What Do International Students Want? Jobs

As universities around the world compete to fill seats, they respond to an increased interest in career prospects.

At a career fair, representatives of Scotland's Edinburgh Napier U. speak with prospective students. The university draws international students with its high ranking for "graduate employability."

Krishna Shetty was burned once by American visa policies, and on his second attempt to remain in the United States after his studies, he was determined not to make the same mistakes.

A native of Mumbai, Mr. Shetty graduated in 2004 with a bachelor's degree from Clark University. He landed a job with Fidelity Investments, anticipating that the company would be able to sponsor him for a work visa—but that did not happen.

A reduction that year in the number of H-1B visas, the main certification that foreign students use to remain and work in the United States after graduation, meant that he was unable to secure one, and his plans fell through.

He continued working for Fidelity, but back home in India.

"My experience was so disappointing, having job offers and not being able to accept them because of my visa status," Mr. Shetty says. "The second time, I wanted to make sure things would work out."

When he decided to return to the United States for business school, Mr. Shetty plotted his strategy with a veteran's expertise.

To ensure that he would be among the first in line when the application window for work visas opened, at the beginning of April, he applied only to programs with graduation dates in December.

Because he was interested in a career in the financial-services industry, he wanted to study in New York, which further narrowed the field.
"I didn't even bother with Columbia or NYU, because they don't have programs with those dates," he says. Fordham University ended up being the highest-ranked program that fit the bill, and Mr. Shetty enrolled in 2007.

He was also strategic in his choice of a dual major.

"My main reason was that I was thinking that if there is a recession, this is a backup," he says of his inclusion of a minor in information systems.

The strategy worked. He graduated in December 2008 and, despite the tough economy, quickly found a job with a telecom consulting company that was willing to sponsor him for a work visa.

Mr. Shetty's pragmatic approach to selecting a graduate-school program is typical of the kinds of calculations that are increasingly determining where foreign students choose to enroll.

Yes, factors such as national and institutional reputation and the lure of specific cities or programs are still major draws.

But in a highly competitive international marketplace, countries and universities are realizing that more foreign students are choosing where to study based not just on where they can get the best education, but also on where their postgraduation job prospects are brightest.

Institutions are scrambling to respond to the growing student focus on employability and are pressing governments to retool immigration policies to allow students more flexibility in seeking jobs after graduation.

Chris Price, international director of MJD Consultancy, a British company, has worked closely with several universities on branding and promotion aimed at attracting international students.

Work opportunities, starting with potential internship possibilities while they are still studying, are now one of the first things foreign students ask about when considering an institution, he says.
"Even two, three years ago, this wasn't in the top five, but it's gone up the hierarchy," Mr. Price says.

**From Reputation to Jobs**

Students are also becoming savvier and more demanding about the career services they expect universities to provide.

This emphasis on jobs is forcing universities that once marketed themselves based on reputation, quality of teaching, student learning, and a reasonable price tag to focus more on employment opportunities, Mr. Price says.

Students from India and China, the two countries that send the most students abroad, are especially interested in finding work opportunities in the countries in which they study, although their motivations may differ, Mr. Price says.

Indian students, many of whom have borrowed money to pay tuition, can be very focused on landing a job in order to pay off their debts as quickly as possible after graduation. Chinese students are just as determined to find work, but often for different reasons.

"For them, it's less about money, and more about, 'I've got to stand out from the crowd,'" he says. For Chinese students, once they return home, the cachet that derives from having worked abroad for a foreign company can outweigh the job-hunting disadvantage of having attended a foreign university rather than a top-ranked Chinese institution.

Edinburgh Napier University, in Scotland, touts its ranking as one of Britain's top 10 institutions for graduate employability as a draw for international students.

Over a third of the university's students are from outside Britain, with large cohorts from India and China, says Jack Worden, dean of the university's international college.

Many of the university's programs have been developed in consultation with businesses and professional organizations. "The whole philosophy of employability is integrated into our programs and our teaching," Mr. Worden says.

Edinburgh Napier's employability rating is based on an annual survey conducted by Britain's Higher Education Statistics Agency, which tracks employment among British graduates.
In terms of how well international students fare, Mr. Worden says that although it can be more difficult to track their progress after graduation, "our belief is that the factors that make for success in employability in the U.K. apply equally in terms of factors for international as well as U.K. students."

Soon the university will be able to test that belief. Along with other British institutions, Edinburgh Napier will take part this year in an analysis commissioned by the British government that seeks to measure foreign students’ employment outcomes.

William Archer, director of the International Graduate Insight Group, which is conducting the study, says that the analysis marks the first national attempt "to implement a comprehensive measure of international graduate employment."

Institutions in countries that have only recently sought to draw larger numbers of foreign students are also quickly learning to respond to those students’ career concerns.

Just two years ago, the BI Norwegian School of Management, a private business school in Oslo, began to recruit students from overseas, says Feite van Dijk, the school’s project manager for international programs. Now one-fourth of the school’s 1,300 full-time graduate students are foreign.

