

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

Commentary

[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [Commentary](#)

March 10, 2011

France's Challenge: Embracing Academic Globalization Without Fear

By Ioanna Kohler

Last August, the Fields Medal—the equivalent of a Nobel Prize in mathematics—was awarded to four researchers, including two young French professors, Cédric Villani and Ngo Bao Chau. Those awards bolstered France's scientific pride: Both awardees were trained in one of the country's most prestigious higher-education institutions, the École Normale Supérieure, which is part of the elite grandes-écoles state-financed system.

Mr. Villani and Mr. Ngo received French educations par excellence, but their career trajectories illustrate a challenge for France. Mr. Villani teaches at Université Lyon I, whereas Mr. Ngo was hired at the University of Chicago. To some, Mr. Ngo's decision is yet another example of France's academic "brain drain," illustrating how France is losing its best and brightest to other countries, especially the United States.

The mobility of French scientists and academics is, in fact, limited. According to a 2008 survey by the [Centre d'Études Prospectives et d'Informations Internationales](#), a research center, the number of scientists born in France who immigrated to America between 1990 and 2000 represented only 1.3 percent of French scientists (which puts France below the 2 percent average in the European Union). Less than 2 percent of École Normale Supérieure alumni were said to be living in the United States in 2010. However, the case of Mr. Ngo encapsulates the challenges prompted by increased international academic mobility, in particular for the most talented individuals.

How can one distinguish between national and scientific interests? Should scientific achievement be attributed to an individual, regardless of citizenship? Should it be credited to the country where that individual was educated, or to the one that fostered that individual's research? France is not alone in struggling with those challenges—and the possible ways I suggest to overcome them can be applied to other countries concerned about "brain circulation."

Losses and Gains

France's academic mobility is a two-sided coin. On the one hand, such mobility can be considered a loss for France, depriving it of its most skilled and talented human capital after it provided a free education. In the case of the highly selective grandes écoles, students receive a salary while they attend, which makes the question of "return on investment" particularly acute when they decide to pursue their careers outside France.

On the other hand, talent circulation bolsters the cross-fertilization of ideas throughout the world and provides a favorable environment for competition, and therefore innovation. Major discoveries made by individuals—whatever their citizenship, and wherever they work—eventually benefit the common good.

That mobility paradox will not be solved soon. But one thing is certain: Thinking of the French scholars' outward mobility in terms of "brain drain" misses the point. France's academic circulation is good news. In this era of global competition for talent, ideas, and knowledge, French students and professors, who used to "stay at home," are embracing the intellectual and scientific exchanges that go with a global knowledge economy. The increasing command of English by scholars over the past 10 or 15 years certainly played a most important role in fostering this new generation of academic globe-trotters. In a highly competitive marketplace, they turn out to be fully exportable. For example, in a 2010 report that I wrote for the French think tank Institut Montaigne, entitled "[Gone for Good? The French Academic Diaspora in the United States](#)," I reported that French professors working in America are teaching in some of the best institutions.

The real issue is how to best foster academic mobility as a two-way street for French and international scholars. How can we leverage the diaspora of French scholars and their international counterparts trained in France (or recipients of French state-financed fellowships) to build new international scientific and academic collaborations?

It is easier said than done. Who is leaving France? Who is returning to France? Who is gone for good? Any attempt to count or identify the Francophone diaspora is difficult, as it is a moving target. Identifying such a diaspora abroad will require coordination between the Ministry of Higher Education, French embassies and consulates, higher-education institutions in France, and their counterparts in the main destination countries. The grandes écoles will also need to strengthen their network of alumni, which is just starting to develop. The identification and data-collection process,

along with the production of annual statistics on the in- and outflow of academics and researchers, will allow policy makers and education experts to conduct regular surveys of expatriate French academics and foreign scholars trained in France. That way, government officials will have an accurate picture of the extent of the brain drain and will be able to devise policy tools accordingly.

