



Challenges and Opportunities in the Pursuit of Professorship by International Academics at German Universities

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Abstract

Germany is one of the most important host countries for internationally mobile students and academics. In comparison to students and academic personnel, however, international professors are underrepresented. The research project “International Academics at German Universities: From Postdoc to Professorship” explores the hurdles faced by international academics in making the transition from postdoc to professorship at German universities.

Germany serves as a significant host country for international academics and is considered a highly appealing scientific destination on a global scale. This is evident in the substantial presence of foreign academics working as doctoral candidates or postdoctoral professionals at German universities.

However, considering the 19 percent of international academics among academic staff, the low (10 percent) proportion of international professors is striking. This indicates that there are barriers impeding international academics from obtaining professorship at German universities.

As part of the research project “International Academics at German Universities: From Postdoc to Professorship” (InWiDeHo), 21 junior scientists from all regions of the world were interviewed: 33 percent from Europe and Central Asia, 19 percent from East Asia and Pacific, 14 percent from Middle East and North Africa, 10 percent each from North America, Latin America and Caribbean as well as South Asia, and 5 percent from Sub-Saharan Africa. 43 percent of the scientists surveyed specialize in natural sciences, 33 percent in economics and social sciences and 24 percent in engineering.

Institutional Support

Support from the university is highly valued and is mostly rated positively. Nevertheless, there is recognizable potential for improvement and optimization.

Insufficient German language skills are one of the main obstacles for international academics. Services offered by universities play a central role in the necessary language acquisition. Yet, these often do not cater to the unique requirements of foreign scientists. Therefore expansion of language course offerings is recommended, with heightened attention to the particular requirements of postdoctoral researchers and professors from abroad. In addition to focusing on everyday language, greater emphasis should be placed on the language of academia, as well as administrative and self-governance aspects.

Furthermore, there are significant gaps in the implementation of family-friendly initiatives, especially when it comes to dual-career services. It is clear that primarily scientists applying for or already holding a professorship are attracted by dual-career offerings. Support measures, such as better information and counseling, and more dual-career service centers should be expanded.

International Orientation

In many areas of everyday university life, the international orientation of German universities is still rather weak. Beyond research, the application of multilingualism as an intercultural practice is relatively limited. This is particularly evident in teaching and in academic self-governance. This also worsens the prospects of international academics with limited German language skills in appointment procedures.

Across the board, university administrations are not yet fully attuned to the needs of scientists from abroad. Multilingualism as a cultural practice should therefore be more strongly established in all relevant areas, especially in teaching, in academic self-governance, in appointment procedures and in research support facilities, thus enabling better support of international researchers. Furthermore, universities should take a more proactive role in advancing the strategy development for appointing international professors.

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Nonuniversity Living Environment

Beyond the university environment, numerous impediments may hinder international academics from residing in Germany for an extended period.

Obtaining a residence permit, which entitles holders to live and work in Germany, has proven to be a significant hurdle—especially for people from outside the European Union. Furthermore, the interviewed scientists highlight deficiencies in both multilingualism and service orientation at immigration offices. Moreover, the presence of xenophobia often is a factor that deters from the idea of permanent residency in Germany.

In order to cushion the particular hardships that result for scientists from abroad from the usual practice of fixed-term contracts in the German academic system, suitable transitional regulations should be developed and implemented by policy makers and universities. In addition, the multilingualism of staff at immigration offices could be increased, and the transparency and speed of processing the concerns of international academics improved.

Furthermore, the society in general and in universities in particular should foster a more welcoming culture, which would contribute to positively influencing the intentions of international academics to stay.

The Attractiveness of Germany as a Science Location

Germany's attractiveness is rated highly in terms of the support of junior scientists and availability of research funding. However, due to legal framework conditions and limited job opportunities, respondents are cautious about long-term career prospects. From the perspective of the interviewed scientists, career paths to professorship are often unclear. For example, the time-consuming habilitation, which is the classical path to a professorship in the German-speaking world, is hardly known in the Anglo-Saxon higher education system and in the broader international context. In addition, professorial duties in Germany with its high teaching load and the obligation to participate in academic self-governance do not correspond to international practices and are also not very flexible.

International academics are often unaware of the specific features of the German higher education and research system at the beginning of their stay, which is why an improvement in information resources on academic careers in Germany seems necessary. The qualification paths and career opportunities should also be brought into alignment with international standards. For example, more positions with a tenure-track option as an alternative to the habilitation procedure and more flexible teaching loads could increase Germany's attractiveness for international academics.

Conclusion

Germany is already an attractive science location and an interesting labor market for young international scientists who aspire to a professorship. However, this attractiveness could be further increased if barriers in the nonuniversity environment were removed and university support measures were better tailored for the target group. Finally, consideration should be given to aligning academic career paths in Germany more closely with international standards. This could mean making more tenure-track positions available as an alternative to the habilitation procedure and making teaching commitments more adaptable. ▲

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