

Brief Discussion Points on Foreign Doctorate Degrees

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This discussion is meant to provide a basic understanding of some issues characteristic of foreign-degreed postdocs, deriving from the differences in educational systems of other countries. I will try to describe not so much the exact differences in graduate degrees in different countries as they are numerous, but more on the areas that generally require attention when dealing with foreign doctoral degree holders. Another reason for this focus is that educational systems are changing quickly (particularly under Bologna process in Europe) towards more uniform degree system across the countries. This document, therefore, is very general and not specific to a particular country. The purpose is to identify the possible disparities that should be clarified in each case if needed.

Which Countries Supply the Largest Amount of Postdocs?

According to Sigma Xi Postdoc Survey (May-June 2005), the most common countries of origin for international postdocs (U.S. or foreign-degreed) are China, followed by India, Germany, South Korea and Japan. Early PDP list assessment surveys showed that the vast majority of foreign postdoctoral degrees of international postdocs in the U.S. were awarded in China and India, followed by a large group of different European countries together with Japan, Canada and Mexico.

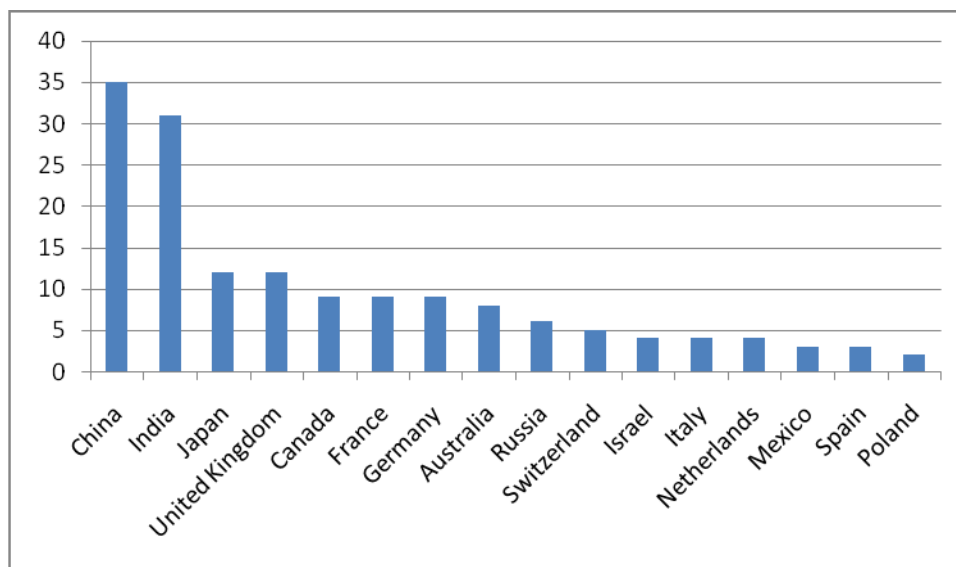


Figure 1. Countries of origin for foreign doctoral degrees of international postdocs in the U.S., PDP Individual-based Quick Turnaround List Assessment Survey

Early Specialization and Structure of Doctoral Programs

The educational system in the U.S. is probably the most flexible in the world. Such flexibility is connected with specialization in later rather than earlier stages of education, typically the level of Master's studies. In many other countries, particularly in Europe, the length of educational programs is shorter (e.g., one year for master's degree and three years for PhD) due to earlier specialization and concentration on undergraduate education rather than on graduate school. Students choose the specialization by the time of admission to undergraduate program. Oftentimes master's degree is required

for admission to PhD. By the time of admission to doctoral programs, students are expected to have considerable knowledge about their study area, relatively clear idea about their future dissertation and some preliminary investigation already completed. By the time of dissertation defense the candidates are sometimes required to have publications.

Because of these reasons, doctoral programs in many other countries do not include any coursework (or if they do, this coursework may be training in teaching or other skills, not constituting the core curriculum for the field). For the same reason it is much harder to switch the fields between undergraduate and graduate studies, while in the U.S. doctoral programs are structured to train people who may have nothing to do with this particular field before.

Status of Doctoral Students and Degree-Granting Authorities

Doctoral students in other countries are more likely to enjoy higher degree of autonomy during both undergraduate and graduate studies as the research curriculum is introduced earlier than in the U.S. In some countries such as the Netherlands, PhD students are categorized as employees, not students. In Russia it is common when a person is accepted to PhD program and hired as a faculty at the same time.

The doctoral degrees are generally granted by the universities (a committee, composed for a particular dissertation). However, some cases are different. Cambridge and Oxford in the UK are the only institutions that allow conferring a doctoral degree by an individual faculty member. In some countries there are permanent bodies/committees that either grant the degree or have to at least confirm it. Sometimes the dissertation may not be written in the university, i.e. the degree-seeking person may be working on the dissertation related to his/her job and not be considered a student, but the candidate for the degree has to have a mentor in the university and has to present the dissertation to the committee in the university to be granted a degree.

Postdoctoral Degree

In a number of countries there is a degree that is one step further than PhD (“habilitation” in Germany, “doctor nauk” in Russia, Doctor of Science (DSc) and the Doctor of Literature (DLitt) in India, “Livre-Docte” in Brazil, “doctor habilitowany” in Poland, “Habilitation à Diriger les Recherches” in France etc.). It often requires writing another, longer, thesis, and/or accumulation of teaching and research experience, publications, and other research-oriented activities. Such a degree is usually a prerequisite for positions roughly equivalent to full professor in the U.S. We are unlikely to see people having this type of degree at the postdoctoral positions because usually by this time, their status is too high to move to a postdoc position even in the U.S. However, there may be some extreme circumstances (wars, natural disasters) that force people to move and look for a job in the U.S.

Countries specifics

China, Japan, and Korea

Higher education in China, Japan, and Korea is mirroring, to a large extent, higher education in the U.S. with more emphasis on earlier stages of education. In China and Japan, for example, high school students take rigorous examinations either at the end of high school or to enter the university). Koreans, unlike Chinese and Japanese, tend to go to the U.S. to obtain doctorates instead of getting doctorate in their home country and coming to the U.S. for a postdoc.

France

French education is highly centralized and controlled by the state. Although the situation is changing, French universities are historically concentrated on teaching, and research is concentrated in prestigious “Grandes Ecoles” (which were originally designed to be professional schools) and national research centers.

Russia

In Russia doctoral degree is called “kandidat nauk”, while the postdoctorate degree is called “doctor nauk”. Like in France, Russia has a separate system of research institutions (comprising Russian Academy of Sciences), while the primary function of universities is educational. Doctoral degrees can be granted both by universities and research institutions.

Israel

Israel has a compulsory for all citizens military service (2 years for women, 3 years for men), which usually takes place after high school. Israeli students, therefore, are a little older on average than in other countries.

Additional Sources

IAU Directories - Higher Education Systems (<http://www.unesco.org/iau/onlinedatabases/index.html>)

Academic degree - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_degree)