

Brain Drain in the US – Brain Gain for Europe? What the EU can do

As researchers in the United States face budget cuts and political interference with their work, European universities see opportunities to attract more talent to Europe. **Bernd Parusel**, senior researcher in political science at SIEPS, and **Lisa Lundgren**, intern at SIEPS, ask what the EU could do to support such initiatives.

The political climate in the United States under the Trump administration has [raised concerns](#) among academics as funding for universities is being cut. Many fear job losses or political interference with their research. In parallel, public-sector employees are being [laid off](#) as a consequence of the administration's 'government efficiency' tactic. This could lead to highly qualified American workers looking for job opportunities elsewhere.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Europe is competing with other world regions, not least Asia, to attract skilled workers, including researchers, to fill a growing demand for talent and foster research. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, declared that Europe's competitiveness depends on "[starting a new age of invention and ingenuity](#)". To lead on innovation, the EU needs to create favourable conditions for researchers, attract new talents and retain them.

We are already seeing European responses to the developments in the US. For example, the University of Aix-Marseille started a "[Safe place for science](#)" initiative, inviting American scientists to continue their work in France. In Belgium, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel is [opening postdoctoral positions](#) aimed at American scholars looking to relocate. The European Research Council has [announced](#) to double the relocation allowance it offers to third-country researchers coming to Europe under one of its grants.

Undoubtedly, developments in the US are a setback for freedom of research and can have negative consequences far beyond US borders. But perhaps they also represent an opportunity for Europe, which raises the question what laws and strategies the EU has, or could employ, to welcome skilled professionals from the US.

EU immigration rules for researchers and highly skilled workers

Over the past ten years, immigration to the EU from non-EU countries for work or education purposes has increased. In 2023, EU countries issued almost 1.3 million first residence permits for work purposes and over 530,000 for education [reasons](#). This shows a strong demand in Europe for workers and students.

Compared to many other nationalities, it is relatively easy for Americans to visit the EU to look for job opportunities. US citizens are exempt from Schengen visa requirements; for visits of up to 90 days, they only need a valid passport. Nationals of other countries might be on the EU [visa list](#), however, even if they currently work in the US. Several EU member states, such as Germany and Sweden, also issue longer visas or residence permits for job-seeking.

Concerning longer-term stays for employment or self-employment, EU member states retain the right to determine the number of people they want to admit,¹ but the EU has set common minimum rules for certain types of work-, study- or research-related immigration. The "[Students and](#)

¹ Articles 79 (1) and (5) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

[Researchers Directive](#)”, for example, sets conditions for the admission and rights of non-EU nationals for research, studies and training. Researchers can be granted a (renewable) residence permit for at least one year, or – where this is shorter – for the duration of their hosting agreement with a research institution in the EU. If they are authorized to conduct research or studies in one member state, they are also entitled to enter, stay and conduct part of their research or studies in other member states.

The EU’s [“Blue Card” Directive](#) facilitates the admission of highly skilled workers. Blue cards are valid for at least 24 months, or, if a work contract is shorter, for the duration of the contract plus a further three months. They entitle holders to enter and stay in a member state and enjoy equal treatment to EU nationals as concerns employment conditions, freedom of association, training, recognition of diplomas, social security and access to goods and services. Blue Card holders can be accompanied by close family members, who are also allowed to work. In addition to this, EU countries can have their own rules, schemes and programmes for attracting third-country researchers and workers.

Obstacles to, and advantages of, moving to Europe from the US

Apart from the paperwork needed to be allowed to work in the EU, American professionals may be concerned about other potential obstacles, for example salary levels, which tend to be lower in the EU than in the US. However, the cost of living in Europe is generally lower as well, and most EU countries offer welfare services including paid parental leave, free daycare and education for children, several weeks of paid vacation and affordable healthcare. Many of these benefits also apply to workers from abroad, at least if they are work-based.²

Another potential concern may be cultural and language barriers. But Europe’s major cities are increasingly multicultural and international. For example, the share of foreign residents in Vienna is [35%](#), in Barcelona [25%](#) and in Berlin [24%](#). English is taught from an early age in schools,

making most (younger) EU citizens bilingual. European universities teach classes and conduct research in English, and international companies often use English as their working language.

Making the EU a single destination

The current situation in the US presents a unique opportunity to turn a potential American brain drain into a brain gain for Europe. EU immigration rules for highly skilled workers and researchers should not be an unsurmountable hurdle, even if further facilitations could be envisaged and a greater degree of harmonization could help promote the entire EU, and not just individual member states, as a destination.

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The EU could play a vital role in raising awareness of the various entry and stay options available to American workers and the benefits that could come with moving to Europe. It could consider launching a campaign to promote itself as a destination.

Increasing efforts to bring talents in the US closer to Europe by expanding academic exchange and guest fellowship programmes as well as raising research funding could also make a difference. With a longer-term view, the EU should strive to make research careers more attractive and to invest into research infrastructure. Finally, talent attraction initiatives at local and regional level in the EU could be expanded if the EU makes more funding available.

² Depending on national law, some benefits and entitlements can be residence-based, which means that they can depend on the length of validity of a foreign national’s work contract, residence permit, or (actual or intended) period of residence in the respective country.