SHOULD INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BE CHARGED MORE?

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Student mobility is the type of migration that has increased most rapidly in relative terms in recent decades. In 2018, the four main destination countries according to Campus France data are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and France. Attracting more and more international students has become a priority for many states around the world. For some OECD countries, whose populations are increasingly ageing, this is a key demographic issue: international students can provide a pool for recruiting a young and skilled workforce. However, these countries do not all adopt the same strategies. While some have chosen to charge very high tuition fees, as is the case in the United Kingdom or the United States, but also in Canada, others have chosen to apply the same fees to everyone. This is the case in Germany, which recently introduced free access to higher education for all students and is becoming an increasingly popular destination. Germany has also facilitated labour market access procedures for international students and graduates.

On the other hand, in France, the government has developed a new strategy for "attracting international students", which it ironically called "Bienvenue en France" and in which it has chosen to multiply by 15 the tuition fees for international students (outside the European Union) in bachelor's and master's degrees from the start of the 2019 academic year. According to the government, this increase would attract more international students, improve their selection, create financial equity between national and international students and give more value to French diplomas abroad.

Let us take a look at this argument. This shift corresponds above all to a commodification of higher education and ignores the many other factors that guide international students' choices: geographical, cultural and linguistic proximity; historical links between the country of origin and destination; the reputation of the education system; the difficulty/ease of obtaining or renewing a visa/residence permit; or post-graduate employment prospects.

According to a survey we recently conducted in France (AIMS Survey: Academic International Migration Survey) among international students enrolled in master's or doctoral studies, these students came to France for two main reasons: the value of the French diploma on the labour market and the reputation of its higher education institutions. It is therefore not necessary, contrary to what the "Bienvenue en France" plan would have us believe, to increase tuition fees so that the "excellence" of French higher education can be recognized internationally. Other reasons considered important include funding and the low cost of education as well as knowledge of French.

Secondly, the participation of international students in the French national economy is much higher than the cost they represent for the State, as shown by a study commissioned by Campus France in 2014. It is also important to remember that France has been ranked for decades among the top countries of destination in the world for international students. What has changed in recent years is the emergence of new

attractive countries such as Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands and Turkey. International students therefore have a wider range of choices, which is all the more reason for France to lose its current position if the increase in tuition fees for foreign students is implemented this year.

In the end, this strategy merely proposes cosmetic and discriminatory measures by claiming to address the issue of underfunding of French higher education and the general decline in public funding allocated by the Ministry. This increase in tuition fees presages the transition to a new model of higher education, indexed more to market forces than to the intrinsic value of knowledge, and the gradual and widespread increase in tuition fees as has occurred in the United Kingdom.

In deciding to increase tuition fees for international students, is the government not rather aiming to find additional ways to select candidates for immigration?

Everything seems to suggest that this is the case. Indeed, the policy for attracting students presented in the Welcome to France Plan is in line with the chosen immigration policy implemented in the early 2000s by the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, aiming, among other things, to better select migrants according to France's economic needs. Among the migrants sought are students and researchers perceived to be more economically profitable. The objective is to attract the most "talented" students in the context of global competition for highly skilled workers. The "Welcome to France" strategy goes even further in the money-based selection of international students through the introduction of tuition fees differentiated according to geographical origin. For economic and diplomatic reasons, the Welcome to France plan aims to reconfigure the geography of student mobility by giving priority to students from so-called emerging or developed countries, such as China, Brazil and Russia. However, half of the foreign students in France come from the Maghreb or sub-Saharan Africa where French diplomas have a well-established social value on the labour market. The latter are already turning to new poles such as China, Saudi Arabia or Turkey. France is therefore in danger of losing even more students by increasing its tuition fees.

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