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**Coming to Europe**

Amarendra Swarup  
United Kingdom  
16 May 2008

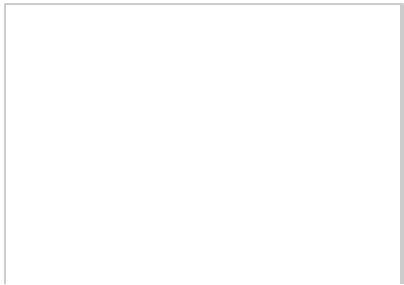
When Pascal Wilmann was awarded a fellowship in 2007 by the Australian government, accepting it seemed the perfect move after his first year as a postdoc at the [University of Nottingham](#) in the U.K. The prestigious award would allow him to stay in the same department at Nottingham and choose his own research direction. Unfortunately, Wilmann hadn't allowed for the slow, dogged mills of government bureaucracy. An Australian, he had arrived in the United Kingdom for his postdoc in August 2006 on a work permit--itself the result of a lengthy process strewn with paperwork. Although he wouldn't be changing universities for the fellowship, he had changed employers in the eyes of the U.K. government.

"As my fellowship was not funded through the university, my employment visa was no longer valid even though I was still working there," explains Wilmann, who researches protein structure in the university's department of pharmacy.

After a 5-month process, Wilmann's new visa came through in late September, just before his fellowship started in October. Then, just a few weeks later, a letter from the

[Home Office](#) arrived, telling him that his visa had been canceled and that he had 6 weeks to leave the United Kingdom. "We had just bought tickets for a holiday weekend in Spain, and I was worried they might not let me back into the country," he says.

It turned out that when the Home Office had called the University of Nottingham to check Wilmann's employment status, it was told that he was not on the payroll, because he was now being paid by the Australian government. So, it canceled his visa. "This was a real unnecessary stress for us for a number of weeks until it was sorted out," says Tania Hansen, Wilmann's fiancée, who moved from Australia with Wilmann to take a position at the [University of Leicester](#).



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Wilmann's experience goes to the heart of an increasingly vocal debate over the immigration status and mobility of international scientists into and within Europe. These processes won't ever be light on paperwork. But the unique nomadic existence of many postdocs and the need to travel for research purposes has led many to argue that, for scientists, a different approach is needed that can facilitate their mobility into Europe and between positions in different European countries.

"We need to attract more researchers to Europe," says Massimo Serpieri, a policy officer in the European Commission's [Directorate-General for Research](#). "However, it is not enough to make European research more attractive. We also need to make the working environment more attractive."



Pascal Wilmann

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#### A growing discontent

Wei Shen, a member of the Mobility Working Group of [Eurodoc](#), a Europe-wide federation representing Ph.D. students and young researchers, agrees that mobility is the key issue that needs to be integrated into the E.U.'s research policy. Shen is a Chinese national who has studied and researched across Europe for the past 8 years. In his current position at the [ESSCA Graduate School of Management](#) in Angers, France, he examines international migration, particularly among students and highly skilled migrants. Many international researchers are attracted by Europe's diversity of research opportunities across different geographical and cultural settings, Shen says. However, the tight and idiosyncratic approach to immigration across the continent is off-putting to many.

"The general feeling is the process is not straightforward and really varies from country to country," Shen says. "Administrative barriers are the main issue. For the U.K., you need to apply for a work permit and then the entry visa, but for other countries, it may go through quite a few additional steps such as medical checks, police registration, and so on, taking anything from weeks to months."



Wei Shen

To address these inconsistencies, the European Union enacted [a directive](#) in October 2005 aimed at easing the entry process for scientists coming to Europe from so-called third countries, non-European countries (the United States, Canada, China, Japan, Latin America, and so on) that aren't associated with any of the European Union's Framework Programmes. Instead of dictating exactly how individual countries should go about this, the directive mandated that member states should pass national legislation to implement the new procedures.

"The E.U. is at a disadvantage to the U.S., as we have 25 different countries and systems with different competencies," says Serpieri. "It

is easy for an academic researcher to take a position in Washington and then move to Atlanta. However, it's much harder for the same researcher to go from Rome to Lisbon."

The directive creates, for the first time, a residence permit for foreign researchers that's independent of their contract status, whether they are employed or self-employed, and with no quota restrictions. Under the new system, a non-E.U. researcher wishing to carry out a research project in Europe will sign a hosting agreement with an accredited public or private European research organization that attests to the researcher's status as well as his or her possession of the necessary scientific skills, financial means, and health insurance.

To avoid any discrimination, the directive also insists that any international researcher should

enjoy the same working conditions as an E.U. national, including pay and social security. On the basis of that contract, and provided that the researcher fulfills standard immigration conditions such as not posing a security threat and possessing a valid passport, the immigration authorities of the host country should then rapidly deliver the residence permit.

Intra-European mobility should also improve as the result of [a recommendation](#) passed at the same time as the directive. Under the recommendation, researchers could carry out part of their research activities in other E.U. countries for a period lasting less than 3 months without requiring additional visas; however, longer periods might require the signature of another hosting agreement.

"It's a skeleton for simplifying contracts and procedures throughout Europe," explains Serpieri. "The mobility issues should also be hugely simplified as anybody moving within the E.U. has already been checked by another country."

### Realities

The question, of course, for most international researchers is whether these lofty aims are actually filtering down to the grass roots of everyday reality. The early indications are promising. Although only six countries had enacted the required legislation by the original deadline of October 2007, 15 member states have now fully implemented the directive, and two more are in the midst of drafting new laws.

There are some differences in how countries have implemented the directive. France, for example, had already introduced a similar scheme for non-E.U. researchers working at accredited public institutions, so they have simply extended this policy to private institutions. In Germany, a whole raft of new legislation has replaced the old system, in which the Foreigners Registration Authority had to check individual cases to determine whether there was a need to employ the researcher and whether they held the required professional qualifications. Now, that onus has shifted to the hosting institutions themselves, and the government merely checks whether researchers satisfy the general visa requirements, speeding the process considerably.

Although it is too early to tell what impact the legislation has had, German universities have welcomed it. "I'm afraid these new rules aren't old enough to show any consequences yet," says Monica Mayer, who deals with international researchers at the [University of Bamberg](#). "But I think Europe is taking another important step in making itself more attractive for foreign scientists."

For historical reasons, the United Kingdom and Denmark are exempt from the directive's mandate. But officials with the British government acknowledge the need to do more to attract and retain the best researchers, particularly as a 2006 report found that nearly 40% of U.K. scientific output over the past 5 years involved international collaboration, an increase of more than 50% on the previous 5-year period.

Although it's early days yet and the new rules aren't old enough to draw any conclusions, "simplified procedures will certainly improve Europe's image and standing as a more welcoming research area and friendly environment for researchers outside Europe," says Shen. "Harmonization would definitely help the mobility of non-E.U. researchers."

Serpieri says the European Commission will perform a detailed analysis in late 2008 to see if the rules are having the desired impact. "The final pieces of the puzzle are slowly coming together," he says.

<p><b>Science Careers Podcast:</b> <a href="#">European Visa Issues</a>. (MP3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A European policy official talks about coming to Europe to do science.</li> </ul>	
<p>Amarendra Swarup is a science writer in London.</p>	<p>Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback <a href="#">to our editor</a>.</p>
<p>Photos. Top: <a href="#">Jon Rawlinson</a>. Middle: courtesy, Pascal Wilmann.</p>	<p>DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800072</p>

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