



DAAD RESEARCH BRIEF

January 2024

International students and everyday multiculturalism

Understanding students' encounters within their local communities

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ABSTRACT

International students' social transition experiences are often discussed and researched in relation to their experiences on campus and with fellow students. However, international study also involves interactions and connections within students' local communities beyond formal campus spaces. This paper reports on findings from a recent DAAD-funded research study which focused on the ways international students experience multicultural encounters within their local German communities, using photo-elicitation interviews with 45 students and 6 international office leaders. The study uses a sociological framing of "everyday multiculturalism", which considered the everyday lived experiences of encountering cultural differences in small, mundane ways throughout our daily lives. The paper concludes with suggestions for practice, reflecting on the ways that DAAD and university staff might embed more holistic supports for international students' community experiences.

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Introduction

Considerations have long been made for how international students' journeys across borders are sociocultural experiences as they are educational ones. The DAAD Strategy 2025, for example, recognises the significant academic contributions that international students make to their universities, but also the social and cultural value of international students' presence in German communities (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, 2020). National campaigns around the world often highlight the "contributions that international students make to universities, towns, and cities" (Universities UK, 2023). These notions broaden out the perceived benefits and contributions of hosting international students, beyond the boundaries of their institutional campuses and classrooms. There is frequently a hope that international study can be a vehicle for encouraging mutual exchange and dismantling existing prejudices within society.

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For these outcomes to be meaningful – to 'promote open discourse' (DAAD Strategy 2025, pg. 8) – there is a need to recognise the social conditions that underpin international students' experiences (Mallman et al., 2021). Social experiences and relationships, after all, form a foundation for meaningful collaboration and intercultural communication (Kudo et al., 2017). They are also widely argued to support international students' transitions towards learning in a new cultural space (Shu et al., 2020). This extends institutions' practical work with international students beyond their classroom learning spaces, and into the micro-interactions they have on campus and in their local communities.

In this regard, international students' experiences of social encounters in Germany and elsewhere have been outlined as being highly complex. While studies highlight a range of practices which have been known to promote developing a sense of belonging (e.g., Valencia-Forrester & Backhaus, 2023), many barriers are also well documented. This includes international students' experiences with stereotyping from fellow students (Imamura et al., 2016) or academic staff (Heng, 2017). International students may also encounter bias and prejudices (Héliot et al., 2020) or even violence (Bonistall Postel, 2020) within their local communities. Nuanced

experiences with racialisation are similarly known to frequently frame interactions (Madriaga & McCaig, 2022). Together, this highlights that internationalisation does happen automatically through the recruitment and sheer presence of international students, but that meaningful intercultural exchange rests on equitable social conditions.

Within students' social experiences, higher education campuses do not exist in isolation and international students' sociocultural exchanges are embedded within their wider host societies (Tran & Vu, 2016). On the one hand, this is often framed through international students' social responsibility contributions to their local communities (Jones et al., 2021), through activities such as community volunteering. On the other hand, interactions with the general public frame the intercultural experiences that both international students and local residents have with one another. Despite this, international students' interactions within their local communities beyond campus has been only limitedly researched.

International students and everyday multiculturalism

In researching international students' interactions within their local communities, this study has used the lens of 'everyday multiculturalism'. Everyday multiculturalism is a sociological conceptual framework that focuses on lived experiences with diversity through everyday interactions throughout one's daily life (Wise & Velayutham, 2009). This conceptual framing illuminates experiences which may, on the offset, seem boring and mundane, but nonetheless form a foundation for developing one's understanding of cultural groups within a multicultural society. Everyday multiculturalism recognises that intercultural exchanges – both positive and negative – often happen at the micro level (Oke et al., 2018). This may be through, for example, purchasing a bus ticket, buying groceries, or sharing a lift. While individually these micro experiences may seem meaningless, together they add up to formulate one's internal depictions and conceptualisations of cultural differences (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2018).

International students' lives in a new city and country are filled with everyday multiculturalism, as the

act of everyday living brings up consistent micro intercultural exchanges. Similarly, local residents are most likely to encounter international students in their everyday lives through micro interactions. These interactions are often referred to as ‘sites of encounter’ – meaning the places and spaces where encounters between these groups are likely to occur within their everyday lives.

With this focus in mind, this study addressed the following research question: How do (international) students experience everyday multiculturalism within their local communities in Germany?

