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STUDIES

Accompanying international students in Germany to academic success

Results and recommendations from the SeSaBa project

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Executive Summary

International students are an increasingly large and important interest group at German universities. Compared to German students, however, they have to cope with special challenges. According to estimates by the German Centre for Higher Education and Science Research (DZHW), currently just 49% of international bachelor's students (starting in 2014/15) and 26% of international master's students (starting in 2016) drop out of their studies in Germany (compared to 27% and 17% for German bachelor's and master's students, respectively).

In the framework of the research project „Success and withdrawal of international students in Germany“ (SeSaBa)¹, the study and life situation of international students was analysed in detail. Between the 2017/18 winter semester and the 2020 summer semester, more than 4,500 international bachelor's and master's students from 125 universities were surveyed about their study and living situation in Germany. This publication summarises key findings from the SeSaBa project.

Preparation for the start of studies: the phase before arrival in Germany and the individual expectations and motives of international students have received too little attention so far.

The reasons for studying abroad are more complex than often assumed. While some students come to Germany because of the quality of teaching, others want to develop themselves personally or improve their career options through experiences abroad. International students are also an extremely heterogeneous group of students whose study experiences require a differentiated view and correspondingly adapted action according to specific differences (e.g. cultural background, language skills). They also bring with them very different educational experiences. The study shows that many students do not feel adequately prepared for starting their studies in Germany. For example, many international students experience a discrepancy between the language skills officially required and those actually needed to study.

The design of the study entry phase: a large offer of support measures often meets with comparatively low demand.

There is a wide range of support services for international students at German universities, especially in the introductory phase of studies, but also over the course of the study programmes. However, these are often only used by a relatively small proportion of international students, and their willingness to participate decreases over time. Consideration should therefore be given to how international students can be motivated more effectively to make greater use of the existing support services or how their benefits can be better explained to them. This applies especially to language courses, not only at the beginning of the study programme, but throughout the entire course of study. This could, for example, prevent international students from failing to write their final thesis due to language problems.

¹ The project was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and conducted by the German Academic Exchange Service, the Bavarian State Institute for Higher Education Research and Planning and the FernUniversität in Hagen.

The organisation of the study process: non-academic aspects of studying abroad are also of central importance for academic success.

The majority of international students surveyed seek help from other international students (e.g. from their home country or other countries) when they encounter problems during the 1st semester. Therefore, the international peer group at the institution represents a major resource for successfully coping with both academic and non-academic challenges. Master's students feel less stressed by their studies than bachelor's students, presumably because of their greater study experience and the often higher proportion of international students in their programmes.

In the course of their studies, the proportion of students who finance their studies mainly through student employment increases, while fewer are financed by parents or rely on savings. Students from Sub-Saharan Africa have the lowest average income. Financial problems are a major reason for international students to have doubts about continuing their studies.

Successful completion of studies and dropping out: students are often concerned about completing their studies and their prospects thereafter.

The most frequently cited reason for dropping out among international students is lack of motivation (37 % in bachelor's and 55 % in master's programmes). Bachelor's students also cite a difficult financial situation or performance problems, while master's students cite dissatisfaction with the study conditions and the desire for a practical job. Bachelor's students often plan to start another course of study or vocational training after dropping out. Master's students intend to work or take up another study programme.

Out of the international graduates surveyed, 76 % of master's students said they intended to stay in Germany after graduation, compared with only 42 % of bachelor's students. Most international graduates of bachelor's and master's programmes would like to work as employees or civil servants after graduation. The corresponding plans differ according to degree type: while bachelor's graduates want to continue their studies (e.g. a master's degree), master's students often aim for a doctorate.

Based on the project results and with the involvement of stakeholders from politics, research and praxis, recommendations for action were developed. Reference is also made to studies or helpful literature sources that provide exemplary insights into the identified fields. In addition, practical examples from German universities are listed, which appear to be useful or recommendable against the background of the project findings. Finally, the study outlines current developments and further topics that should be taken into account in the future in connection with increasing the academic success of international students in Germany.



Status quo and research needs

Germany is one of the key host countries for international students worldwide. According to UNESCO², only the US, the UK and Australia had more international students enrolled in 2018. This makes Germany the key non-English-speaking host country for internationally mobile students, ahead of Russia, France and Canada.

Germany's appeal as a place to study is also reflected in the fact that international student numbers have been increasing steadily for more than ten years. According to the Federal Statistical Office (Statistisches Bundesamt 2011, 2021), the number of international students grew from 184,960 to 324,729, i.e. by 76 %, between the 2010/11 and 2020/21 winter semesters – more than twice the increase in the number of German students (29 %).

At the same time, however, it can be assumed that international students drop out of their studies in Germany significantly more frequently than German students. According to estimates by the German Centre for Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW), just under half (49 %) of international bachelor's students and at least one quarter (26 %) of international master's students currently drop out of their

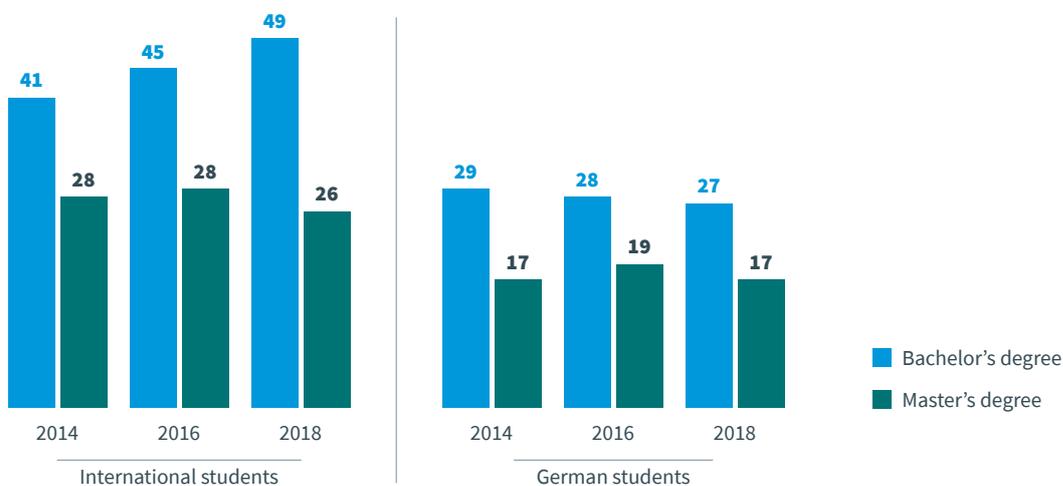
studies. The figures for German students are only 27 % (bachelor's degree) and 17 % (master's degree) (Heublein et al., 2020).

For this reason, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD, 2020) has set itself the goal as part of its 2020 strategy to work with German universities to raise the academic success rate of international students to a level that is equal to that of German students by 2025. In view of this, it makes sense to look at the academic situation of international students in Germany and the progress they make, and consider which specific factors might account for them dropping out.

There is a consensus that the drop-out phenomenon is a complex process subject to multiple causes that essentially derives from a mismatch between two elements: firstly, the specific course prerequisites and the student's individual approach to their studies based on these, and secondly the requirements and conditions that apply at the institution (Neugebauer et al., 2019, p. 1034). Key issues here which, according to Neugebauer et al. (2019) are currently being addressed by higher education research and educational policy, are the subsequent career paths pursued by those who drop out – for

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FIG. 1: DROP-OUT RATES AMONG INTERNATIONAL AND GERMAN STUDENTS ON BACHELOR'S AND MASTER'S PROGRAMMES BASED ON A TIMES-SERIES COMPARISON (2014–2018) (in per cent)



Source: Heublein et al. (2020)

2 Cf. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

example their transition to vocational training or the labour market – and the measures that universities can take to reduce the drop-out rate. Meanwhile, public discourse on the issue of dropping out, which Heublein and Wolter (2011, p. 216) define as a particular form of attrition that includes only those who leave the higher education system without a (first) degree and do not resume their studies at a later date, is dominated by discussion of the cost to the individual and society as well as the impact on the labour market in the face of population decline and the resulting shortage of qualified specialists.

The subject of academic success and drop-out has a long research tradition in the disciplines of sociology, education, psychology and economics (Astin, 1964, 1984; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1983; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1988), especially in the US, but less so in Germany, where it is a comparatively recently established field of research (Hüther & Krücken, 2016). The analysis of the educational trajectories of international students is also already a firmly established subsidiary field of higher education research in the English-speaking world (see Krsmanovic, 2021). In Germany, too, researchers are now looking into the academic situation and life circumstances of international students, for example their economic and social situation, the appeal of Germany as a place to study, the integration of graduates in the labour market, and general difficulties both when pursuing academic study and in terms of non-university life in Germany (Apolinarski & Brandt, 2018; Forschungsbereich beim Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration, 2017; Geis, 2017; Glorius, 2016; Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik & Grote, 2019; Jungbauer-Gans & Lang, 2019; Morris-Lange, 2019; Oesingmann, 2016; Preuschhoff & Wiemer, 2016; Ripmeester & Pollock, 2014; Stifterverband & Fintiba, 2019).

The meta-study by the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (Morris-Lange, 2017) summarises five core problems that international students and students with a migration background have to overcome when pursuing their educational pathway at a German university:

- Language: Difficulties with the German language in everyday life and in academic studies
- Requirements of academic study: adaptation problems despite educated parents due to the different learning culture in Germany
- Finance: cost of living in Germany are often higher than in the country of origin, a lot of time is required for part-time jobs, usually no *BAföG* grant
- Social environment: establishing contact with German students is extremely difficult, exclusion or discrimination in some cases
- Bureaucratic and legal hurdles: in particular, students from countries outside the EU experience uncertainty when dealing with authorities or are afraid of having to leave Germany before the end of their studies

2

Research design: *SeSaBa* as a mixed-methods study

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Between 2017 and 2021, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) funded three research projects under the funding line *Academic success and dropout phenomena I*, which focused on the success and drop-out rates among international students in Germany. Two of these projects dealt with specific aspects from an interdisciplinary perspective, such as the challenges of preparing international students with a refugee background for university (Grütner et al., 2020, 2021) or the complex relationship between German language proficiency and the academic success of international students (Möhring, 2019; Wisniewski & Lenhard, 2021; Wisniewski et al., 2020).

With their project *Success and withdrawal of international students in Germany (SeSaBa)*, the DAAD, the Bavarian State Institute for Higher Education Research and Planning (IHF) and the FernUniversität in Hagen undertook a comprehensive analysis of the situation of international students³ at German universities using a study progress panel and applying various qualitative methods. In three independent sub-projects, different disciplinary topics from the fields of sociology (IHF) and psychology (FernUniversität in Hagen) were investigated. The DAAD was

responsible for project coordination and qualitative support of the study.

This publication summarises selected results and recommendations for action from the *SeSaBa* project relating to the following issues:

- What particular conditions and obstacles to academic success arise for international students in Germany?
- What is their academic situation and what are their life circumstances, both at the university and off-campus?
- What measures might help reduce drop-out rates among international students or increase their rates of academic success?

The *SeSaBa* project focused on investigating the specific academic situation and life circumstances of international students at German universities and the factors that determine rates of success and drop-out. Using a study progress panel and various qualitative methods, the *SeSaBa* study was conducted using a three-phase⁴ design, following Kuckartz (2014) (see Fig. 2).

FIG. 2: DESIGN OF THE SESABA STUDY



Source: Falk et al., 2021a

³ International students are defined as follows for *SeSaBa*: Students with a foreign nationality who have acquired their university entrance certificate abroad or on a German preparatory course for university admission and are on either a bachelor's or a master's degree programme in Germany.

⁴ "This involves researchers collecting both qualitative and quantitative data in single or multi-phase designs. The integration of both strands of methods, i.e. data, results and conclusions, can take place in the final phase of the research project or in earlier project phases, depending on the design" (Kuckartz, 2018, p. 33, original in German).

2.1 Conceptual framework of the study: collection of relevant variables

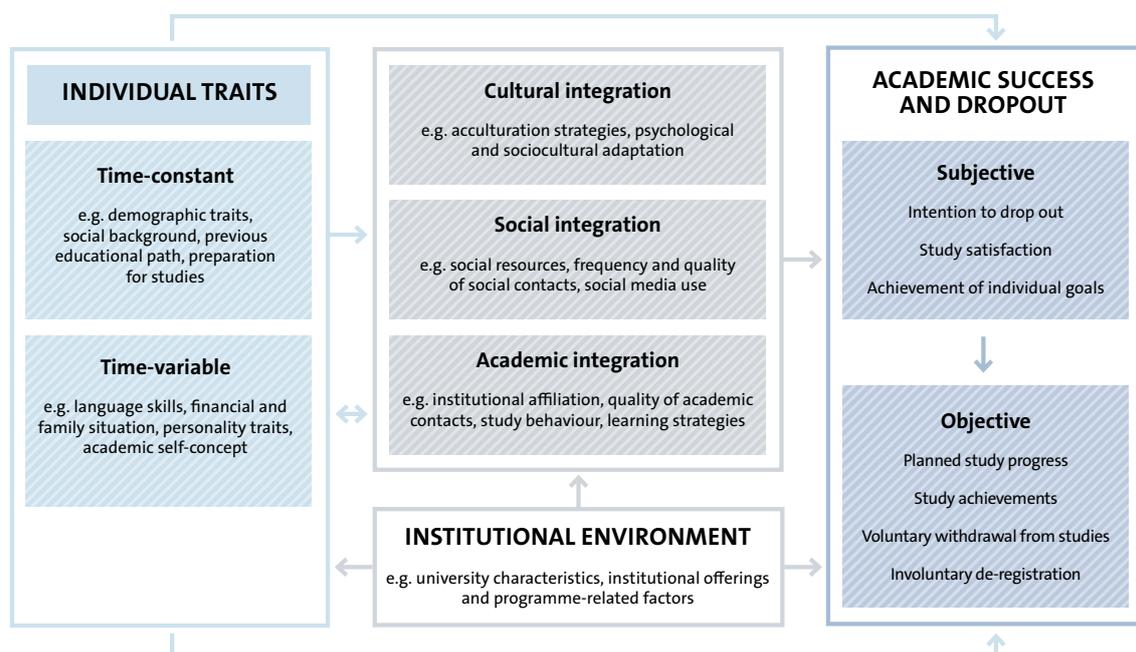
The *SeSaBa* project looked at aspects of success and drop-out criteria that are subjective (e.g. study satisfaction, achievement of individual study goals, intentions to withdraw) and objective (successful completion of studies or [in]voluntary drop-out, study grades, study progress).

In addition to socio-demographic characteristics such as gender and social origin which remain constant over time, individual characteristics such as language proficiency, academic performance and degree of social integration which vary over time were also used as predictors of academic success. As such, the chosen research approach goes beyond the mainly static concepts used in previous research. Analogous to Tinto's (1975) model, individual processes of perception and integration reflecting the academic and social challenges involved in academic study were conceptualised as central mediators between the aforementioned time-stable and time-variable predictors and the subjective and objective criteria of academic success.

For international students, the start of academic study involves a transition to a new institutional environment which, in addition to changes in the social environment and personal relationships, also brings about a change in the cultural macro-context. The resulting psychological conditions and consequences are reflected in (individual) acculturation strategies and adaptation of the students. Acculturation strategies refer to international student's orientation towards the culture of origin and the host culture and the strategies derived from this in terms of integration, assimilation, separation or marginalisation (Sam & Berry, 2010). Psychological adaptation is considered a measure of (successful) coping with the stress involved in the cultural transition, while sociocultural adaptation describes (successful) coping with the day-to-day demands of living in a foreign cultural environment. In this way, the cultural transition is integrated as a specific challenge faced by international students into the conventional research context.

The theoretical model described in Figure 3 is understood as a conceptual framework model that integrates the individual research focus areas for the purpose of a condensed overview,

FIG. 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE SESABA STUDY



though without claiming to be a theoretically coherent and empirically testable (path) model. In the further course of the project, specific conceptual models were developed to address the thematic aspects covered by the sub-projects which were better suited to representing the relevant theoretical and methodological complexity of the relationships between influencing variables and academic success criteria.

2.2 Data basis

2.2.1 QUALITATIVE PRELIMINARY STUDY: EXPERT WORKSHOPS AND FOCUS GROUPS WITH STUDENTS

At the beginning of the project, a qualitative preliminary study (see Pineda, 2018) was conducted to explore the question of what causes can be suspected behind the high drop-out rates among international students, over and above those factors described in the literature. The preliminary study served to enable an initial exploration of the topic, allowed the planned instruments to be piloted and adapted, and served to refine the research questions. This was done firstly based on expert workshops with 48 representatives of 34 project partner institutions and secondly through focus groups involving 40 international students at the University of Bonn.

2.2.2 QUANTITATIVE SECTION: PANEL INTERVIEW – INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY⁵

The quantitative main study dealt with the analysis of personal, social, institutional and cultural conditioning factors of academic success and drop-out. Beginning in the 2017/18 winter semester, 4,751 registered students from 125 partner universities across Germany were questioned a total of six times at half-yearly intervals

about their academic situation and life circumstances in Germany (see Falk et al., 2021a).

These surveys were conducted online using the software Questback. An incentive concept was developed to increase students' willingness to participate.⁶

Participants in the panel survey were selected based on a two-stage procedure. This initially involved registration via a brief questionnaire in which the basic characteristics of the students were recorded (e.g. nationality, intended degree type, university, semester). Subsequently, participants were selected based on these characteristics according to the previously defined population. Only students who met the following criteria were invited to take part:

- Enrolled for the first semester of a bachelor's or master's degree programme
- Not in possession of German citizenship
- Enrolled at a university of applied sciences (UAS) or other university in order to obtain a degree in Germany
- University entrance certificate obtained abroad or on a German preparatory course for university admission

The registration phase ran from the end of 2017 until February 2018. Invitations to complete the registration questionnaire were sent out to the students by the universities. 4,751 international students registered to participate in the panel study:

⁵ Due to the practical orientation of this publication, a more detailed description of the methodology will not be presented here. For more information on this, see the methodological report on the study (Falk et al., 2021a).

⁶ As a thank-you gift, each participant received an Amazon voucher worth €10 after completing the first and fourth questionnaire. For completing the interim questionnaires, participants were able to win attractive prizes such as laptops, iPads and Amazon vouchers. Among the participants who took part in all questionnaires, there was also a prize draw for five vouchers worth €1,000 (see Falk et al., 2021a).

TAB. 1: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY SAMPLE

Degree type	Bachelor's degree	1,892	39.8 %
	Master's degree	2,859	60.2 %
Gender	Male	2,642	55.6 %
	Female	2,102	44.2 %
	Other / n.a.	7	0.2 %
Region of origin	Western Europe	481	10.1 %
	Central and South Eastern Europe	498	10.5 %
	Eastern Europe and Central Asia	500	10.5 %
	North America	217	4.6 %
	Latin America	404	8.5 %
	North, Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle East	1,090	22.9 %
	Asia and Pacific	1,561	32.9 %
Subject groups	Engineering	1,624	34.2 %
	Humanities	433	9.1 %
	Law, economics and social sciences	1,309	27.6 %
	Mathematics, natural sciences	1,116	23.5 %
	Other	269	5.7 %
Type of university	University	3,566	75.1 %
	University of applied sciences (UAS)	1,151	24.2 %
	No information	34	0.7 %
Age	Average	25	
Age by group	18-22	922	24.2 %
	23-27	2,052	53.8 %
	28-32	617	16.2 %
	Over 33	220	5.8 %

Source: own compilation

At the beginning of the panel survey, around 60 % of the participants were enrolled in a master's programme and around 40 % were on a bachelor's programme (cf. Tab. 1). There is a slight surplus of male participants (55.6 %). All regions of the world are represented, but more than half of the participants come from the two regions Asia and Pacific (32.9 %) and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East (22.9 %).

