# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN GERMANY: POLICIES AND INITIATIVES TO ATTRACT THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST

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## ABSTRACT

Germany being now the most attractive country after all English-speaking countries for international students, has put considerable effort into attracting and retaining international students by various policy initiatives. The first section of this paper gives a brief overview of international students including their scope and most popular subjects of studies, regions in Germany, and countries of origin. This is followed by an examination of particular policies and initiatives taken by governmental and non-governmental actors.

## INTRODUCTION

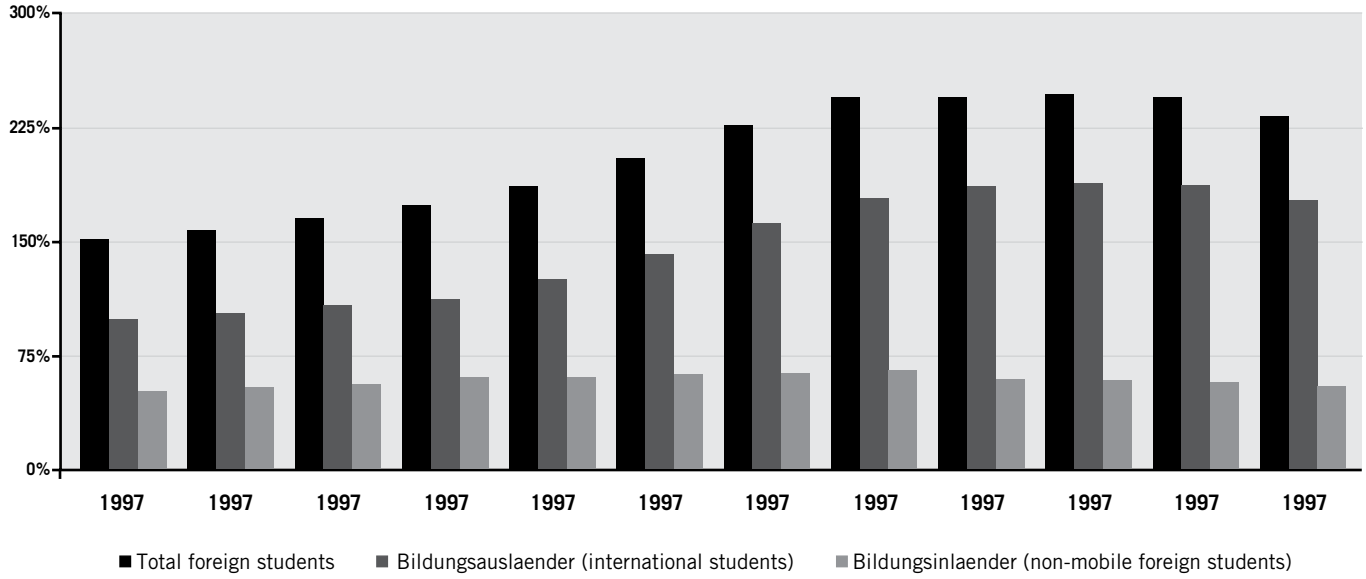
The increased significance of knowledge as the backbone of contemporary economies, combined with the demographic challenge faced by industrialized countries in attracting, integrating and retaining international students (who are a subset of highly skilled workers) have an utmost importance in the globalizing world. Today Germany faces an aging work force and as strong a competition as ever before in the international education market. Against this background, the president of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), Wintermantel, calls to do more to retain talented young people with global and intercultural knowledge and skills. Those international students are valuable as semi-finished human capital (Khadria, 2001), who are tomorrow's high skilled workers, combining excellent foreign language skills, knowledge of international markets, valuable resources for innovation and intercultural competence. For a long time the USA, Canada and Australia have provided attractive academic programs and the opportunity to start a professional career in their countries relatively smoothly. Nowadays, they are facing increased competition particularly from Europe but also from other parts of the world where former closed-door policies on immigration are opened up to fill the demographic gap and seek highly skilled talents worldwide. Germany being now the most attractive country after all English-speaking countries for international students has indeed put a considerable effort into attracting and retaining international students by introducing international joint degrees, programs in English and policies that make it easier for international students and graduates to stay and work in Germany. No doubt, Germany has also been benefitting greatly from the European integration process that helped a large number of European students through the Erasmus program and a harmonized study and degree structure (Bologna process) to come to Germany.

In the wake of the fast changing policies worldwide to attract and retain international students as highly skilled workers, this article will give an overview of policy trends and developments in Germany as one of the prime non-English speaking players in the competition for the best and brightest. After giving an introduction on the scope of international students in Germany, some main policy actors and initiatives are discussed.