Research Approach

SETTING

This research was conducted in four German cities, which were selected in consultation with the DAAD. This allowed the research team to evaluate participants’ experiences in different geographical regions in Germany and in different kinds of urban environments. To preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, the names of each city have been withheld, but descriptive information about each location is as follows:

- City 1: A large city (approx. 500,000 residents) in the east of Germany
- City 2: A small city (approx. 100,000 residents) in the east of Germany
- City 3: A large city (approx. 500,000 residents) in the west of Germany
- City 4: A small city (approx. 100,000 residents) in the west of Germany

Within each city, two universities were chosen for participant recruitment. This included both a ‘traditional’ university and a university of applied sciences. This distinction allowed the research team to evaluate whether institution type played a role in influencing student and staff experiences, although no distinct differences in findings between institution types was found.

PARTICIPANTS

This research was conducted with international students, local German students, and institutional leaders of international offices. Altogether 48 individuals participated in this study, including 35 international students, six local German students, and seven international office leaders. The international students included in this sample were citizens of 23 different countries, including countries within the EU and outside. However, it is recognised the nationality alone is a poor proxy for diversity, and that participants represented a wide range of cultures, ethnicities, religions, genders, and backgrounds. Altogether, the participant sample is broadly representative of higher education students in Germany.

DATA COLLECTION APPROACH

Research collection with students took a narrative interview approach, whereby participants were asked to share stories about their interactions and experiences within their local communities through a set of semi-structured interview questions. We also asked student participants to share up to three photographs with the interviewers that they felt represented their multicultural experiences within the city they live and beyond campus. The interviews were conducted online in English and lasted approximately one hour each.

For staff interviews, we took a semi-structured interview approach which asked a set of questions about institutional provisions for supporting students’ social transitions. A key area of focus in these interviews was understanding whether and how universities supported students with developing connections within their local communities.

The following section provides a summary of the overarching findings identified through an analysis of students’ narratives and international office leaders’ reflections on university practices. An openly accessible online gallery of the photographs shared by students is available with their permission at: <https://researchintlstudents.com/2023/11/13/where-do-students-see-multicultural-learning-taking-place/>

Research findings

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENTS WITHIN THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Throughout this research, all participants outlined a wide range of interactions within their local communities and beyond their university campuses. For some participants, this included more macro experiences such as formalised intercultural exchange programmes or friendship development with peers from other countries. However, in line with the study's framing of everyday multiculturalism, this was perhaps more commonly seen through daily life interactions. Example sites of encounter shared included shopping, transportation, interactions with neighbours, work experiences, or community activities. Participants were generally found to be easily able to identify interactions within their communities through everyday living.

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Sites of encounter, particularly for international students, were often those which one may not assume would elicit memorable experiences. A common thread in interviews and photographs, for example, was transportation and travel, through interactions such as purchasing tickets or finding directions. Trains, for instance, represented lessons on cultural values of timeliness for many participants:

"In Germany, they are very strict with that [time]. Like if you say, I'm meeting you at 3:00, it means 3:00 or 2:55 but never 3:01...I had to adapt. Like for example, if I have to take a train or bus or anything, and it leaves at 3:03. And I approaching the station, but it's already 3:03 they won't wait for me. Sometimes it makes me very angry because I was like almost there, they saw me walking to the train but they would leave, because it's their time. So I had to adapt myself, I had to force myself." (Brazilian student, large city in the east of Germany)

Another particularly illustrative example centred on bins and recycling, highlighting how figuring out how to throw away rubbish opened up doors for first conversations with neighbours:

"I think she's really nice and she told us about the garbage because in Germany they're really specific about throwing garbage in the right bin. We have

four bins and we didn't know that, so that was really difficult for us." (Indian student, large city in the west of Germany)

Small talk was similarly highlighted as an opportunity for cultural learning, despite the conversations not explicitly being centred on what might often be considered meaningful exchange. For instance:

"Usually in Algeria when you ask someone 'how are you?' you don't really wait for a deep answer. Once I was speaking with a German colleague, and I asked, 'how are you?' I promise you his answer lasted for one hour. He was telling me about all the doctor's appointments that he had in the last two months, and it lasted for literally one hour. Here, if you ask somebody 'how are you?' they think that you really want to engage in a deep conversation." (Algerian student, large city in the west of Germany)

That is certainly not to say that grander sites of encounter did not exist. In fact, some students shared experiences of taking initiative to, for example, curate a community art exhibit or organise student-led community clean-up projects. These examples demonstrate the social responsibility that international students contribute to their wider communities. However, the vast majority of the stories heard through the interviews were more subtle and serendipitous, often set within daily living.