Around 75 % of participants were studying at a university, and more than half (53.8 %) belonged to the 23-27 age group (average age: 25.3 years)⁷.

For an overview of the main focus areas of the sociological and psychological sub-projects, see Table 2.

⁷ It should be noted that age was only asked in the first wave, so reliable information is only available for 3,811 students.

TAB. 2: ANALYTICAL FOCUS OF THE QUANTITATIVE SECTION OF THE STUDY

IHF	FernUniversität in Hagen
The introductory phase of academic study	Psychological characteristics as determinants of academic success
Social background and academic success	Acculturation and adaptation processes among international students
Social and academic integration over time during academic study	Learning strategies and academic success

2.2.3 QUALITATIVE SUPPORT OF THE STUDY

Throughout the entire duration of the project, the DAAD engaged in close dialogue with experts at its own events or at events organised by other institutions.⁸ In this way, it was possible to involve actors from politics, research and universities in the project. The results of this practice-oriented dialogue and the transfer of results were integrated in the further development of the study on an ongoing basis.

Following each wave of the quantitative panel survey, the educational attitudes⁹ and experiences of study participants were investigated based on a combination of several qualitative methods as part of the three-phase design. Among other things, respondents' comments and feedback in the final free-text response provided in the panel questionnaires were assessed based on a content analysis.¹⁰ This qualitative analysis enabled topics to be identified that were not included in the questionnaire or that were of particular importance to participants. It was an approach that served both the further development of the panel survey and the design of a guide for the qualitative support study involving graduates and drop-outs from the sample.

In order to complement the quantitative analysis with a qualitative view, 62 problem-centred interviews according to Witzel (2000; Witzel & Reiter, 2012) were conducted with drop-outs and graduates from the panel survey in the course of the study. The aim was to provide a complementary qualitative analysis of educational biographies before, during and after students' stay in Germany so as to supplement the quantitative research findings. The selected research questions were based on the topics contained in the quantitative surveys, but also included aspects that were not covered by these.

There were a total of five interview field phases between the 2018 summer semester and the 2020/21 winter semester. Interview partners were selected based on the principle of theoretical sampling.¹¹ 329 participants expressed a willingness to participate, and in the course of the field phases, it was possible to gain 11 drop-outs and 51 graduates for a qualitative interview. It is assumed that theoretical saturation was achieved from the point of view of grounded theory.¹²

All interviews were conducted via Skype for Business in either German or English and as problem-centred interviews. They were recorded and selected sequences were transcribed. The recordings were processed using a transcription system and anonymised in several stages. For this reason, the languages of some passages has been adapted or smoothed out.

8 For a detailed overview of the events and conferences in which the *SeSaBa* project consortium participated, see www.daad.de/sesaba.

9 Attitudes are understood as the relatively stable tendency acquired by an individual through experience to react to a social object (persons, groups, social situations) with certain feelings, ideas and behaviour (Peuckert, 1992, p. 60, original in German).

10 Results from this systematic analysis have appeared in a number of publications (see Pineda et al., 2019; Pineda, 2021).

11 According to the logic of grounded theory, the sample is not determined in advance, but selected in the course of the study, taking into account the research interest (see Glaser & Strauss, 1970; Glaser, 1978).

12 Saturation is the point in the course of the analysis at which additional material and further analyses no longer yield any new properties of the category and no longer contribute to any relevant refinement of knowledge about it (Strübing, 2014, p. 32, original in German).

3

Selected findings from the *SeSaBa* project

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In the following, the results of the quantitative and qualitative sub-projects are presented in complementary fashion. Cross-sectional analyses of the (stable) characteristics of the sample studied (e.g. in particular the descriptive figures in Chapters 3.1 and 3.2) were carried out based on the data from one measurement time point (e.g. from the first measurement time point at the end of the first semester [T1]). In the descriptive statistics shown in the figures, all responses available for the respective variable in the relevant wave (e.g. after excluding missing data) are used.

In addition, longitudinal analyses were carried out on selected questions that compare the first semester (T1) with the fourth semester (T4) (e.g. in particular the descriptive figures in Chapter 3.3). This period was chosen because it falls within the standard period of study for students of both types of degree (bachelor's and master's), so it can be assumed that the general conditions in both sub-samples are largely comparable. Where this seemed helpful to achieving a better understanding of the results for substantive reasons, the presentation of the findings was also differentiated by degree type (bachelor's degree, master's degree) or language of instruction (German, English). Data are used relating to students who answered the respective question in both the first semester (T1) and the fourth semester (T4). In all figures that refer to drop-outs and graduates (e.g. the figures in Chapter 3.4), data are used from students who were enrolled for the entire survey period (T1–T6).

3.1 The phase before the start of academic study

3.1.1 EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The routes into German higher education for international students are heterogeneous. They depend on the country of origin and the respective educational qualification as well as on the question of whether the university entrance certificate is recognised in Germany (thereby allowing direct access to higher education) or not (Falk et al., 2021b). For example, the university entrance certificate held by students from EU member states is frequently recognised directly. If this is not the case, proof has to be provided of additional educational experience or qualifications (e.g. experience of academic study abroad, aptitude test at a preparatory course) (Falk et al., 2021b).¹³

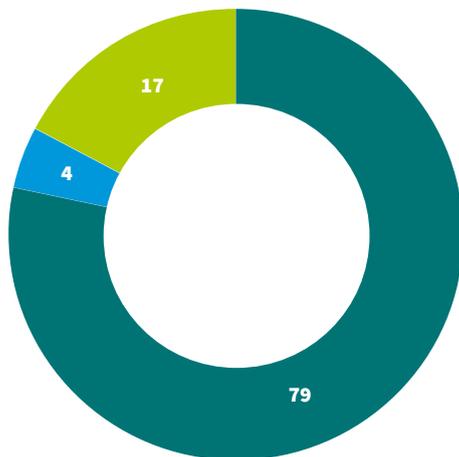
One option for foreign students to access higher education in Germany is offered by preparatory courses for university admission, i.e. educational institutions where foreign applicants without a direct university entrance certificate are prepared for academic study at a German university. After attending a preparatory course that usually lasts one year, they take an aptitude test. This is recognised as a university entrance certificate and enables prospective students to complete their application process and begin studying in Germany.

In terms of where students gained their university entrance certificate, the present sample reveals the following:

13 Some analyses deal with the complexity of access to higher education as well as the particular characteristics of preparatory courses for university admission (see Berg et al., 2019; Grüttner, 2020; Pineda & Rech, 2020). The research project *Stukol: Studienkollegs für internationale Studieninteressierte – Eine Kosten-Nutzen-Analyse* ('Preparatory courses for international students – a cost-benefit analysis'), which receives funding under the BMBF funding line *Academic success and dropout phenomena II*, has been in progress since April 2021.

FIG. 4: PLACE WHERE INTERNATIONAL BACHELOR'S STUDENTS OBTAINED THEIR UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE CERTIFICATE (in per cent)

Where did you obtain your university entrance certificate?



- At a foreign school outside Germany
- At a German school outside Germany
- On a preparatory course for university admission in Germany

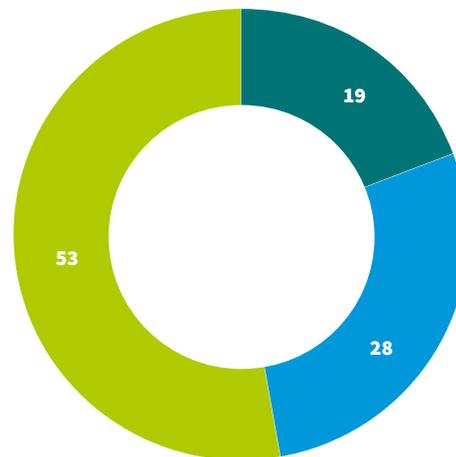
Source: International Student Survey (n = 1,535)

79% of the international students surveyed following a bachelor's programme obtained their university entrance certificate at a foreign school outside Germany, and 21% did so either at a German school outside Germany¹⁴(4%) or by taking a preparatory course for university admission in Germany (17%)¹⁵. Accordingly, the latter students have previous experience of the German education system when they start their studies and do not have to get used to the requirements of the German higher education system from scratch.

For prospective international students from certain countries, access to German universities is

FIG. 5: PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE OF ACADEMIC STUDY AMONG INTERNATIONAL BACHELOR'S STUDENTS (in per cent)

Did you ever pursue academic study prior to your current studies?



- Yes, I studied at university before and obtained at least one degree
- Yes, I studied at university before but without obtaining a degree.
- No

Source: International Student Survey (n = 1,538)

also possible if they have started or completed a course of academic study in their country of origin.¹⁶ Figure 5 shows that 28% of the bachelor's degree students in the sample had previously followed a course of study (without obtaining a degree). Another 19% said they already held at least one degree.

As Falk et al. (2021b) show based on data from the International Student Survey that international bachelor's degree students with no previous experience of academic study or a preparatory course assess their preparation to meet the course-specific requirements similarly to bachelor's degree students who have attended

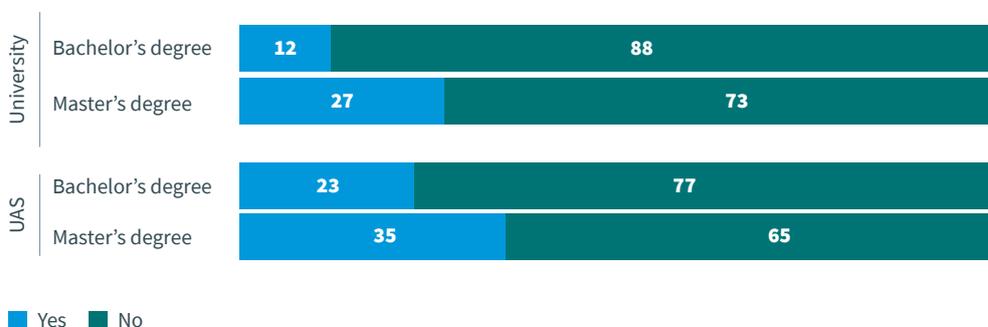
14 According to the Central Agency for Schools Abroad (ZfA), there are 140 German Schools Abroad (DAS) worldwide. For further information, see <https://www.auslandsschulwesen.de/>.

15 When answering this question, it was possible for students to assign themselves to both categories – “at a foreign school outside Germany” and “on a preparatory course in Germany” – when answering this question. For this reason, the reported percentage of 17% might be underestimated. The registration questionnaire used for the International Student Survey also asked whether students had attended and completed a preparatory course in Germany before taking up their studies in Germany. Here, the share of bachelor's degree students who answered this question in the affirmative was 19%.

16 Based on the data, however, no conclusions can be drawn as to how many students gained access to higher education based on their previous experience of university study.

FIG. 6: WORK EXPERIENCE IN FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT PRIOR TO CURRENT STUDIES ACCORDING TO TYPE OF UNIVERSITY AND DEGREE TYPE (in per cent)

Did you gain work experience in a regular job before your current studies?



Source: International Student Survey (UAS bachelor's degree $n = 520$; UAS master's degree $n = 397$; university bachelor's degree $n = 1,004$; university master's degree $n = 1,865$)

a preparatory course. However, bachelor's students with previous experience of academic study rate their preparation more positively than bachelor's students who have no previous experience of academic study and have not attended a preparatory course. Only a few bachelor's degree students stated that they were familiar with the working techniques (36 %) and academic methods (44 %) of the subject at the beginning of their studies. Students who rate their language skills in German and English as better also rate their preparation for the course-specific requirements more positively.

Another source of (study-related) qualifications can be work experience before commencing academic study. Only a few students in the present sample reported relevant work experience, with master's students more likely to have had such experience before taking up their studies in Germany than bachelor's students. Students at universities of applied sciences are more likely to have previous work experience than students at other universities. This might be accounted for by the fact that they are seeking to acquire a practically oriented higher education.

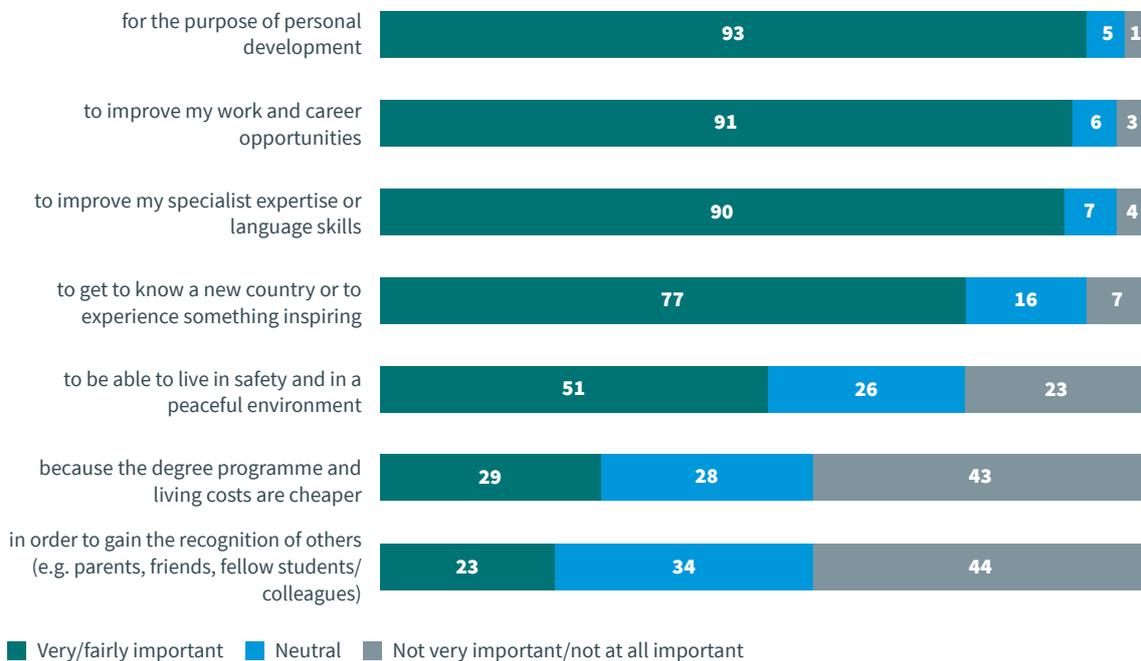
3.1.2 REASONS FOR STUDYING IN GERMANY

Results from previous research show that the motivation behind academic study and the reasons for studying at a university impact success and progress. The higher the interest in the subject and the intrinsic motivation when deciding to commence a course of study, the lower the probability of dropping out and actually dropping out (Heublein et al., 2017; Isphording & Wozny, 2018). In view of this, the students of the *SeSaBa* sample were also asked about their reasons for wanting to study in Germany.

At first glance, it is striking to note that many students come to Germany for intrinsic reasons, namely to advance their personal development. However, extrinsic motivation is also a major factor, namely improving job and career prospects as well as language skills. Another common factor is that there is no requirement to pay tuition fees. The latter was important to 54 % of international students (Apolinarski & Brandt, 2018, p. 61). In the *SeSaBa* study, however, only 29 % of students said that favourable study and living costs were major reasons for them to study in Germany.

FIG. 7: REASONS WHY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WANT TO STUDY ABROAD (in per cent)

How important were the following aspects to you personally in your decision to study abroad?



Source: International Student Survey (varying number of cases depending on the bar, n = 3,817/3,818)

There are other sources of motivation too, however, e.g. displacement, as analysed in the project *WeGe von Geflüchteten an deutsche Hochschulen* (WeGe). About half of the students in the *SeSaBa* sample said that peace and security were key factors in their decision to embark on a degree programme in Germany. For this group of migrants, university study provides an opportunity to become socially and economically integrated in Germany. This clearly shows that factors outside the university context also have a role to play in the decision.

3.1.3 A QUALITATIVE TYPOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BASED ON THEIR MOBILITY MOTIVES

The motive-centred view of reasons for studying in Germany can – taken on its own – give the false impression that international students’ motives for embarking on university study are very similar on the whole, with the differences between them mainly being limited to such motives being somewhat stronger or weaker in each individual. However, the fact that this

is not the case can be demonstrated using an additional qualitative and typifying perspective. This has another key advantage when applied to higher education practice as compared to the quantitative, motive-centred approach: it offers a much more viable basis for orienting support services specifically towards the target group, since in this case, not only do a wide range of different motives have to be taken into account but also a manageable number of student groups whose various characteristics can each be linked to direct action from the perspective of the university.

The drop-outs and successful graduates questioned by means of qualitative individual interviews explained their educational aspirations and motives for mobility. In order to reduce the complexity and diversity of the attitudes recorded here, a typology was drawn up based on the qualitative interviews (Kuckartz, 2018), which classifies the attitudes expressed into “study-related” and “non-study-related”, thereby distinguishing five model types of international

students in Germany.¹⁷ The aim of this distinction is to gain a better understanding of the interviewees' patterns of reasoning regarding their intention to study abroad, their actions and the differing interpretations of their experience. In the following, this typology is presented based on a characterisation of the individual types.

Explorers are individuals who originally had no specific interest in pursuing academic study but were more interested in getting to know Europe or Germany or in living abroad. The themes they highlight in their personal narrative are mainly the reasons why they were interested in cultural experience, learning foreign languages or possibly even living in a particular place. Their information-gathering process is very intense, especially regarding the cultural dimension of their

stay. Representatives of Type A mainly wanted to gain new experience abroad, "live life to the full" and attain independence or become more mature through studying abroad. They choose countries that they have either already visited or have inside information about. Friends and family are named as sources of information.

In the interviews, it is noticeable that they were not always able to explain how exactly their stay abroad and their decision to study abroad came about. What is more, they frequently lacked any concrete idea of career opportunities after graduation. Interviewees assigned to this type usually stated during the interview that they did not know why they had chosen the degree programme they were enrolled in. In addition, they frequently lacked any clear idea of which subject

TYPE A: EXPLORERS

Selected quotes

"A friend of mine is studying in Germany now [...] In 2013 she did an au pair programme in Germany and then [...] [she] told me [...] that Germany was a better place to study. You don't have to pay fees to study at university ... I've applied for a master's degree in philosophy at university [X] and university [Y]. I thought a lot about doing a master's programme, but my German wasn't good enough for a master's programme, especially in philosophy. That's why I decided to do a bachelor's programme ..." (Interview 1)

"It was just a question of, well, I might want to do that and during my stay I could see if [I] still liked the city or whatever ... I think it was a mixture ... I wanted to understand the German system a bit better. And I think the thing with this programme is that it's very German-specific ... And I think [...] I was still toying with this idea: maybe I wanted to consider some kind of future in Germany or in Europe. I thought it might be a good transition ... but I think it was because I was just thinking 'Okay, what do I want to do with my future?', do I want to stay in [my home country] or go to Europe? Maybe it's a good opportunity to just find out more about Germany and then see what I want to do next ..." (Interview 3)

"One of the reasons I wanted to go to Germany was because there's a university near me, two hours away - [...] I'm from [country]. But lots of people from my home country go there, and I wanted something a little different. That's why I decided to migrate to Germany. After all, it's only 4 hours away. And I also had a friend in a music club there ... I made sure it was close to home. The next choice would have been Munich. But since Munich was too big for me, I decided on Heidelberg after all." (Interview 29)

17 Methodological note: the aim of the qualitative study was to reconstruct the educational attitudes and experience of international drop-outs and graduates in Germany in order to empirically map out their perspectives. The typology was presented at several expert workshops and research colloquia, and the feedback received was used for the purpose of further development.

they should study, so in some cases they applied to take different degree programmes in different disciplines. For this reason, they were sometimes prepared to apply at a lower level than would have been possible in their home country in order to gain admission.