It is also important to create online social forums and networks specifically dedicated to academics abroad. The networks could advertise job offers in France, list benefits available to returning French scholars or international academics, promote scholar-in-residency programs, conferences, seminars, fellowships, and grants. The French embassy in the United States, along with American offices of the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, which is devoted to research on human health, and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, already disseminate some of this information. Still, a more comprehensive communications strategy needs to be devised to reach out to the French expatriate academic community as a whole, wherever they live. France could draw inspiration from Germany and Italy, which have started interesting projects such as the [German Academic International Network](#) or the [Italian Scientists and Scholars in North America Foundation](#).

Recruitment Across the Globe

Increasing two-way academic mobility also means making university recruitment in France genuinely international. University human-resources departments should, for example, establish international search committees and advertise positions in the international higher-education press. Being visible in the international academic job market counts, too. So far, only one French university, the École d'Économie de Toulouse, has been participating in this type of international job search.

As much as possible, international recruitment should be free of pain and red tape. That translates into extending professional equivalency to foreign-earned doctorates and better recognizing work experience abroad both for purposes of career advancement and pensions. It is well known that French compensation standards are significantly lower than those in America or Switzerland. French institutions should take full advantage of their recent budgetary autonomy, granted in 2007, to offer personalized recruitment packages, outside the fixed salary range, to the most desirable French or international candidates. Some institutions have already started doing so for long- or short-term contracts with outstanding academics. The Université de Paris VII's recent hiring of American

George F. Smoot, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2006, shows France is indeed capable of attracting some of the best international talent.

With more than 7,000 research papers co-authored by French and American academics every year, trans-Atlantic scientific collaboration is doing well. Still, there is room to enhance France's scholarly exchanges at the international level. Experience shows that academics and scientists are instrumental to leading institutional cooperation. They are key to fostering new cooperation agreements, exchange programs, and joint degrees between institutions throughout the world. That is why France should harness the network of its academic expatriates to build new scientific bridges with other countries. For example, the online forum [Aurore Sciences](#) seeks to further cooperation among French and Chinese scientists.

What's more, scientific or academic joint-ventures, like the Casanova and Abel laboratory started by Rockefeller University, in New York, and Faculté de Médecine Necker, in Paris, need to be encouraged. Created in 2010, the innovative partnership fosters collaborative research, with all publications and patents arising from it credited to both institutions.

Such cooperation bodes well for France, and points the way for how nations can move beyond the brain-drain impediment and start to benefit from the brave new world of academic mobility.

Ioanna Kohler is the director of policy programs at the French-American Foundation United States.



More global news from *The Chronicle*

SIGN UP: [Get Global Coverage in Your Inbox](#)

JOIN THE CONVERSATION: [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [LinkedIn](#)

Comments

Powered by [DISQUS](#)

Add a comment

Log in to post

with your Chronicle account:



Don't have an account? [Create one now.](#)

Or log in using one of these alternatives:

Showing 2 comments

Sort by

Follow comments: by e-mail by RSS

Real-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#))



richardtaborgreene 2 years ago

I think it was 1660 the Societe Philosophe in its charter declared "we are citizens of truth more than of any nation". That was a trans-nation dream of early scientists--more loyal to truth than to family, class, nation. Science nowadays is immensely vaster so within one nation a lifetime of unresolved interesting questions can be found. So people end up being bigoted by the nation they defaulted their lives into and only notice it after age 50 when "international" contacts are bothersome or critical of their attitudes. Notice how immigrant French, immigrant Americans, have a drive to go where it, whatever their "it" is, is best. Ever was it thus. The best are loyal more to truth. The less best are loyal more to convenience.

Notice CATIA was developed long ago in France and declined to catch up with American CAD catch ups with CATIA till last year, I think it was, IBM, sloughed CATIA for Siemens PLM St. Louis softwares. France has her special genius but pinnacles of it due to lack of internationalization tend to erode and disappear.

Like



burger1376 2 years ago

I believe in the philosophy of Star Trek. Once we are visited by an alien race, we will realize that we are the human race, not the black, asian, white, whatever race. Then we will unite in order to advance scientific pursuits and space travel. Until then, we will continue to think of things in terms of race, nationality, and other rather backwards catagories. Hopefully Spock will visit us sooner rather than later.

1 person liked this. Like

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037