MICRO ENCOUNTERS AS SOURCES OF BELONGING

Everyday encounters were reflected by many participants to be spaces where they developed a sense of belonging within their local communities. One illustrative example was a river ferry, which one participant described frequently using to purchase ice cream on the other side:

"And the driver, you know, keep knowing it, 'Oh, she's the one'. He stopped looking the tickets from us, you know, because now we do it a lot. And then we meet a lot of people who will be like talking to us, because whenever we go in that it looks like we are tourists, but we are not... even small talk or for a minute or two. It actually makes the day because I feel good when some people come from nowhere and talk to you." (Indian student, large city in the east of Germany)

Similarly, everyday encounters were often described as symbolising international students' transitions towards 'fitting in'. Take, for example, another participant's description of buying groceries in a local shop:

"I have learned what they expect from me or how the general conversations go... For example, they would never ask if you'd like a receipt in Turkey, but here they do so. That was a new experience for me. At first I didn't understand that - excuse me, what? - but then I came along, learning what that means, and I usually take it. Yeah, so that's kind of an adjustment." (Turkish student, large city in the west of Germany)

Everyday life, for many participants, also became a way of living "like a local", as seen through the experiences of one participant taking a train for weekend travel:

"You know like I always take the train to go to somewhere, but this day was my first weekend, it was so full, and it made me feel like part of them going to somewhere else and travel to somewhere else, and then on Sunday coming back home." (Italian student, large city in the east of Germany)

These examples show the ways that sites of encounter are given meaning by international students as markers for developing local knowledge and ways of living. For instance, one participant (British student, small city in the west of Germany) highlighted how they had changed their behaviour when crossing roads, choosing to wait for the signal to turn green, despite never doing this in their own country. When asked why, they described: *"because...If I'm with a German person, then I want to do the same as them and I don't want them to judge me, and say 'Oh, why are you doing that?'"*. This conscious choice to change everyday actions becomes an opportunity for reflection on cultural and contextual differences and how these may be externally viewed.

While in the grand scheme of their experiences, many of the examples provided by participants may seem inconsequential – purchasing a bus ticket, picking up a parcel, buying lunch. However, they became symbols of cultural learning and personal

transition through the eyes of many students living in a new place.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS THROUGH EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS

Participants provided a range of examples where everyday encounters opened the door for multicultural interactions. The aforementioned bins, for instance, provided an opportunity for students to interact with neighbours for the first time. In another story, a participant shared how petting a dog on the sidewalk led to an opportunity to identify commonalities with a local resident:

"I've seen a lot of people carry their dog around and they are usually tiny. So something like that happened and we met a family, a couple and they were like middle aged and had a small dog with them. So we just patted the dog and my boyfriend patted the dog and then we started talking with them and luckily they knew, like, a bit of English, and then they were asking about us. And it was so nice because I had just moved out, and I was missing home, obviously, and she told us 'even my son is in the university, he is doing the same thing as what you're doing'. And in that way she connected with us and even we felt the same connection....she gave us a hug and I felt like I miss my mother at that time." (Norwegian student, large city in the west of Germany)

Often these small interactions remained in students' minds because they represented experienced kindness. One student, for example, described encountering technical trouble with a printer in the library and receiving help from a German stranger: *"So he just helped and vanished. I do not know who he is. He just said hi, came to help, and went. I think it is so nice."* (Mauritian student, small city in the east of Germany).

However, not all experiences involved direct communication, as community participation was also described through the lens of being an observer or through passive participation. For instance, one student described attending a monthly singing community event:

"I think it represents my experience well because, so this event happens once a month and every time it's a different song. So it sort of represents like,

having an ongoing relationship with the community or having some kind of routine opportunity to engage with different people." (British student, small city in the west of Germany)

Although this participant described only attending to sit and listen, these regular community interactions through observation highlighted a powerful experience of cultural learning and sense of belonging.

These learning opportunities were not limited to international students, but were also highlighted through the stories shared by German students, particularly those who were moving to a new city or living in a multicultural space for the first time. For example:

"Next to where I live is a small mosque...something that I observed is how they interact with each other. There is prayer and then they eat ice cream afterwards, especially the small kids and I always walk past them and sometimes they also greet me and say hi" (German student, large city in the west of Germany)

In this way, many participants described developing insights into other cultures through observation, offering them windows into how others live their lives.

