



Fast track immigration for attracting researchers

Dr Conor O'Carroll, Research Director at the Irish Universities Association, argues that the Scientific Visa pioneered by France and implemented as a European Directive in 2005 is in itself a really effective method for attracting researchers to Europe.

13 May 2013 - By DR CONOR O'CARROLL

The US has always been perceived as a very attractive system with an open door for talented researchers from around the world. Following the September 2001 attacks this approach changed with increased border security. By 2003 the percentage of researchers from China, India and South Korea coming to US graduate schools has decreased by 18 %. This was a clear example of how putting up barriers could reduce the attractiveness of what is a leading country for research. The question one can then logically ask is whether reducing immigration barriers would have the opposite effect; make a country more attractive for researchers. It is interesting to note that in the last Presidential campaign both President Obama and Senator Romney were fully committed to lowering immigration barriers for talented people.

In the nineties, France introduced the Scientific Visa that conferred upon non-EU researchers and their families, the same rights as French citizens. The problem of visas had been highlighted by non-EU researchers across most EU Member States as a real problem. By 2005, the French Scientific Visa had been taken as best practice and the EU Third Country Directive was introduced as a means to overcome this difficulty.

Universities attract most foreign researchers

Ireland has been operating the Scientific Visa for non-EU researchers since 2007. Ireland, like the United Kingdom and Denmark, was not obliged to implement the EU Directive, as we are non-Schengen states. However it was recognised that the visa would help to attract non-EU researchers to the country. The scheme, which offers a free and fast service, has been successfully operating in Ireland since 2007 and is open to

universities and companies. The scheme is operated by the EURAXESS Ireland office based in the Irish Universities Association and supported by the government Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

Visas are issued rapidly and work permits are not required. Researchers' families can accompany them immediately and avail of public schooling. Over the last six years 1 720 researchers have come to Ireland under this scheme. There are over 40 organisations using the fast track scheme including universities, institutes of technology, research organisations and companies. However the seven universities host over 80 % of all the non-EU researchers.

ICT, computing and life sciences on top

In total, there are researchers from 78 different countries. The majority of researchers come from India, China and the United States; together they account for 50 % of the total. Almost one third of the researchers had already left their home country before coming to Ireland. Most were PhD students based in Europe and some in the US and Canada. Most non-EU researchers found employment in ICT/computing and life sciences, 27 % and 26 % respectively across Irish research institutions. A significant share of researchers work in the engineering sector (23 %), while physics and chemistry attracted 17 % and 15 % respectively.

In March, the EURAXESS Ireland office conducted a survey of researchers who have used the fast track scheme. Over 300 researchers responded to a series of detailed questions evaluating their own experiences with the fast track scheme. One of the most highly appreciated benefits of the scheme is a significant reduction of the length of the immigration process. For 50 % of the researchers the process takes a maximum of 2 weeks and for 30 % from 2 to 4 weeks. This is a huge improvement as the time needed for the visa and work permit arrangements took from 6 to 8 weeks for the majority of the institutions in the past.

Research excellence is not enough

The survey revealed that a 23 % of researchers would definitely not have come to Ireland if the scheme were not in place. Another 53 % said they might have decided not to choose Ireland for the next step in their research career without this opportunity. Only 24 % would have come regardless of the immigration process. This result cannot be overemphasised. It is often assumed that only the quality of the research facilities and people are the deciding factor when deciding to move to another country. This shows clearly that immigration is a key part of the decision making process. If it were not for the fast track immigration scheme then 23 % and probably more would have chosen a different destination than Ireland.

Ireland is not fundamentally different from most other European countries. There has been since the late nineties a concerted effort to build research excellence through sustained national investment by government and philanthropic sources. But then we were coming from a very low base of investment in research. The effect has been marked. In 2002, Ireland was ranked 36th in the world for research impact; by 2012 we had moved to 19th position. This is of course an important factor in attracting researchers. There is no doubt in my mind that in order to be attractive a country needs strong commitment to research excellence. However this is not enough to attract global talent as the US discovered when it introduced significant immigration barriers.

Our experience with the Scientific Visa has shown that it can act as a decisive factor in attracting researchers. I believe that this will work in any country and is not uniquely an Irish phenomenon. Open borders will attract talent and will be a critical part of achieving the European Research Area.

Proposal for a new scientific visa

All the EU Member States, except Denmark and the United Kingdom, participate in the Scientific Visa Package for long-term admissions. With the aim of making Europe even more attractive for foreign researchers, the European Commission proposed a new visa directive on 25 March 2013. The new visa application shall be shorter, while facilitating intra-EU mobility by allowing more opportunities to access the labour market. The proposed directive will be discussed and agreed upon by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. The Commission estimates that the new rules will take effect as of 2016.

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[Attracting Researchers to Ireland: the Impact of the Scientific Visa](#)