



DAAD RESEARCH BRIEF

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International Career Services in Germany

Current Structures and Strategic Ways to Move Forward

1

ABSTRACT

International Career Services (ICS) is an umbrella term which refers to career services for international students. ICS support international students with integrating successfully into local, regional and national labor markets, and has traditionally been a feature at universities in the Anglosphere. More recently, ICS have increased in Europe due in large part to the rise of English-medium programs, and German universities in particular have enjoyed broad based support for ICS programs. In this research brief, the case of career services for international students in Germany are outlined, a conceptual framework is presented, and four strategic planning areas are identified that can aid universities interested in developing their own international career services.

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Introduction

From Finland to Turkey, an ever-increasing number of higher education institutions (HEI) in Europe are developing specialized career services for international students. Developing career services for international students is one component of the internationalization of career services, which is defined as ‘the deliberate addition of an transnational, international, binational and/or multicultural dimension to the academic, cultural, experiential, advising, training and support structures that seek to facilitate international students’ transition into the host, home, or third country labor market’ (Schueller, 2022d, p. 21). In this research brief, the case of career services for international students in Germany is outlined and a conceptual framework is presented that can aid HEI in developing their own internationalized career services.

AUTHOR



Jessica Schueller is a doctoral student at Miami University in Ohio, USA. Her research and work focuses on transnational higher education and the internationalization of career services.

The need for international student-specific career services

International students face different challenges than their domestic counterparts – this is the assumption made in separating career services for both populations. Research shows that international students face a plethora of challenges, including 1) insufficient language skills, 2) a lack of knowledge of the working world in the country of study and little practical experience, 3) reluctant employers, especially in small companies, 4) a lack of personal and professional networks in the country of study, 5) little needs-based support for career entry or the lack of use of such support, 6) legal barriers, and 7) incomplete degree programs (Morris-Lange & Brands, 2015, pp. 19-21). These challenges are not present for the vast majority of university-going students in Germany today, effectively differentiating the needs of international and domestic students.

2

Beyond these broad challenges, non-German speaking international students face additional challenges that create a need for more advanced support in preparing for careers in Germany, due to both linguistic and cultural barriers. The number of international students studying in Germany has increased by over 75% in the last decade, and a major part of this growth is attributable to English-medium programs (DAAD & DZHW, 2021; Kercher, 2019, p. 3). The 2017 “Study & Work” study from the Institute for Higher Education Research Halle-Wittenberg and the Federal Government Commissioner for the New Federal States found the following additional barriers to be crucial for English-only students (Dömling, 2017, p. 9, Author’s translation):

- Students’ abilities to be independent during an internship and job search vary widely due to the prior experiences, cultures, education, and learning systems available in their respective home countries.
- The language barrier for students in English-language degree programs in internships and job searches is greater.
- Depending on their country of origin, students must expect to experience more skepticism or prejudice in some industries.

- There is a varying degree of urgency in finding a career prospect in Germany or a third country due to complex labor market situations, political situations, or (civil) wars in students’ countries of origin.
- Finding a well-paid job also seems to depend on the extent to which students are obliged to care for their families.

International students in general, but those with no German language or cultural skills in particular are at a disadvantage (Morris-Lange & Brands, 2015, pp. 19-21). The role of ICS is to mitigate, counteract and help prepare students for integration into the German labor market despite these present challenges.

International Career Services in Germany

An increasing number of English-medium programs was undoubtedly a catalyst for the increasing development of ICS. Other factors also played a role, such as the comparatively generous 18-month post-study work visa, combined with national marketing strategies that seek to welcome international students. Combined, these initiatives have added to Germany’s positive image among young professionals, who see English-medium programs as an accessible gateway to a career in Germany. And while international students are often situated as ‘ideal immigrants’ due to their studies affording them familiarity with “the cultural facets of Germany as well as with the German language” (Nintcheu & Köbler, 2020, p. 10), this is not always the case for graduates of English-medium programs. Despite this apparent disconnect between English-speaking students and German employers interested in German-speaking employees, recent OECD data indicates that nearly 50% of international students from the 2015 cohort remained in Germany five years later (OECD, 2022, p. 185). Overall, this dynamic over the preceding decade has increased attention on international student career services in Germany in policy, practice, and research.

An ICS provides “career support, services and guidance tailored to the needs of international students” (Schueller, 2022d, p. 21). The terms career services for international students and international career services are used interchangeably and understood

to share the same meaning. Whereas career services for international students and international career services refer to the actual services provided, the internationalization of career services refers to the process of integrating a dimension that addresses international and/or global labor market transitions. An ICS may be used by a specific employee in an existing unit (e.g., International Office, Career Service) at an HEI, as a separate unit (e.g., ICS), and/or as part of a project-funded program.