THE LIMITATIONS OF EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS

So far, the findings described have outlined the ways that everyday experiences provided affordances for cultural learning and multicultural interactions. However, there were significant limitations outlined about the interactions occurring through everyday encounters. For some participants, experiences in everyday life brought negative impressions of Germans and German culture. For example, one participant described the limited small talk encountered through everyday interactions such as grocery shopping:

"Like in comparison to Egypt, you take your time and there's someone who's helping you pack the things in plastic bags, but here, you need to bring your own bags and so on, so that was the thing that I had to get used to...That's what I realize now: people don't generally talk to each other." (Egyptian student, large city in the west of Germany)

Another common theme was students' encounters with directness in communication styles from local residents. In this regard, participants outlined feeling surprised, taken aback, or even offended by the way they were treated in everyday interactions within their communities. One participant, for example, highlighted an experience of a miscommunication with a bus driver over purchasing a ticket:

"I told her, I'm sorry my German is not so good, and then she told me it's not about your German, it's about your math. I was just like okay wow, that's very nice of you, and I just walked away like [laughs]." (American student, small city in the west of Germany)

This was similarly experienced by German students, whose everyday interactions allowed for reflections about their own culture and how it is seen by others:

"In my workplace, we had a problem with there was an issue with someone from England and I didn't learn so much about English culture, but I learned a lot about German culture from that. We are very direct and sometimes it could be we are considered a little bit rude. Because we had this problem... and I directly confronted him and I was saying okay there's a problem...and basically it was his fault, and he was a little bit offended by it...he was a little bit shocked by my direct approach." (German student, small city in the west of Germany)

In absence of opportunities for reflection or more substantial intercultural exchange, then, students may rely upon stereotypes or use everyday encounters to confirm negative impressions of other cultures. These experiences were often exacerbated by language barriers, particularly for students who studied through English medium programmes and did not speak much German. For example:

"So I would say with local people here as well, I have some interactions sometimes in German, sometimes in English, but most of the people don't like speaking English. Like sometimes they think it's a little bit stressful for them. So my interactions are mainly with some very short sentences in German, trying to communicate." (Brazilian student, large city in the east of Germany)

It is also important to note that not all encounters are positive, and several participants outlined problematic experiences with racism and xenophobia through everyday interactions. These were experienced in all four cities we focused our research on, but was more prevalent from international students who studied in smaller cities or cities in the east of Germany. For instance:

“Sometimes older people, I only encounter it rarely, but I have had bad experiences when they look at me as if it was a strange person. They asked me, ‘where are you from?’, but in rude a way.” (Mexican student, small city in the west of Germany)

This was similarly reflected on by a German student, who recognised the prominence of this within their local community and were cognisant of how it may impact upon international students:

“Not everybody is xenophobic, but there are like some right-wing people. There are right-wing demonstrations of right-wing people in this area. I don’t know how come but it’s happening, and I think it’s like a concern of some people.” (German student, large city in the east of Germany)

The prevalence of racism and the potential for racialized encounters was on the forefront of many international students’ minds, often informing their decisions to study (or not) in certain regions or cities. This was frequently considered prior to arrival, with some international students outlining: *“I got a lot of bad reviews about [city where studying], saying you will face racism or something like that”* (Malaysian student, large city in the east of Germany). Other participants, in sharing their photographs, recognised how their highlighted spaces of multicultural encounter were also spaces of significant xenophobia. For instance, one participant noted about a photograph they shared of a church that:

“I also heard of similar experiences where people like neo-fascist groups are meeting in front of these exact temples that I just showed you the pictures.” (Slovakian student, small city in the east of Germany)

Therefore, while everyday interactions are a lens for learning about multiculturalism in and through

Germany, they are also a space where inequalities and unfair treatments thrive.

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

The examples provided thus far have highlighted the stories and perspectives of students, but there are further considerations for whether and how everyday multiculturalism is considered by the universities where they study. In interviewing international office leaders, there was an exceptional range of initiatives undertaken to support international students with developing a sense of belonging on campus and forming connections with fellow students. Many of these were made possible through funding from external organisations such as the DAAD, and were organised by staff who valued creating opportunities for intercultural exchanges.

However, the vast majority of support structures shared by international office leaders centred on student-to-student interaction or were primarily located on campus. Student-community programmes were rare and were frequently aligned solely with academic development, such as industry internships (although as noted by one international office leader: *“but the problem is normally that they don’t speak German, so it’s very difficult for them to find an appropriate internship”*).

