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German Academic Exchange Service

DAAD
STUDIES

International Student Mobility in Germany

Summary of the results for the first International University
Benchmark (BintHo) in the 2020/21 winter semester

April 2023





Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The BintHo study included a survey of 117,270 students at German higher education institutions in the 2020/21 winter semester. The analysis concentrated on two groups: domestic students (n=86,348 individuals after weighting) and international students at German higher education institutions (n=13,871 individuals after weighting). When necessary, analyses within the international student category differentiated between degree-seeking and exchange students.

Setting out into the world from Germany: international mobility of domestic students

UAt the time of taking the survey, 19% of the domestic student respondents had previously completed a study-related stay abroad. Just under half (46%) of the students were planning or considering undertaking a stay abroad. Over a third (35%) of them had not considered a stay abroad, decided not to undertake a stay abroad or dropped plans for a stay abroad.

The preferred form of mobility for domestic students is a semester abroad (Uni: 71%, HAW: 61%), although work placements and semesters spent in the workplace are also common ways of undertaking international mobility (Uni: 25%, HAW: 32%). For just under half of students, the stay abroad lasts between three and six months. Another quarter of students spend between 6 and 12 months abroad. Only around 8% of students spend more than a year on a stay abroad.

Higher education institutions utilize compulsory stays abroad in different ways and for different purposes. For example, 76% of university students studying foreign language education must spend part of their studies abroad. By contrast, among university students studying for state examinations without a teaching degree, this proportion was only 4%. Periods of mobility were almost twice as common at universities of applied

sciences¹ (HAW) than at universities due to compulsory course requirements (Uni: 17%, HAW: 29%). On the other hand, the share of university students who completed a stay abroad was higher than among students of universities of applied sciences (Uni: 22%, HAW: 16%).

Domestic students spend the majority (61%) of their study-related stays abroad in Western Europe, most frequently in Spain (12%), the UK (10%) and France (10%). In other regions of the world, countries such as the US (9%) and China (3%) were popular with domestic students.

The most common problems associated with a study-related stay abroad were finding accommodation in the host country (26%) and restrictions to planned activities due to the Covid-19 pandemic (22%). The problems faced by students varied by host country. For example, students were comparatively unlikely to report problems with finding accommodation in China (16%), but were relatively more likely to report language difficulties (38%), poor quality of courses (11%) and courses that were not academically challenging (14%). The picture is similar for Russia (R), where problems with finding accommodation are comparatively rare (14%). However, compared to the average (Av.) for all respondents, respondents for Russia were twice as likely to rate courses as poor (R: 12%, Av: 6%) and that the level was too low (R: 16%, M: 8%). The US presents a very different picture. Compared to the average, students were more likely to report not having experienced any problems (USA: 24%, Av: 18%), and were significantly less likely to report language difficulties (USA: 6%, Av: 16%).

In terms of their motivation to undertake a stay abroad, German students most often cited personal development (75%), cultural interest (64%), a desire for exciting experiences outside university (59%) and improving language skills (58%). Nevertheless, there were marked variations in these motivations between different subject area groups. For example, students in the performing arts, film or theatre reported personal development as a goal at below the average rate (63%, Av: 75%). Instead, they indicated that teachers or specific courses at the host institution motivated them to undertake a stay abroad (24%, Av: 9%). Students studying architecture or interior architecture were, by contrast, more interested in acquiring subject-specific knowledge (39%, Av: 28%). They were less motivated by the prospect of improving their chances of finding a job due to having experienced international mobility (31%, Av: 41%).

The most significant benefits reported by students from their stay abroad align with their motivations, with 77% reporting personal development, such as increased confidence or greater openness to new experiences, as the greatest benefit from their stay. Students were more likely to report these benefits if they had completed their stay further afield in countries such as Australia (86%), Taiwan (88%) and Nepal (93%), than if they had stayed closer to home in a country such as Luxembourg (56%) or Belgium (67%). Compared to the average (53%), students reported exciting experiences in the host country more often for Estonia (68%) and Latvia (69%) as the main benefit from their stay abroad. Students who spent time in Lithuania were particularly likely to report that making contacts and expanding networks was a significant benefit compared to the average (61%, Av: 43%).

1 'Universities of applied sciences' includes 'Fachhochschulen'.

Over half of mobile students (56%) had to find information about organisational issues such as visas, health insurance and vaccinations prior to their stay abroad. Around 47% researched the financial cost of their stay abroad. The same share (47%) gathered information about how their achievements at foreign higher education institutions would be recognised. Here, too, there were differences between fields of study. For example, compared to the average for all respondents, students studying architecture and interior architecture were less likely to look for information on organisational issues (38%, Av: 56%) but were more likely to research the social and cultural aspects of their host country (32%, Av: 23%). By contrast, industrial engineering students reported much more often that they were interested in how their academic achievements abroad would be recognised (59%, Av: 46%).

