

Resolution by the  
38th General Assembly  
of the HRK  
on 14 May 2024  
in Fulda

**Successful study and career  
paths for international  
students in Germany – basic  
principles and framework  
conditions**

**HRK** German Rectors' Conference  
The Voice of the Universities

Leipziger Platz 11    Tel.: +49 30 206292-0    post@hrk.de  
10117 Berlin        Fax: +49 30 206292-215    www.hrk.de

Ahrstraße 39        Tel.: +49 228 887-0        post@hrk.de  
53175 Bonn         Fax: +49 228 887-110     www.hrk.de

## I. Background

The HRK has repeatedly reaffirmed the importance of the internationalisation of education and research in building sustainable universities, most recently in its guidelines and standards in international university cooperation adopted in 2020. Germany has undeniably developed into a global player in university internationalisation in recent decades; it is currently one of the world's most popular host countries for internationally mobile students. In the winter semester 2022/23, around 458,000 foreign students were studying at German universities, including around 368,000 foreign students who did not obtain their higher education entrance qualification in Germany; these figures are currently rising.

In recent years, the internationalisation of universities, and in particular the recruitment of international students, has increasingly come into focus at a political level as a key measure for securing skilled workers for the German labour market.<sup>1</sup> As welcome as the increased focus on the considerable potential of international graduates for the German economy is, from the HRK's perspective it remains essential to emphasise that international students must not be viewed and valued purely in terms of their potential contribution to the domestic economy. Rather, both the specific situation of the target group and the interests of the countries of origin – in terms of the desired 'brain circulation' – as well as the justified interests of German universities must be given appropriate consideration in political deliberations.

The importance of the internationalisation of universities is multifaceted. On an individual level, multinational teaching, learning and research environments are an essential prerequisite for teaching students global citizenship and qualifying them for a labour market that is now international in all its facets. For researchers, an international environment is the norm; science is international by nature. At an institutional level, internationalisation makes an indispensable contribution to innovation in

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the OECD, almost one in four skilled workers in Germany who received a permanent residence permit for work purposes in 2019 previously had a residence permit for study purposes. In some countries, the figures are even higher. "Transition from study permits accounted for a large share of total admissions for work in 2019, especially in France (52%), Italy (46%) and Japan (37%)." Source: OECD International Migration Outlook 2022, chapter 7: Elisabeth Kamm and Thomas Liebig, *Retention and economic impact of international students in the OECD*. With regard to the international dimension of securing skilled labour, the focus should not only be on attracting international students, but also on improving permeability in the sense of facilitating the recognition and crediting of skills acquired abroad (e. g. professional qualifications in social, medical or clinical fields).

teaching, learning, research, transfer and governance. It is therefore a central element of quality assurance and quality development and a guarantee for the competitiveness of universities. Against the background of the need to secure skilled labour within research, it is also necessary, in addition to international exchange mobility, to attract international talent to Germany as a location for study and research in the long term and to retain this talent at universities by offering attractive study and career conditions.

## **II. Organisational requirements at institutional level**

It is the task and mission of universities to qualify their students professionally and to prepare them for their subsequent entry into the labour market. For the target group of international students, the HRK believes that it is crucial not only to attract them to study in Germany, but also to lead them successfully to a degree. The drop-out rate among international students on bachelor's and master's programmes is still above average.<sup>2</sup> This not only has serious personal and professional consequences for the individual students, but also represents a misallocation of resources in an institutional and societal sense. It is well documented by the relevant research that sufficient language skills as well as academic and social integration into student life in Germany are crucial for academic success. In order to ensure the successful academic and social integration of international students, it therefore makes sense to identify potential and necessary improvement measures throughout the entire student life cycle, starting with university admission.<sup>3</sup>

- Greater flexibility in university admission

In the case of prospective international students, the secondary school leaving certificate from the country of origin is the basis for granting a higher education entrance qualification for an undergraduate degree programme. It is not so much the individual performance of the applicant that is decisive, but the assessment of the relevant school system, which is carried out by the Central Office for Foreign Education (ZAB). If the final certificate is categorised as equivalent, direct university

---

<sup>2</sup> 41% of international bachelor's students and 28% of international master's students end their studies without a degree. The figures are therefore significantly higher than the drop-out rates of German students (28% in bachelor's programmes; 21% in master's programmes). Ulrich Heublein et al, *Die Entwicklung der Studienabbruchquoten in Deutschland*, DZHW Brief 05/2022, p. 5 ff.