A few universities had programmes for encouraging community connections, such as one university which offered a family pairing programme:

“We have these individuals who are interested in meeting an international student and take care of this person for this one semester he or she is here, or maybe two semesters. We’ve had friendships for life starting from this, bringing people together.” (large city in the west of Germany)

However, examples of these types of community exchange were limited, with international office leaders often blaming budgeting and resourcing:

“I would say it’s [the work we are doing] a bit under-resourced, and I think it’s not the strategic focus of the university. It’s more strategic to have lots of international partner universities and a lot of international students at the university. But I think the creation of an international experience is not a

strategic focus. I would say it's definitely welcomed, but we don't have resources for that, basically.

(small city in the east of Germany)

Even in institutions with a strong strategic focus on internationalisation, staff noted, *"it does not really translate into resources"* (large city in the east of Germany). Despite this, staff were able to identify many creative future programming ideas to develop students' links within their local communities, were resourcing not a limitation. Yet, it was highlighted that, *"we just don't have that infrastructure"* (large city in the west of Germany).

Similarly, there were only a few examples of programmes which specifically aimed to support international students with transitions within everyday life interactions. This was typically limited to short programming upon arrival *"about how Germany works"* (large city in the east of Germany). Given the values placed on everyday interactions by students, and the potential for surprising interactions to confirm students' stereotypes about their host country, programmes which centre this issue may offer a supportive pathway forward.

In regards to the issues raised by students about encounters with xenophobia and racism, several university leaders were aware of this occurring within their community. This was most prominently noted by institutions located in the east of Germany:

"You do encounter moments of racism, xenophobia, and that's something we have to be very much aware of here to address. So we, in addition to working very closely with student clubs, we participate in helping them and helping us to participate in campaigns organised by the city, be it marches against racism, being actively against the right wing movement that, unfortunately, we do have. [Far right organisation] still marches around every Monday, less and less frequently, but they still do that, so we can kind of help to create a bit of a counter movement." (large city in the east of Germany)

At other institutions, this was less recognised or in focus, despite the prominence of stories in student interviews about encountering xenophobia and racism. Take, for example, one staff participant who

described the city as a *"rather safe place"* but later outlined:

"I mean there are areas in [city] where you may not want to go as somebody from Africa or China, or whatever. But other than that, no, [city] is a pretty safe place when it comes to that." (large city in the west of Germany)

This raises, therefore, a need for further efforts to dismantle potential racism and xenophobia experienced by international students within their surrounding communities, particularly as they are prominently encountered through students' everyday lives.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Altogether, this research has highlighted the important role that everyday multiculturalism plays in shaping the experiences of both home and international students in Germany. Everyday multiculturalism is a space where students formulate their sense of belonging (or lack thereof). Encounters with local residents through daily life also develop students' understandings of Germany, German culture, and their surrounding community. Yet, emerging evidence shows that supporting transitions within and connections to students' local communities is not a strong strategic or practical focus for many universities.

This research, therefore, raises the following suggestions for practice:

- Universities may wish to consider developing support structures both pre- and post-arrival for international students which specifically focuses on navigating daily life tasks in their new environment. One creative solution, for example, might be the development of drama-based activities to practice and discuss everyday living (see, for example: Harvey et al., 2019)
- Many participants in our study noted enjoying the research process as an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with everyday multiculturalism and what it meant for their experiences studying internationally. Therefore, another

consideration is for how institutions might develop opportunities for encouraging reflective storytelling about life beyond campus.

- Language was a common barrier for meaningful exchanges between students and community, particularly for students who studied through an English programme and did not speak German. Therefore, more support is likely needed for developing students' German language proficiency for use in everyday encounters.
- Racism and xenophobia are common detrimental experiences that students encounter within their local communities, which are not often identified through formal university reporting mechanisms. Therefore, institutions may wish to reflect on their roles in creating 'counter-movements' (as noted by the participant above) that purposefully addresses these sentiments within their cities.

- Resourcing is a persistent concern for developing meaningful student-community links, and these issues are often not in focus due to their lack of strategic investment or available staffing and workload. This highlights the need, firstly, for institutions to invest further in seeing internationalisation's intersections with localisation and their surrounding local communities. This, secondly, points to the valued resourcing support from organisations such as the DAAD for making important 'optional' programming possible. Student-community connections may be an area for further consideration in future funding rounds.

With this in mind, our work counters prominent framings of international students which assume they are missing or unconnected with their local communities. At the same time, though, there are significant tensions within everyday interactions that need addressing, which offers considerations for future research and practice.

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