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Member states told to welcome researchers

Ministers accused of falling short on immigration vision

RESEARCHERS AND STUDENTS are struggling with obstructive rules on immigration to the EU that urgently need updating, research organisations and MEPs have said.

Scientists from countries outside the EU are not being made welcome and often face problems in moving freely between member states, say research groups. Meanwhile, students are being deterred from coming to the EU because they are not granted sufficient time after graduation to find employment.

"There are cases that are just unbelievable, where people hired for Framework programme projects cannot be sent to another EU country for their research," says Wolfgang Eppenschwandtner from the Initiative for Science in Europe, or ISE. But plans to improve the situation have stalled in the hands of member states, which are struggling to finalise several EU migration laws as national anti-immigration rhetoric rises.

An update to researcher and student visa rules, proposed by the European Commission in March 2013, includes plans for better mobility between member states. In February, the European Parliament gave its support to the plans and even strengthened some aspects, proposing to lengthen the time that researchers and students can remain after graduation or the end of a research contract from 12 to 18 months.

Research groups have welcomed the planned changes. "One of the most important proposals is that families will be allowed to come with researchers," says Eppenschwandtner. "But member states seem quite sceptical over some details."

Swedish MEP Cecilia Wikström, who is leading negotiations for the Parliament, says the Council of Ministers has highlighted plans for free intra-EU mobility, and students and researchers being able to remain for lengthy periods, as particularly problematic. "We heard that they have discussed three months for this," said a Parliamentary assistant.

The Council has yet to set out its official position, after which negotiations with the Commission and the Parliament will determine the final legislation. The ISE will lobby national justice ministers this summer. "We hope that by showing how large the problem is, we

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can improve it," says Eppenschwandtner. "It should not be too difficult to convince political leaders that researchers are people we need," he says.

But Thomas Jørgensen, head of doctoral education for the European University Association, is less optimistic. He says existing EU rules on scientific visas are "pretty good" but are not well implemented across member states. "If the old ones weren't implemented correctly, why would the new ones be?" he asks.

"None of the research-intensive economies have national talent pipelines sufficient to rely solely on the bright people in their country," he adds. In the face of increasing global competition for researchers, Europe will do itself "no favours" by not implementing these rules. "It would be crazy not to do it."

According to Yves Pascouau, a migration policy analyst at the European Policy Centre, the EU needs to become more open to combat demographic change and regional employment disparities. Having one clear rule, under which students can remain in the EU to seek employment in any member state, would be a "really strong message to send," he says.

But recent events in Switzerland, where a vote to limit mass immigration has had immediate consequences for research institutions, could be a sign of things to come. "The voters' fear of immigration tends to be stronger than their understanding that you need to let foreign researchers in," says Jørgensen.

According to Pascouau, the EU needs a common mind-set. "If we are not able to discuss these issues openly at EU level, the worst-case scenario will be growing competition between member states to attract people," he says.

A significant signal could come in June, when EU leaders are due to set guidelines on freedom and security. "Here we will see whether they are willing to set a common approach for the next 10 years," says Pascouau. "But I fear they will not be very ambitious."

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