<sup>3</sup> With regard to possible measures, reference should also be made to the recommendations of the German Academic Exchange Service (position paper "International students as the skilled workers of tomorrow", March 2023).

admission is possible. If the certificate is not considered equivalent, it is possible to gain access to higher education by attending a *Studienkolleg* (institution offering preparatory courses) with a *Feststellungsprüfung* (university qualification exam) or by providing proof of a year of study in the country of origin. In some federal states<sup>4</sup>, universities can also offer prospective international students access to higher education via an internal university procedure, which includes both a preparation programme and an examination procedure. However, this access route has so far been little utilised. For admission to a master's degree programme there are far more flexible selection and access options.

Universities that use more flexible admission procedures for undergraduate degree programmes report high success rates in the course of study. Against this background, the HRK would welcome the creation of a legal basis in all federal states for making university admission more flexible. In future, the individual performance of each prospective student could be taken into account to a greater extent when deciding whether to grant them admission. Such further flexibilisation will necessarily mean increased resource requirements at the universities in order to ensure effective decision-making processes and targeted and customised preparation.

- Diversification of study preparation

Up to now, international applicants without direct access to higher education have generally attended *Studienkollegs* (preparatory courses) in Germany to prepare for their studies in terms of subject and language; this concludes with the *Feststellungsprüfung* (university qualification exam). Experience has shown that this type of study preparation guarantees a successful course of study. In federal states without state *Studienkollegs*<sup>5</sup>, access to higher education can be gained via a university's own preparation programmes and access procedures<sup>6</sup>; in Hesse, Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt, both access options exist in parallel. In addition, the digital preparation programme VORsprung, developed under the leadership of the DAAD, is currently being implemented at a number of pilot locations.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Bremen, Brandenburg, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia.

<sup>5</sup> Bremen, Brandenburg, North Rhine-Westphalia and Saarland.

<sup>6</sup> Examples include the programmes "Access to university for international students (ESiST)" of the state of Brandenburg and "Studienstart International Plus" of the University of Cologne.

<sup>7</sup> The programme offers prospective international students the opportunity to prepare for a STEM degree course in Germany in their

In the HRK's view, the expansion of study preparation programmes – whether provided at *Studienkollegs*, jointly between universities and *Studienkollegs* or independently by universities – is urgently needed to ensure subsequent academic success. Pilot programmes of alternative forms of study preparation in the home country (virtual / hybrid) should be carefully analysed against the background of a potentially better cost-benefit ratio and, if successful, expanded rapidly. Although digital or hybrid programmes in the home country provide useful support for preparation and may take better account of applicants' individual life situations, the HRK recommends that a large proportion of study preparation should take place in person at institutions in Germany, ideally in close cooperation with the host university. Only in this way can the essential linguistic, academic and socio-cultural preparation and integration of international students succeed.

- Ensuring academic, language and social support for students  
Universities currently offer support programmes for international students to varying degrees and with varying emphasis; these are generally taken up by international students on a voluntary basis. The majority of these programmes provide subject-specific support, improve general study skills and subject-specific language skills and introduce students to academic work. These programmes usually also include support for social integration, often delivered with the assistance of mentors or peers. Both experience at universities and research studies confirm the need to provide the support and mentoring services described above during the course of study.

