



Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst  
German Academic Exchange Service



# **International students are the skilled professionals of tomorrow**

DAAD Position Paper

**March 2023**



## 1

# International students: Strong potential to meet the demand for skilled workers in Germany and around the world

2

Demand for qualified and skilled workers is rising in Germany, the EU and around the world. In autumn 2022 Germany's federal government presented its skilled workers strategy, which is framed in the context of demographic changes and an expected shortfall of 240,000 skilled workers in Germany alone by 2026. In response the government has adopted a motto of 'leveraging potential at home and abroad'. International students are among those attracting increasing attention from within political and business circles. The German government's Skilled Labour Strategy (2022a) puts it thus:

*'Furthermore, more immigrants must be encouraged to study or undertake vocational education in Germany, and it must be easier for them to remain after graduating. **International students are particularly attractive for the German labour market** because they come to Germany with many skills and during their studies gain additional skills which are important for the German labour market.'* (Editors' emphasis).

International students hold huge potential in terms of recruiting skilled workers. **Every year over 50,000 international students graduate from higher education in Germany.** The number

of international graduates rose by 76% in the last 10 years (DAAD & DZHW, 2023). The efforts of higher education institutions and the DAAD, along with funding programmes approved by policymakers are making an impact. Given the growing shortage of skilled workers in STEM careers, the fact that international students make up a substantial share of students on technical and scientific study programmes is of particular relevance. **Over half of international graduates from German higher education institutions gained a degree in a STEM subject**, with engineering alone accounting for 40% of international graduates. While the number of German students on STEM courses has been declining for years, the number of international students continues to grow strongly (DAAD & DZHW, 2022).

When it comes to skilled worker migration, higher education institutions serve as magnets and motors. But we are a long way from making the most of this potential. In terms of turning international students into the skilled workers of tomorrow, **numerous political and structural barriers still persist.** There are three key levels to help make progress in this area: (1) attracting students, (2) improving outcomes, and (3) easing the transition into employment. If all

stakeholders involved in these three areas fully commit themselves, international students will make a much bigger contribution than ever to meeting the need for skilled workers.

Germany is already well placed to **attract international students**. According to UNESCO data from 2020 Germany ranks behind only the USA, UK and Australia in the world's leading host countries for international students (DAAD & DZHW, 2023). Over the past ten years the number of international first-year students has risen from 42,000 to 75,000 today. Given the need for skilled workers, this positive trend needs ongoing support through measures to recruit students, prepare them for higher education, and to facilitate access to the German higher education system.

The second of these three critical levers is **improving outcomes** for international students. Drop-out rates for international students from bachelor's and master's programmes remain well above those for German students (DAAD & DZHW, 2022). Substantially improving student outcomes could significantly boost the potential for international students to stay on as skilled workers in Germany. The long-term goal should be to reduce drop-out rates for international students to the same level as German students.

However, international graduates only become successful skilled workers when they **transition from education to employment**. In principle, the conditions to make this happen are good: a substantial share of international students in Germany want to remain in Germany after completing their studies and find employment. The DAAD's 'BintHo' survey, conducted in the 2020/21 winter semester, found that, alongside high academic quality, good study conditions and low costs for higher education, the good career prospects are what makes Germany particularly attractive as a place to study. Out of over 15,000 international students in Germany surveyed, 81% identified career prospects as one of the leading reasons for choosing Germany as a host country (DAAD, forthcoming). However, recent OECD data also shows that only a third of international students at German higher

education institutions are still in the country ten years after getting their first residence permit and have made the transition to employment or a long-term residence permit (OECD, 2022). Based on the most recent data for first-year students, this would equate to some **25,000 skilled workers migrating to Germany through higher education**.

**If we pull these three levers together, the DAAD estimates that the number of international students entering skilled employment in Germany could double at least by 2030.**

We need to tap this huge potential to the full. The Federal Government's position paper on skilled labour migration (Federal Government, 2022b) has already identified international students as a group to target and provided important fresh thinking in the area. The European Commission's initiative to create 'talent partnerships' as part of the migration and asylum package also identifies international student mobility between EU member states and certain third countries as a key element in countering the EU-wide shortage of skilled workers, as well as improving collaboration with partner countries on migration issues (European Commission, 2022). However, there still remains a need to expand targeted funding and support mechanisms to help international exchange students make their way into employment in Germany, nor has there been a systematic attempt to remove existing barriers these students face. For this to happen there needs to be **coordinated and collaborative efforts by policymakers, higher education institutions, the DAAD and businesses**.