Type B refers to persons who came to Germany for various reasons not related to academic study. These may have been family-related (e.g. marriage, family roots), job-related (e.g. job in Germany, desire to improve life circumstances), political (e.g. displacement) or other motives (e.g. au pair). This also includes individuals who completed a degree programme at a German university and later decided to stay and pursue their academic studies further in Germany. The decision to take up university study was made

after arriving in Germany, either to improve career opportunities – if an existing foreign degree was not recognised – or to do something challenging alongside work.

An important feature of Type B is that the phases of information-gathering, application and decision-making are very different from those of the other types. Immigrants only apply to universities in Germany because this is their desired place of residence or because they are already here. They are less flexible in their choice of degree programme because they are tied to a specific place. The same applies to the phases of arrival and commencement of studies. Some immigrants previously studied in Germany, so regardless of whether they previously dropped out or transferred, they were already familiar

TYPE B: IMMIGRANTS

Selected quotes

“My husband and I decided that we wanted to move to Germany because he is of German descent, so we wanted to go back to Germany and I looked around for job opportunities and universities to study at. And I decided to study at the university of [X] because it had a really good reputation and I thought that the master’s [...] was an interesting mix of business and law, something a little bit different than what I had studied before. So, that is why I decided to apply for that programme ... I applied for the programme while I was in [my native country] when I was still working because we didn’t want to move without me having something to do once I got to Germany because I knew that it would [not] be so easy to find a job right away. So, before we finalised our decision to move, I had already been accepted into Uni”. (Interview 9)

“Actually, I came to Germany for family reasons. But because it’s a bit strange to come to Germany as a non-German with a [foreign] degree, I thought I definitely need something in addition. This has been borne out over time that it’s not necessarily the best decision ... To be on the safe side, in order to get a place at university, I applied for bachelor’s programmes. But I wanted to do a master’s degree, and no one could tell me whether my degree was sufficient or not. To be precise, I asked several times, at different universities, and they tended to say no, because there can be recognition problems.” (Interview 23)

“I came to Münster before thinking about studying here. It was actually for work reasons. I was accredited as an English teacher while I was living in [my native country] ... I ended up getting a job here in Münster. Came here then I went to elsewhere ... and then I came back here and taught the language here. And eventually, I just kind of thought that the schedule of the working with the times of the year would work pretty well to go to the university. The programme seemed interesting. It just seemed like a kind of a really nice match, you know? The idea of an English programme that was offered. A programme offered in English is something that I was quite interested in ...” (Interview 25)

with the German higher education system. Since these individuals have private ties, the university is not the main factor in terms of providing a living environment or an experiential setting.

This type poses a challenge for universities since their needs are less easy to address. Clearly, integration in the institution is less important and in some cases even impossible, e.g. for those who have their social networks outside the university or live with their family in Germany. They have a different status from most other international students since they have had different past experiences and move in different social networks.

Type C shares many characteristics with Type D, the career-oriented idealists who also exhibit a strong subject-specific interest. But Type C's view of their stay abroad stands out as very pragmatic one. Here educational attitudes include high importance being attached to vocational qualifications. This group includes holders of

a bachelor degree who wish to start a master's degree as soon as possible directly after graduation, for example. They hope that the degree programme will be very practically oriented as well as providing improved career opportunities, since in some cases they have no work experience. Once the decision to study abroad has been made, representatives of this type apply to all countries and for all suitable degree programmes.

While career-oriented idealists (see Type D) act in a more focused way and take care to gather detailed information on potential degree programmes, career-oriented pragmatists tend to focus more on the degree to be obtained. These individuals try to find out about the current situation on the labour market and then make strategic, pragmatic decisions. Representatives of this type often draw on extrinsic criteria (e.g. city, cost, easy access) to limit the range of choice among a large number of alternatives.

TYPE C: CAREER-ORIENTED PRAGMATISTS

Selected quotes

“First I wanted to study in the US because all my family live there. My uncle, my grandma and everyone else. I had many relatives there and it would have been much easier for me to go there but after I applied, a new law was passed by the president of the US Mr. Trump. It was a Muslim ban, and I couldn't apply for a visa anymore. So, this plan was cancelled. Immediately I was looking for courses in Europe because my sister also lives in Europe. Because there were not many choices for me to study in English, I found this course. Apart from this course in Europe, there are just two other courses in [this subject] which are held in English. One in Spain and one in England. You know, this course provides also licensing for working in this field. It is important to receive this license, too, for those who want to work in Europe.” (Interview 10)

“But I actually thought that my Erasmus stay in Germany ... would allow me to try out, if you like, whether academic study in Germany was suitable for me, because it's simply well known that the requirements and demands in Germany are high and I actually wanted to try out, so to speak, before I started the master's programme in Germany, whether I could manage it, whether I was suitable and so on, and whether I could manage it in terms of language.” (Interview 19)

“I was studying in Konstanz, I got admitted from Berlin and then I asked some of my friends what to do, which one to choose and then they asked me to just go and see the city. I remember I visited Berlin and Konstanz, I saw that Berlin and the capital is really a cool city and I felt like home, because Konstanz is like a small town and like from the capital of my country, I really needed some noise. But apart from that, there are a lot of companies in Berlin for my field.” (Interview 31)

Interestingly, this type includes individuals who would normally have been classified as the career-oriented idealist type due to their original interest in studying abroad. But their attitudes change between the application and decision phases: this might be due to circumstances such as deadlines, the fact that they were rejected by their preferred institution, or because a scholarship was not possible or they did not want to apply through uni-assist. So representatives of this type have a plan B: instead of waiting, as career-oriented idealists would do, they embark on academic study as a “better than nothing” option.

Type D includes individuals who developed a substantive interest in pursuing academic study

or even a specific degree programme while they were considering studying abroad. They wanted to broaden their subject knowledge as well as gain work experience, and they deliberately wanted to do so at a specific German university because Germany is one of the global leaders in their respective field and offers high-quality degree programmes. As such, academic study is regarded not just as a means to find a job but as something of value in itself.

The representatives of Type D begin by looking at the rankings and the reputation of the universities. They also take care to systematically compare the curricula of the degree programmes. Here, reference was made in the

TYPE D: CAREER-ORIENTED IDEALISTS

Selected quotes

“In [my native country], there are institutes called [X]. Those are considered to be the top tier universities of [my native country] ... So now, the problem is those [institutions] which are the top tier universities, those universities are very few in numbers and the students that yearly apply to get seats in those colleges, are about, say, yearly about 600,000 students ... There are too many people applying for very few seats of engineering. So, the problem is that only the top 40 people then get the best college out of 600,000 people. That ratio itself is absolutely, I mean, crazy. Basically because of this difference in order to get into the best university, you have to be very, very, very good at basically everything, every study that you do. So, I heard, how about trying for some other countries? And of course, when one thinks of other countries in [my native country], one naturally thinks of maybe US, maybe UK, maybe Australia. But my reason for choosing Germany, of course, was because at that time I was thinking about mechanical engineering and according to me at least, Germany is one of the leaders in mechanical engineering.” (Interview 2)

“First of all, I searched universities through the university rankings system ... I searched through economic subjects and ranked them and applied from first to the bottom in all of the German universities ... based on the rankings. And then I went to the university website and checked out the lecturers for example. In Frankfurt University there is Prof X and Prof Y. They are both very good lecturers. [S/he] is one of the impressive professors. That is another good impression for me that both lecturers are perfect. It is a good signal for me to choose that university.” (Interview 2)

“I just sent them my CV, I wrote my letter of motivation, I attached a couple of recommendation letters. Just the usual stuff. Then I received an invitation for the test which I wrote in [my native country], [...] which was mainly biology, but also there were some questions in physics and chemistry. I wrote the test. Surprisingly, I thought I had failed the test but then I received an invitation for the interview. They were inviting me to [the university] in person offline. So, I flew there. It was beginning of March 2017. They interviewed me. I think less than a week later, I received the invitation to join the programme.” (Interview 6)

interviews to the reputation, history and even visibility of the institution, sometimes there was mention of Excel files created for comparison purposes or similar strategies. When reporting on their choice of degree programme, students mentioned well-known academics or institutes they had come to know through their literature research or work experience. This type is also specifically associated with a particular kind of application experience: in some cases they go through special selection procedures such as interviews and the like. Career-oriented idealists, unlike career-oriented pragmatists, are willing to wait and postpone their stay in order to meet certain requirements and possibly be awarded a scholarship, for example.

They include individuals with high expectations of their degree programme: they are looking for well-qualified teachers and a high-quality infrastructure at the university. For them, the most important experience is the academic part of their stay. They spend more time on their studies than representatives of other types. In fact, they reported a lack of leisure

activity and even a level of burden bordering on overload in some cases.

In their interviews, career-oriented idealists particularly emphasised their interest in high-quality curricula, clearly demonstrating that they are well acquainted with their degree programme and career opportunities. Compared to the other types, they focused more in their interviews on an assessment of the academic level offered by their degree programme and talked less about their experience of administrative or logistical matters. While other types criticised the bureaucracy and external aspects of their stay abroad, career-oriented idealists were concerned with the structures and framework conditions offered by the university in relation to career prospects.

Representatives of this type are usually academically highly motivated and strive to study effectively. In some cases, they are more likely than other types to gain relevant work experience during their degree programme in the form of placements, jobs as assistants or student trainee positions.

TYPE E: TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS

Selected quotes

“When I was in bachelor in the university, some of my lecturers, they were the students from that programme, from that scheme. They told me about the experience in Europe, about how I can choose to study in two countries. It was very interesting for me at the time. So, I decided to follow that, to find a programme. Because I thought I had the opportunity to live in two countries in two years.” (Interview 7)

“I didn’t know the city, I didn’t know the school. The only schools I knew in Germany were the most famous ones like Mannheim and everything. They advertised the school and explained where it was located for people not to be mistaken with the other Frankfurt. I only had the information the school provided us at first, so it was some kind of a discovery. I trusted the school.” (Interview 13)

“After we completed the studies in Egypt, we would go back to Germany and that was the semester to do the thesis writing. Because I could write the thesis from anywhere, I decided I was just going to go back to [my native country] where I could work and write my master’s thesis at the same time. Pretty much after Egypt I went back to [my native country], worked on my thesis. I would do Skype sessions with my supervisor in Germany, e-mail my other supervisor from Egypt. And then, after my thesis was completed, I then went back to Germany to the thesis defence ... the final semester I was more based in [my native country] than I was in Germany.” (Interview 27)

Type E might be described as “cosmopolitans”. Transnational students make globalisation their lifestyle and are in search of international (educational) experience. Representatives of this type have several cultural affiliations or are in search of such affiliations. They may be multilingual, engage with different cultures and have well-developed intercultural skills. This type includes people who have been made aware of the option to study abroad as a result of an international cooperation at their school or university. They regard their experience in their home country as preparatory training, and the same applies to their accomplishments in Germany. The themes they highlighted in their personal narrative are very similar to those of Type A (Explorers). However, one major difference is their reason for academic mobility.

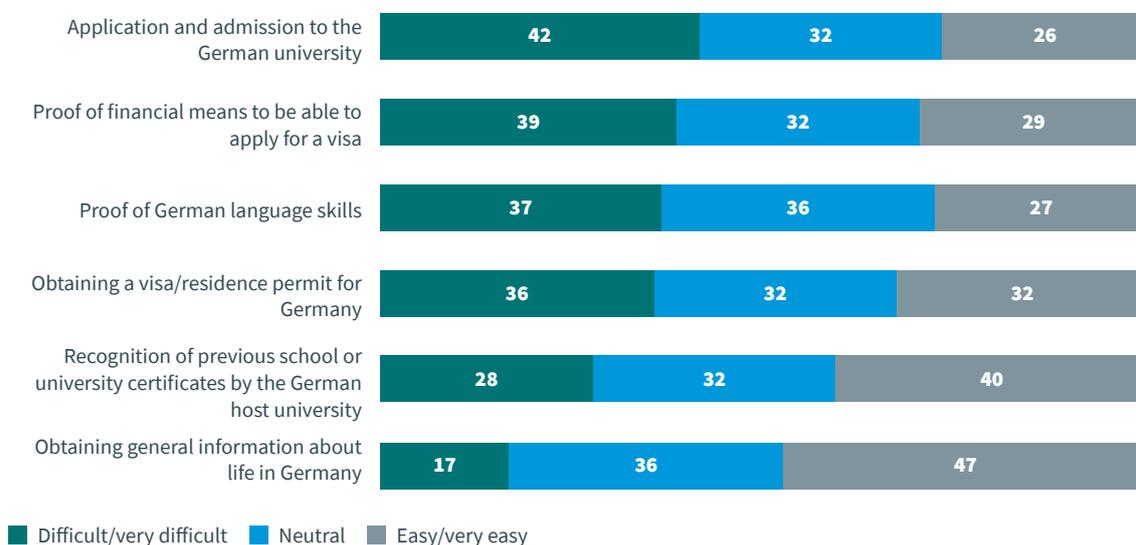
This type also includes students on so-called dual degree programmes. In these cases, the individual’s stay in Germany is shorter and more goal-oriented. These individuals maintain close ties with their country of origin or with other places where they intend to study or have previously studied. For those of them who have to prepare for several educational systems and possibly learn several foreign languages in a short time, this also means a dual burden. Individuals who belong to this type are global citizens. They

participate in projects that address international issues. They strive for a deep knowledge of global matters and universal values.

Some representatives of this type come from Germany’s neighbouring countries. They benefit from the geographical proximity and can commute easily and quickly between their home country and Germany. In these cases, studying in Germany is the ideal way for them to gain international life experience and broaden their horizons without having to undergo a substantial mobility experience. They study in Germany because their preferred degree programme does not exist in their own country or the cost of higher education is lower. As their choice of degree programme tends to be opportunistic, they focus exclusively on the content of the programme. Due to the fact that their academic situation and life circumstances reflect this particular constellation, representatives of this type may have a similar experience to Type B (immigrants). The university is the main factor in terms of their living environment or experiential setting. What is more, they often feel they are not “international” students. In the interviews, they often said that this was why they did not necessarily share most of the challenges faced by other international students because their experience differed greatly from the latter.

FIG. 8: DIFFICULTIES IN PREPARING TO DO A UNIVERSITY DEGREE IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY (in per cent)

How easy or difficult were the following aspects in preparing to embark on university study in Germany?



Source: International Student Survey (varying number of cases depending on the bar, n = 3,789/3,815)

3.1.4 PREPARATION FOR THE STUDY VISIT

A first step towards studying in Germany is for prospective students to specify their desired course of study and choose from various options. In the focus groups and interviews conducted as part of the qualitative support of the *SeSaBa* study, it was found that prospective students' experience of application varies greatly since procedures differ substantially depending on the specific university in question, the type of university and even the degree programme. The quantitative survey identified the following findings regarding difficulties experienced in preparing to study abroad.

According to Figure 8, only few students reported, that it was easy or very easy for them to prepare for their studies in Germany. Consequently, there is a need for better accessibility of relevant information. Especially challenging are university applications and admissions and financial aspects when preparing the stay in Germany. In contrast, obtaining general information about life in Germany tended to be seen as straightforward.

3.2 The introductory phase of academic study

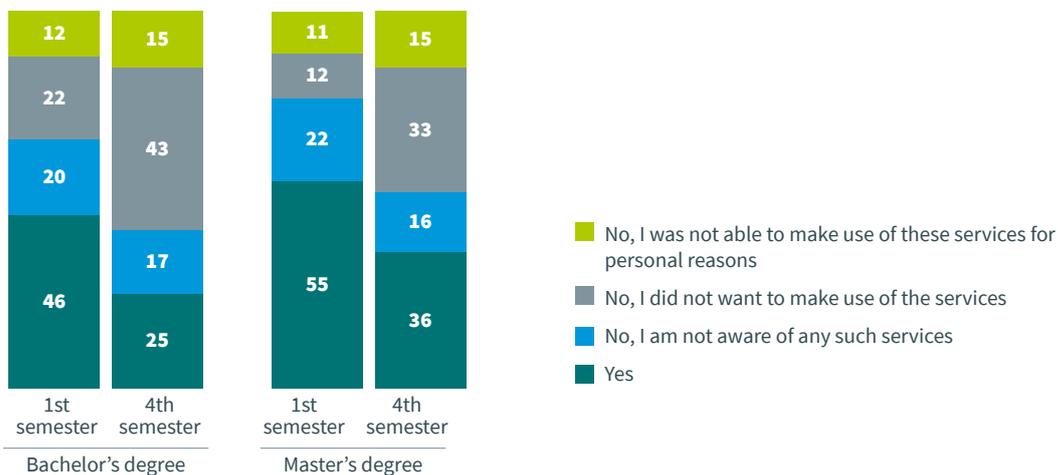
3.2.1 PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES DURING THE INTRODUCTORY PHASE OF ACADEMIC STUDY

In general, the introductory phase of academic study is considered to play a particular role in shaping the transition from school to higher education (see Key & Hill, 2018). In der Smitten and Heublein (2013, p. 101, original in German), for example, have identified three essential tasks that prospective students have to master:

Firstly, they have to quickly gain a sense of orientation in their academic study, establish a foothold in their new stage of life and make social contacts at the university. Secondly, they must assess how their existing level of knowledge relates to course requirements, identify possible deficits and fill any existing gaps. And thirdly, they have to cope with the amount of material they are required to cover in their degree programme, since many courses involve challenging exams in the basic subjects in the first two semesters.

FIG. 9: USE OF UNIVERSITY COUNSELLING AND SUPPORT SERVICES BY DEGREE TYPE COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST VERSUS FOURTH SEMESTER) (in per cent)

Most German universities offer special counselling and support services for international students (e.g. preparatory courses, introductory events, cultural events, etc.). Have you made use of such services yourself?



Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree $n = 830$; master's degree $n = 1,432$)

An analysis carried out by Stifterverband and Fintiba (2019) looked at the challenges facing international students beyond cultural and educational issues. According to this study, prospective students are confronted with various issues between the application and the start of their studies. This includes admission, sorting out the financing of their studies, opening a blocked account, researching the topic of health insurance, applying for a residence permit where necessary, and organising entry to the destination country.