The majority of lecturers use the means available to inform students about the possibility of studying or interning abroad. Just under three-quarters of students reported that their teachers had drawn on their own experiences abroad in their teaching. There is also a linear relationship between the behaviour of the lecturers and the international mobility of the students: among the students who stated that none of the lecturers encouraged them to spend time abroad, the proportion of students who are internationally mobile is the lowest, at eleven percentage points. In contrast, the proportion of students who spent time abroad in the group of respondents who stated that all lecturers encouraged them to spend time abroad is 35 percentage points. This finding suggests that lecturers have an influence on students' international mobility.

Just under half (47%) of the internationally mobile domestic students surveyed said they had funded their stay abroad through Erasmus+. Other major sources of funding include support from partners, parents or friends (54%), personal savings (54%), and part-time jobs before or while studying (37%).

Some domestic students had initially planned to be internationally mobile but had abandoned that plan. The reasons given to explain these decisions included financial difficulties (37%), loss of time in their studies (35%), and travel restrictions owing to the Covid-19 pandemic (30%). With regard to financial difficulties, it is notable that women reported these significantly more often than men (40% vs. 33% respectively).

The reasons why domestic students did not consider a stay abroad included being separated from their social environment in Germany (53%), feeling it would be too challenging to organise (40%), the perception it would cost too much (38%) or the belief it would take too much time out of studying (32%). Women were more likely to report concerns about being separated from their social environment as a barrier than men (60% vs. 48% respectively).

Just under half of domestic students (49%) who have not yet considered any stay abroad said they would be more willing to do so if they could sit exams for their higher education institution in Germany online during their stay abroad. In addition, 37% of those individuals who reported separation from their social environment as a barrier to completing a stay abroad said their interest in mobility would be increased if all courses abroad could be completed digitally or virtually.

Coming to Germany from around the world: international students at German universities

Of the international students surveyed, more study at universities (66%) than at universities of applied sciences (34%). Of these, the majority of international students surveyed were on degree-awarding study programmes (95%) while only 5% were exchange students. The largest group of international students are studying for master's degrees (47%), while 35% are studying for bachelor's degrees and 12% for doctorates. Popular fields of study include economics and business administration (15%), IT (10%), mechanical engineering/process engineering (8%) and electrical engineering and information technology (7%).

For half of international students (50%), their courses are taught exclusively in English. However, there are significant differences depending on the type of mobility and degree. Among exchange students (i.e. those who do not intend to graduate in Germany), the proportion of students on courses taught solely in English is significantly lower (35%) than among international students who intend to graduate in Germany (51%). The proportion of students on courses of study taught in English at the master's degree level is significantly higher than at the bachelor's degree level (66% vs. 27% respectively).

Just under half of international students on degree-awarding study programmes (49%) fund their studies by working part-time prior to or while at university. This is the case for only 21% of exchange students. Visiting students were three times more likely to report funding their studies through scholarships than international students on degree programs (57% vs. 17% respectively).

Germany was the first choice for studying abroad for over three-quarters of international students (76%). International students cite a range of favourable factors for Germany. These include an attractive range of courses and good conditions for study (91%), the chance to obtain an internationally recognised degree (88%), good job prospects after graduation (81%) and freedom from having to pay tuition fees in almost all federal states (79%).

Just over 56% of international students were able to get a place at their university of choice in Germany. International students base their choice of higher education institution on aspects such as specific course content (58%), the good reputation of a higher education institution (53%), freedom from tuition fees (52%), and the availability of English-language study programmes (48%). Master's degree students reported the latter category significantly more often than bachelor's degree students (62% vs. 32% respectively).

When choosing a higher education institution, the key sources of information include an institution's website (76%), ranking and assessment portals (40%), information provided by the DAAD (36%), along with friends or family members who have or are currently studying at the institution (34%).

For around 60% of international students, finding accommodation represents a challenge. The majority of these would have welcomed more support from points of contact at their higher education institution. With regard to study conditions at

German higher education institutions, around half of international students feel the degree of independence in organising studies was too high or slightly too high (51%) and over a third (36%) felt the level of difficulty was too high or slightly too high. Furthermore, international students commonly rated their lecturers' academic expertise as 'good' or 'very good' (Uni: 89%, HAW: 81%).

Over a fifth of international students (82%) said they would recommend their current higher education institution in Germany to others. There were no significant differences between universities and universities of applied sciences in this regard.

Just under a third (29%) of degree-seeking international students said they 'definitely' wanted to stay in Germany, while slightly more (32%) were considering the possibility of doing this. In other words, **around 61% of the international students surveyed said they had some intention to stay in Germany after completing their studies.** This intention to stay in Germany correlates with the situation in students' countries of origin. Where countries are affected by crises, students from those countries are more likely to state an intention to remain in Germany. Where the situation in a student's country of origin is politically stable and economically prosperous, it is generally less likely that they intend to stay in Germany. For example, the proportions of international students who intend to stay in Germany and who are from Syria (83%), Afghanistan (79%) and Azerbaijan (76%) are relatively high. In contrast, the proportions for countries of origin such as Luxembourg (19%), Switzerland (26%) and France (38%) are substantially lower. International students studying at universities of applied sciences are more likely to intend to remain in Germany (65%) than those studying at universities (59%). Engineering students are most likely to intend to stay in Germany (67%), while the intention to remain is lowest among medicine and health sciences students (53%).

