THE HECHINGER REPORT

HIGHER EDUCATION

With new 'talent visas,' other countries lure workers trained at U.S. universities

Economic competitors are aggressively recruiting 'the best, brightest and most talented people'

by **JON MARCUS**   June 17, 2023

Cansu Deniz Bayrak, who considered emigrating from her native Turkey to San Francisco but ended up in the U.K. "There's a certain element of hubris that, 'Of course people are going to come to the U.S.,' " Bayrak says. Credit: Hesther Ng for The Hechinger Report

LONDON — When Cansu (pronounced "Johnsu") Deniz Bayrak was deciding where to emigrate from her native Turkey, she first considered San Francisco.

Only in her 20s, she had already co-created an e-commerce website that rose to the top of its category in her home country, gotten snatched up by a tech company, then been poached by another tech firm. But she saw more opportunity in the United States, where there is a projected demand for **more than 160,000** new software developers and related specialists per year, and where tech companies said in a survey that recruiting them is **their biggest business challenge**.

The Washington Post

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Bayrak quickly learned, however, that to come to the United States, she'd need an employer sponsor. Even then, she'd have to enter a lottery for an H-1B visa, with only one-in-four odds of being approved. If she was laid off, **she'd have 60 days** to find a new job, or she'd likely have to leave.
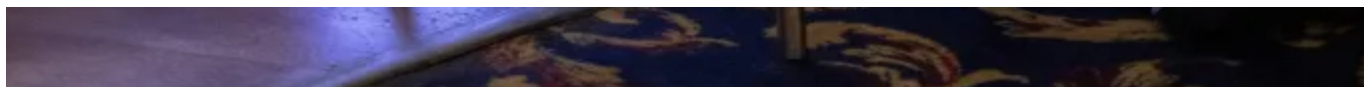
Cansu Deniz Bayrak, who considered emigrating from her native Turkey to San Francisco but ended up in the U.K. "There's a certain element of hubris that, 'Of course people are going to come to the U.S.,' " Bayrak says. Credit: Hesther Ng for The Hechinger Report

Bayrak was recounting her story over a pint in a pub in London, where she now lives thanks in part to a United Kingdom program that actively recruits immigrants with skills in short supply and streamlines the naturalization process for them — no employer sponsor, lottery or long and unpredictable waiting period required.

"There's a certain element of hubris that, 'Of course people are going to come to the U.S.,' " said Bayrak, now 37. But coming to the U.K. turned out to be "much easier to navigate."

While foreign-born applicants who want to work in the United States face red tape and long delays, new "talent visas" in the U.K., Australia, Canada and elsewhere are luring away people who have some of the world's most in-demand skills.

Now these countries are homing in on another target: international students being educated at U.S. universities to work in tech and other high-demand fields.

"We are a beneficiary of the failures of the U.S. system," said Nicolas Rollason, partner and head of business immigration for the London-based law firm Kingsley Napley.

> **"How do you get to the U.S. and build your startup? You can't, unless you win the Nobel Prize."**
>
> Sergei Nozdrenkov, a Russian software engineer who moved to the U.K.

Most international students in the U.S. say they want to remain, and U.S. employers need workers like them to fill jobs in areas of shortage. But only 11 percent of foreign-born U.S. university bachelor's degree recipients and 23 percent who get master's degrees manage to stay and work in the United States, according to researchers at the University of California, Davis, and elsewhere.

International graduates of U.S. universities can apply for an optional practical training, or OPT, visa that allows them to stay in the country for 12 to 36 months, depending on what they studied, after which they have to get an employer sponsor and enter the lottery for an H-1B visa. With delays in processing and other problems, including those long odds for an H-1B, however, the number getting OPT visas was down by 17 percent last year from its peak in 2019-20, to 184,759.

That has ominous implications for the supply of talent in the United States, where <u>around 80 percent</u> of people studying computer science and electrical engineering at the graduate level are international students, the National Foundation for American Policy reports.

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Other countries are eagerly taking advantage of the difficulties of the U.S. system faced by foreign-born university graduates with valuable skills.

The U.K. last year added a "high potential individual" visa, offering a two-year stay to <u>new graduates of 40 universities</u> outside the country ranked as the best in the world — 21 of them in the United States.

Rollason said that, at this time of year, his firm is regularly contacted by international students who have just graduated from American universities but are still waiting for an OPT visa or can't get a visa through the H-1B lottery, and have decided to move to the U.K.

"Why wouldn't you want people who graduate from Harvard or Stanford or MIT?" he asked mirthfully.

> **The number of international graduates of U.S. universities on optional practical training visas, which let them stay in the country for up to 36 months, fell by 17 percent last year from its peak in 2019-20.**

Nearly <u>**40,000 foreign-born graduates**</u> of U.S. universities were recruited to Canada from 2017 to 2021, according to an analysis by the Niskanen Center, a Washington think tank that advocates for immigration reform.