In a study of ICS in Germany, based on the data collected from a review of university websites (n = 420) and an online survey of practitioners at German HEIs (n = 141), revealing roughly 20% of all German HEIs have an ICS (Schueller, 2022d, p. 60). The study also revealed that a typical ICS has six elements: 1) the ICS is anchored within the international office or career services and situated within existing services; 2) it offers tailored, subject-generalized support; 3) it caters to degree-seeking students in English-language master's or German bachelor's programs; 4) it is provided primarily in English and/or German; 5) during the middle and end of a study program; and 6) it helps integrate international students into the national labor market.

Most universities who participated in the study reported that they fund their ICS with short-term project funding. The assumption is that projects will be integrated into universities' main budgets, but this is not always the case, leading to ICS closures. Without sustainable funding, there is a loss of knowledgeable staff and permanent service structures to serve the international students that continue to matriculate every semester. Unlike other programs, such as temporary resettlement support for refugees, the integration of international students into the German labor market will persist as an area of need for as long as international students are being recruited by German universities and sought by German employers.

Four Areas to Consider When Developing International Career Services

As more German HEI consider adding ICS to their institutional service portfolios, there are four key areas that need to be considered prior to launch. These include developing an institutional policy

that aligns with local labor market needs, determining the correct services based on the international student population, considering funding (including from employers), and naming the ICS appropriately. Each of these areas will be briefly described next.

1. INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES

Policies, strategies and initiatives that seek to support international student retention are abundant in Germany at the institutional, city, regional, and national levels. Beyond government policies, some German HEI have included phrases or sections about international student labor market integration into their larger internationalization strategies (e.g. University of Oldenburg, Heilbronn University, s. Schueller, 2022c, p. 83). Others have gone above and beyond, passing stand-alone strategies for international talent retention. One example of this is the University of Applied Sciences in Schmalkalden, which developed an additional strategy only for international student labor market integration (Hochschule Schmalkalden, 2021).

While strategies specific to international student retention in local labor markets are relatively new, over the past decade or so, other states such as Brandenburg and Bavaria have developed similar initiatives. Such strategies are key for the targeted development of ICS. Regional needs and degree programs offered at local universities are different across the country, meriting individualized approaches to creating ICS. Institutions should consider defining and developing policies alongside local labor market actors to determine the direction of their ICS.

In deciding institutional policy, it can be helpful to consider whether the ICS should be permanent or temporary, and where it will reside within the HEI. Table 1 provides an overview of the four most common ICS structures, grouped by funding and structure.

This conceptual framework outlines four types of ICS including 1) independent-temporary; 2) independent-permanent, 3) joint-temporary, and 4) joint-permanent. These types relate back to the funding organization (e.g. DAAD, private foundations, university) and the anchoring of the ICS within the institution (e.g. where is the ICS situated

TABLE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNATIONAL CAREER SERVICES

Structure	Funding	
	TEMPORARY	PERMANENT
INDEPENDENT	<p><i>Justification:</i> A small number of refugees need help entering university and choosing what to study and understanding how it relates to the labor market.</p> <p><i>Possible implementation:</i> Project-funded ICS.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Hochschule Georg Agricola, Competence Empowerment Center¹</p>	<p><i>Justification:</i> Consistently high numbers of international degree-seeking students.</p> <p><i>Possible implementation:</i> Stand-alone ICS funded by an institution.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Universität Leipzig, Career Service for Internationals²</p>
	<p><i>Justification:</i> Due to the high number of international students, especially in certain study programs, a coordinator sets up structures that utilize a faculty or program that can be reused by other staff.</p> <p><i>Possible implementation:</i> Project-funded ICS positioned between CS and IO.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Hochschule Karlsruhe, Career Service für Internationals³</p>	<p><i>Justification:</i> Consistently high numbers of international degree-seeking students, in specific fields or who have specific needs require a joint effort; OR (small) universities in one region must come together to cooperate.</p> <p><i>Possible implementation:</i> One person in the IO or CS performing ICS work; a multi-university structure.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> International Career Service Rhein-Main⁴</p>

¹ <https://www.thga.de/en/international-matters/incoming-students/programmes-and-projects-at-thga/competence-empowerment-center>

² <https://www.uni-leipzig.de/studium/beratungs-und-serviceangebote/career-service/career-service-for-internationals>

³ <https://www.h-ka.de/ebi/beratung>

⁴ <https://ics-rm.de/>

Source: Schueller, 2022c, p. 93.

4

within the HEI). Universities can use this model to discuss their institutional goals, funding prospects, and potential structures. More examples of Good-Practice ICS can be found in the German Rec-tors Conference ICS manual (Böhm et al., 2021).

