(+ 11% in 5 years).

Students from all around the world:
France welcomes students from 190 countries every year.
54 of these countries send more than 1,000 students every year.
(43% from Africa, 26% from Europe, 19% from Asia, 8% of America,
4% from the Middle East).

France is the third most-popular study destination and
the leading non-English-speaking destination in the world.
(7% of the 4 million internationally mobile students)².

1- Source: Ministry of Higher Education and Research 2014 ; 2- Source: UNESCO 2014 latest data from the year 2012.





France, one of the top destinations for international students, continues to make their nation attractive for international study.

FRANCE, a global leader in recruiting international students, has nonetheless faced the same tough competition for international students as other countries and is taking several steps at the national level to improve perceived weak points in the experience of international students in the country.

Subject to approval by the French Parliament, a Plan National de Vie Étudiante (PNVE), or National Student Life Plan, announced in October 2015 as part of a larger domestic education agenda, and a separately introduced Law for the Rights of Foreigners, would address the needs of international students by increasing the availability of visas and providing assistance to students to help them address the administrative demands of studying in the country.

The legislation, championed by the French Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Higher Education, in part responds to a survey published in 2014 by Campus France, the

French national agency for the promotion of higher education, international student services, and international mobility, which found that while most international students enjoyed their stay in France and were pleased with the education they received, the administration burdens of studying in the state were onerous.

“I think we are aware that there is a competitive environment for international students,” says Béatrice Khaiat, Campus France’s executive director. “Many countries’ higher education institutions are coming on the scene and are becoming more attractive. While many of the ways to stay attractive to students relate to the efforts of French institutions themselves, addressing issues like administrative burdens and visas is also one way to address this. So this legislation represents one point among others.”

A Mobility Leader

Campus France reports that French institutions hosted 298,902 international students in 2014–2015, up 4.4 percent from the 2010–11 total of 284,945, according to French government sources. France was the third ranked destination country for international students in 2012 according to UNESCO figures, with 271,399 international students, following the United States’ 740,482, the United Kingdom’s 427,686, and ahead of Australia’s 249,588, and fifth-ranked Germany’s 206,986. By another tally, France was one of the top five international student destinations in 2014, following the United States, the United Kingdom, and China, and slightly behind Germany, according to Institute of International Education’s Project Atlas.

Like many leading higher education destinations, rapid international student growth at French higher education institutions in past decades has moderated in recent years, says Patricia Pol, a professor at Université Paris-Est specializing in higher education issues, including international mobility and previously Paris-Est’s vice president in charge of international development.



EDITOR’S NOTE:

This article is fourth in an occasional series on international student recruitment strategies in select countries.

Still, Pol notes that the urgency of internationalization efforts may be diminished because many French higher education institutions are already highly internationalized. “The proportion of international students to total students is higher than in U.S. and China, representing between 12 and 13 percent of whole student population and 42 percent of doctoral students,” notes Pol. She says a large emphasis at French higher education institutions is to improve the quality of international student recruitment, by increasing the percentage of doctoral and masters-level students and by improving the credentials of those entering French higher education institutions. “My university has very structured and attractive policies for doctoral candidates that include specific scholarships,” Pol notes. “And for focused master’s programs we develop summer school programs and curricula in foreign languages. These are good instruments to attract good students.”

France’s National Strategy for Higher Education includes increasing internationalization as a second priority, including government efforts to help French higher education institutions to deliver a more international strategy, says Pol. One goal is to double the number of international students in all forms of inbound mobility programs from 2015 to 2025, Pol notes.

Pol says that there may be a split between French government officials, who desire more international students for economic and global influence reasons, and leaders of French higher education institutions, many of whom feel that the main challenge for their institutions is much more quality of, rather than quantity of, international students and who must deal with the economic and administrative challenges of addressing international student needs.

Legislative Tweaks

The actual reforms included in the PNVE reflect Campus France research on international student recruitment examining the image international students have of France as a higher education destination through a poll of 20,000 students coming to France, in France, or who had concluded studies in France. It found that while 90 percent of students recommended France as an international study destination, for reasons including quality of studies, the ability to learn the French language, and the quality of life, among the negative aspects of French higher education reported by those polled were their administrative experiences.