After overcoming these preparatory hurdles, international students have to deal with actually arriving and starting their studies. Morris-Lange (2019) points out that the amount of preparation required for the stay abroad means that some international students are forced to arrive after the semester has begun. As a result, some students miss out on important parts of the introductory phase of academic study. At expert workshops held as part of the *SeSaBa* project, there was frequent discussion of the low level of participation in university activities at the beginning of degree programmes and the difficulty of maintaining contact with students in need of advice as their studies progressed. The International Student Survey also asked students

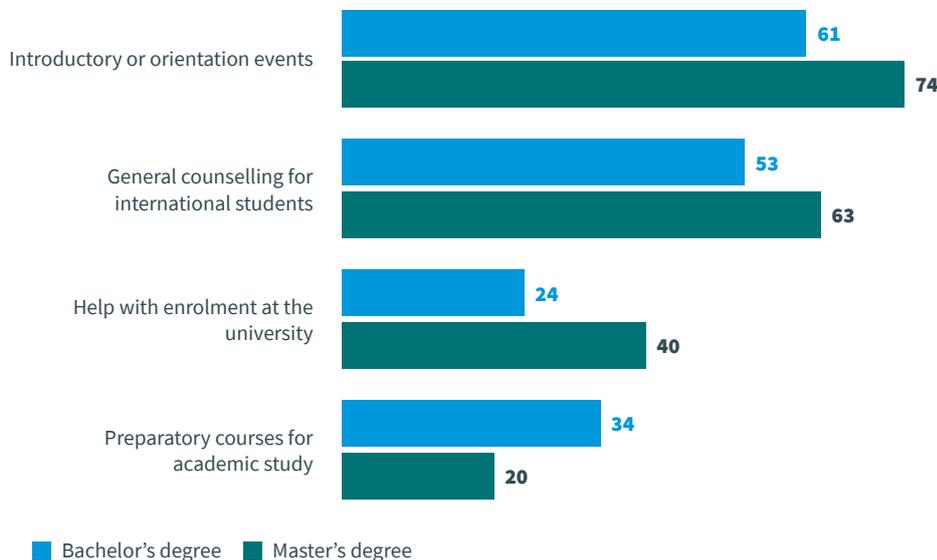
whether they were aware of and had made use of the counselling and support services offered by their university.

The results show that the majority of international students find various support services available at German universities, both subject-related and non-subject-related. It is pleasing to note that the share of students who stated that they were not aware of any counselling or support services offered by the university decreased from the first to the fourth semester, for example from 22 % to just 16 % among master’s students.

At the same time, the share of students who are aware of services but do not take advantage of them increases as the degree programme progresses. There may be various reasons for this. It is conceivable that (1) students no longer consider supplementary courses to their studies necessary (even though they might be necessary) or (2) these no longer correspond to their interests or support needs later in their studies (e.g. they are aimed more at first-year students). In the first semester, for example, many International Offices offer “Introductions to German Culture and Language”, which are no longer relevant to

FIG. 10: UNIVERSITY COUNSELLING AND SUPPORT SERVICES USED IN THE FIRST SEMESTER ACCORDING TO DEGREE TYPE (in per cent)

Which of the following services for international students did you make use of?



Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree n = 727; master's degree n = 1,255)

students in the fourth semester. Relevant support should therefore be offered for international students in higher semesters (e.g. language proficiency and application training, help with academic writing); the profile of such support also needs to be raised and its popularity increased.

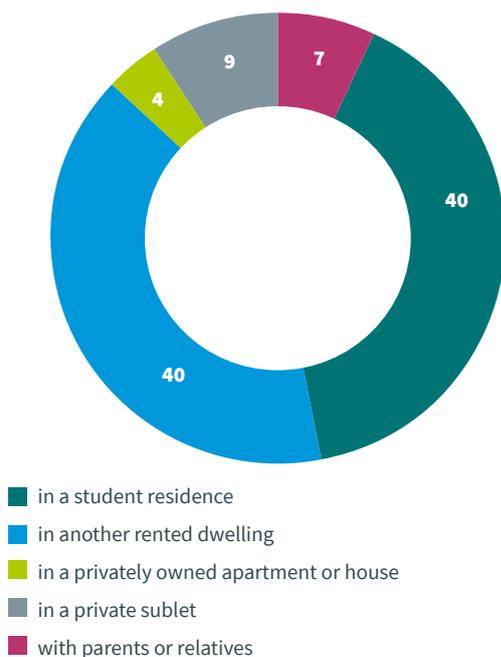
In the first semester, there is a high level of willingness to participate in introductory and orientation events as well as in student counselling. Participation in university activities varies depending on the degree type an international student is aiming to obtain. Interestingly, predominantly master's students make use of support services. They may be more familiar with the demands of academic study, and they possibly know how to get support or are aware that they can benefit from it.

3.2.2 HOUSING SITUATION

40 % of the international students surveyed in the 1st semester live in rented accommodation

FIG. 11: HOUSING SITUATION DURING THE LECTURE PERIOD AT THE START OF THE DEGREE PROGRAMME (in per cent)

During the lecture period do you predominantly live ...



Source: International Student Survey ($n = 3,809$)

off campus. An equally large proportion live in a student hall of residence. Choosing a room in such an institution offers numerous opportunities and advantages for international students, e.g. opportunities for social exchange and a comparatively low financial burden. Far fewer respondents live as subtenants with private individuals (9%) and with parents or relatives (7%). Only 4% stated that they lived in a condominium or their own house.

3.3 Student's ongoing progress

3.3.1 LANGUAGE SKILLS

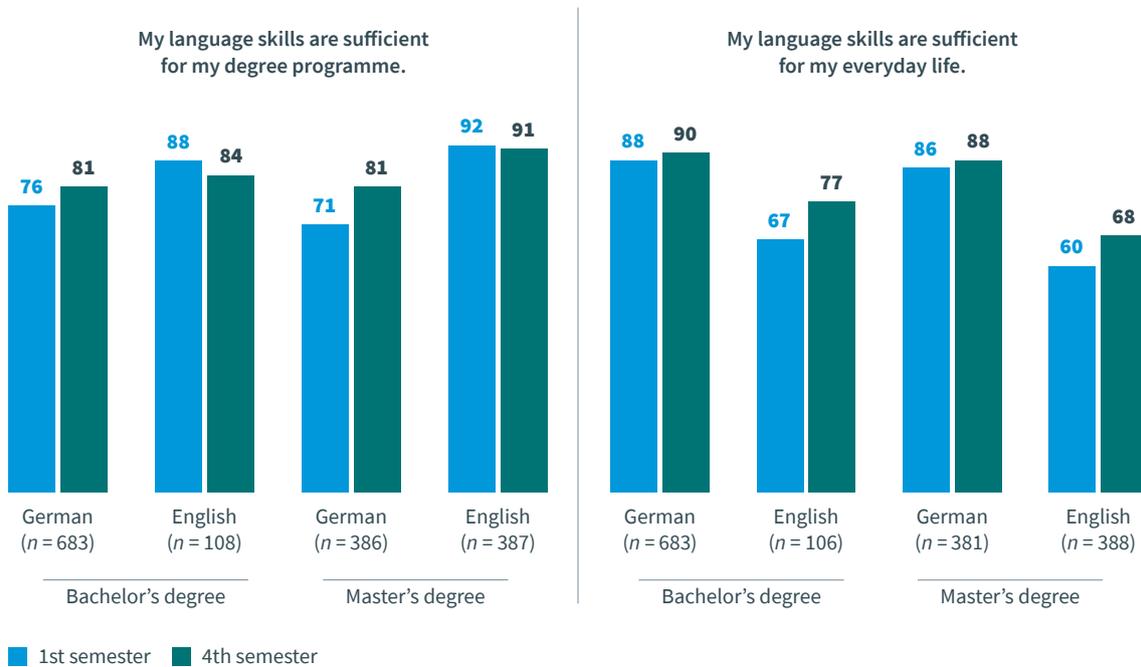
Both the number and the share of English-taught degree programmes in Germany has increased considerably in recent years. According to the HRK Higher Education Compass, at the time of writing (August 2021), out of a total of 20,854 degree programmes offered by German universities, there were 273 bachelor's and 1,434 master's degree programmes in which English was the main language of instruction. This is 3% of all bachelor's and 15% of all master's degree programmes in Germany.

It is not possible to state the number of international students taking English-taught degree programmes here since this data has not yet been collected by the Federal Statistical Office. However, a student survey conducted by the DAAD in the 2020/21 winter semester revealed that around two-thirds (64%) of international master's students were enrolled on purely English-taught programmes with a further 19% enrolled on programmes where the language of course instruction reflected a mixture of German and English.¹⁸ Only 15% of the international master's students surveyed completed a degree programme taught solely in German.

18 The survey was conducted as part of the DAAD project *Benchmark internationale Hochschule*. In total, more than 20,000 international students from 74 German universities took part. At the time of writing, no citable report on the *BintHo* project was available, but this is due to be published on the project website (*BintHo*, www.daad.de/bintho).

FIG. 12: ASSESSMENT OF LANGUAGE SKILLS BY DEGREE TYPE AND LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST VERSUS FOURTH SEMESTER) (in per cent)

Please rate below to what extent you feel your language skills are sufficient to pursue academic study and communicate in everyday life.



32

Note: shares of responses 4 and 5 on a scale of 5 from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5); only respondents who took part in both survey waves and answered the relevant questions.

Source: International Student Survey

As far as bachelor’s programmes were concerned, the picture was very different. Here, 49 % of the international students surveyed were enrolled on German-taught degree programmes, 26 % on English-taught degree programmes and 23 % on degree programmes with a mixed offering of courses in the two languages. Among the respondents in the SeSaBa project, 15 % of bachelor’s and 72 % of master’s students reported that they were enrolled on an English-taught degree programme (DAAD & DZHW, 2019).

It can be assumed that language proficiency in the respective language of instruction is a major factor for the academic success of international students (cf. e.g. Wisniewski et al., in preparation). Initial results on the topic of the language of instruction and of daily academic life of international first-semester students at German universities (see DAAD & DZHW, 2019) indicate varying levels of proficiency in German

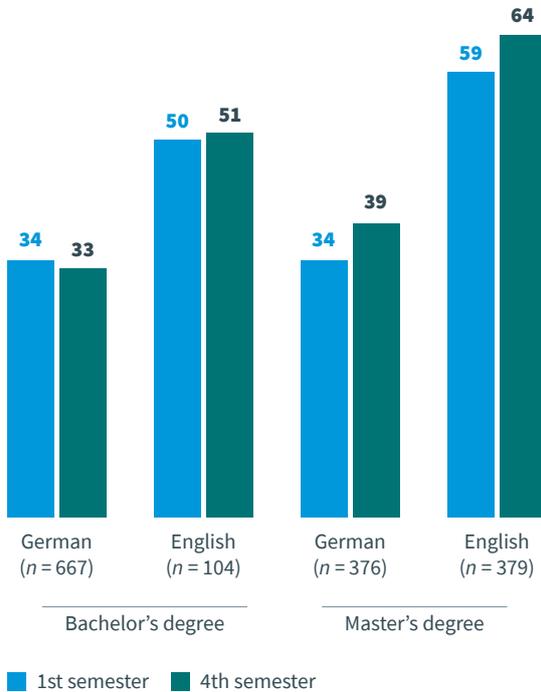
and English depending on the language of instruction. It can be seen that the level of proficiency in the respective language of instruction is higher among students on English-taught degree programmes than among those taking German-taught degree programmes. This means that students taking English-taught degree programmes speak English better than students taking German-taught degree programmes speak German.

The fact that this indicates better academic integration of international students on English-taught degree programmes is also evident in the findings relating to programme-related self-assessment of language proficiency: students on English-taught degree programmes were significantly more likely than students on German-taught degree programmes to say that their language skills were sufficient to cope with their studies.¹⁹ At the same time, in the cited analysis,

19 There is considerable debate as to the significance of language skills based on self-assessment. The project *Sprache und Studienerfolg (Sprastu)* arrives at the conclusion that international students overestimate their own level of language proficiency (Wisniewski et al., 2022).

FIG. 13: BEHAVIOUR IN COURSES ACCORDING TO LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND DEGREE TYPE COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST VERSUS FOURTH SEMESTER) (in per cent)

I actively participate in seminars, practical courses and tutorials, e.g. by joining in discussions or asking questions.



Note: shares of responses 4 and 5 on a scale of 5 from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5).

Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree $n = 771$; master's degree $n = 755$)

the German language skills of students on German-taught degree programmes turn out to be significantly better than the German language skills of students on English-taught degree programmes. Furthermore, it can be seen that students on German-taught degree programmes were likely to assess their language skills as sufficient to cope with everyday life.

In the present publication, the findings already available (DAAD & DZHW, 2019) on the academic and everyday language proficiency of the students surveyed in the first semester were supplemented with the relevant results from the fourth semester so as to be able to analyse the development of these assessments over the course of the degree programme according to degree type and language of instruction (see Fig. 12). Only students who participated in the survey in both the first and fourth semester

and had answered the relevant questions were included in the analysis.²⁰

Comparing the assessments in the two semesters under consideration, it emerged that most of the groups show a tendency to improve their subjectively perceived language skills and, in consequence, their ability to cope with their studies and with everyday life. In terms of coping with their studies, students on German-taught degree programmes in particular notice improvements in their language skills between the first and fourth semester. This effect is even more pronounced on master's programmes than on bachelor's programmes. With regard to everyday life, students on English-taught degree programmes in particular report an improvement in their language proficiency. At the same time, students on German-taught degree programmes only very slightly improve their daily life language skills.

²⁰ This results in certain deviations from the findings presented in DAAD and DZHW (2019), which included all students who participated in the survey in the first semester.

Another surprising finding is that on English-taught degree programmes, the share of those students who feel that their language skills are sufficient to cope with their studies decreases between the first and fourth semesters. At the same time, significant improvements in language skills are to be observed in particular among those groups of students whose proficiency level was low in the first semester. One explanation for this could be so-called ceiling effects: students with a low level of language proficiency are able to improve their overall language skills to a greater extent than students with a high level of proficiency, since further improvement becomes increasingly difficult (or difficult to perceive) as language proficiency increases.

The second step was to look into whether the positive development of subjectively perceived language proficiency is also reflected in an increase in active participation in courses. As Figure 13 shows, such an effect can only be observed among students on master's programmes, but not among those on bachelor's programmes; in the latter case, the share stagnates. The effects here seem to be largely independent of the starting level or frequency of active participation in the first semester; this is because for bachelor's programmes, the levels stagnate in spite of very different starting levels in the two language groups. In master's programmes, on the other hand, the levels increase similarly in both language groups, despite the very different starting levels. This suggests that active participation in courses is not primarily dependent on the respective level of proficiency in the language of instruction but on other factors not considered here. It should be noted, however, that on German-taught bachelor's and master's programmes – even in the fourth semester – less than 40 % of international students actively participate in courses (based on their self-assessment).²¹

Once again, academic participation among international students is significantly higher on English-taught degree programmes: the relevant figures here are significantly higher in the latter case, at around 50 % for bachelor's programmes and around 60 % for master's programmes. Or to put it another way: the need and potential to increase the academic participation of international students on German-taught degree programmes is obviously much greater than in the case of English-taught degree programmes.

3.3.2 FINANCIAL SITUATION

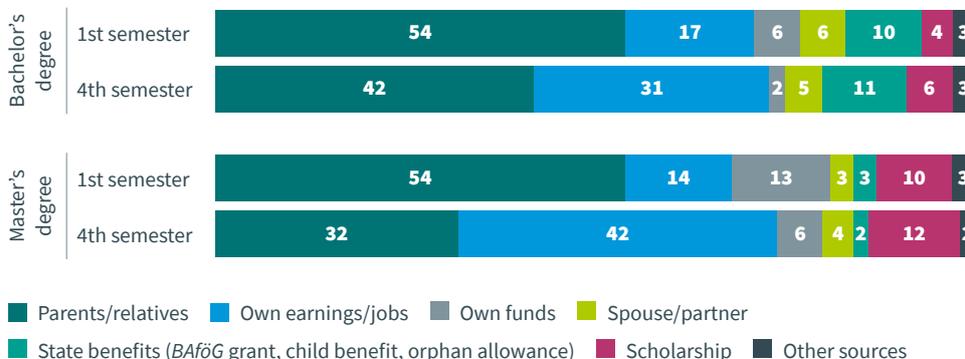
The *SeSaBa* study looked at the role of the financial situation in connection with students who dropped out or who were considering dropping out (Pineda et al., 2019). Based on quantitative and qualitative data, it was found that the financial situation is one of the most frequently cited reasons for considering dropping out of studies, along with a lack of motivation to study and dissatisfaction with the conditions of study (see Pineda et al., 2019).

So what is the financial situation of international students as their degree programme progresses? The main sources of funding among students asked at the beginning of the first and fourth semester are shown in Figure 14. More than 50 % of bachelor's and master's students in the first semester stated that parents, relatives and (spousal) partners were the main sources of funding for their studies, while only 17 % of bachelor's and 14 % of master's students named their own earnings as the key source. In the fourth semester, on the other hand, the share of students who mainly had parents, relatives and (spousal) partners pay for their studies was lower, while the share of students who financed their studies mainly from their own employment was higher. This indicates that a change in funding occurs as students progress through higher education.

21 It can be assumed, however, that the actual share is even lower due to social desirability effects in the survey.

FIG. 14: MAIN SOURCE OF FUNDING BY DEGREE TYPE COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST VERSUS FOURTH SEMESTER) (in per cent)

Please state your main source of funding.



Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree n = 796; master's degree n = 1,340)

Based on previous research on the subject of German students dropping out of university, it can be assumed that if a student is in gainful employment, this does not of itself mean that there is a higher risk of the student dropping out. One requirement is that the employment does not take up more than a certain amount of time and should ideally be related to the student's degree programme (Heublein et al., 2017). The results of the *SeSaBa* project indicate that the transition to student employment among international students does not result in a change in university grades but does lead to a delay in academic progress (e.g. fewer ECTS credits accumulated per semester). At the same time, it is assumed that only certain students will pursue gainful employment at all (e.g. particularly high-achieving students or students who are financially worse off). Another point to mention here is the significant decrease in students' own funds (savings) as the main source of finance.

With regard to state benefits (*BAföG* grant, child benefit, orphan allowance), the data indicate that these are only claimed by a minority, since most of the international students in the sample hold a temporary residence permit (78 %).²² The share of international students who finance the majority of their studies by

means of a scholarship is twice as high among master's students at 10 % than it is among bachelor's students at 5 %.

The available budget was also surveyed for each semester. A slight reduction in the average budget between the first and fourth semesters is to be observed among students from most regions of origin (see Tab. 3). One possible reason for this might be that parental financial support decreases as the student progresses through their academic studies and their savings run out quickly because the cost of living in Germany has been underestimated. Students from Sub-Saharan Africa in particular have less money available on average than their fellow students from other regions. In view of the fact that data from the International Student Survey indicate that there is a delay in pursuing academic study among international students (see Chapters 3.3.3 and 3.4.4), this development appears to point to a particular problem with financing university study, though it also offers a potential starting point for measures to counteract the drop-out phenomenon (in later phases).

²² *BAföG* eligibility for international students is linked to certain conditions, depending on their country or region of origin. International students from EU countries have to have lived in Germany for at least five years or have a parent who lives and works permanently in Germany. For international students from non-EU countries, a permanent residence permit is the primary source of entitlement to *BAföG*.

TAB. 3: AVERAGE MONTHLY BUDGET AVAILABLE TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, AFTER HAVING PAID RENT AND UTILITY COSTS, BY REGION OF ORIGIN AND COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST TO FOURTH SEMESTER)

Region of origin	Semester	Mean value	Development – semester 1 – 4
North America	Semester 1	EUR 450	-2.4 %
	Semester 4	EUR 439	
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	Semester 1	EUR 402	+7.7 %
	Semester 4	EUR 433	
Central and South Eastern Europe	Semester 1	EUR 385	-1.5 %
	Semester 4	EUR 379	
Western Europe	Semester 1	EUR 380	+3.8 %
	Semester 4	EUR 394	
Latin America	Semester 1	EUR 402	-7.6 %
	Semester 4	EUR 372	
North Africa and Middle East	Semester 1	EUR 394	-7.9 %
	Semester 4	EUR 363	
Asia and Pacific	Semester 1	EUR 366	-10.4 %
	Semester 4	EUR 328	
Sub-Saharan Africa	Semester 1	EUR 292	-9.9 %
	Semester 4	EUR 263	

Source: own compilation

3.3.3 SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION²³

International students face a variety of academic and social challenges as they navigate the German higher education environment. German universities try to reduce these difficulties by providing support services and structures. In addition to this institutional support, social contacts, friends and other key figures have a major role to play.

