

Scaling the EU visa barrier

Laboratories depend on an international workforce, yet crossing national boundaries remains a trial of endurance for many academics both in the United States and Europe.

Horror stories about the difficulties of obtaining or extending visas to the US since 9/11, and the detrimental consequences of this for scientists and for research in the United States, are all too familiar. However, travelling to conferences in the EU also poses a significant challenge for non-EU citizens. So how tortuous are EU visa policies and is it time to revamp the system before it damages European science?

At the 2000 Lisbon European Council, the EU launched a ten-year plan to make the EU 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' by 2010. Estimates indicate that 700,000 more researchers will be needed by 2010 to meet this target and the allied objective of increasing spending on R&D to 3% of the EU's GDP. In addition to stemming the 'brain drain' of European scientists who leave, making the EU attractive to non-EU scientists is now a priority.

Realizing that unnecessary visa hurdles hinder attracting global talent to Europe, the EU Council issued a directive in 2005 to streamline the process for visa applications by non-EU scientists (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32005L0071:EN:NOT>). The details of the process — which can sometimes take months — varies between EU states and depends on the applicant's nationality. It often involves interviews with consular officials, expensive medical appointments with consulate-prescribed doctors, and a hefty dossier of supporting material to document one's ties to the country of origin. A key feature of this directive is that the host institution in the EU provides a 'hosting agreement' that would allow the applicant to obtain a residence permit rapidly without also having to obtain a work permit. Under the aegis of this 'scientific visa', 'third-country nationals' (non-EU citizens) can also conduct research for less than three months in EU states other than the primary hosting country, subject to the visa and entry regulations of the individual country. The directive is to be implemented in member states by October 2007 but has so far been adopted by only four EU members: Austria, Slovenia, Slovakia and, most recently, Germany. Notably, the UK, which hosts a large proportion of non-EU scientists and has a cumbersome visa-granting system in developing countries, is not legally bound to translate the directive into national law.

The EU Council is to be commended for taking these first reforming steps, but significant barriers remain. While it is reasonable that non-EU citizens have to obtain a visa to work in the EU, some require additional visas even for short-term travel within the EU (for example, nationals of India, China and Russia, but not of South and Central America). Researchers from these countries will still face restrictive travel conditions. The main obstacle for travel exists between Schengen and non-Schengen states (the Schengen Agreement eliminated border checks between the participating 15 European countries; it does not include the UK and Ireland). As a result of the Schengen Agreement, a non-EU resident of the Schengen states who

would normally require a visa to travel to these countries can travel freely between Schengen states, but travel between the UK and the Schengen states still requires a visa. As the UK is a major research hub hosting a large population of non-EU researchers, particularly from China and India, the present situation is unduly prohibitive for attending conferences and for collaborating with labs elsewhere in the EU. These critical obstacles can hinder the career development of young and talented scientists.

The process of obtaining travel visas is neither swift nor cheap. Most Schengen countries require a face-to-face interview with a consular official that can take several weeks to arrange — exacerbated during the holiday season, which coincides with many key conferences. For example, a *Nature* editor recently had to cancel her attendance at a conference in France because an interview date before the conference could not be obtained. The duration of the visa is entirely at the discretion of the interviewing consular official and can range from a single-entry visa that is valid only for the specific dates of travel to a multiple-entry visa of up to six months, or sometimes longer. The cost of obtaining these visas alone can pose a major financial hardship for scientists from developing countries and can effectively deter them from attending conferences. The UK also requires interviews for visa applicants resident in the Schengen states, but the upside is that multiple-entry visas ranging from six months to ten years are issued. Ironically, the US, despite its onerous visa system, issues ten-year business visas that cover travel to scientific conferences and talks at research institutions. Aware of this problem, the EU Council has proposed additional recommendations to ease the issuance of short-term visas precisely to facilitate travel of third-country nationals within the EU and into the EU (from, say, the US or Asia). Unfortunately, these recommendations, unlike directives, are not legally binding. A further concern is that the recent emergence of terrorists with professional degrees will undermine any liberalization of visa policies.

For scientists based in the EU, we would urge that a special visa category be created that is long-term and multiple-entry and that would enable third-country nationals to travel freely throughout the EU. The National Academies in the US have proposed a similar policy for scientists' visas. They and other agencies, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, have advocated effectively for changes to US visa policies. It is time that the European Research Council and European scientific societies did the same.

Many would argue that US scientific dominance is unlikely to be undermined by restrictive visa policies in the long term. Scientific recruitment to the EU may have benefited from a temporary disenchantment with the US, but whether the EU can maintain this momentum given its own capricious visa controls remains to be seen.

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