## THE SCOPE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN GERMANY

According to Wissenschaft Weltoffen 2010, the latest study on international students that annually reports current and long term trends on international education in Germany, the numbers of international students[1] have been steadily increasing in Germany and reached an all-time peak of 189,852 in 2006 (see Figure 1). The numbers of international students decreased considerably from 2007-2008 to 177,852 but have since been on the rise again.

FIGURE 1: Foreign students in Germany from 1997 to 2008




In Germany, almost two-thirds of all international students were enrolled at universities in 2009, according to the study. Over the past four years there has been an enrollment trend towards universities of applied sciences that make up one fourth of international student enrollment. A minority of 3.5% studied at universities of fine arts. The top three general fields of study (specific fields) chosen by international students at universities were humanities (German studies and other European language and cultural studies), social sciences (economics, law, political science) as well as math and natural sciences (computer science, biology and chemistry). At universities of applied sciences the most popular fields of study were engineering, followed by economics and computer science. There is a clear difference between the subject of study and country of origin. Eastern and Western European students tend to choose subjects related to economics, whereas North American students choose to study German linguistics and those students coming from the African continent choose engineering and computer sciences (DAAD, 2009).

The majority of international students at universities (65.1%) and universities of applied sciences (83.1%) were doing a first degree; graduate degrees were more popular at universities (16.5% graduate studies, 12.8% PhD studies) than at universities of applied sciences (14.1%).

The majority of international students in Germany came from European countries (20% from Western and 30% from Eastern Europe) led by Russia (9,740 students) and Poland (9,401), Bulgaria (9,162) and Ukraine (6,324). Following Europe, Asia was the most popular continent at 33%, led by China, which leads all countries of origin with 23,140 students, followed by South Korea (4,136) and India (3,236). Africa accounted for one tenth of all students, led by Morocco (5,970), Cameroon (5,363) and Tunisia (2,702). Only 6% of mobile foreign students came from North and South America, led by the USA (3,080) and Brazil (2,089). The numbers of students from Australia and Oceania were 0.2% which is comparatively insignificant.

While the largest number of international students studied in the federal states of North Rhine-Westphalia, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin and Hessen, the highest percentage of international students was found in the states of Saarland (17.8%), the city states of Bremen (13.3%) and Berlin (12.7%). The average percentage of all federal states was 8.9% in 2009 after a peak of 9.5% in 2005 and 2006.

## POLICY SHIFTS AND INITIATIVES

For most of the time after World War II Germany followed a policy of cultural exchange and development aid towards international students (Hosseinizadeh 2005). The start of the European ERASMUS program in 1987 as part of the European integration process that has since given 2.2 million international students[2] mobility grants to study in other European Union member states and the European Freedom of Residency Act, marks the first major policy shift that gives international students from the European Union that study in Germany the same rights of access to higher education and to the labour market as domestic students. The Bologna process[3] that the European Union (EU) and other non-EU countries started in 1999 furthermore expanded the transferability of student credits and recognition of degrees to countries outside of the EU also aiming

to increase international student mobility. One of the intended outcomes of the ERASMUS program to foster high-skilled labour mobility so far has not been as successful as expected. With the rise of the New Economy at the end of the 1990s and the rising gap of qualified and high-skilled labour that neither domestic students nor European students could fill, a broad group of major national business, education, scientific, labour union and communal organizations published a manifesto in 2000 to call upon the political leaders, federal and state governments to strengthen Germany`s position in the higher-education market to attract the best and brightest international students to Germany in order to help meet Germany`s economic and demographic challenges in a more and more globalized world. The manifesto called for a liberalization of residency and working restrictions for international students and more student marketing and support services for international students (Bund-Länder-Kommission 2000).

The sudden break down of the New Economy hindered a fast development of ideas and their implementation in the first couple of years but they were quickly revived after the economy picked up again and additional public events concerning the question of migration and integration increased the political pressure to rethink Germany`s national migration and integration policy. As part of the new policy, a national integration concept[4] was developed in 2007 that also includes higher education and international students as primary domains and target groups. The concept could revive the demands of the earlier manifesto and, as a primary political document, could strengthen the political will to change policies and allocate resources to meet the goal of attracting and retaining the best and brightest.

Later in 2007 the government adopted a reform of the German residency act that gives all international students, despite their country of origin, the possibility to prolong their stay for up to one additional year after their graduation to search for a suitable job. Furthermore the government opened up labour market policies that abolish labour market opinions for international students and graduates, thus giving them more equal access to the labour market. As data from the national labour agency shows, post-graduate job search visas doubled between 2006 and 2009 and working visas increased from 13% to 22% of all graduates[5]. The new policies already have been proven successful, although a much larger increase could have been possible if the working visa would not be restricted to one employer or a suitable job, which is not the case, for instance, in the UK. Work outside the university is also restricted to 90 full or 180 half days for international students from outside the European Union during their studies while international students from European Union member states and domestic students can work up to 20 hours a week[6].