Figure 15 shows where students seek help when they come up against difficulties in their studies. Most of the students said that during the first semester they were able to turn to students from their home country for help, followed by students from other countries and their lecturers. This shows that international students mainly go to other international students for help when they have problems, so this group is clearly a major resource at the university when

it comes to ensuring the success of internationalisation efforts.

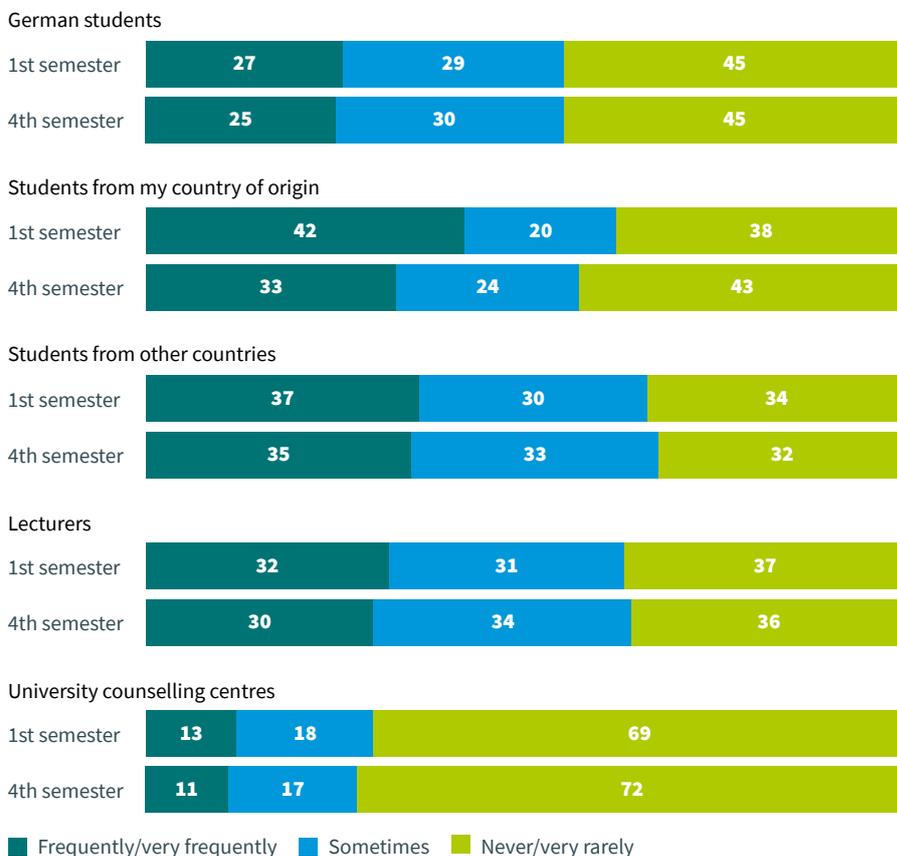
By contrast, international students are less likely to ask German students for support, even though the latter may find it easier to navigate the university system. This suggests a segregation of friendship networks between German and international students, at least initially. Yet social integration is key to the academic success of international students. Numerous studies have shown that drop-outs have fewer contacts overall, feel less at ease and lack opportunities to communicate with other fellow students (Heublein et al., 2002; Schiefele et al., 2007). Relatively few students take advantage of the university’s services.

Sociocultural adaptation is considered an indicator of the ability to cope successfully with day-to-day challenges in a foreign cultural context. Here, the difficulties students experience in various

²³ Publication notes from the SeSaBa project: Thies, T. & Falk, S. (in review), International students in higher education: Determinants of university belonging and social integration; Yildirim et al. (2021), The importance of a sense of university belonging for the psychological and academic adaptation of international students in Germany, *Zeitschrift für Entwicklungspsychologie und Pädagogische Psychologie*.

FIG. 15: SOURCES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE EVENT OF STRESS/PRESSURE DURING STUDIES COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST VERSUS FOURTH SEMESTER) (in per cent)

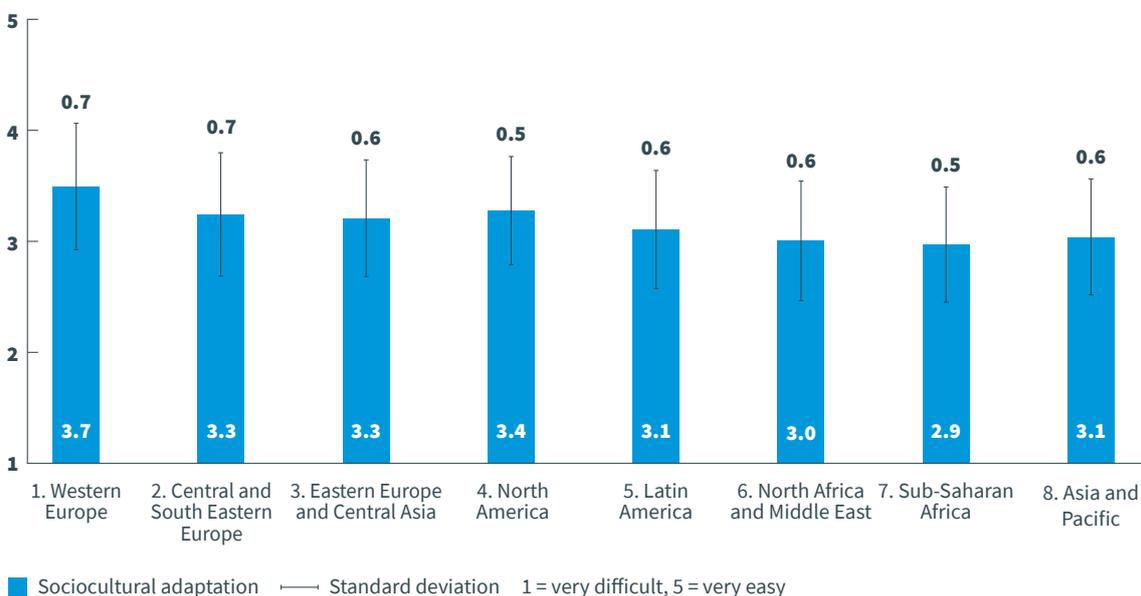
If you have problems in your studies, who do you turn to for help?



Source: International Student Survey (varying number of cases depending on the bar, n = 2,120/2,122)

FIG. 16: LEVEL OF SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION BY THE END OF THE FIRST SEMESTER BY REGION OF ORIGIN (mean values)

How difficult or easy is it for you to cope with living in Germany?



Source: International Student Survey (n = 2,261)

spheres of life are recorded and aggregated into an index (for a differentiated breakdown by spheres of life and details of how these domains were determined, see Zimmermann et al., 2021).

As Figure 16 shows, the challenges involved in sociocultural adaptation vary depending on the cultural distance of the student’s region of origin. The highest degree of sociocultural adaptation, i.e. the least difficulty in coping with everyday life, was reported by students from Europe and North America. For these groups, a comparatively low cultural distance can be assumed, which favours adaptation. By contrast, students from Africa said they faced more socio-cultural challenges in everyday life and display a lower level of adaptation. The ranking remained largely stable over the first four semesters.

One study on the relevance of sociocultural adaptation for the academic success of international students (Zimmermann et al., 2021) showed that adaptation is a predictor of drop-out intentions – mediated by study satisfaction – also over a period of several semesters. Accordingly, a higher level of adaptation is associated with a

higher level of study satisfaction, and thus ultimately a lower likelihood of a student wanting to drop out.

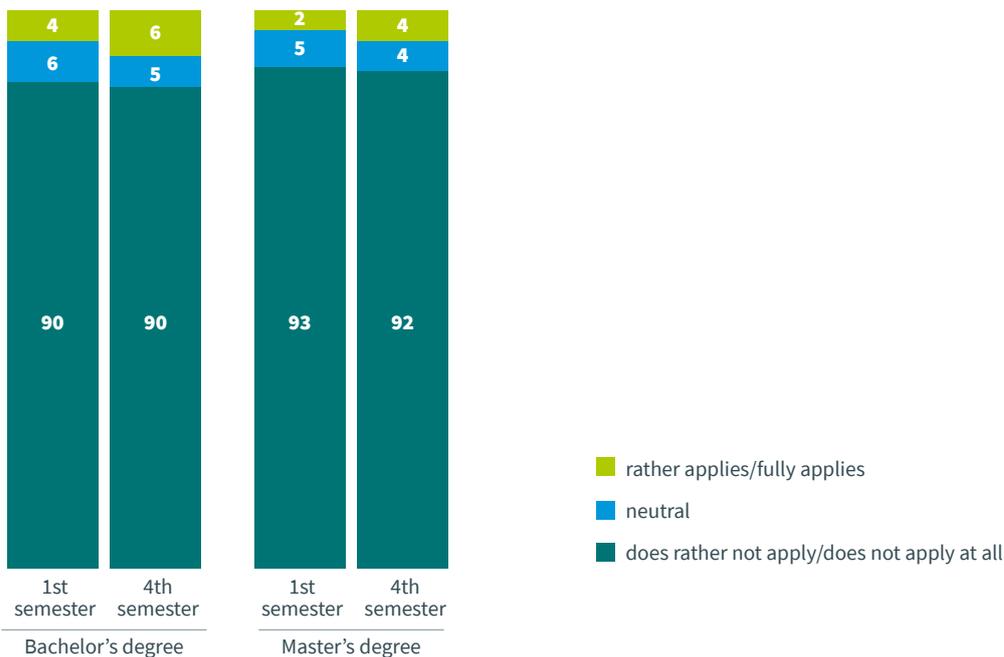
3.3.4 DROP-OUT INTENTIONS

According to the International Student Survey, only about 10 % of bachelor’s students consider dropping out sometimes, often or very often in both the first and fourth semesters. The share is even lower among master’s students.

Various factors have a role to play here. According to the project WeGe, for example, international students with a refugee background are more likely to consider dropping out of a preparatory course prematurely than international students without a refugee background (see Grüttner et al., 2020, 2021). Meanwhile Thies and Falk (2021) show in a study on the importance of socio-economic background that international students from academic parental homes in particular are less likely to consider dropping out. This is firstly due to the fact that they gained better average grades for their university admission and are more positive in assessing the likelihood of their achieving academic success.

FIG. 17: INTENTIONS TO DROP OUT ACCORDING TO DEGREE TYPE COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST VERSUS FOURTH SEMESTER) (in per cent)

I am seriously thinking about giving up my current degree programme altogether.



Source: International Student Survey (n = 830 bachelor and n = 1,431 master)

Secondly, they have parents with higher educational aspirations who also provide them with more financial support. All in all, we can say for international students that a lower probability of entertaining drop-out intentions mainly derives from better average grades for university admission and a positive assessment of the likelihood of achieving academic success, as well as better integration in the faculty and their student peer group.

3.3.5 STUDY SATISFACTION²⁴

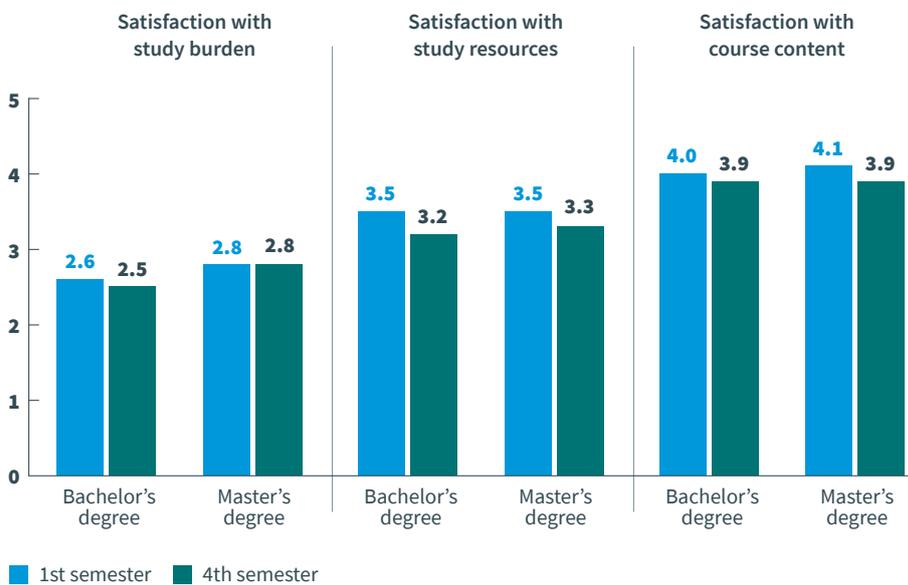
Master’s students were more satisfied with their perceived study burden, i.e. they felt less stressed by their studies as compared to bachelor’s students. All in all, students can generally be said to be less satisfied with university resources and course content in the fourth semester than at the beginning of their studies, while no longitudinal

variations can be found in terms of study burden (see Fig. 18). This means that with regard to study burden, there is no evidence of transitional effects of higher levels of stress as reported in migration research in connection with transferring to another culture, for example.

There are many ways of interpreting the finding that satisfaction with course content and conditions of study decreases on average as the student progresses through their degree programme. Actual changes in circumstances may have a role to play here, such as university resources or curriculum. But it is also conceivable that students’ subjective perceptions change as they become more familiar with the course content and facilities available (also in comparison to other subjects or institutions).

FIG. 18: MAIN SOURCE OF FUNDING BY DEGREE TYPE COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST VERSUS FOURTH SEMESTER) (in per cent)

In the following questions, we are interested in how satisfied you are with your degree programme and what your expectations were.



Source: International Student Survey (n = 804 bachelor and n = 1,346 master)

24 The following items were considered in this analysis: satisfaction with
 – the ability to cope with the burden of university study*: (1) I often feel tired and strained because of my studies; (2) My studies use up a lot of my energy; (3) I find it very difficult to balance my studies with other commitments.
 – the conditions of study*: (1) Too little attention is paid to the concerns of students at my university; (2) The poor resources available for my degree programme (e.g. technology, study materials, premises) is a frustrating factor; (3) I wish the conditions of study at my university were better.
 – the course content: (1) I find my course really interesting; (2) All in all, I am satisfied with my current degree programme; (3) I really enjoy what I am studying.
 * The items of the dimensions ‘burden’ and ‘conditions of study’ were recoded prior to aggregation, so higher index variables (mean values across the respective items) reflect a higher level of satisfaction.

3.3.6 SUBJECTIVE PROBABILITY OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

In both the first and fourth semesters, there is a share of at least 14% of students following a bachelor’s programme and 5% following a master’s programme who do not believe they will be able to achieve their academic goals. In the fourth semester, students view their probability of academic success somewhat more positively on average (see Fig. 19). Master’s students may assess their likelihood of achieving academic success more positively because they feel more secure in the academic milieu based on previous experience. Students who assess their probability of academic success more positively are less likely to consider dropping out (Thies & Falk, 2021).

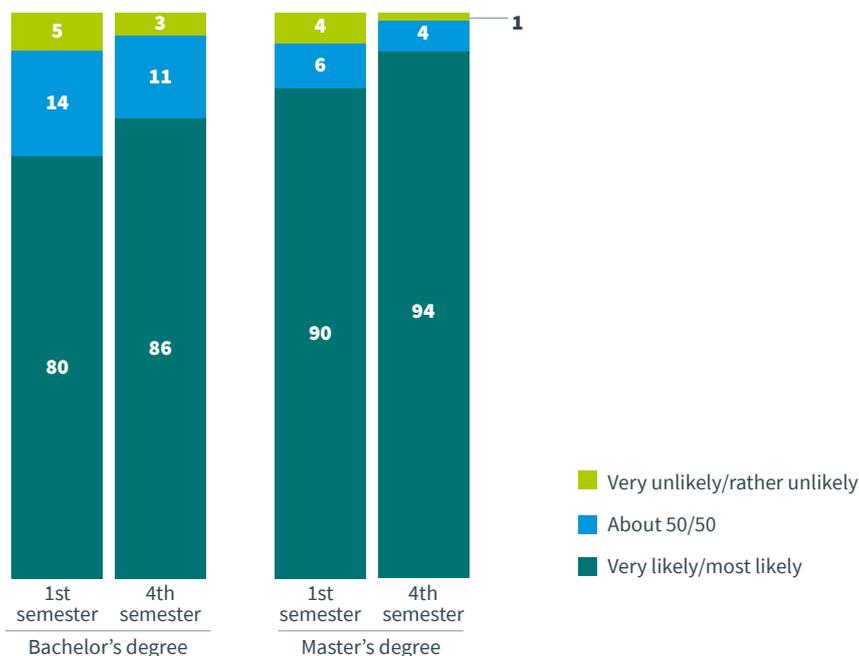
3.3.7 WORK ON THE MASTER’S THESIS²⁵

At the end of the fourth semester, the master’s students were asked whether they had already started working on their thesis. As can be seen in Figure 20, this was not yet the case for 45% of students.

The question arises here as to whether the examination regulations realistically reflect the time required for examinations and the final thesis. If a student overruns the standard period of study unexpectedly, e.g. due to postponement of the final thesis, this could have numerous consequences such as financial problems, compulsory removal from the university enrolment list or difficulties with the foreigners’ registration authority regarding extension of the resident permit. A way of counteracting this would be to offer targeted support for the preparation and writing of a master’s thesis. The following breakdown of the key problem areas provides

FIG. 19: SUBJECTIVE PROBABILITY OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS BY DEGREE TYPE COMPARED OVER TIME (FIRST VERSUS FOURTH SEMESTER) (in per cent)

How likely do you think it is that you will be able to successfully complete your current degree programme?

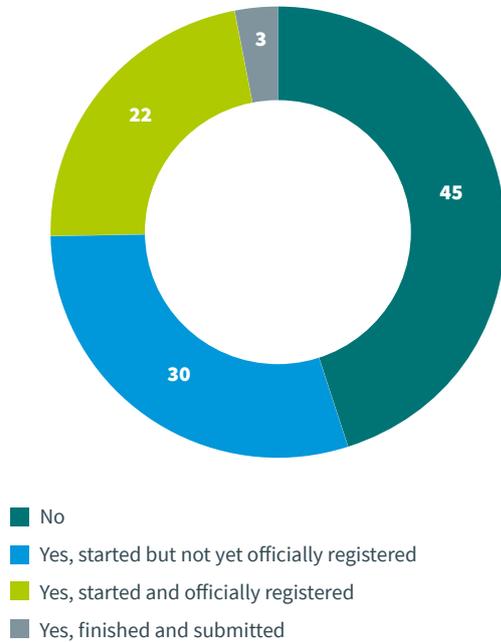


Source: International Student Survey (n = 830 bachelor and n = 1,432 master)

25 For this analysis, only the fourth wave of the study for master’s students is considered. No analyses were carried out for the sixth wave of the study for bachelor’s students, since the sixth wave occurred in the first semester in which courses were delivered virtually, therefore yielding results that were difficult to compare due to the fact that the situation was unfamiliar for students. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, about 44% of the international students surveyed assumed that their period of university study would be extended as compared to what was originally planned (see Falk, 2021).