Australian recruiters are also fanning out across the United States, attending job fairs and visiting university campuses, Patrick Hallinan, regional director for the Americas in the Australian Department of Home Affairs <u>**told a webinar**</u> convened on this topic by the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute.

The United States still enjoys substantial advantages in attracting international talent. It boasts <u>**by far the most venture capital investment**</u> in technology businesses, for example — four times more than second-place China. The number of eligible applicants this year for H-1B visas for foreign workers in specialty occupations remained strong; it was <u>**up nearly 60 percent**</u> over last year, although because of <u>**a cap set more than three decades ago**</u>, the already distant one-in-four odds of approval plummeted as a result to about one in seven.

"The United States has managed to remain competitive in spite of its immigration system," said Madeleine Sumption, director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford. "People tolerate the chaotic immigration system because there's so much else that's attractive."

Over the longer term, however, "the question is: As these other countries start to take the race for talent more seriously, will that dynamic shift?" said Kate Hooper, a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute.

A bill introduced in the House last month would eliminate per-country limits on employment-related visas and make it easier for international students with science, technology, engineering and math degrees to stay in the United States. Previous similar measures have gone nowhere.

Related: How higher education lost its shine

While other countries have promised to make life easier for immigrants with skills, it still isn't easy. Back in that pub, Bayrak's glass sits empty by the time she's finished listing the many twists and turns in her journey to the British passport she finally received in February.

But the British path is still faster and simpler than the American one, said Rollason in his office overlooking London's ascendant high-tech neighborhood of Shoreditch.

"I imagine if an Indian engineer has two job offers, one in the U.S. and one in the U.K., I can guess which they would choose," he said.

Whether or not the new visas attract large numbers of highly skilled immigrants, they "do serve a function in terms of staking a claim in this contest for talent," said the Migration Policy Institute's Hooper. "There's a sort of marketing element that signals you're open to talent."

She added, about the U.S.: "What signal are we sending?"

> **"There's a certain element of hubris that, 'Of course people are going to come to the U.S.' "**
>
> Cansu Deniz Bayrak, who moved to the U.K. from Turkey

Under the U.K.'s more general global talent visa, launched in early 2020, immigrants who work in digital technology and other industries — no matter where they got their educations — don't need a job offer to come into the country, and can be eligible for permanent citizenship within three to five years, depending on their field.

"We're in a global race for talent," said Gerard Grech, founding chief executive of Tech Nation, the nonprofit organization that the British government appointed to administer its new global talent visa program. And to compete, Grech said, some countries are making it "as frictionless as possible for the best, brightest and most talented people" to immigrate.

Canada is increasing its immigration target from 465,000 **to 500,000 per year** by 2025, and the share of spots for people with workforce skills from 57 to 60 percent.

It already has an "express entry" program for particularly highly skilled migrants, **more than 440,000** of whom applied through that program in 2021, the most recent year for which the figure is available — up from 332,331 in 2019. **Most common among them** were computer programmers, software engineers and designers and information systems analysts and consultants.

Nicolas Rollason, partner and head of business immigration for the London-based law firm Kingsley Napley. "We are a beneficiary of the failures of the U.S. system," Rollason says. Credit: Hesther Ng for The Hechinger Report

With an aging domestic population and high numbers of vacancies in many fields — problems also being faced by the United States — "immigration has to be part of our response as a country," Canada's deputy minister for Immigration Christiane Fox **told that Migration Policy Institute webinar**.

A company launched by an American expat is **leasing billboards** along Highway 101 in Silicon Valley to advertise Canada's comparatively simpler immigration system as a means of recruiting tech workers to come there. "Canada's secret weapon," it calls that system, promising a process that approves 80 percent of applications within two weeks compared to **as long as 18 and a half months** for an employment authorization in the United States.

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In Australia, the government last year also announced an **increase in the number of immigrants** it would accept, to 195,000 — nearly **three-quarters of them with workforce skills**, Hallinan, the Home Affairs official, said.

Admitting immigrants with designated skills appears less politically controversial than immigration more broadly. Even in the U.K., where hostility to immigration helped fuel Brexit, surveys show that people **largely support** admitting immigrants with skills in areas in which there are labor shortages.
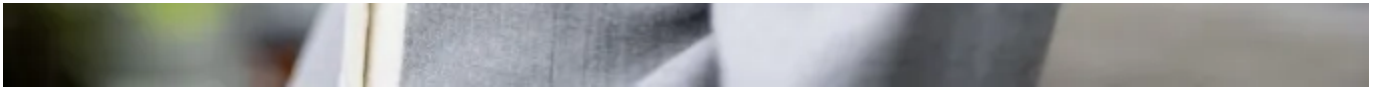
Madeleine Sumption, director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford. "We're recruiting the brightest and the best. It sounds meritocratic. It sounds fair," Sumption says. Credit: Hesther Ng for The Hechinger Report

In those cases, "there's not as much concern about competition in the labor market," said Sumption. And among politicians, she said, "there was this desire to have a counterweight and say we're not necessarily cracking down on everyone. We're recruiting the brightest and the best. It sounds meritocratic. It sounds fair."