As part of the policy change, funding has also been allocated to provide more and better support services for international students and the quality of studies in general. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), being one of the oldest and most experienced organizations on international education in Germany, has a strong membership base of higher education institutions and a long history of government relations. Along with the German Rectors Conference (HRK), the prominent organization for higher education leadership on structural reforms and quality assurance of institutions of higher education, DAAD has become one of the main actors to achieve these goals. Through a consulting process between the government and the organizations, DAAD was granted continuous support of their previous international student support programs and new programs that were especially intended to foster the long term retention and integration of international students. By 2012 DAAD will have given out 9 million Euros through its PROFIN grants to support institutions of higher education to develop, implement and administer service concepts and programs for international students.[7] The HRK developed a national code of conduct for working with international students that, as a voluntary certificate, intends to be a motivational element of quality management and good service.[8]

In addition to the national integration concept that is an impetus to policy changes and support services and quality management programs that help to attract and retain international students, the German federal and state governments adopted the Initiative For Excellence[9] in 2005 to bring at least a few German universities up to the top group of international rankings such as 'The Times Higher Education Supplement' (Stuchtey, 2008). In other words, the main purpose of this initiative was to turn Germany into a more attractive research site, while advancing its international competitiveness and highlighting the exceptional achievements of German universities and the overall German scientific community. Within the framework of Initiative for Excellence, a total of 1.9 billion Euros of funding have been made accessible to higher education institutions on a competitive basis. 75% of this amount is supplied by the federal government, the rest is supplied by the federal states. 'From 2006 until 2010, the federal government will contribute €250 million annually to the project and the German states €130 million (together about US$453 million annually)' (Kehm, 2006). The Initiative of Excellence has three project-oriented avenues of competition among German universities. The first one is new graduate schools for young scientists to provide

modernized and structured doctoral programs within an exceptionally good environment and a broad area of science. The second avenue of competition is research and training institutions known as 'excellence clusters'. These excellence clusters are to be created at the universities and will collaborate with non-university research institutes, universities of applied sciences and industry as defined by DFG. The third area is the advancement of future concepts for top-class research at the universities, which is to enhance the shape of at most ten selected universities, referred as institutional strategies. In order to get this type of support a higher education institution is required to at least encompass one excellence cluster, one research school and an authentic and reasonable general plan of action for transforming into an internationally acknowledged 'beacon of science'. While this particular policy mainly aims to make German universities and its economy competitive by internationalizing the universities mainly through attracting international students, it also has effects on retaining them by granting funds to various interdisciplinary and interactive programs including German language courses, mentoring programs, career facilities and supporting the students to be active in their fieldworks and at various conferences.

## CHANCES AND CHALLENGES

Despite some slowdown in international student growth, the German government and Germany`s non-governmental organizations in the higher education sector are dedicated to further develop and reform their immigration and integration policies as well as their academic study programs, research and support services to attract the best and brightest international students as potential future high-skilled migrants. In the past few years Germany has seen strong policies and initiatives that have allocated a considerable amount of funding to reach that goal. With international education staying on the political agenda, continuous research and monitoring on international education will assist Germany to react to international trends and policy shifts in the higher education market. Nevertheless, challenges remain to further develop good practices and policies that are robust to economic turbulent times. Looking ahead, if support structures and funding opportunities are not sustainable or flexible enough to change, Germany will not be able to fully profit further than only attracting the students. Therefore, integration of those students into the wider society and labour market still pose a great challenge and must be the major concern for the future.

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### FOOTNOTES

[1] The term *Bildungsinlaender (non-mobile foreign students)* refers to those those foreign students who have grown up and educated in the country of study, while the term *Bildungsauslaender (mobile foreign students)* means international students who hold another country's citizenship, have a visa for Germany in relation to their studies. The second category who is referred as international students is the target of this article.

[2] see: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc80_en.htm (accessed 3/1/11)

[3] see: http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290_en.htm (accessed 3/1/11)

[4] see: http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Archiv16/Artikel/2007/07/Anlage/2007-07-12-nationaler-integrationsplan,property=publicationFile.pdf (accessed 3/1/11)

[5] see 2006: http://www.pub.arbeitsagentur.de/hst/services/statistik/200612/iiia6/ae/aezu_d.pdf

see 2009: http://www.pub.arbeitsagentur.de/hst/services/statistik/200912/iiia6/ae/aezu_d.pdf (accessed 3/1/11)

[6] see court decision 12 RK 34/79 of the German High Court for Social Welfare (Bundessozialgericht) and paragraph 16.3.2./3./8 of the German immigration regulations (AufenthaltG-VV)

[7] see: http://www.daad-magazin.de/14181/index.html (accessed 3/1/11)

[8] see: http://www.hrk.de/de/download/dateien/Nationaler_Kodex.pdf (accessed 3/1/11)

[9] http://www.bmbf.de/en/1321.php