FIG. 20: STATUS OF WORK ON MASTER'S THESIS AT THE END OF THE FOURTH SEMESTER (in per cent)

Have you started working on your thesis yet?



Source: International Student Survey (n = 1,510)^a

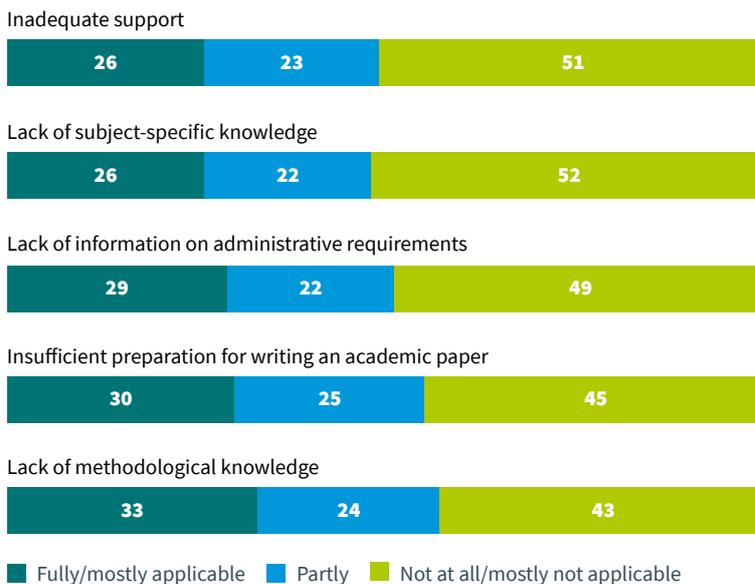
further input in terms of concrete starting points for such measures.

When asked about the nature of the challenge, students particularly mentioned problems regarding methodology, general preparation for writing an academic paper and information on administrative requirements in general (see Fig. 21).

One unexpected finding is the fact that language problems were not reported as frequently (see Fig. 22). One reason for this could be that this type of problem is easier to address by asking a friend or an acquaintance to proof-read a text, as opposed to methodological challenges or a lack of familiarity with subject-specific requirements. Nonetheless, the language of instruction is still a factor here: while 24% of students on German-taught programmes reported language problems, this was only the case with 18% of participants on English-taught programmes. This indicates a particular need for language support among students following degree programmes taught through the language of German.

FIG. 21: CHALLENGES IN CONNECTION WITH THE MASTER'S THESIS AT THE END OF THE FOURTH SEMESTER (in per cent)

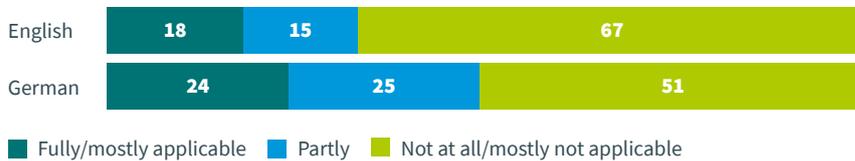
What challenges have you experienced to date with regard to your thesis?



Source: International Student Survey (varying number of cases depending on the bar, n = 813/821)

FIG. 22: LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES IN COMPLETING THE MASTER’S THESIS AT THE END OF THE FOURTH SEMESTER BY LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION (in per cent)

Have you experienced linguistic challenges with regard to your thesis?



Source: International Student Survey (German-taught master’s programme $n = 193$; English-taught master’s programme $n = 583$)

3.4 The end of the degree programme: drop-out and graduation

3.4.1 STUDENT STATUS AFTER SIX SEMESTERS OF STUDY IN GERMANY

Each wave of the International Student Survey asked about the student’s current academic situation. In particular, participants of the panel survey were asked whether they were still pursuing university study, had graduated or had dropped out. At the time of the last survey (i.e. after the sixth questionnaire plus the follow-up questionnaire), information was available from about two thirds of those students who had originally registered, an analysis of which can be seen in Figure 23.

Of the students who gave details of their status at the end of the sixth semester, 64 % said they were still enrolled at a university.²⁶ 30 % had graduated, 5 % had dropped out. 45 % of master’s students had completed their studies, while 51 % were still studying at the end of the sixth semester. 86 % of the bachelor’s students stated that they were still at university, while 7 % each had dropped out or obtained a degree.

The figures indicate that the standard period of study in Germany of four semesters for a master’s degree and six semesters for a bachelor’s degree is significantly exceeded. This finding is in line with the results from Chapter 3.3.7, according to which a substantial share of master’s students had not yet started working on

their master’s thesis by the end of the fourth semester. However, it should be noted that the sixth semester survey was conducted in the 2020 summer semester, i.e. during the coronavirus pandemic: the additional time delay in students’ academic progress could have been caused by the changeover to virtual teaching and/or other restrictions imposed during this period.

What is more, it is common for German students to take more time to complete their studies, too. For example, the median total period of academic study for bachelor’s students in the graduating class of 2019 was 7.6 semesters (Federal Statistical Office, 2021). The time delay can be caused by placements, periods of time spent abroad, changes of subject and interruptions. It is also conceivable that international students deliberately take fewer courses per semester due to the additional language barrier or spend more time in gainful employment (cf. Chap. 3.3.1 and 3.3.2) in order to be able to obtain a good degree. If a student overruns the standard period of study unexpectedly, this can have numerous consequences such as financial problems, compulsory removal from the university enrolment list or difficulties with the foreigners’ registration authority regarding resident permit extension.

Finally, it should be noted that for 35 % of the students originally registered for the survey ($n = 4,751$), no information was provided on student status at the end of the sixth semester. It can be assumed that those who were no longer

26 Within this group, there was a choice of the following alternatives on the questionnaire: (1) I am enrolled at a university in Germany and am pursuing a degree programme in Germany; (2) I am enrolled at a university in Germany and am doing a practical semester/placement in Germany; (3) I am enrolled at a university in Germany and am studying/doing a placement visit abroad on a temporary basis; (4) I am not (any longer) enrolled at a university in Germany but have transferred from a German university to a foreign university and am continuing my studies there on a permanent basis; (5) I am taking a (temporary) break from my studies in Germany (e.g. taking a semester off).

FIG. 23: ACADEMIC STATUS OF THE SAMPLE ON COMPLETION OF THE PROJECT BY DEGREE TYPE AND OVERALL (in per cent)

Which of the following statements apply to you at present?

Source: International Student Survey (bachelor $n = 1,197$; master $n = 1,912$; Total $n = 3,109$)

studying at university (e.g. those had dropped out or graduated) may have been more likely not to participate in the surveys and not to report that they had dropped out or graduated. For this reason, the drop-out and graduation figures may be underestimated. Falk and Thies (forthcoming) show that high-achieving students were more likely to participate in individual waves of the International Student Survey. Students with a tendency to change subjects or drop out participated less frequently in individual waves of the panel survey.²⁷

3.4.2 REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT

For years, several DZHW studies have focused on tracing the drop-out rates and motives among German students with and without a migration background (see Ebert & Heublein, 2017; Heublein et al., 2017).

As mentioned at the beginning (cf. Chapter 1), dropping out of university study has to be regarded as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Students often gave several reasons for their decision, for example. The results of the International Student Survey (cf. Fig. 24) indicate that the most frequent reason for dropping out among international students (37 % for bachelor's programmes and 55 % for master's programmes) was a lack of motivation to study, operationalised in the questionnaire as false expectations of the degree programme and diminished interest in the subject (see also

Pineda et al., 2019). Bachelor's students also reported a difficult financial situation (lack of funds, inability to combine studies and work) and academic problems (e.g. course requirements were too exacting, failed exams). Master's students also frequently reported dissatisfaction with the conditions of study (e.g. insufficient support, overcrowded classes, anonymity of the university) and the desire to pursue practical work.

3.4.3 PLANS AFTER DROPPING OUT

After dropping out, 75 % of students said they had already de-registered and 21 % said they were intending to do so. Only a small share of respondents (4 %) did not plan to do so. Some studies in Germany have analysed the integration of university drop-outs in the labour market and the vocational training market (Daniel et al., 2019; Heublein et al., 2017, 2018; Neugebauer & Daniel, 2021; Tieben, 2016). But there is currently a lack of research into the question of what international student drop-outs do next.

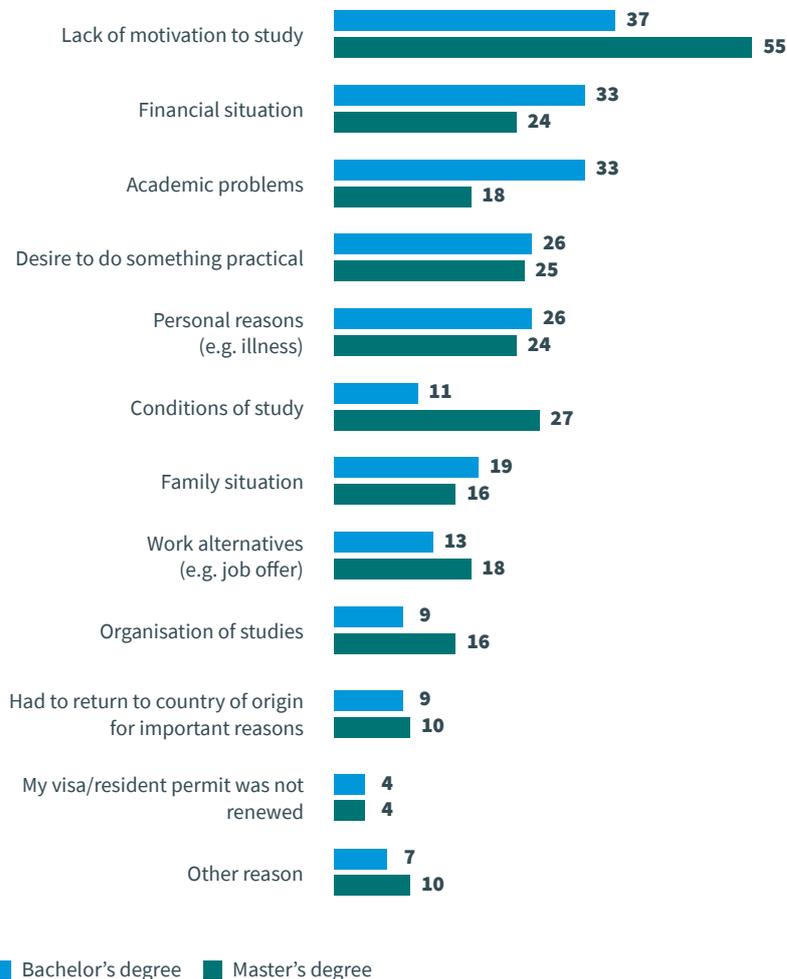
As can be seen in Figure 25, post-drop-out plans differed according to the degree type. 33 % of drop-outs from a bachelor's programme planned to start another degree programme, while 20 % intended to pursue vocational training.²⁸ In these two groups respectively, 11 % planned to continue the same degree programme at another university or to get work as an employee or civil servant. The majority of participants who had dropped out of a master's programme

27 Numerous measures were implemented during the field phase so as to boost the response rate to the International Student Survey, e.g. contact via different (e-mail) addresses or an incentive concept (Falk et al., 2021a; Falk & Thies, forthcoming).

28 If international students discontinue their studies in Germany, they may be able to take up vocational training if it is in an occupation where there is a shortage of qualified applicants (Fleuß, 2021, AufenthG § 16).

FIG. 24: REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT BY DEGREE TYPE (in per cent)

Please tell us the reasons that led you to drop out of your studies.



Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree $n = 70$; master's degree $n = 51$)

also planned to work (40%). However, 20% were considering another course of study and 10% were considering self-employment.

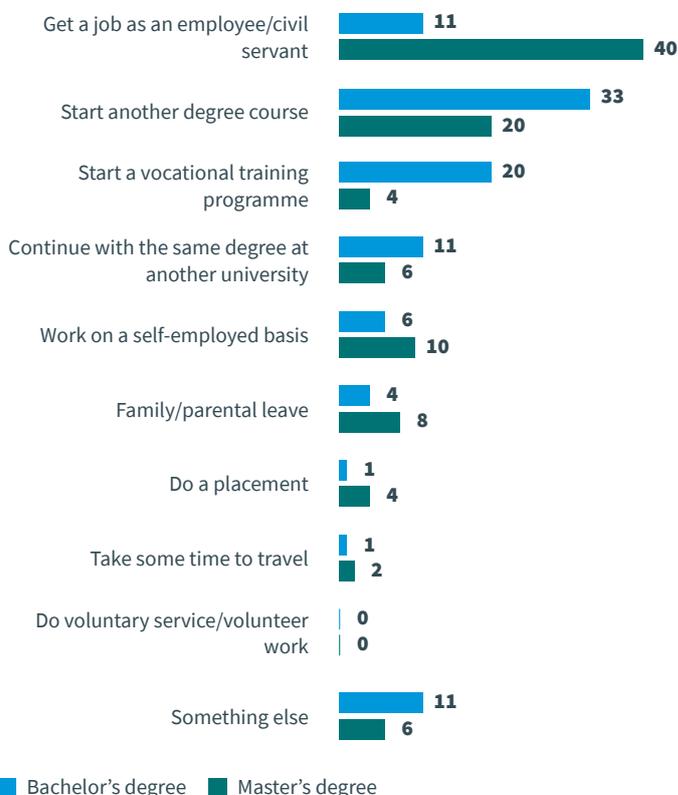
Most drop-outs expressed the intention to stay in Germany (see Fig. 26). It would presumably be a good idea to provide students with the relevant information or counselling on their prospects if they drop out of their studies so as to be able to assess the extent to which such plans are legally viable or whether they will be forced to leave the country after being removed from the list of registered students.

3.4.4 REFLECTION ON THE REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT OF UNIVERSITY STUDY

The analysis of the reasons for studying abroad (see Chapter 3.1.2) shows how varied and individual students' expectations of studying in Germany can be. The actors also had very varied ways of dealing with their decision to drop out of university. In the qualitative interviews, some drop-outs explained how they had discovered through their experience in Germany that they were no longer interested in an academic career, for example, or no longer considered certain goals worth pursuing. These individuals were able to value their experience in Germany despite dropping out, since it had helped them gain a sense of their own identity.

FIG. 25: PLANS AFTER DROPPING OUT OF A DEGREE PROGRAMME BY DEGREE TYPE (in per cent)

What are you planning to do next?



Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree $n = 70$; master's degree $n = 50$)

FIG. 26: PLANNED PLACE OF RESIDENCE AFTER DROPPING OUT BY DEGREE TYPE (in per cent)

Where do you plan to pursue this activity?



Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree $n = 67$; master's degree $n = 50$)

The following section will therefore illustrate different ways in which international students reflect on the reasons and consequences of dropping out of university study based on the typology developed in Chapter 3.1.2. This observation once again underlines the heterogeneous nature of the decision-making processes being analysed here.

TYPE A: EXPLORERS

Selected quotes

“During the semester break, I went back to [my home country], but the semester wasn’t quite over. I thought I would have to think about this – being in Germany for such a long time without any results is not so helpful. That’s what I was thinking. I thought [...] about this and then I decided not to carry on with my studies.”

(Interview 1)

“I had the feeling I was just sitting at my desk and not getting away, that I wasn’t moving, and I felt that the other students weren’t really my people. I felt I wouldn’t really be able to work with them later on either, because I had the feeling that they were more introverted and I’m not so introverted in terms of my personality.”

(Interview 29)

Since students of the explorer type have a very abstract interest in subject matter during the information-gathering and decision-making process, they often experience disappointment when they find themselves in an unexpected situation during their studies and realise that the subjects they have chosen do not actually match their own interests or personal profile. For this reason, explorers were less likely to be able to reconstruct relevant aspects of their academic experience during the interview than other international students. Instead, the focus here was on administrative and logistical aspects as well as their feelings and experiences outside university. While some of these students succeeded in gaining experience in terms of travel and personal encounters, others said they felt like “a fish out of water”.

If students of this type do not find the inspiring experience they were looking for outside higher education either, this results in a greater likelihood of them dropping out of their studies. The reason for this mainly tends to be that they do not identify sufficiently with their subject and lack the academic motivation to complete their studies. Several expert workshops were held involving discussions of potential interventions to prevent students from dropping out, in particular in this type of case. From the point of view of some practitioners, this might be possible by means of a change of subject, since the subject tended to be a secondary factor in the students’ choice of degree programme.

TYPE B: IMMIGRANTS

Selected quotes

“As I was staying in [the town], traveling to [the city] was always a problem because the commutation [...] is really bad. It takes you like seven hours or eight hours by public transport to reach that place. So, I was really confused. Should I actually stay there and pursue my course? Then I went through some of the seniors and asked them how the job scenario is after having this master’s [degree]. And I didn’t get like good response[s] because a lot of them were struggling in getting a job. So, I thought that finally when I was pursuing that master’s course, I should also start looking for opportunities here. Because I already have a degree and four years of work experience. So, I thought that maybe one of the companies might be interested even if I don’t have a master’s degree. Luckily, this year in March, I got a job. So that worked in my favour. I just told the company that I had been also enrolled in one of the master’s programs. Is that going to help me or what should I do? Should I continue with my master’s and then, after I’m done with my master’s, would you want to approach me again or how is it? So, they said it is all up to you. Then I thought my master’s degree from [my first university] was very much equal and worth in the job market. So, I approached the university and told them like I had got a job and I think that I would definitely want to take a break from my studies.”

(Interview 21)

In the case of immigrants, there is variation in terms of both the expectations of university study and the options in the event of dropping out because they have varying resources to deal with the problems involved. Even if they do drop out, their living situation remains relatively unchanged, as they often stay in Germany anyway, as was noted in several interviews. In addition, they are better placed to justify failure and their time spent abroad because they can argue that they learned the language or gained work experience in Germany. This is a major

difference when comparing the explorers and immigrants with the other types, since the first two did not leave their home country or change their lives for the sole reason of pursuing academic study. As a result, they are able to benefit more from non-academic experience.

TYPE D: CAREER-ORIENTED IDEALISTS

Selected quotes

“So, the whole second semester, I was thinking about either leaving the institution, either staying there and fighting my way till I pass everything or if I should go to some other college or other course or something like that. So for the whole of six months of the second semester I would like to say I was really in this phase of you know sort of rethinking all of my choices that I made to come to this institution. And reevaluate everything in my mind. If I was in the right place, if I was studying the right course, if I was studying in the right language.”

(Interview 2)

“It was not the language barrier that caused my failure, because my failure was basically due to my lack of background knowledge. Actually, I didn't have a lot of chance to go see around. I just saw the university. And to be honest, most of my time was at the university. I could not see around [the city] very well. I just studied and went back to [my place]. Because the programme was very intense for me. I mean, after I graduated, I worked for three years and I realized that I forgot much of the lectures and I had to catch up. So, I spent my time at the university mostly. I stayed after the lectures and tried to catch up. And the German system is a bit different from the [...] system as well. So, I had to try to adapt to that. Also, I didn't have any scholarship. I always had in mind that I was running out of money and at some point, I had to go back to [my native country]. It's another point. I'm not blaming that issue as well because my father could help me if I asked. But all things combined, it became a hard challenge, you know? I mean, I was spending my own savings and I

always kept thinking about it. Like, my three years of savings, I am spending it here. And I was not getting good grades and I was thinking about if it is a good investment or not. Because I cannot get the benefit out of it and I am spending a lot of money.”