Laurent Fabius, French Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development at the launch of France Alumni in November 2014.


The PNVE states, “The quality of the welcome [to students], notably in terms of administration, the improvement of residence rights, and the simplification of such procedures, are key issues for the attractiveness of French higher education institutions.”

Under the PNVE, one aspect of the program would assist international students to address and receive help in addressing, the various administrative requirements for residency and study in the country.

It would require a national effort to expand current “guichets uniques d’accueil”: one-desk stops designed to provide international students a single location for the different steps to be taken when arriving in France, such as opening a bank account, lodging, and formalities for getting the *carte de séjour* residency card required for students to stay in the country. Guichets uniques have already existed in some cities, such as Paris, for 10 years. The PNVE also calls for the development of quality student housing. The PNVE’s elements affecting international students are expected to take effect beginning in fall 2016, in time for the start of the next academic year.

Other introduced legislation would simplify the rights of international students to study and work in the country. Under current law, undergraduate and all other students except at the master’s or doctorate level must have residency permits stamped each year. Under the proposed new requirement, students would be able to obtain residency permits for the entire length of their student experience in the country.

Under the legislation, a “*carte de séjour pluriannuelle*,” which is presently granted to a limited number of international students, would be given to all qualified students when needed. A maximum length of four years would be created, especially for researchers and students at PhD level or for working students who have graduated in France at the master’s level. In addition, the



ability of other students to ask for a Visa Long Séjour (Prolonged Visa) would be speeded up and the reason for refusing to deliver such a visa would have to be explained. A third visa that would allow students to go back and forth from their countries of origin also would be created.

Expanding French Higher Education Institutions' Reach

Higher education options for international students in France include 73 public universities, 220 Grandes Écoles, which offer the equivalent of a bachelor's and master's degree combined over a five-year period, and various specialized schools of business management, engineering, and art, design, and architecture.

France is a relative newcomer to a centralized strategy to foster international student recruiting, with such efforts commencing only in 1998. Campus France itself is a relatively recent development that reflects the combination of two previously independent organizations in May 2012, one doing marketing and another, older one administering grants and scholarships. Campus France now employs 230 individuals in France and 300 in local offices abroad and maintains 235 offices in 121 countries. In July 2015 Campus France director general Antoine Grassin was replaced by Béatrice Khaiat. Since April 2014 Khaiat had served as vice general director of Campus France and earlier participated in the creation of Edufrance, directing it from 2000 to 2006 and from 2009 to 2012.

France's COMUES



NE FRENCH TOOL in furthering internationalization and international

student recruiting is France's COMUE (Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions), education-sector clusters made of universities, Grandes Écoles (elite schools), and research organizations designed to pool resources of those institutions to build major centers of higher education, research, and innovation.

Initiated by the creation of the PRES (Poles of Research and Higher Education) in 2006, the government-led effort directs all French universities (around 70) and hundreds of Grandes Écoles to work together for the creation of 26 COMUEs, since the 2013 Foriaso Law for Higher Education and Research.

The aim of these clusters is to allow higher education institutions to better collaborate on many topics: international strategy, joint delivery of master's degrees and PhDs, and welcoming students. The other objective is to create larger universities in order to form sufficient critical mass to compete with top world universities and improve their position in the international rankings.

Thierry Valentin, Campus France deputy executive director, says the COMUEs allow French higher education institutions in the same region or adjacent regions with the same views of international mobility to share resources to facilitate international mobility.

As an example, the Paris Saclay COMUE located at the southwest of Paris aims to integrate and enter the top 10 rankings of the Shanghai

Ranking index within a decade. This COMUE includes world famous institutions: École Polytechnique, HEC, Université Paris Sud, CNRS, and CEA. The creation of largest universities also gives them greater means for their international exposure, allowing them to open representative offices abroad, as is the case of the University Sorbonne Paris Cité (USPC), which opened offices in Singapore, Buenos Aires, and Sao Paulo, says Valentin.

The COMUEs range from simple association to new institutions as a result of the fusion of oldest, as is the case of the universities of Grenoble I, II, and III, which have merged on January 1, 2016, to create the University of Grenoble Alpes. This new entity will cover all fields of knowledge, from social sciences to natural sciences.