Recent studies support this view, as does analysis on retaining skilled workers through migration via higher education institutions carried out by the German Economic Institute (Geis-Thöne, 2022).

By providing funding programmes, promoting Germany as a place to study and conduct research, and advising German higher education institutions on internationalisation questions, the DAAD is already making a significant contribution to meeting the need for skilled workers in Germany and around the world. However, current challenges in the employment market demand a thorough approach to expanding these services.

In this the DAAD is committed to upholding its global responsibility as an actor in and promoter of internationalisation, particularly with regard to partner countries in the Global South. Expanding the pool of potential skilled workers to include international students must therefore be underpinned by **principles of fair migration**, taking into account the risks of brain drain which countries of origin face. The goal must be to achieve a **win-win-win situation for individuals, countries of origin and host countries** which creates opportunities for all involved. Young people must get the chance to study in Germany and get attractive career prospects in Germany, the European Union or elsewhere around the world. Germany must get the opportunity to recruit potential skilled workers for its domestic labour markets. Countries of origin must not only be able to access networks and contacts with Germany and benefit from transfers of finance and knowledge, but also to acquire skilled workers with experience of working abroad for their own economies when graduates ultimately return home. (Chen *et al*, 2021)

This perspective forms the basis of the DAAD's position as set out in this paper, along with its recommendations to relevant decision-makers in politics, higher education and business. Achieving the goals set out above and making systematic use of the potential for international students to become skilled workers requires a **coordinated approach between these actors and linked funding programmes** to support higher education institutions in their role as facilitators and promoters of skilled migration.

## 2

## The qualification pathway – how international students become the skilled workers of tomorrow

Fully leveraging the potential of international students as a means of recruiting skilled workers to Germany means looking at every stage of this pathway, starting with recruiting students and helping them prepare for higher education, then supporting them during their studies and ensuring they achieve good outcomes, through to helping them transition into employment. However, despite the fact that the underlying conditions are good, obstacles persist at every stage of the **qualification pathway for international students on their way to becoming the skilled workers of tomorrow**. As such, we must reshape these stages around the needs of international students.

### 2.1 Student recruitment Making Germany more attractive

Germany is highly attractive as a place to study, putting it in a strong position to attract international students. Six areas of activity are of particular importance when it comes to providing targeted support for potential students entering higher education in Germany.

1. An **attractive range of study programmes**, tailored both to the interests of international students and society's needs for skilled workers with specific qualifications, is the foundation for attracting the talented individuals who will be the skilled workers of tomorrow. **Courses taught in English** are an important element here, giving potential international students who have no or limited German language skills a way of studying at German higher education institutions and thereby significantly increasing earning potential. There is therefore a need to expand these programmes in a systematic way, accompanied as a matter of course by language courses to teach German.
2. We must continue to strongly promote Germany as a place to study and conduct research. International **higher education and research marketing** by the DAAD, its partners and higher education institutions are already addressing this need. However, given the growth in demand for skilled workers, this marketing should be expanded with a focus on innovative, cross-media approaches and targeting specific groups such as school leavers from 'PASCH' schools (which offer a German school education abroad), and

students on German study programmes abroad (known as ‘TNB’ programmes). Marketing activities should make more of the good chances of subsequently being able to remain in Germany to enter employment.