(Interview 4)

For students of the career-oriented idealist type, failure has serious repercussions, as they came to Germany with the intention of obtaining professional qualifications and improving their career prospects. If they fail to achieve these goals, they are not able to positively justify the time they spent in Germany. For this reason, students of this type often go to particular lengths to describe the efforts they made to avoid dropping out at all costs.

OTHER TYPES

In the case of the career-oriented pragmatists and transnational students, it is not possible to draw any comparisons because it was only possible to assign one interview to each of these types. However, it seems reasonable to assume that similarities might be found between the career-oriented pragmatists and the career-oriented idealists, as well as between the transnational students and the immigrants.

It is also worth mentioning that many of those who drop out of university study realise too late that without support, their daily hurdles or burdens are virtually impossible to overcome. The interviews indicate excessive demands in many areas. What is more, there is often a lack of knowledge about available contact persons and institutions that could have provided effective and timely support.

Comparing the experience of different interviewees, it emerges that the time at which the difficulties occurred seems to be a relevant factor. After a stressful arrival, for example, drop-outs more often reported a series of challenges that were impossible to fully overcome even over a period of time. They also often talked about interpersonal problems inside and outside of the university.

A similar finding emerges with regard to the issue of integration. The earlier dropping out is considered, the more likely the student is to go through with it. This is mainly due to the fact that these students neither have fixed social networks in the new country nor have they been able to get accustomed to the new academic situation and life circumstances. For this reason, the idea of having to or being able to start afresh in a different place is probably less daunting for them than for better integrated students. To some extent, this option might even be seen by such students as a desirable “fresh start”.

3.4.5 PLANS AFTER GRADUATION

International graduates from German universities can help alleviate the shortage of skilled specialists in Germany. For this reason it makes sense to look at how many international students want to stay in Germany and how integration in the labour market can be ensured (for previous studies on the topic, see Forschungsbereich beim Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration, 2017; Hanganu, 2015; Hanganu & Heß, 2014; Koenings et al., 2021; Morris-Lange, 2019). Participants in the International Student Survey who indicated that they had completed their studies were asked about their future plans (see Fig. 27).

Most international graduates who had gained a bachelor’s or master’s degree intended to work as employees or civil servants after graduation. Plans differed greatly depending on degree type, however: 29% of those graduating with a bachelor’s degree said they wanted to start another course of study (presumably a master’s programme), while 24% planned to do an placement. Meanwhile, 37% of master’s graduates intended to pursue a doctorate. In each group, 9% were planning to do an placement or take some time to travel.

The high share of students intending to do a doctorate is surprising. This may have methodological reasons, since the calculations are based on the data of a group of students which can be assumed to be particularly high-performing: 433 master’s students who (1) had completed

their studies by the sixth semester – and therefore quite quickly, especially as compared to the majority of international students – and (2) were willing to provide information. At the same time, more in-depth analyses of this issue are necessary, as it may well be that those graduating from English-taught master’s programmes have more difficulties transitioning to the German labour market. Positions in research can be attractive alternatives, since the language of academia is English and good proficiency in English is explicitly desired.

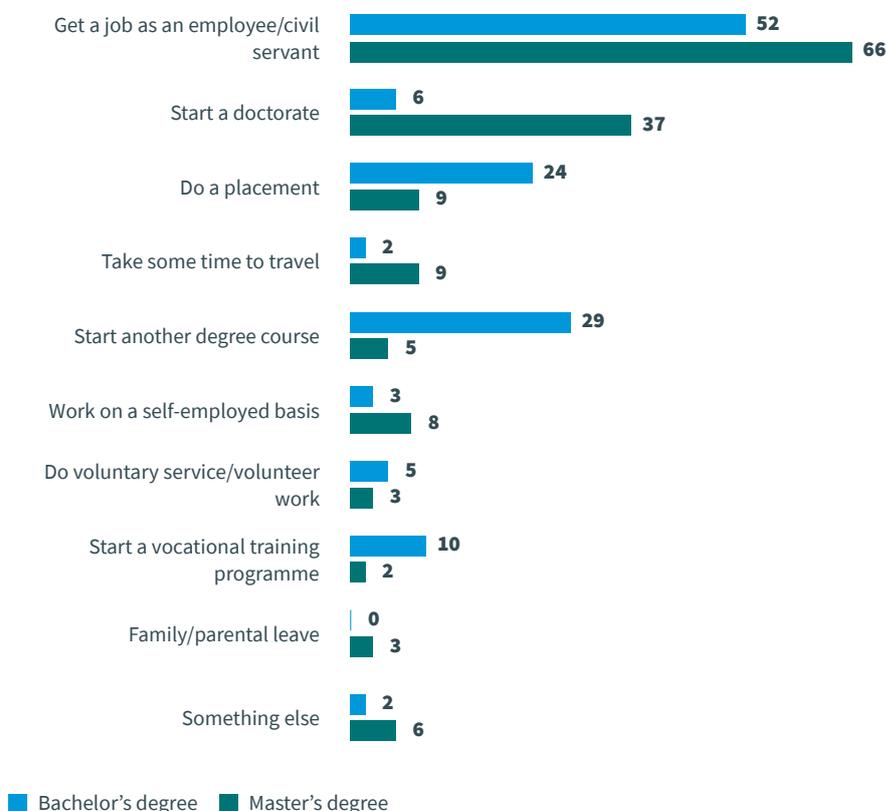
Of the graduates who took part in the International Student Survey with a master’s degree, 76% said they wanted to stay in Germany after graduation, while (only) 42% of bachelor’s students expressed the same intention (cf. Fig. 28). In general, previous studies show that at least half of the students already plan to stay in Germany when they start their studies (Koenings et al., 2021; Thies, forthcoming).

The results of the survey make it equally clear that younger students in particular are more mobile and more often intend to leave Germany again after their studies (Thies, forthcoming). By contrast, students who have a partner in Germany, already lived in Germany before commencing their studies or have better German language skills are less likely to entertain this idea. Students who take engineering subjects are also less likely to want to leave Germany than students who have not studied a STEM subject (Thies, forthcoming). This could be related to the fact that the labour market prospects in Germany are particularly good in engineering.

If we look at master’s students on German-taught and English-taught degree programmes, there are no major differences in terms of whether they plan to stay in Germany: 74% of master’s students on English-taught degree programmes planned to stay in Germany (see Fig. 29). Since students on English-taught degree programmes in particular have difficulties communicating in everyday life (cf. Chapter 3.3.1), this group of students should be motivated to attend additional German language courses during their

FIG. 27: PLANS AFTER GRADUATION BY DEGREE TYPE (in per cent)

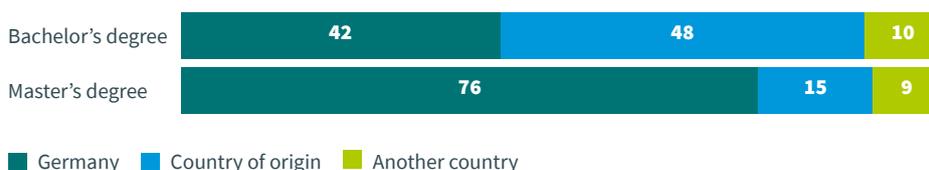
What are you planning to do next?



Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree $n = 62$; master's degree $n = 660$)

FIG. 28: PLANNED PLACE OF RESIDENCE AFTER GRADUATING BY DEGREE TYPE (in per cent)

Where do you plan to pursue this activity?



Source: International Student Survey (bachelor's degree $n = 62$; master's degree $n = 657$)

FIG. 29: PLANNED PLACE OF RESIDENCE AFTER GAINING A MASTER'S DEGREE ACCORDING TO LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION (in per cent)

Where do you plan to pursue this activity?



Source: International Student Survey (master English $n = 474$; master German $n = 140$)

studies so that they can be successfully integrated in the labour market later on. With regard to the internationalisation of German universities, it can be concluded that offering English-taught (master's) degree programmes might be a way to alleviate the shortage of skilled workers in Germany, since graduates of such programmes also have a desire to stay in Germany.

3.4.6 REFLECTION ON THE REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF SUCCESSFUL GRADUATION

University study is a major phase in the personal and professional development of a young adult. As the motivation typology in Chapter 3.1.2 has shown, international students seek to pursue academic study for a variety of reasons. Some want to achieve a concrete professional goal, while for others academic study offers an opportunity for them to get their bearings in life. Varying interpretations of a successful graduation derive from the differing sources of motivation, relating both to academic study and other factors. Relevant differences are to be found based on age, gender, degree type, subject group, educational biography and life situation, for example.

Most of the graduates interviewed were proud to report their success, especially those who had already made the transition to the labour market or taken up further studies at the time of the interview. Others were disappointed not to have achieved their goals. This shows that for some graduates, academic success is not synonymous with simply obtaining a degree or successfully applying for a job. The degree programme and course content are also important to many students in terms of their ongoing individual biography.

Some interview partners spoke of being overwhelmed and exhausted towards the end of their degree programme. The search for a follow-up opportunity after graduation was on many students' minds for months before the end of their studies. They were having to complete their thesis while at the same time making arrangements for their future, e.g. looking for a placement or a job and, if necessary, applying for a residence permit. There was also variation in terms of the deadlines individuals set themselves. There were interview partners who wished to continue studying immediately, while others wanted to take time to reflect and consider their options carefully.

“That didn't actually come from the university, that was pressure I put on myself. Well, from the university's point of view I could have handed it in a year later, it wouldn't have mattered, but you have to register your master's thesis six months in advance and then you have to hand it in six months later. But I was doing fine anyway, the deadline was in September and I actually didn't hand it in until the beginning of September. At first I thought I was doing fine, but then I got behind due to the corrections, so I had to include the time for the postage as well. That took two weeks for the master's thesis. And then September came, the deadline. I'd been thinking about it for a month, so that wasn't good because then I was [...]. It would have been better if I'd finished it off properly, stayed in Germany for a while and been able to hand it in in person. Then I wouldn't have got into such stress. That was partly my own fault, because I simply left Hamburg too early, I could have easily stayed for another month or two ... but then again there's the agreement with the employee.”

(Interview 32)

The transition to the labour market is full of new challenges. It can be a great disappointment when graduates find that it is more difficult to find a job with the degree they have obtained than they had originally expected. This was particularly something that students on English-taught degree programmes found. The issue came up during several interviews:

“If I wanted to go back to [my native country], I think I could really market myself as more as an international lawyer now, because I had this experience. I’m staying in Germany which means kind of limiting myself professionally a little bit.”

(Interview 9)

“I think if I knew German right now with my M.A. degree, I think I would still apply to big companies to do internships or even get some other jobs. But without my knowing German I don’t even bother to get there yet.”

(Interview 12)

“Yes, I [...] regret [...] that I didn’t work in Germany so much in the area of my studies. And I don’t have as much work experience as other master’s graduates, so I’m not as competitive in the job market.”

(Interview 35)

In view of the fact that in some fields university study cannot compensate for the lack of work experience, the interviews show that graduates were sometimes unable to find qualified employment appropriate to their degree and return to the job they had been doing before their studies. It is equally clear that some graduates are prepared to take up a job after graduation that is not in line with their subject interests. Some were concerned with the question of further development and tried to keep various options open.

“I submitted my thesis in January. So, it took a while, four months, three months to grade my thesis. I just received an email from the programme coordinator that I officially passed the programme, so I will have my graduation at the end of this month. I think I will apply for a job-seeking visa in Germany. It is just like a plan B because I think that I will go back to [my native country] for a while to see if I can find a job there. I think, for me, I understand more about my profession, about the professional world, but sometimes I wished that there would be more approach from the real world. Because the programme mostly focused on researching more history academy. The professional aspect is somehow lacking.”

(Interview 7)

“It actually fits quite well, I would say. It’s not sustainability. I think as time goes on it might go in that direction, but it fits well because it’s international. You have English, German, Romanian. The assignments are really dynamic. I’ve already done all kinds of things. Some events, some marketing. So it’s not necessarily what I studied, but it’s along those lines. So, I’m satisfied. I would say yes, let’s see. My hope is that as time goes on, maybe something might come up to do with sustainability – I won’t lose sight of that, because otherwise I could almost say I did my studies for nothing.”

(Interview 14).

4

Core findings and recommendations for action

In order to develop these suggestions, a first draft was discussed with higher education practitioners at the seminar “Studienerfolg und Studienabbruch von Bildungsausländern” (‘Academic success and drop-out among international students’) put on by the International DAAD Academy in June 2021. In addition, the subject matter was closely coordinated with colleagues from the DAAD’s Strategy Department, Simon Morris-Lange of the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR), Luise Haack of the University of Passau and Kathrin Wisniewski, head of the project Sprastu. We would like to thank all those involved for their support and the numerous responses.

Academic student success and drop-out are subject to multiple causes. Empirical analyses of the academic situation and living situation of international students in Germany are a crucial requirement in order to be able to develop recommendations for action to promote academic success. Static “one size fits all” approaches and blanket recommendations are not suitable when it comes to planning contextually appropriate action. In the following, practice-related core findings of the *SeSaBa* project are summarised and related solutions are set out that indicate potential ideas for action, though without claiming to offer patent remedies to address all situations and constellations. In order to prevent international students from dropping out of their studies, it will always be necessary to weigh up on a concrete, case-by-case basis the appropriate combination and design of measures, taking into account the specific resources at the university and its departments as well as the relevant student population.

These practical suggestions were developed based on the findings of the study, dialogue with relevant (education policy) actors and an analysis of the state of research. Reference is made to studies or helpful literature sources that provide exemplary insights into the fields identified. In addition, practical examples from German universities are listed that appear to be useful or recommendable based on the project findings and will ideally be a source of ideas that can be adapted to the individual institutional context.

Core finding 1: Too little attention has been paid in the past to the phase prior to arrival in Germany and to international students' individual expectations and motives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION:



Expectations management: a key finding of the qualitative preliminary study conducted as part of the *SeSaBa* project (see Pineda, 2018) was that there is a discrepancy between expectations and reality among international students. One reason for this is that it is often difficult to find consistent information on pursuing university study in Germany.²⁹ A second, exacerbating factor is that there is frequently no support or counselling before and during the application phase. In these cases, students are at considerable risk of obtaining either inadequate or potentially even incorrect information when they come to Germany.

Data from the panel survey show that most international bachelor's students acquired their university entrance certificate at a foreign school outside Germany, i.e. without a link to the German education system (→ **3.1 The phase before the start of academic study**). Only a small share of the students surveyed said that preparing to attend university in Germany had been easy or very easy for them (→ **3.1.4 Preparation for the study visit**).

Additional research as part of the qualitative support of the *SeSaBa* project revealed that communication on Germany as a place to study can be described more as marketing than as information. This means that a wide range of benefits and attractive aspects of studying abroad are presented, but little is said about what it actually means to study in Germany, what practical challenges this involves or what to expect after graduation. Here it would seem that differentiated and transparent information is required on academic study and careers.

Further research done by the team also indicated that many initiatives to support international students do not start until after application or even after arrival. Only a small number of universities offer information events or checklists for prospective students, for example.³⁰ Formats could be developed to enable (virtual) dialogue between students who are already at a university and prospective students, or checklists could be made available to prospective international students that address not just administration issues but also specific details relating to the choice of degree programme:³¹ this would provide guidance during the application phase, making it easier for students to get off to a good start.

29 The federal states in Germany each have their own legal framework for higher education as well as different types of universities and subject groups, so there are major differences between them that need to be taken into account.

30 Practical examples: Cologne University of Applied Sciences and the University of Osnabrück offer prospective refugee students the option of getting in contact and obtaining information on a no-obligation basis, even if they do not have concrete plans to study at the university in question. Similar concepts could be implemented for a broader group of international students. See *Pamoja Buddy Programme* at Cologne UAS (www.th-koeln.de/en/international_office/pamoja-buddy-program_66145.php) and information for refugees provided by the University of Osnabrück (www.uni-osnabrueck.de/studium/informationen-fuer-gefluechtete).

31 In their book *Erfolgreich Studieren: Vom Beginn bis zum Abschluss des Studiums*, Stock et al. (2009) provide prospective students with helpful checklists that include the following aspects: selection of subject, selection of university, information on enrolment, checking specific prerequisites, information specific to the university, programme and examination regulations, schedule and workplace planning.



Support for application procedures, potentially using digital tools:³² the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat, 2016) recommends that universities ought to be given a more prominent role in deciding on admission to higher education and clarifying any subject-specific requirements that may be necessary so as to enable university-specific recruitment of international students. A special analysis undertaken as part of the DAAD sub-project (Pineda & Rech, 2020) on support services aimed at helping international students prepare for and start a degree course at a German university showed that more and more German universities are using *TestAS* to determine study aptitude, as well as getting students to take university-specific entrance tests and undergo preliminary, introductory phases.³³ Other options include developing and testing new qualification pathways (cf. initiatives such as the DAAD and Goethe-Institut project *VORsprung*, for example³⁴), offering digital orientation programmes, taking a differentiated look at the specific situations of certain target groups (students with/without a refugee background, bachelor's students with no previous experience of academic study, students on English-taught degree programmes, students aged over 30) and implementing additional options for early support or preparation of admitted applicants.

Furthermore, the *SeSaBa* project shows that the reasons for studying in Germany are more complex than assumed (→ **3.1.2 Reasons for studying in Germany**). For many international students, the degree programme or qualification itself is not the only factor: others may be personal development, job opportunities, the prospect of staying in Germany on a long-term basis or gaining international experience. In view of this, identifying the expectations and motives of applicants or of the relevant (international) student body on site can contribute to establishing appropriately tailored (advisory) services. Counselling interviews and/or (digital) self-assessments to explore subject interest and the subject-specific requirements of the envisaged degree programme might be integrated in a differentiated procedure.

32 Practical example: Project *Digitaler Campus* (www.daad.de/digitalercampus).

33 In connection with preventing students from dropping out, there is increasing discussion in Germany of the role of aptitude tests for admission, aptitude and study ability. See the documentation of the BMBF conference *Eingangstests unter der Lupe - Studienbeginn begleiten, Hochschulserfolg erhöhen*.

34 Cf. www.daad.de/de/der-daad/was-wir-tun/digitalisierung/vorsprung.

Core finding 2: Making admission criteria more rigorous would be a simple but not unproblematic way of reducing drop-out rates among international students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION:



Making admission criteria more rigorous for international students would most likely lead to a decrease in drop-out rates.³⁵ This is shown by a comparison with countries such as the US, where differentiated statistics are available on the academic success rate of international students at universities with admission quotas of varying degrees of strictness (cf. Kercher, 2018, p. 17). According to this, the share of international bachelor's graduates on unrestricted degree programmes in the United States in 2015 (six years after the start of the programme) was only around 31 %, whereas on those where less than 25 % of applicants were admitted it was a remarkable 86 %.

It is not clear from these statistics which selection criteria were applied in each case. However, it can be assumed that similar correlations would be found in Germany if selection were to be stricter or more individualised (e.g. using individual aptitude tests) based on the criteria commonly applied here (e.g. average grade of the university entrance certificate, subject-specific aptitude or interest in the subject, proficiency in the language of instruction) (cf. also Thies & Falk, 2021; Falk et al., 2021b).

