

German Students Abroad

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In April 2013, the federal and state governments adopted a common strategy for the internationalization of the German higher education institutions. A central goal defined in this strategy—albeit without a target date—is for every second graduate to gain study-related experience abroad and for at least one in three to complete a visit abroad, lasting at least three months, and/or eliciting at least 15 European Credit Transfer System points.

With this national goal, Germany considerably exceeds the mobility targets set on the European level: The European Union and the countries committed to the Bologna process set themselves the goal that by 2020; at least 20 percent of all graduates in the European Higher Education Area should have completed a study- or training-related visit abroad.

IS STUDY ABROAD ESSENTIAL?

Study abroad is considered to be very beneficial to drive self-development, to equip students with intercultural competences. The students work within an

international labor market, as well as to prepare them to identify issues shared across borders—such as, curing diseases, finding energy solutions, and fighting hunger, and thus to know how to engage in an increasingly globalized working world. According to Allan E. Goodman of the Institute of International Education, “globalization is here to stay, and students who want to work in our interconnected global world should study abroad.”

Study abroad means leaving the comfort zone, which if done correctly empowers students. Empowerment means that students learn how to take responsibility for their own lives as well as for society. It is important for them to realize their role in society and how to participate and shape it. Therefore, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is promoting the idea that international experiences should become an essential part in higher education studies. International mobility is not only an asset to the personal curriculum vitae but also a unique experience and formative module for one’s own personality.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

There are two types of international student mobility: short-term stays (often referred to as credit mobility) and long-term stays with the purpose of obtaining a degree abroad (often referred to as degree mobility). Mobility studies show that this distinction is not only a terminological one: For some important aspects the available data for German students show noticeable differences between the two types of mobility. For example, while Austria, the Netherlands, and Switzerland are among the four most important destination countries for degree-mobile students (together with the United Kingdom), they do not play a major role

when considering temporary study-related visits abroad. Countries that play an important role for credit-mobile students are the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and Spain. Also, while students of language and cultural studies belong to the most mobile group referring to temporary study-related visits abroad, they are underrepresented among students studying abroad to pursue a foreign degree.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN GERMANY

The number and proportion of degree-mobile German students have increased steadily since the early 1990s—in both absolute and relative terms. Specifically, the number of German students enrolled abroad increased from about 34,000 in 1991 to about 134,000 in 2011. Interestingly, the increase in degree-mobile students from Germany has accelerated sharply during the last years. Between 2005 und 2011, the number of internationally mobile students from Germany rose by 10.6 percent on annual average. While from 1991 to 2004, the mean growth per year was only half as high (5.3%). However, in 2011, the growth rate was only 4.6 percent, compared to 10.2 percent in 2010. The next years will show if this decline in the growth rates was only temporary or if this is the beginning of a long-term trend of lower growth rates.

Data on credit mobility of German students, collected in national graduate surveys, show that about 30 percent of all graduates at German higher education institutions in 2010 spent study-related affairs abroad, with a minimum duration of three months. In contrast to the constantly rising numbers for degree mobility, credit mobility quotas have stabilized at this level during the last decade. This means that while the Europe-wide target (20% credit mobile graduates in the

European Higher Education Area in 2020) has already been reached with regard to Germany, the national mobility goal of the Joint Science Conference and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) (50% credit mobile graduates in the midterm) remains to be fulfilled.

Finally, some important structural developments are linked to the Bologna process. Some students now spend time abroad at an earlier stage, stay for slightly shorter periods on average, and make use of the so-called “bridge mobility.” These are mobility units in the phase between bachelor’s and master’s degrees or between master’s and PhD. A bridge mobility unit could be designed, for example, as a year-long direct exchange program with a partner institution, where each partner sends one (or several) highly qualified students to the other institution.

POSSIBLE FURTHER PROMOTION IN GERMANY

With its numerous programs, the DAAD is constantly working to lower the hurdles for international student mobility—the main ones being funding problems, concerns about losing studying time, and difficulties reconciling a visit abroad with the requirements of the study program at home. Two particularly promising measures involve enhancing the number of programs with double or joint degrees and integrating so-called “mobility windows”—i.e., time slots reserved for mobility—into bachelor’s and master’s degree programs. Combined with an adequate number of scholarships, these measures should help Germany revive the upward development for study-related visits that were observed during the 1990s.

Note: Together with the German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW), the DAAD compiles and presents data on outgoing and incoming, as well as international student mobility—on the Web site: wissenschaft-weltoffen.de (in German and English)—adding further information to the correspondent publication.