3. **Orientation programmes** such as websites providing information on entry requirements and how to find a place on a study programme are essential for potential students to find the right study programme and hence for later outcomes as well. Existing websites such as those developed by the DAAD should be expanded and enhanced with improved self-assessment tools and opportunities to prepare to study in Germany. Digital services make it possible to reach potential students around the world and provide personalised support.
4. Potential students should start getting the right **qualifications and preparations for higher education** while still in their home countries, and they should be supported with this. The German language is of central importance in this. Appropriate language learning programmes should be available where students need them, but we also need to expand structures for teaching German as a foreign language so learners abroad can achieve the academic qualifications they need. Alongside linguistic preparation, academic preparation programmes are important as these are frequently an access requirement for higher education in Germany.
5. The administrative barriers to starting higher education in Germany remain too high. **Higher education access rules** for bachelor’s degree students lack transparency for those to whom they apply and are focused on the wrong aspects, particularly as regards recruiting students from countries outside the EU. The current system must be made more flexible in order to attract more international students to Germany in future. A fundamental improvement could be achieved by providing digital services which process and confirm higher education entrance qualifications while the applicant is still in their home country. In the long-term, however, a more fundamental reform of the current system is needed. Access to higher education in Germany should be on the basis of an assessment of each individual applicant’s qualifications and suitability, rather than an evaluation of the school system in their home country. In order to allow more potential students to start studying in Germany, the visa process needs to be accelerated, visa conditions need to be made more flexible (including those for proof of funds), and there needs to be a stronger focus on service when handling residence permit applications.
6. There needs to be a particular focus on support for recruiting highly qualified early-career academics to master’s degree and PhD programmes by **awarding scholarships**. These promote equality of opportunity and encourage highly qualified talent. In some areas such as renewable energy – both in industry and academia – highly qualified experts are in particularly short supply. Meeting this need requires the development of innovative funding programmes targeted at recruiting future skilled professionals.

**THE QUALIFICATION PATHWAY FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:  
LEVERS TO INCREASE POTENTIAL TO MEET SKILLS SHORTAGES**



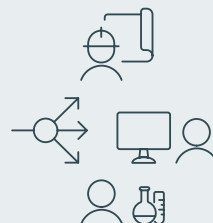
**Recruiting students**



**Improving outcomes**



**Supporting transition into employment**



**Measures:**

- Attractive courses and programmes
- Higher education and research marketing
- Orientation programmes
- Qualifications, language courses, preparatory programmes
- More flexible higher education entry requirements
- Attractive scholarship programmes



**Measures:**

- Create a more welcoming environment
- Advice and support programmes
- Parallel German language courses
- Digital information and support services



**Measures:**

- Higher education institution–business partnerships
- Teaching skills for the workplace
- International Careers Centres
- Stronger alumni networks
- Improving chances to start careers in German academic system

**2.2 Ensuring successful outcomes  
Improving support for international students during their studies**

Successfully completing a study programme is an essential condition for transitioning to qualified employment for international students. However, the drop-out rate for international students on bachelor's and master's programmes remains much higher than for German students (BA 41–49%, MA 28–34%; DAAD & DZHW 2022). In absolute terms, this equates to over 25,000 international students dropping out every year. Improving outcomes will require a focus on three areas of activity:

1. The DAAD and BMBF 'SeSaBa' study of outcomes and drop-out rates among domestic and international bachelor's and master's degree students shows that **advice and support programmes** specifically aimed at international students can significantly improve outcomes (DAAD, 2022). Proven and successful models and structures for this at higher education institutions, such as welcome centres for international students and researchers, should be consolidated and expanded with digital competences. There is also a need to improve social integration for students and provide better mental health support services. Higher education institutions should also think more coherently about diversity and internationalisation as aspects which impact a student's experience.

2. Being able to speak German is a fundamental condition both for academic success and integration into the German labour market, as has now been shown many times in academic research (SVR Research Division, 2017, Wisniewski *et al*, 2022). Provision of **German courses for students alongside their studies** needs to be expanded systematically, aiming to ensure that all international students graduate with very good German skills which allow them to transition directly into the German labour market, which is dominated by SMEs. This is true of programmes taught in German, but it is particularly relevant to **programmes taught in English**.
3. In future, support programmes for international students should be more **holistic in conception and design**, covering the whole student journey from recruitment and orientation to preparation for study and support while in higher education, through to graduation and the transition to employment, including follow-up contact as well. Networked digital platforms to support international students at all stages of their journey could offer innovative approaches to the issue and provide information, support and opportunities to access qualifications.

### 2.3 Supporting labour market integration

#### Making it easier for international graduates to find their way into professional life

Transitioning to employment represents the third stage of the qualification pathway. Compared to other nations, Germany offers a good environment in terms of regulations and residence laws affecting finding and starting employment, creating a strong foundation for international graduates to start their careers in Germany. In addition to this, international students need practical preparation and support for the transition to working life. Refugee students as a group should not be

overlooked at this point. Four levels of action are particularly significant here:

1. In order to provide the best-possible support for international students as they make their way into the labour market, **close communication is needed between higher education institutions and businesses (local, regional and national)** and other political and administrative actors. This was one of the findings of the federal government-funded Study & Work initiative (BMW & Stifterverband, 2017). For their part, higher education institutions should consider the specific needs and skills required by employers when designing study and support programmes. On the other hand, employers should be systematic in considering the potential of international students and create appropriately welcoming and supportive cultures for those starting their careers. Existing partnerships between higher education institutions and regional employers can be encouraged by expanding practical collaborations on the levels of study programmes and higher education institutions. In addition to this, facilitating early contact with potential employers by including international students in work placements and internships is a great advantage to finding employment in Germany at a later time. Furthermore, it would be desirable for employers and businesses to be more engaged in students' ongoing studies, such as by funding scholarship programmes and language courses.
2. International students should be given specific preparation for the requirements and customs of the German employment market. This means including helping international students gain **skills and qualifications relevant to the employment market** through modules within study programmes or as supporting programmes. Practice-oriented events and courses, work placements in partnership with businesses, career days and similar networking opportunities are chances to make initial contact with employers and



should therefore be tailored to the needs of international students. In addition to support programmes run in parallel to academic studies at higher education institutions, existing digital platforms for international alumni of German institutions (such as Alumniportal Deutschland) should be further expanded. Alumniportal Deutschland already communicates tailored information and training opportunities to this group to help them start their careers in Germany.

3. **International Careers Centres** focus on the needs of international students, providing assistance with finding a job, applying and interviews. These should become the standard across German higher education institutions (cf Schueller, 2022, Schueller, forthcoming). Setting up these centres should be expedited through linked funding programmes and supported by measures to promote networking and sharing experiences in this field.
4. In addition to shortages of skilled workers in business, Germany also faces **shortages of skilled professionals in academia** in certain disciplines across higher education institutions, non-university research institutions, and commercial research organisations. International research marketing has a vital role to play in this area. German higher education institutions should increase their focus on retaining high-performing international students, helping them start careers in this country's academic system and facilitating career development right up to the level of professorships. There is a need for action on this level in particular, as international professors only made up 7% of all professors at German higher education institutions in 2020 (DAAD & DZHW, 2022). All too often, top early career academics leave Germany after completing a PhD or postdoc in Germany. The DAAD is currently conducting a scientific study of the contexts and reasons behind this.

## 2.4 Promoting fair migration: Supporting training for leaders and experts around the world

The qualifications pathway for international talent into Germany's labour market is not a one-way street. By training and educating international students, Germany is making an important contribution to **meeting the global shortage of skilled workers**. Many international students at German higher education institutions return to their home countries immediately after graduating or at a later point. There, these Germany Alumni contribute the knowledge and skills they gained in Germany to social and economic development at home. International graduates working at businesses in Germany can promote knowledge sharing and networking with their home countries and thereby support their economic and social development in a way analogous to sending money home. Three areas of activity are particularly important on the way to achieving a win-win-win situation for individual students, their countries of origin and Germany:

1. Students are **free to choose their own development pathway**. The support they receive is systematic and independent of the outcome of that choice. Scholarships such as those offered by the DAAD come with no pre-conditions for an individual's life journey after completing their studies.
2. **Intergovernmental migration and mobility partnerships** (including partnerships at EU level) can be set up to support international cooperation around training and recruiting skilled workers. Such partnerships can create regulatory and policy environments that protect the interests of all stakeholders by providing binding rules governing safe migration.
3. Programmes to **promote training for academic staff abroad** help address shortages of skilled workers in their home countries while at the same time laying the foundations for international networks with partners

with links to Germany. These programmes bolster regional economies and help meet the need for skilled workers faced by German businesses abroad. In the 2022 academic year some 36,000 students were enrolled at binational higher education institutions or on transnational study programmes. These institutions and programmes are developed and provided in partnership with institutions in Germany and have close links to Germany (DAAD & DZHW, 2022). Other ways of targeting support for educating and training highly qualified individuals in their countries of origin include institutional partnerships and structural support programmes for higher education, setting up regional centres of excellence in collaboration with German and international higher education institutions, and awarding scholarships within students' regions of origin. Expanding partner countries' training and education capacities therefore forms an integral part of a skilled labour concept for Germany which is both integrated and takes a global outlook. The DAAD will continue to put all its efforts into training and educating academic staff abroad.