The emphasis non-European students place on employability took the Norwegians by surprise and forced them to adapt quickly.

"The demands of students with respect to what happens to them after they graduate are really important and led to our awareness that we have to make more visible what we have to offer," he says.

"We came up with statistics for placement and economic indicators for Norway as a country," Mr. van Dijk says. "We're not guaranteeing jobs when they come to Norway, but the framework we present is that this is a country where you can get an opportunity to find a good job because the economy is still strong, with unemployment 2.5 percent or even lower."

Unfortunately, Mr. van Dijk says, Norway has no national immigration policy, and students are allowed to remain in the country on their student visas for only three months after graduation, meaning those who want to stay have to make job hunting a top priority from the outset.
"We tell them that the job search doesn't start when they graduate, but when they start studying, and the vast majority get offers when they graduate."

**Revamping Work Laws**

Norway has yet to develop a coherent national strategy to promote employability for foreign students, but a growing number of countries have done so, often as a result of direct pressure from universities.

The Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education supports the immigration of "knowledge workers" into the European Union, says Hanneke Teekens, its director of communications.

Pressure from the group and the country's universities led directly to a recent change in Dutch law, allowing graduates to stay on in the Netherlands for one year, she says.

The shift is indicative of the country's attempts to develop a more comprehensive approach to international student recruitment.

"You have to organize your legal system, your immigration system, your attitude in the education and business sectors in different ways, if you want to become attractive for students," she says. "It's a much broader concept than just salaries or promotion."

In Britain, Universities UK, the lobbying group for the chief executives of all the country's universities, was a driving force behind the introduction of the new post-study work visa, in 2008, which allows students to remain in the country for up to two years after graduating in order to find jobs.

Britain is second only to the United States in the number of foreign students its universities attract, but those institutions recognize that they are not the only focus of overseas applicants.

"We know international graduates want to build on their education in the U.K. with a period of work in the U.K.," a spokeswoman for Universities UK says.

Other popular destination countries, including the United States and Canada, have also made changes to their visa policies to ease the postgraduation job hunt for foreign students.
Between Mr. Shetty's 2004 graduation and his 2007 return to the United States for graduate school, the government tweaked a visa provision to allow recent graduates a broader window of time to work under an optional practical-training program.

Had the same measure been in place when he finished college, Mr. Shetty says, he would have been able to take the job he had been offered and wait longer for the company to sponsor him for a work visa.

In what it called "an exciting finding for Canada and our future plans to address skills shortages and increase global competitiveness," a 2009 Canadian survey of international students, published this year, found that "50 percent of international students plan to stay in Canada after they have completed their studies."

The growing enthusiasm of international students for entering the Canadian work force was tied directly to new immigration opportunities, such as the postgraduation work-permit program, which allows students to remain in the country for a job for as long as the duration of their study programs.

This year the premier of Quebec upped the ante, proposing a fast track to citizenship for students who complete a degree at a university in the province.

Problems of Abuse

As they seek to attract foreign students, countries face a tough balancing act between offering work incentives and ensuring that their systems are not abused.

Australia, the world's fifth-most-popular destination for foreign students, provides a cautionary tale. Until about a decade ago, foreign students were encouraged to use their Australian degrees to try to enhance their immigration chances, but there was still a clear delineation between international higher education and immigration policy.

"When we went to fairs, it was made clear to us by government officials that we couldn't refer to migration," says Bruce Mackintosh, director of the International Centre at the University of Western Australia.

In 2005, in order to fill a skills gap, the Australian government introduced new rules granting permanent-residence status to workers that made it easier for foreign students to obtain residency visas after graduation.
Within a few years, the number of private institutions providing vocational education in fields such as hairdressing and cooking had soared, with enrollments driven largely by foreign students seeking a quick path to immigration.

The government has since begun revamping its laws and oversight of higher education to crack down on the more questionable colleges.

But damage has been done to Australia's international reputation, even that of its universities, which have not been part of this migration boom.

International students "don't tend to distinguish" between the universities and the for-profit vocational colleges, says Glenn Withers, chief executive of Universities Australia, the representative organization for the country's 39 universities.

Immigration policies aside, Australian universities have been focusing on fostering greater employability skills for both Australian and international students in response to calls from the business sector, says Mr. Withers.

In surveys conducted a couple of years ago, overseas students who had studied at Australian universities expressed overall satisfaction with their experience, but one of the areas they singled out was a need for more-extensive work-study experience.

"They were looking not just for the right to work but for the capacity to work in ways that linked to their studies, that gave them an advantage when they went home but also gave them an advantage if they stayed," says Mr. Withers.

Universities have sought to respond to these concerns and build more work-study arrangements into their curricula, says Mr. Withers.

As he and others note, the increased international competition for students requires both educators and government officials to work together to develop a coordinated national strategy to improve employment opportunities after graduation. Many international students are demanding nothing less.