In particular, student proficiency in the language of instruction and – independently of this – German language skills per se are also issues that repeatedly come up in the higher education policy discussion in this connection, since many universities have come to recognise that a lack of language proficiency and the problems this leads to in terms of integration both inside and outside higher education is a pivotal factor in the academic success of international students. This became clear at various *SeSaBa* project events involving university representatives (expert workshops, DAAD leaders' conference) and is also borne out by the project findings (→ **3.1.1 Educational background of international students**, → **3.3.1 Language skills and Falk et al., 2021b**).

In this regard, it can certainly be said that an excessively liberal admission practice is equally unlikely to be in the interests of the students accepted where this results in an increase in drop-out probability due to unsuitable selection criteria or selection procedures that are not refined enough or too standardised. The quality and informational value of students' certificates of language proficiency in the relevant language of instruction are also likely to be key factors here: there are clearly some substantial variations between the various different (private and public) testing bodies, both abroad and in Germany (cf. Wisniewski & Lenhard, 2021).



However, it is doubtful to what extent such measures might be desirable from the point of view of the universities themselves and higher education policy in general. After all: by failing to admit prospective students to study in Germany due to (a lack of) certain characteristics, potential might be wasted for academia and/or the economy – whether in Germany or the students' home country. It should also be taken into account here that the various countries of origin by no means offer students the same conditions in which to prepare

³⁵ From a legal perspective, making admission criteria more rigorous specifically for international students would only be possible for students from non-EU countries due to the principle of equal treatment for students from EU countries. Alternatively, the only option would be to make admission criteria more rigorous for all applicants, i.e. both foreign and domestic.

adequately for university study in Germany. If the admission criteria were to be made more rigorous for all international students, those affected most would inevitably be students from countries with particularly poorly developed education systems. This would deprive a lot of them of the opportunity to make the most of their potential.

And there is another aspect to consider here: German universities have so far applied relatively low admission hurdles for international students as compared to institutions in English-speaking countries, and this can be interpreted as a reflection of Germany's specific approach to academic exchange, which has much more of a partnership orientation – especially as compared to other major host countries.



If universities were to consider making their admission criteria more rigorous, a second step would be to clarify how rigorous they should ideally be. There is no universally valid answer to this question – another point that is reflected in the *SeSaBa* project findings. After all, as shown by the analysis of study preparation measures carried out as part of this project and the interviews with students and experts, the requirements for students vary considerably between the different degree programmes (depending on the language of instruction, type of university, subject group, student composition, regional environment, etc.).

As such, the best option would be to give individual consideration to what additional or more rigorous admission criteria should be applied, or what changes to the selection and admission procedure might be sensible and realistic for each degree programme. The key question here should be: which criteria, and in what form, might appropriately reflect the requirements of the degree programme, while at the same time giving those prospective students a chance who would be perfectly capable of meeting these requirements in spite of potential problems at the beginning.

This requires individual assessment and discussion of which student characteristics and abilities can be selectively targeted by means of the relevant support measures with a good chance of success during the degree programme and where such support is less likely to be effective. Here it is particularly important to draw on the experience of previous student cohorts, looking at their success and drop-out rates and the reasons identified for any lack of academic success.



Finally, in view of a partnership-based approach to academic exchange, the issue of admissions should not only be considered unilaterally with a view to making the criteria more rigorous: it is also important to look at how prospective international students can be better prepared for university study in Germany before they start. This is because by combining support measures of this kind with admission criteria that are adapted to the requirements of the respective degree programme, it would be possible to avoid rejecting international applicants who – due to adverse prior conditions in their home countries – would otherwise have had very little chance or none at all of meeting the adapted admission criteria.³⁶

36 Practical examples: University of Cologne, *Studienstart International* (<https://portal.uni-koeln.de/international/studium-in-koeln/studienstart-international>); DAAD and Goethe-Institut, project *VORsprung: Mit digitaler Vorbereitung zum Studium* (<https://www.daad.de/de/der-daad/was-wir-tun/digitalisierung/vorsprung>).

Core finding 3: A large supply of support measures frequently meets comparatively low demand.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION:

→ Increase the appeal of support measures and raise their profile: the counselling services already available at universities are often not taken up by all students, either because there is little interest in them or because many students are not aware of them, as the *SeSaBa* panel survey showed (→ **3.2 The introductory phase of academic study**). For this reason, the aim should be to develop measures that address the specific support needs of international students so that the students participate at the measures more frequently. Ongoing evaluation and dialogue with international students would be helpful in this regard. Furthermore, students need to be made more familiar with the measures before they start their studies: information-seeking behaviour at this point influences participation in tutorials, use of academic support services and attendance at introductory events (cf. Falk & Helmkamp, forthcoming). It is also advisable to maintain contact with students throughout their degree programme by engaging them through peer channels.³⁷

→ Support new socialisation experiences: the majority of the students surveyed stated that during the first semester, they were most likely to seek help among students from their home country, followed by international students from other countries and lecturers (→ **3.3 Student's ongoing progress**). This means that in addition to German students, other international students could be specifically integrated in the support services offered (e.g. via mentoring programmes, tutoring programmes, peer networks).

The feeling of being integrated in the group of fellow students is a major predictor of academic success and drop-out (cf. Yildirim et al., 2021). Certain results of the *SeSaBa* project (cf. Thies & Falk, in review) show that a change from infrequent to frequent contact with German students strengthens international students' sense of belonging to the university. In the introductory phase of study, freely accessible leisure activities – that appeal to both German and international students – should be offered to specifically enhance social integration and strengthen the students' sense of belonging to the university. In this way, universities can create opportunities for contact and intercultural exchange.

→ Expansion of subject-specific offerings to compensate for knowledge deficits when starting a degree programme: the results of the *SeSaBa* project show that when they start university study, international bachelor's students have deficits in terms of working techniques (correct citation, writing a seminar paper, etc.) and also in the academic methodology of the subject (cf. Falk et al., 2021b). For this reason, targeted additional support services in these areas would be appropriate, especially in the introductory phase for bachelor's students without previous experience of academic study.³⁸ Care should be taken to ensure that suitable time slots are provided in the academic schedule to enable students to make use of these services.

37 Practical example: University of Bremen, *Kompass International* (www.uni-bremen.de/studium/starten-studieren/angebote-fuer-internationale-studierende/kompass).

38 Here the question arises as to how these knowledge deficits or needs can be identified. One key potential factor here is students' overestimation of their abilities when it comes to making use of voluntary support services. Students are often not aware they lack knowledge until it comes to acquiring credits after the introductory phase of their degree programme. For this reason, such deficits should ideally be identified before the students arrive (see finding 1).

Core finding 4: International students benefit from a holistic approach to university internationalisation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION:



Establish a culture of monitoring and ongoing evaluation: among those surveyed in the *SeSaBa* project, master's students felt less burdened by their studies than bachelor's students. All in all, it was also found that students are generally less satisfied with their study resources and course content in the fourth semester than they were at the beginning of their studies, while no significant longitudinal variations were found in terms of study burden (→ **3.4 The end of the degree programme: drop-out and graduation**).

About 10 % of the students in the sample reported that they considered dropping out during the first and fourth semesters (→ **3.4 The end of the degree programme: drop-out and graduation**). Instruments such as regular internal evaluations, direct feedback between the university and the student body, identification of good practice and alumni surveys might help identify potential for improvement and respond to the specific needs of individual student groups.



The development of language proficiency can be promoted through the appropriate offerings: according to the findings of the *SeSaBa* project, international students experience a discrepancy between the level of language proficiency officially required and what they actually need for their studies. In addition, there are different perceptions of academic routine and everyday social life at university, depending on the language of instruction. Students with good language skills in both German and English rated preparations to meet course-specific requirements more positively than students with poorer skills (cf. Falk et al., 2021b).

Furthermore, the results of the *SeSaBa* and *SpraStu* projects show that language proficiency improves over time (→ **3.3.1 Language skills**). Nonetheless, universities could do more to support and influence this development. In this connection, for example, the *SpraStu* project recommends using placement tests to determine needs, combined with specific support services at the relevant proficiency level. Another option would be to integrate courses on subject-specific language in the curriculum so that in the case of a German-taught degree programme, learning German is not an additional hurdle to overcome but can be seen as forming part of the degree programme. In addition, it might make sense to hire so-called language coaches to provide students with linguistic support when preparing a presentation or a term paper.

In the case of students on English-taught degree programmes, the study indicates that most want to stay in Germany after graduation (→ **3.4 The end of the degree programme: drop-out and graduation**). In order to facilitate potential integration in the labour market, acquisition of German should also be promoted for those on English-taught degree programmes by means of accompanying language courses; here, incentives could be offered to boost take-up (e.g. credits for elective courses).

- Raise awareness among all university staff regarding the particular situation of international students:³⁹ students, lecturers and staff at a university all share responsibility for students completing their studies successfully. In view of the particular challenges facing international students, it is advisable to promote internationalisation skills among both academic and administrative staff. There are many successful models for this: these include International Staff Weeks, as well as the encouragement or consideration of intercultural skills in new hires. Important aspects include raising awareness of the problems involved in coping with a foreign language or of students' lack of language skills, recognising the role of teachers as intervention protagonists, and networking with institutions inside and outside the university so as to be able to provide opportunities for dialogue and, if necessary, further training (e.g. on the topic of discrimination prevention).
- Increase sensitivity to self-positioning and positioning by others: international students are a heterogeneous group whose experience of academic study requires differentiated consideration based on the specific constellation (bachelor's or master's degree, German or English as the language of instruction, with or without refugee experience, with or without a scholarship, etc.). One result of the qualitative support of the *SeSaBa* project (cf. Pineda, 2021) is that universities should address processes of self-differentiation and (self-)exclusion. This relates to such things as adopting a sensitive approach in the design and participant planning of support programmes and of preparatory language and subject courses. In this way, the experience of stigmatisation can be avoided, thereby preventing potential inter-group conflicts.
- Consider different learning strategies adopted by international students as a factor that impacts on academic success: different learner types (cf. Yildirim et al., 2020) could be specifically targeted with individualised support services. For this purpose, an online assessment could be carried out before the start of the first semester to determine learner types. Based on this allocation, it would then be possible to apply support measures during the introductory phase of the degree programme (e.g. language courses, learning strategy training, video tutorials) as well as in the further course of studies (e.g. transfer workshops) to target different needs.
- Need for further target-group-specific offerings to enable students to acclimatise to the new learning and campus culture: international students have widely differing backgrounds in terms of education, career and work (→ **3.1.1 Educational background of international students**). To reflect this heterogeneous composition, a wide range of different support measures is necessary. The following areas could be particularly strengthened by means of concrete measures: training for examination formats, support and design of study groups, *Meet your Prof* events, language support for preparing seminar papers and theses, methodical preparation for the thesis, provision of study-related software and of study and work spaces.

39 Practical examples: Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Project *admINT* (www.uni-weimar.de/de/universitaet/international/fuer-administrative-mitarbeitende/admint); Stifterverband, *Diversity-Audit* (<https://www.stifterverband.org/video/diversity-audit>).

Core finding 5: The non-academic aspects of studying abroad are key to academic success, too.**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION:**

- Consider the campus as a place in which students pursue their studies and live their lives (at weekends, too): international students have particular difficulties in areas of everyday life such as dealing with bureaucracy (e.g. authorities and administration, concluding and terminating contracts), housing (e.g. difficulties in finding accommodation) and financing their studies (e.g. finding suitable jobs, combining work and study) (cf. Zimmermann et al., 2021). This indicates that additional support services geared specifically towards them would be helpful in these areas (e.g. on-campus office hours offered by the relevant institutions).
- Expand targeted financial assistance for lower-income students: the results of the *SeSaBa* project indicate that the financial situation of international students is a key factor in connection with dropping out or an intention to drop out (→ **3.3.2 Financial situation**). The following measures are suggested to counteract this: make KfW student loans available to certain groups, emergency fund for international students, incentivisation (e.g. rewards such as prizes for outstanding academic performance, compliance with scheduled progress) or possible reductions in certain payments (e.g. reduced social security contributions, reduced fees for residence permits, reduced TV and radio licence fee). Consideration should also be given to potentially offering more opportunities for financial support towards the end of the degree programme or in the event of an unplanned extension (e.g. introduction or expansion of end-of-programme scholarships).

Core finding 6: Graduation and post-university prospects are often a source of concern for students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION:

- Greater flexibility or expectations management with regard to the standard period of study for international students: most of the students surveyed in the *SeSaBa* project were still enrolled at the university after four semesters (master's degree) or six (bachelor's degree) semesters (→ **3.4.1 Student status after six semesters of study in Germany**). It should be clearly conveyed to international students before they embark on their studies that it is often not possible to keep to the standard period of study and that this may have an impact on their individual life circumstances, financial situation and career planning (e.g. residence permit, possible underestimation of funding, drop in motivation, sense of frustration).
- Provide support for the final thesis on time: the fact that many of the international students surveyed had not yet started their master's thesis by the end of the fourth semester (→ **3.3.7 Work on the master's thesis**) suggests that relevant support services would be a sensible measure to increase academic success. The main problems concern knowledge of methodology, academic writing skills and a lack of information regarding administrative requirements. The fact that many respondents in the *SeSaBa* project indicated similar knowledge deficits regarding study techniques and methods towards the end of their degree programme as they did at the beginning reflects a particular need for appropriate support services to be provided throughout the degree programme.
- Early warning systems and prevention measures: according to the *SeSaBa* panel survey, a lack of academic motivation is the most common reason for dropping out among international students (37 % of those on bachelor's programmes and 55 % of those on master's programmes) (→ **3.4.2 Reasons for dropping out**). Some students who drop out do not realise until far too late that they will not be able to complete their studies successfully (→ **3.4.4 Reflection on the reasons and consequences of dropping out of university study**). Possible preventive actions would be to introduce feedback on academic performance, develop measures to offer reorientation for at-risk groups or for students who are considering dropping out, implement ongoing academic performance monitoring and, in particular, coordinate with students themselves to take action in the event of unexpected developments.⁴⁰
- Transition management: the qualitative support of the *SeSaBa* project showed that the search for post-graduation follow-up opportunities was a significant concern for many of the students interviewed before the end of their studies (→ **3.4.6 Reflection on the reasons and consequences of successful graduation**). They were having to complete their thesis while at the same time making arrangements for their future, e.g. apply for placements or jobs and possibly also apply for a change to their residence permit. Possible assistance might include extended deadlines or support with administrative procedures and formalities.⁴¹

40 Practical example: University of Mannheim, *ErStiMA – Frühwarnsystem und Studierendencockpit* (www.uni-mannheim.de/universitaet/einrichtungen/koordinationsstelle-fuer-studieninformationen/kompetenzzentrum-erfolgreich-studieren-in-mannheim).

41 Practical example: University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, provision of information in connection with off-boarding (www.fau.de/people/off-boarding-outgoing).



Focus on prospects after successful graduation and discontinuation of studies: towards the end of their degree programme, students particularly need support that facilitates their transition to the labour market, since a large share of international students would like to stay in Germany after their studies (→ **3.4 The end of the degree programme: drop-out and graduation**). This might include support in looking for a job, help in preparing applications for the German labour market (e.g. correction of application documents), offering application training in German and English as well as providing insights into possible career areas.⁴² Students' lack of work experience should be addressed as a challenge when transitioning to the labour market, as well as the importance of having as high a level of German language proficiency as possible so as to be able to find a job.

42 Practical example: University of Passau, *istudipass* (www.uni-passau.de/en/istudi-pass).

5

Discussion and outlook

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This study provides an overview of general challenges that international students face before and during their studies in Germany. The following questions were addressed: what particular conditions and obstacles to academic success arise for international students in Germany? What is their academic situation and what are their life circumstances, both at the university and outside it? And finally: what measures might help reduce drop-out rates among international students or increase their rates of academic success?

5.1 Possible follow-up analyses

The analysis of the International Student Survey showed that the focus areas of the *SeSaBa* project offer potential for the investigation of numerous other relevant issues that can link up to as yet unexplored areas of international psychological and sociological research. This particularly concerns questions such as subject differentiations and the diversity of the international student body, as well as related perspectives on intersectionality (i.e. interactions arising from characteristics such as gender, educational and cultural background). These focus areas promise to offer significant insights into why international students achieve academic success or drop out of university study in Germany.

In view of this, FernUniversität in Hagen and the IHF conceived the project *InterMINT* ('International STEM students in Germany: The combined effector of the predictors of academic success at the individual, subject, university and cultural levels'), which started in August 2021 under the BMBF funding line *Academic success and dropout phenomena II* and will be conducting secondary analyses of the study progress panel "International Student Survey" collected in the *SeSaBa* project. The added value of *InterMINT* results from the complementary interdisciplinary research perspectives that provide insights into sociological and psychological determinants of international students' academic success in STEM subjects at the individual level. With a view to analysing generic impact levels,

information on professional, institutional and cultural levels is integrated as part of the various focal points of analysis.

5.2 Transfer and practical relevance

From the very beginning, the *SeSaBa* project – not least due to the fact that it was jointly managed with the DAAD – was very much geared towards incorporating universities' practical experience into the research process and – by the same token – transferring the research results into practice. This purpose was served by the expert workshops and the focus groups with students at the beginning of the project, and in particular the numerous dialogue events with university representatives which were held throughout the course of the project. It quickly became apparent that the universities were very interested in the subject and also engaging in dialogue, both with the project team and in particular with other universities. For this reason, another key contribution of the project – in addition to the concrete research results and the recommended actions based on them – should be to initiate and establish regular experience-sharing sessions between universities. It emerged that there is still a great demand for dialogue and networking at many universities, which is why the latter made proactive and profitable use of this platform.

In view of this, another practical recommendation is to maintain such dialogue and networking opportunities between universities after the *SeSaBa* project has ended. This could take the form of a working group, for example, and/or regular events such as the annual conference of international office leaders organised by the DAAD. In many ways, completion of the project and publication of this report means that the key phase of the transfer process has only just begun: the findings and recommendations of the project are now fully available to universities. It can be assumed that ongoing dialogue regarding practical implementation will be crucial to achieving extensive and effective practical transfer of the *SeSaBa* findings.

5.3 Outstanding questions

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for international students in Germany have not yet been considered in depth in this study. Challenges facing students in this connection include not only the switch to digital teaching formats and uncertainty with regard to the procedures involved with digital examinations, but also the lack of face-to-face contact between teachers and students (cf. Falk, 2021).

At the present time, it is not possible to predict the long-term impact of these problems on the internationalisation of higher education. However, (physical) international student mobility is unlikely to become less important in the post-pandemic period – on the contrary: all signs currently indicate a rapid recovery and even a further increase in mobility numbers when pandemic-related travel restrictions end. One indication of this is that even in 2020 interest among international students in studying in Germany remained at a high level, as suggested by current data provided by the DAAD and uni-assist (cf. DAAD & uni-assist, 2020).

Nonetheless, we can expect to see very varied combinations of international education programmes. In addition to traditional internationalisation measures, it would also be conceivable to offer entirely virtual study and research stays abroad from the international students' current place of residence, as well as combined or hybrid virtual-physical types of mobility. At the same time, these potential scenarios will involve new problems, such as the fact that student groups from countries with poor internet or library access (or poor access to specialist literature in English) would be disadvantaged, and there would also be complications caused by time differences when studying online. The lack of social integration and networking involved in a purely virtual experience abroad is another aspect to be considered.

In view of this, there will also be a need for further research in the future on the conditions required to enable international students to achieve academic success in different mobility constellations. The research field remains in motion.

6

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