From the HRK's perspective, it will be necessary to discuss whether the existing programmes should be made mandatory to a greater extent in the future. Furthermore, the HRK considers it a disadvantage that a large number of the support and accompanying measures described are (and can be) provided solely on a project basis, financed by externally acquired third-party funds. Important support units at universities, such as welcome centres and career services, often suffer from high staff turnover and a lack of resources. In the HRK's view, it is therefore particularly important to provide adequately funded and thus sustainable support structures.

- Improving support during the transition to employment  
Despite the desire of many international (master's) students to remain in Germany for a longer period of time after completing their studies, as proven by studies, only some international graduates actually make the leap into the German labour

---

home country and to take both the *Feststellungsprüfung* and the TestAS aptitude test there after this preparatory phase.

market. There are many reasons for this. Firstly, labour market-related support services at universities have so far only been geared to a limited extent towards the particular needs of international students. Secondly, some international students have insufficient knowledge of application processes and labour market structures. The considerable importance of German language skills for a career in Germany is also often underestimated, with the result that the support programmes available at universities are sometimes not used to a sufficient extent.

There is currently an increased interest and endeavour on the part of all stakeholders to facilitate the transition to employment for international students by means of appropriate awareness-raising and support measures.<sup>8</sup> Experiences from completed or ongoing initiatives should be analysed to identify "lessons learned"; also the sharing and dissemination of examples of good practice should be systematically supported. It is already clear that the timing of awareness-raising is particularly important: the earlier expectations are managed towards both international students and future employers, and targeted mutual contacts are made possible, for example via internships or practical semesters, the easier it will be to compensate for knowledge or qualification deficits during the study phase. Here, too, it will be important to provide adequately funded and therefore sustainable support structures, such as International Career Services.

### **III. Organisational requirements at system level**

At the system level, the HRK sees four overarching organisational needs with regard to the successful integration of international students at universities. The calls for action are directed firstly at universities themselves, which must and want to make their contribution to success, and secondly at the policy makers and social actors involved. Only by joining forces can this task be successfully accomplished for the benefit of individual students as well as for the benefit of universities and society.

- Openness to the world as the guiding principle of an institutional and social culture of welcome

Since 2015, the universities that are members of the HRK have been campaigning for openness and against xenophobia and racism with the nationwide initiative "Weltoffene Hochschulen – Gegen Fremdenfeindlichkeit" (German Universities Open to the World – Against Racism and Chauvinism). The initiative is a

---

<sup>8</sup> Examples include the recently launched DAAD FIT programme as well as earlier initiatives such as "Study and Work" (Stifterverband / Federal Government Commissioner for the New Federal States).

response to racially motivated verbal and physical violence, which also affects international students, researchers and staff at universities. The urgency and necessity of this public commitment to openness, diversity of opinion and basic democratic values as the foundations of all university activities are becoming clearer than ever in these days and weeks. An open and international campus and the international mobility of teaching staff and students are essential foundations for high-quality teaching and learning, excellent research and innovation and good governance. The HRK believes that ensuring an open, internationally orientated campus is a joint task for all stakeholders. Only if all university members as well as the local and regional community around universities firmly stand up for these values will it be possible to attract international talent to study, work or research in Germany in the future.

- Continuous improvement of legal and regulatory framework  
It is the joint task of universities, local stakeholders and policy makers to continuously improve the framework conditions for international students at German universities. Significant bottlenecks have been observed for years in the issuing of visas, both at central and local level. The improvement measures introduced by the Federal Foreign Office in the meantime are already having an effect in some cases, but there are still long waiting times in some areas. These bottlenecks have a considerable impact on the ability of German universities to attract qualified students from abroad. The HRK therefore welcomes the efforts of the Federal Foreign Office to remove the existing hurdles and considers efforts to further accelerate the process to be urgently needed. Another important lever in the process should be to provide local immigration authorities with adequate human and financial resources; their cooperation with universities should also be even more active.