## 3

## Ten recommendations to decision-makers in politics, higher education and business

If Germany is to leverage the full potential of international students in terms of attracting skilled workers, it must look at all stages of the qualification pathway. This requires a holistic and coordinated approach from all key stakeholders in politics, higher education and business. In this the DAAD sees itself as a mediator and facilitator at the interfaces between these stakeholders, and it recommends a particular focus on the following aspects of efforts in this area.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO NATIONAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS

#### 1. Reform access requirements to make it easier for potential international students to come to study in Germany's higher education system

In future, access to higher education must be on the basis of assessing each applicant's qualifications, not the education system in their country of origin. Digital programmes to allow students to take university qualification exams and prepare for study in Germany while still in their home countries can ease the administrative burden of the current process for applying to higher education institutions in Germany. Ultimately the goal must be

fundamental reforms to the higher education access system.

#### 2. Simplify and speed up visas for international students

Administrative obstacles in the visa application process need to be analysed and removed systematically. In addition to providing the resources needed in German embassies and consulates, this includes introducing greater flexibility around locked account balances.

#### 3. Provide funding programmes to help higher education institutions shape the qualification pathway

Innovative funding programmes must help German higher education institutions optimise all stages of the qualification pathway for international students and put in place the necessary structures and measures. This can build on experience gained from integration programmes for refugees and also focus specifically on refugees as a group. At the same time, higher education institutions must be given assistance with developing German language programmes, with a particular emphasis on academic training for German teachers.

#### **4. Promote fair long-term migration partnerships through intergovernmental agreements**

Intergovernmental agreements to regulate migration and mobility between Germany and its partner countries and consider their needs for skilled workers offer an important framework for recruiting students to careers where demand is particularly high while also providing clear rules in the spirit of fair migration. Germany should also access the potential of talent and mobility partnerships in the context of European migration policy.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

#### **5. Provide attractive courses and programmes and advertise internationally**

Study programmes which prepare international students for specific career areas are very attractive. Increasing the number of courses taught in English must be a particular priority as a way of allowing talented young people to access Germany's higher education system even if they speak little or no German. Student recruitment activities should be combined with dedicated orientation, language teaching and preparatory programmes, and these should be integrated as key elements of the qualification pathway. The potential for finding employment after graduation can be used as an argument to recruit students.

#### **6. Improve outcomes, language skills and integration for international students**

The key lever in the hands of higher education institutions is improving outcomes for international students. In addition to academic support programmes, German language courses, social integration programmes and mental health support services are central to this. Adequate resources and structures to provide proper support for international students across the whole qualification pathway must be expanded and supported through funding programmes.

#### **7. Actively support students' transition from higher education to employment**

Higher education institutions should provide targeted support to international students to prepare them for employment, taking advantage of dialogue and collaboration with businesses and future employers, particularly at a regional level. Practical cooperation with businesses is vitally important in this. International Careers Centres tailored to the needs of international students should become a standard feature at German higher education institutions.

#### **8. Expand professional development programmes for international and refugee academics**

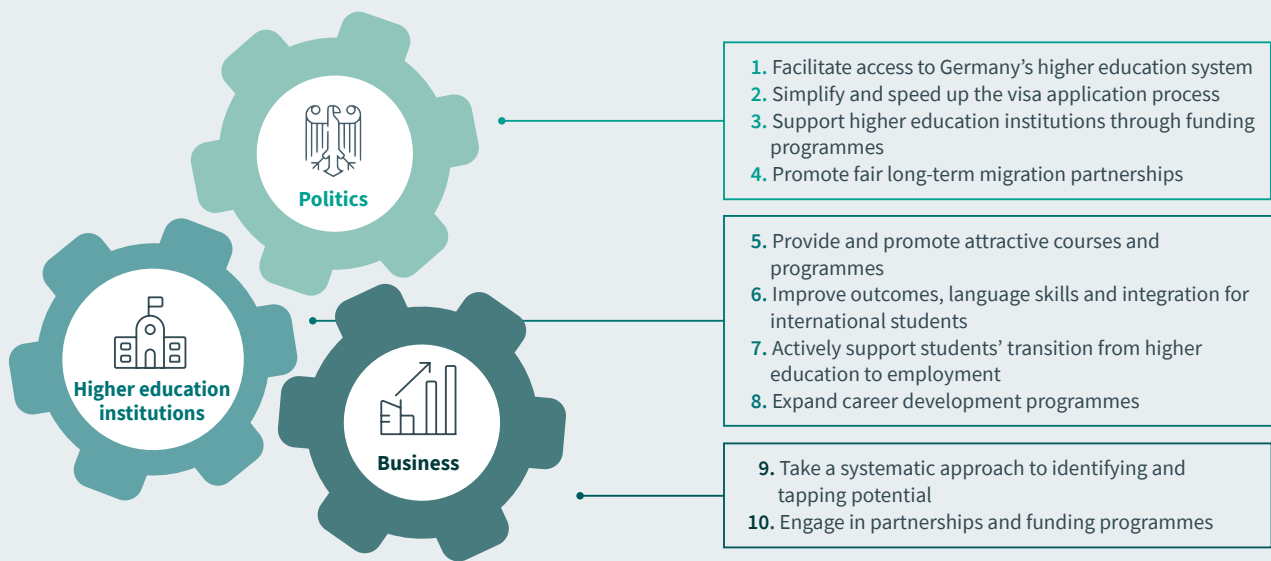
If international academics, (and particularly those who are refugees) hold foreign degrees and lack specific additional qualifications to start a career in Germany, higher education institutions should develop and provide professional development programmes tailored to their needs. Programmes of this kind are conceivable in relation to teacher training.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS TO BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS**

