

International students- signs of a positive future

Youth and their prospects are the best indicators of a country's dynamism and attractiveness. We talk about mobility and expatriation when we chose to leave for positive reasons – the “pull factors”. One speaks of migration or exile when one is forced to leave his country - the «push factors».

For young Europeans, mobility has been encouraged through the Erasmus flagship program. Since 1987, it has enabled the exchanges of millions of young Europeans. These are semesters spent in schools/universities in a Member State of the European Union, leading to a diploma awarded by one (or more) universities/schools. It can also be several months of humanitarian/voluntary engagement in a non-profit organization, within the framework of the European Voluntary Service (EVS) (1). A third possibility is an internship abroad- Erasmus+ mobility projects help to finance these apprenticeship stays in Europe.

In all cases, these European experiences were most fruitful for all the young people who left to discover countries or cultures close but different, encounters with other young people who had not had the same educational paths, learning about otherness and diversity, emancipation also from their familiar frameworks (families and friends)... Many young people speak of positive destabilization, awareness of their abilities, acquisition of real autonomy (2)... They developed intercultural competence by learning to study and/or working with multicultural teams in foreign environments. A survey carried out by the French magazine «L'Etudiant» in January 2025, indicated that the international dimension was the first criterion for choosing the best students especially in engineering or business schools (3).

We talk about expatriation when national students leave; “impatriation” means the reception of foreign students in our country. National higher education promotion agencies regularly conduct surveys to find out the reasons for students choices (4). In 2020-2021, the German organization for managing international student exchanges (5) indicates that 81% of respondents cite as their main reason the professional prospects in Germany after their studies, before the academic level and the low cost of studies. In France, Campus France in 2018 (6) highlights that the cultural influence of France is the most cited reason by international students (78%), before economic prospects (33%). A 2020 Campus France study (7), based on discussion groups of students from six countries, identifies three main factors for mobility: the search for a stimulating personal experience, the desire to strengthen one's competitiveness on the labour market and the willingness to emigrate to build a project of life in the host country. For these three factors, France is perceived positively by foreign students. They emphasize the quality of training, the international recognition of certain diplomas or programs, the prestige of certain institutions, the level of research and the quality of study conditions. Anglo-Saxon students prefer short mobility courses (summer schools) while Chinese, Ivorian, Indian and Mexican students are looking for graduate mobility, with the main objective of following an internationally recognized curriculum. For non-French-speaking students, higher education in France is perceived as less visible internationally, complex and less easy to integrate with education mainly in the French language (linguistic barrier).

The attractiveness of a country for foreign students is one of the most decisive indicators to assess its influence. Having occupied the first place among the countries hosting international students during the interwar period (1918-1939), France has seen a steady increase in the number of international students admitted to its higher education system since the 2000s (9) but lower than that of some Anglo-Saxon countries or Germany. France was the second largest host country in 1980 behind the US; fourth in 2017 after the US, the UK and Australia; and seventh in 2022 behind Canada, Germany and Russia (8). For more than 20 years, the geographical areas of origin of international students in France have changed little. French higher education primarily attracts francophone students. Rapidly growing numbers of mobile students from China (10), and more recently from India and Nigeria, are choosing English-language courses in the US, the UK or Germany.

The choice of students is also guided by geopolitics – the political, economic, social and cultural context of a country. The negative messages sent by an aggressive, isolationist or even xenophobic US administration (anti-immigration discourse) since the arrival of President Trump on January 20, 2025 can be very dissuasive on the decisions of the best elements among students. The Trump team's attacks on science and research, which resulted in the indefinite dismissal of thousands of top researchers in their field, and drastic budget cuts for internationally renowned national agencies finish planting a cataclysmic picture of the United States in 2025. Having long attracted the best elements by a competitive but very stimulating ecosystem for many researchers (prestigious MIT, Silicon Valley attraction...), America has disappointed.

In the unbridled competition between nations, brains are just as crucial and more sustainable resources than the «strategic minerals» coveted by the Trump administration (Ukraine, Greenland...). Western Europe, with the UK coming closer to the EU since the arrival of the Trump team, can play a decisive role in attracting the most promising young talents in the most competitive sectors (AI, economy 3.0 or even 4.0...). After a phase of reflection and reserve, the European Commission has multiplied the announcements since January 2025 to relaunch itself on the international scene with future programs (competitiveness, European industry, rearmament...) (11).

“There is no wealth but men” wrote French economist Jean Bodin in the 16th century. It is not by brutalizing men and Nations that we build a future. The American anti-example (Trump 2024-2028) must inspire us. Long live Europe! Welcome to international students !

Bénédicte Halba runs a research institute (iriv) that has been working on the topic of migration since 2003, she hosted a club at the Cité des Métiers for a migrant audience (2012-2022) and has published a blog dedicated to migration since September 2024 - <https://actions-migration.blogspot.com/>.

- (1) whose first (still experimental) version was launched in 1996 (thanks to a French Commissioner, Edith Cresson)
- (2) a European project eMocc interviewed young people who had experience of mobility in four countries- Germany, Spain, France and Italy-to find out their motivations, expected satisfactions and/or difficulties encountered- <https://emocc.eu/>
- (3) Student survey cited in their 2025 engineering schools ranking - <https://www.letudiant.fr/classements/classement-des-ecoles-d-ingenieurs/region-ile-de-france.html>
- (4) Cour des comptes «An evaluation of the attractiveness of French higher education for international students» - 10 March 2025 – Paris- <https://www.ccomptes.fr/sites/default/files/2025-03/20250310-Attractivite-de-la-France-pour-les-etudiants-etrangers.pdf>
- (5) Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst – DAAD cited in the Court of Auditors' report, a survey of 15,000 foreign students enrolled in German higher education
- (6) sample of comparable size (Cour des Comptes, Paris)
- (7) China, Ivory Coast, United States, India, Mexico, United Kingdom, (Cour des Comptes, Paris)
- (8) UNESCO data (number of international students in so-called graduate mobility) , Cour des Comptes, Paris
- (9) Court of Auditors
- (10) third place of international students behind Morocco and Algeria (11) «competitiveness» council- <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/meetings/compet/2025/03/12/>