2. SERVICES

For the reasons mentioned above, it is critical to provide extra and expanded career services pro-gramming for international students. Since each

HEI is different, however, it may not be necessary to offer comprehensive services, but rather focus on one concrete area of need, or one specific program. Table 2 offers an overview of the elements of ICS, which can be used to prompt discussion around which areas require the most attention at a particular institution.

TABLE 2: ELEMENTS OF INTERNATIONAL CAREER SERVICE SUPPORT

No.	Element	Description of corresponding services, themes, and topics
1	<p>LABOR MARKET Detailed and simplified information about the labor market structure, expectations, and opportunities</p>	Preparation for and education about the demands, needs, and requirements of the German labor market; key companies on the DAX, the social market economy, and hidden champions; how higher education works in Germany and how it connects to the labor market; the development of a career strategy for Germany; specific courses for certain nationalities; and occupational orientation and further development specific to Germany, the everyday business life and work culture in Germany, and legal and tax topics
2	<p>NETWORKING Information and training about business culture and networking in the country</p>	Communication, interviews, norms, and intercultural training; digital networking covering LinkedIn and Xing & Co.; German for professional contexts and purposes; and contact with international and German alumni
3	<p>APPLICATIONS Information and application training for professional opportunities in Germany</p>	Application workshops in English and/or German with specialized information (e.g., about mistakes commonly made by international students, the “hidden curriculum”, expectations for submitting application in English, understanding job descriptions, interview preparation, work contracts and certificates, legal and diversity issues, and specialized job portals)
4	<p>SKILLS AND WORK EXPERIENCE Assistance with finding potential employers and accessing practical work experience in Germany</p>	Connections to companies, job-related German courses with integrated company visits, placements and internships, information about finding internships, stu-dent jobs, career speed dating, entrepreneurship training, career fair preparation, and supervised attendance
5	<p>CULTURE Formal and informal cultural preparation and training</p>	Information about what is needed to be successful as an international applicant in the German labor market, how to translate international experiences for domestic employers, and intercultural training (including understanding and dealing with racism in Germany)

Source: Schueller, 2022b, p. 20.

There is no “best practice” ICS. HEI in Germany are as diverse as their student populations, and therefore assuming that there is an “ideal” service structure for any and every institution and its students would be illogical. Instead, there are many good practices in ICS development, delivery, and design across institutions large and small, public and private. These five elements offer a guideline for which areas of service provision to consider when developing services.

3. FUNDING

There are multiple ways in which an institution can receive funding to support the development of an ICS, including through the DAAD, Stifterverband, EU-funding bodies (e.g. European Social Funds), states, employer organizations, and of course also through the HEI itself (s. Schueller 2022c for an overview of ICS projects). Over 10% of the surveyed institutions indicated that they receive funding from one or more of the following:

- Single employer or employer foundation;
- Employer/business association; and
- Regional business development agency.

This select result was thoroughly investigated in a sub-study, revealing that these funding schemes represent public-private partnerships in cost sharing of ICS (Schueller, 2022e). While many institutions look toward funding agencies when considering developing an ICS, these results reveal that those who benefit from international student mobility are also in a position to contribute to it.

4. NAME

Terminology confusion around ICS can be a problem for individuals, institutions, and the country as an international education destination. On an individual level, these varying project names may make it hard for international students to recognise or find ICS through a simple online search – and motivating students to participate is a problem for many ICS initiatives.

On an institutional level, if ICS programmes are not easily accessible, funding for ICS projects may be at risk despite current needs. Additionally, inconsistent naming of ICS may lead to the development of

parallel service structures within institutions, making it difficult for projects to gain recognition from university leadership.

Institutions should choose a name that would be recognisable when searched for (e.g. “International Career Service” or “Career Services for International Students”).

Conclusion: Sustaining International Career Services

ICS straddle the nexus between international students, universities and the labor market. Sustainable funding is critical, but so is sustainable and aligned marketing (Schueller, 2022a). This means that German HEI with English-medium programs need to be transparent in marketing their programs to prospective students. If local employers repeatedly articulate the need for graduates who speak German, these concerns should be met with appropriate measures, such as embedding language courses through a degree program. The same goes for concerns raised by current students or international alumni.

The most robust and well-funded ICS cannot make up for a degree program that is not producing graduates in a labor market relevant field. While this may at first generate criticism due to the role of non-economic goals in the German higher education system, the reality is that international students are acutely aware of their career prospects when choosing a destination country and degree program. Aligned marketing is transparent, generating sustainable long-term recruitment that makes sense for the institution, students, and local communities.

Finally, for ICS programs to be sustainable, it is critical that institutions and career service practitioners network with and support each other. An exemplary example is the University of Bonn whose ICS developed a handbook for ICS practitioners about how to design and develop career services programming for international students (Khrul et al., 2022).

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Editor

Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst e.V. (DAAD)
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

Contact

Division Strategic Planning – S1
Dr Jan Kercher, kercher@daad.de

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