#### **9. Take a systematic approach to tapping the potential of international students**

If businesses are to meet their needs for skilled workers, they must target and leverage the potential of international graduates from German higher education institutions. To achieve this, businesses should work with policymakers and higher education institutions to analyse needs and potential, but above all they must create a welcoming culture in the workplace and target support to the needs of international graduates starting out in their careers. Making early contact and networking with international students in higher education, and working closely with the institutions themselves is essential to achieving this.

### CONCERTED EFFORTS BY ALL STAKEHOLDERS: TEN RECOMMENDATIONS



#### 10. Demonstrating commitment through partnerships and funding programmes

Meeting the demand for skilled workers over the long term demands active and systematic engagement from businesses for international graduates of German higher education institutions. Systematically expanding practice-oriented partnerships with higher education institutions is an important element in supporting the qualification pathway for international students. Financial support such as tailored scholarship programmes, language courses and work placements to prepare students for work are effective tools to recruit skilled workers in a targeted way.

## 4

## DAAD involvement

14

As a funder and mediator between key stakeholders in politics, higher education and business, the DAAD will support and contribute to the development of the qualification pathway for international students to become the skilled workers of tomorrow. In this it will draw upon its existing portfolio of programmes and many years' experience in recruiting international students and early career academics and helping them gain the qualifications they need to become the skilled workers of tomorrow. Given the scale of demand, the DAAD must expand these activities in a thorough and targeted way. As an association of German higher education institutions and student bodies, the DAAD will work in partnership with policymakers, businesses, academia and society to focus on the following priority areas:

### 1. Fair migration

DAAD supports recruiting and preparing international students as the skilled workers of tomorrow in line with the standards of fair migration in the common interest of all involved: students, countries of origin and Germany. The DAAD does not take a uniform approach but makes use of the expertise of its global network to develop and deliver programmes which are tailored to specific