What are the Grandes Écoles?

Grandes Écoles, literally in French "grand schools," meaning "elite schools") of France are higher education establishments outside the main framework of the French university system. Most were established by branches of the state; the first of all, École Polytechnique, during the French Revolution. The grandes écoles select students for admission based chiefly on national ranking in competitive written and oral exams, while French public universities have a legal obligation to accept all candidates of the region who hold a corresponding *baccalauréat*.



For Olivier Chiche-Portiche, director of the Marketing and Mobility Department for Campus France, “Campus France has been working in Asia and Latin America as top priority destinations for many years but it’s true that we are now back to our traditional markets launching ambitious communication campaigns in Africa and Maghreb and operating prospective activities in non-French speaking African countries (Nigeria, Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya...) and to central Asian new promising destinations”.

He notes that Campus France recently developed a specific communication campaign for Asia as part of an “Asian Attractivity Plan” requested by President François Hollande. In 2014–15, the top origin markets for international students were Morocco (35,199), China (29,709), Algeria (21,279), Tunisia (11,573), and Italy (10,353), according to French government sources.

In January 2015 France and U.S. higher education institutions announced an initiative that aims to double the number of U.S. students going to France and the number of French students coming to the United States by 2025. Named the “Transatlantic Friendship and Mobility Initiative,” this process is supported by the French Embassy in the USA and higher education institutions in the United States and the French government and Campus France in France. To support this initiative, a large French-American conference will take place March 7–8, 2016, in Paris. The meeting will investigate topics that include (1) diversifying students’ mobility, (2) improving the welcoming of students, (3) developing mutual recognition of diplomas between the two countries, and (4) increasing access to internships in each

country. Academic cooperation being a top priority for the French Embassy in the United States, a number of measures are taken such as scholarships to PhD students (Chateaubriand program) and undergraduates students (Benjamin Franklin program), animation of centers of excellence in Great American University campus, the development of France initiatives on campus (France Campus Price, Lafayette debates) and finally the launch of the French Alumni platform USA scheduled in September 2016.

The recruitment possibility and needs of Africa will be highlighted during the next “Rencontres Campus France” scheduled at the end of 2016. In 2016, 50 universities from Africa will be invited to join the event, which is organized on a regular basis by Campus France, and allows representatives of Campus France abroad to meet with 150 French higher education institutions.

A large share of international students who come to France are from countries that are former French colonies—especially countries in Africa. In many such countries, French is widely spoken and their national secondary school systems have been modeling after the French public system, and, more recently, the European design of three cycles (license, master’s, and doctorate), resulting in a seamless transition for such students when they matriculate into French higher education institutions as international students. Many also are eligible for grants from the French government related to ties to the former colonies.

France has worked to diversify its base of international students in recent years. Some higher education experts state that a challenge to diversifying France’s international

Béatrice Khaiat (center in black jacket), executive director of Campus France, hosting Colette Suda (center in red jacket), secretary of state, Department of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education in Kenya, in September 2015 in Paris.



student base further, given English's status in many source market countries as the first or leading second language, is a lack of English language capacity at French higher education institutions. France has long guarded the primacy of French at national universities. Only in July 2013 was a law passed by France's lower parliament to allow subjects to be taught in a language other than French.

The new law aims to attract more international students, especially from emerging countries, clarifying a situation where many courses were already given in English, and strengthen French students' training for international careers. International students following English courses are also given French lessons during their stay in France.

"Today there are over 1,200 courses that are available either fully or partially in English," Khaiat notes. This willingness to provide English courses was reasserted by Secretary of State for Higher Education and Research Thierry Mandon at the Forum Campus France General Assembly in December 2015. Pol also noted that French HEIs are increasing their language of instruction capabilities in other key languages, such as Chinese, German, Arabic, and Spanish.

That in part reflects that demand for French education can play out in unexpected ways in a globalized economy. Pol notes, for example, that there is high demand for French instruction from Chinese students so that they can communicate and integrate into French-speaking former colonies in Africa.