The HRK believes that the existing legal and regulatory framework for international students studying in Germany is sufficiently differentiated. At the same time, new – digital or hybrid – study formats, in which international students are increasingly participating, will require further adjustments to the regulatory framework, particularly with regard to enrolment and social security in the case of study visits to a German university lasting less than one semester and possibly involving several interruptions. In the HRK's view, the introduction of a new student status '*internationale Teilleistungstudierende*' could create the basis for the necessary improvements.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. HRK ADVANCE, *Improved framework conditions for the participation of international students in virtual study components. Guidance*. Bonn, 2023.

After completing their studies, international graduates receive an 18-month residence permit to look for a job opportunity that matches their degree. In the HRK's view, the legal framework conditions for international graduates are therefore appropriately liberal by European standards.

- Valuing of language skills as a success factor for studying and labour market integration

Based on its recommendation "Institutional language policy at German universities", the HRK is in favour of embedding multilingualism more firmly in academia and promoting the conscious use of different languages in everyday university life.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, universities have increasingly recognised the strategic relevance of language policy issues and have set the course accordingly, particularly with regard to international students.<sup>11</sup> For example, the range of language courses, both in English and German as a foreign language (DaF), has been significantly expanded in many places. Nevertheless, in strategic decision-making processes, not only questions of multilingualism beyond English, but also in particular the ability to study in a given language – whether German or English – are often not given the necessary importance. Experience and studies have shown that insufficient language skills on the part of international students are the most frequently cited reason for difficulties in pursuing a course of studies, which can lead to students dropping out. Adequate German language skills, including German for academic purposes, are essential at the beginning of a German-language degree programme. These should be deepened during an individual's studies through additional language courses to enable them to remain in Germany and gain access to the German labour market. With a view to the possible labour market integration of international graduates, target-group-specific language qualification courses should also be provided during the course of study in the case of English-language studies, and if necessary anchored in the curriculum. In addition to the expansion of regular language support during studies, the HRK believes that special programmes for international students who intend to stay are also conceivable. For example, pilot programmes could be established for specific study tracks with a mandatory proportion of German language courses or six-month intensive German programmes for international master's graduates. Corresponding pilot programmes could be set up with the help

---

<sup>10</sup> Recommendation of the 11th General Assembly of the HRK on 22 November 2011, *Language policy at German universities*.

<sup>11</sup> The number of degree programmes taught in English has also increased significantly in recent years and currently stands at 3.1% at bachelor's level and 15.3% at master's level (internal calculation).



of state or private funding in cooperation between universities and local or regional businesses and thus be geared towards the specific needs of universities and prospective employers.

- Reducing the structural underfunding of university internationalisation

The targeted and sustainable internationalisation of universities is an essential prerequisite for attracting international talent to Germany as a location for higher education and research. Since 2009, the HRK has been supporting this process with the tool portfolio of the Audit 'Internationalisation of Universities', among other things. 111 universities have so far undergone an audit process to support and further develop their institutional internationalisation.<sup>12</sup> Despite heterogeneous institutional and local conditions, a meta-analysis of these more than one hundred audits clearly shows that insufficient personnel capacities and a lack of resources often hamper the internationalisation efforts of universities. Despite the great commitment of the federal and state governments, the HRK observes with concern that activities in the field of internationalisation are generally only financed within the framework of temporary funding programmes and thus become a further burden on the basic budgets of universities in the medium term. In view of the importance of internationalisation described above, not only for universities themselves, but also for the future viability of Germany as a business location, efforts on the part of federal and state policy makers must be significantly increased. This includes not only reliable funding for the German Academic Exchange Service and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, whose work is of central importance for the internationalisation of universities, but also securing student accommodation, especially in urban centres. At the same time, existing and new ongoing tasks at universities, for example in the preparation and support of international students, the integration of refugee students and language training and support for these target groups, should be permanently funded. Only sustainably financed and autonomous universities will be able to successfully shape their internationalisation process in the long term and thus contribute to Germany's scientific, social and economic development.

---

<sup>12</sup> As at: 1st quarter 2024.