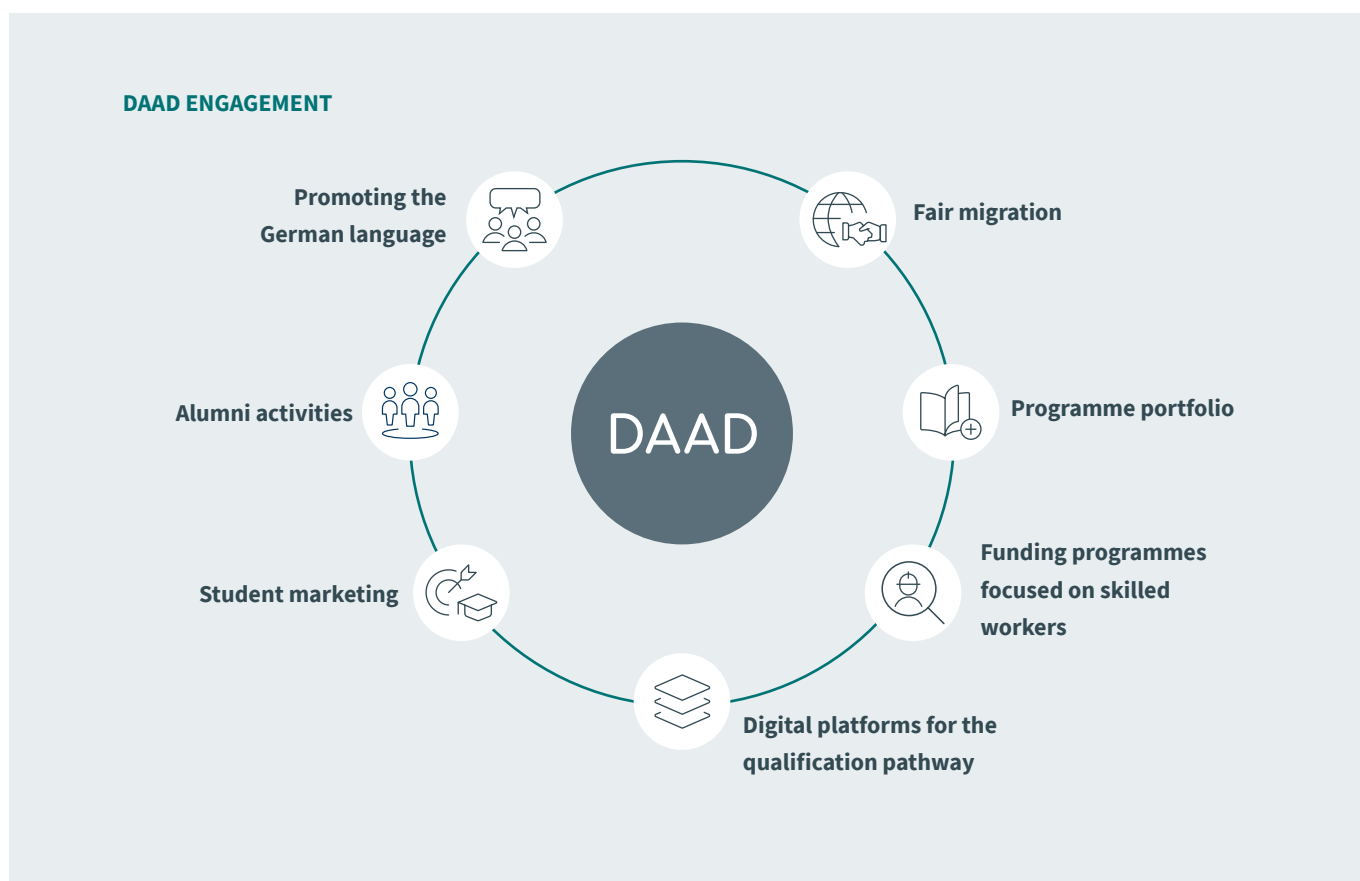
contexts. It seeks to advance the discussion around skilled workers by providing knowledge and opportunities to share and discuss ideas and experiences.

### 2. Programme portfolio

The DAAD will reflect the shortage of skilled workers in Germany, Europe and around the world across its whole portfolio, responding to the issue in an appropriate way.

### 3. Funding programmes focused on skilled workers

The DAAD has already proposed a specific funding programme targeted at helping international students and early career academics improve their qualifications to become the skilled workers of tomorrow. The programme builds on tried-and-tested activities and experiences gained through higher education programmes for refugees such as Integra, Welcome and Profi. The DAAD also plans to develop additional programme formats aimed at recruiting international students for careers facing particular shortages of skilled workers in Germany.



#### 4. Digital platforms for the qualification pathway

The DAAD will continue to build innovative digital platforms to recruit, prepare and support international students on their way to becoming the skilled workers of tomorrow.

#### 5. Student marketing

The DAAD encourages policymakers to promote marketing for Germany as a place to study and conduct research through its global network, and to expand programmes targeted at specific groups in order to recruit skilled workers. Existing schemes and campaigns are to be expanded with a focus on peer-to-peer and community programmes.

#### 6. Alumni activities

DAAD will take a more systematic approach to leveraging the potential of alumni of German higher education institutions to become skilled workers in Germany and in their countries of origin. Alumniportal Deutschland, which is run in partnership with the Goethe-Institut and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, will continue to expand its successful programmes

to help skilled workers gain qualifications to work in Germany, develop their careers, learn languages, and find jobs.

#### 7. Promoting the German language

The DAAD will continue to bolster opportunities to learn German abroad with a particular focus on supporting academic training for German teachers.

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