One caveat to the strong recruitment numbers of international students posted by French higher education institutions is that the costs of international student higher educations are being underwritten by the French state. With a few exceptions, such as schools of management, tuition is the same for domestic and international students, which means, in essence, almost no tuition fees. Thus, having more

international students means a heavier financial burden on universities that is subsidized by the government.

"There is a widespread willingness to keep that and preserve that to allow large access to higher education," says Khaiat. "It is a competitive advantage for us to not have highly differentiated fees for different students," Pol notes.

It may also make business sense, Khaiat notes. A 2014 Campus France study estimated that while international students cost the state around 3 billion euros, these students contribute 4.65 billion euros to the French economy, through tuition fees, consumption of goods, and travel expenses, including visits from relatives.

Campus France was praised by one competitor for its strong website and electronic materials offerings. It offers nearly 80 websites in more than 30 languages. Its website had more than 17.1 million visits in 2014. Campus France's online presence includes a presence on Facebook, web services for students, and special dedicated portals for recruiting and placing students from different national scholarship programs such as Science Without Borders (Brazil), Bec.Ar program (Argentina), and the Excellence Program (Gabon).

In November 2014 Campus France launched a new website designed to create a social network for international student alumni of French institutions, France Alumni. The website is designed to allow French institutions to follow the subsequent accomplishments of alumni, allow alumni to connect with each other and French institutions, and facilitate career networking and potential future educational opportunities, such as pursuing master's or PhD programs in France or improving their French-language skills. By November 2015, 20,000 alumni and other members had joined the service.

Campus France is also using technology to build upon a traditional strength: tourism. One new Campus France initiative will combine the ability to learn about France



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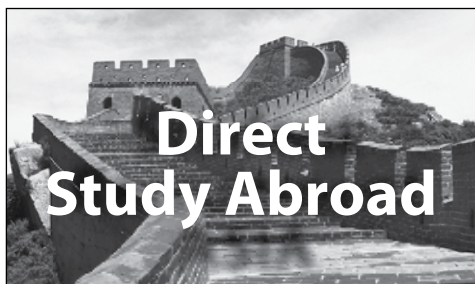


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CAMPUS FRANCE

Campus France exhibits at NAFA's Annual Conference and Expo.

and the French language while doing sightseeing. "That is for all levels of students and is meant more for those interested in shorter stays," Khaiat says.

Immersion France is a new app that was to be launched by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Campus France at the beginning of 2016 that will help users find the right place where to study French, taking into account the level of language, the length of the stay, the lodging, and the additional cultural or professional activities that are also looked for.

University Efforts

Some French-based institutions are the very embodiment of internationalization. INSEAD, a prestigious international business school with campuses in France, Singapore, and Abu Dhabi, became a pioneer of international business education with the graduation of the first MBA class in its Fontainebleau campus in France in 1960. INSEAD, whose name originally was an acronym for the French "Institut Européen d'Administration des Affaires," or European Institute of Business Administration, has 148 faculty members from 40 countries who instruct more than 1,300 degree participants annually in its MBA, Executive MBA, specialized master's degrees, and PhD programs. Its student body is equally diverse, with 78 nationalities represented among its 2015 MBA class's 1,018 students, and 53 nationalities among the 210 participants in its 2016 Global Executive MBA (GEMBA) class, which targets seasoned middle managers.

"We believe that diversity is a powerful source of learning and as such we have no dominant culture at INSEAD," says Pejay Belland, INSEAD's director of marketing, admissions, and financial aid for degree programs. "I would say it is inaccurate to call INSEAD a French institution, even in its early years—it was always a global school with initially a mission to provide top-class education first in Europe and very rapidly with globalization from a business perspective, worldwide. INSEAD is an independent, private school and therefore does not depend on input from any state. In today's global arena, exchange of ideas and best practices by individuals and enterprise from around the world is crucial to developing responsible leaders and entrepreneurs who create value for both their organizations and their communities. However, we are very proud of our European roots, and our success as the first one-year MBA in Europe has enabled us to achieve our worldwide presence today, and to grow our graduate management and executive development programs into our current portfolio of management education offerings."

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DAVID TOBENKIN is a freelance journalist based in the Washington, D.C. area. His more recent article for *International Educator* is "Latin American Partnerships Cross Borders," in the current March/April 2016 issue.