In fact, giving preference to immigrants with skills isn't necessarily either fair or meritocratic, according to its critics. Rights groups say people should be allowed to immigrate regardless of the educations they were able to afford. "There's a lot of pushback around the words 'skilled' or 'unskilled,' " Sumption said. "People feel it's a judgment on a person's worth."

As in the United States, immigration policies in other countries are subject to political winds. There's now worry among advocates in the U.K. that the record numbers of immigrants coming there will again prompt politicians to close the gates, including to those with needed skills. The net number of immigrants who arrived in the U.K. last year was a record **more than 600,000**, despite the Conservative government's promise to reduce the annual flow to below 100,000.

Related: Foreign tech workers are getting fed up. Can better education for U.S. students fill the gap?

While research is only now getting started to track the people admitted to the U.K. through the global talent visa, "it seems to be the case that lots of these [immigrants] are working for decent corporations or setting up their own companies," said Jonathan Kingham, an attorney based in London who specializes in business and personal immigration law at the legal-research provider LexisNexis.

That's because, "if you allow people to naturally shine, they create great things," said Sergei Nozdrenkov, a Russian software engineer who also moved to the U.K., where he is working with an Italian-born fellow immigrant to create technology that could help scientists and commercial interests measure marine biodiversity and predict algae outbreaks.

Sergei Nozdrenko at London's busy Liverpool Street train station. Credit: Hesther Ng for The Hechinger Report

The U.S. "has more VC," Nozdrenkov, who is 30 and resembles a young Elon Musk, said at a coffee shop outside London's Liverpool Street rail station, using the acronym for venture capital. "But the immigration process is very hard. How do you get to the U.S. and build your startup? You can't, unless you win the Nobel Prize."

Notwithstanding recent layoffs at Meta, Amazon and other US. tech giants, **deep shortages of workers** continue in those fields, according to the labor market analytics firm Lightcast; there have been more than four million job postings in the last year in the United States for software developers, database administrators and computer user support specialists, it says, and the number of computer and IT jobs is projected to grow **another 15 percent by 2031**, with too few native-born workers to fill them.

As billions are being spent to beef up U.S. production of semiconductors, there's a projected shortage in that industry alone of **70,000 to 90,000 workers**, Deloitte reports. In the equally hot field of artificial intelligence, more than half of the workforce in the United States **consists of immigrants**, according to the Georgetown University Center for Security and Emerging Technology. Two-thirds of U.S. university graduate students in AI-related fields are foreign born.

> **"These visas [in other countries, for skilled workers] often aren't catering to a huge number of people, but they do serve a function in terms of staking a claim in this contest for talent."**
>
> Kate Hooper, policy analyst, Migration Policy Institute

"We are educating the best and brightest, and then we end up losing them to other countries," said Cecilia Esterline, an immigration research analyst at the Niskanen Center.

"We don't have the necessary talent within the U.S." to do these jobs, Esterline said. "But we don't have the visas required to onshore the people who can." Now "other countries are jumping at the opportunity to take our graduates."

One result is that international students appear to be reconsidering whether they want to come to the United States at all. That's a threat not just to the broader economy, but to universities and their communities, which take in $45 billion a year from them, the U.S. Department of Commerce reports.

Jonathan Kingham, an attorney based in London who specializes in business and personal immigration law at the legal-research provider LexisNexis. "It seems to be the case that lots of these [immigrants] are working for decent corporations or setting up their own companies," Kingham says. Credit: Hesther Ng for The Hechinger Report

The number of international students in the United States **has been flat or down** since 2016, and international enrollment in the especially important subjects of science and engineering **began to fall** in 2018 after years of steady growth, according to the most recent figures from the National Science Foundation.

A survey by Interstride, which helps universities recruit international students, found significant concern among them **about their ability to stay** in the country once they graduate; fewer than half said the value of a U.S. higher education continued to justify the cost.

"Our ranking as the top destination for international students is in jeopardy," said Esterline. Already, she said, "We're not necessarily keeping up and we're going to lose our edge when these other countries are coming up with new schemes that are very welcoming to immigrants."

Nozdrenkov said he might have moved to the United States if the process had been easier. But like other immigrants with skills who have been welcomed to the U.K., he said England "feels like home now." And he is planning to stay.

He paused, reconsidering for a moment.

"I might skip winters, though," he said. "It's too dark."

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Neil Munro

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There's a lot of corporate fraud in the "best and brightest" claim.

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