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Internationalisation from the students' perspective

Among domestic students, 38% would like to see a greater proportion of international students at their German higher education institution. The rate at which domestic students would like to see more international students varies between subject groups. Students of the humanities expressed this desire in particular (53%), followed by romance philology (51%), political sciences (50%) and social sciences (48%). Until now domestic students have generally seen less of a benefit from opportunities for international and intercultural exchange which are offered by the presence of exchange students at their higher education institutions. Among domestic students, only 7% said they spoke to international students from within or outside Europe very often, while 8% reported such conversations happening daily.

Data on conversations which international students have held during the past month shows that over half of students (54%) from Northern and Western Europe have no or very little contact with other international students from outside Europe. This is slightly less common for students from Central, Southern and South-Eastern Europe (39%). However, this applies to only a quarter of students from countries of origin outside Europe (25%). Correspondingly, this latter group comes into contact with other international students from outside Europe every day or very frequently (52%). These results indicate that international students mainly talk regularly to other students from their own region of origin.

For over three-quarters (77%) of domestic students, the provision of a wide range of language classes represents an important or very important marker of the internationalisation of their higher education institution. Over half (52%) of domestic students also see events for intercultural exchange between students (such as international evenings) as important or very important services for a higher education institution to provide. For international students, four key indicators of the level of internationalisation at their higher education institution in Germany are of particular significance: administrative staff with adequate English skills (76%), an English language website (72%), courses of study taught in English (72%) and a wide range of language classes (71%).

Virtual mobility experiences

Around a fifth (20%) of domestic students who had planned an in-person stay abroad but had to abandon that plan see virtual stays abroad (i.e. a stay undertaken online) as an attractive alternative. They see the chief benefits arising from lower costs (82%), lower organisational effort (68%) and not having to be separated from their social environment in Germany (49%).

Those domestic students who have already completed an in-person stay abroad were much less likely to see virtual mobility as an attractive alternative (5%). The main reason for this is that students associate virtual stays with a lack of intercultural experiences (81%), a limited effect on personal development (73%) and a lack of experience outside the higher education institution (60%).

Overall, a quarter of domestic students are already making use of various digital offers provided by higher education institutions abroad, such as online seminars as part of degree-awarding study programmes (15%), teaching and learning videos on specific topics (10%) and mobile learning (8%). In addition, just under a third (31%) of domestic students access teaching and assessment tools and supporting services provided by foreign higher education institutions. These include podcasts and blogs produced by teachers abroad (17%), digital lectures (16%) and support materials from teaching courses such as lecture notes and minutes (14%).

Studying during the pandemic: experiences of international students in Germany

Of the international students who took part in the survey, only 5% were able to pursue their studies in-person in Germany in the 2020 summer semester, while only 3% were able to do so in the 2020/21 winter semester. Over half of these students pursued their studies exclusively online while they were in Germany to attend higher education institutions (2020 summer semester: 52%, 2020/21 winter semester: 59%). A smaller proportion of students attended online courses at German higher education institutions while based abroad (2020 summer semester: 12%, 2020/21 winter semester: 9%).

International exchange students faced major challenges due to a lack of personal contact (77%), lack of access to infrastructure such as cafeterias and libraries at their higher education institution (72%) and financial worries (60%). **Over half (51%) of international students said that less money was available to them due to the pandemic, while just under half (47%) reported that their financial situation had become a serious burden on them.**

The most common problems reported by domestic students were a lack of personal contact (83%), distractions from their studies (55%) and a lack of technical infrastructure at their higher education institution (52%). Around a third reported that less money was available to them than before the pandemic, while one in five (20%) said this had been a serious burden on them.

Imprint

Editor

Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst e.V. (DAAD)
German Academic Exchange Service
Kennedyallee 50, D-53175 Bonn
Tel.: +49 228 882-0
Fax: +49 228 882-444
E-Mail: webmaster@daad.de
Internet: <https://www.daad.de>

Authorised Representative of the Executive Committee:
Prof Dr Joybrato Mukherjee
District Court of Bonn
Register of associations, number VR 2107
Sales tax number: DE122276332
Person responsible according to § 18 Abs. 2 MStV:
Dr Kai Sicks, Kennedyallee 50, 53175 Bonn

Project management

Dr Jan Kercher

Analysis and reporting

ISTAT – Institut für angewandte Statistik
Dirk Reifenberg in collaboration with Veronika Phillips
Universitätsstraße 12
D-34127 Kassel

Layout and typesetting

Atelier Hauer+Dörfler GmbH, Berlin

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cleevesmedia e.K., Meckenheim

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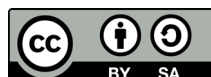
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