



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **New research on international students and their migration intentions after studying. Europe risks losing 'brightest and best' as international students are found to be poorly informed about options for staying on to work.**

**The SVR-Research Unit conducted a comparative study on the staying intentions of international students in five EU countries. An online survey of over 6,200 international students in Germany, France, the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden showed a strong interest among students in staying on temporarily after graduation. The main motivation was found to be the possibility of gaining international work experience. The key recommendation is that in order to keep the 'brightest and best' students, barriers, including lack of information about legal regulations, need to be addressed.**

**London, 22 June 2012.** International students are an attractive group of prospective skilled migrants: they are young, highly educated and already equipped with host country credentials. But so far, not enough has been done to support their transition into the labour markets of their countries of study after graduation. The Research Unit of the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration (SVR) investigated the staying intentions of non-EU international students in five European countries. The study, "Mobile talent? The staying intentions of international students in five EU countries" was conducted in cooperation with the Brussels-based Migration Policy Group (MPG). The research project was funded by the Stiftung Mercator.

For the study, 6,239 students at 25 universities in Germany, France, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK took part in an online survey. The research project examined the factors that are important in determining whether students plan to stay and look for work in the country of study after graduation. Since only Master and PhD students were interviewed, who tend to have a greater interest in finding a job directly after graduation than Bachelor students, the results are particularly meaningful. A comprehensive analysis of the legal conditions for the transition of international students into the labour markets of the countries surveyed was also carried out.

A large gap exists between the intention to stay and its realization: two-thirds of the respondents would like to remain in the country of study after graduation. In fact, only about one-quarter in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK and one-third in France do stay on. "If the main aim of immigration policies is to attract the 'brightest and best' it makes sense to look at the obstacles faced by international postgraduate students", said Dr. Alex Balch, the UK academic partner for the project and an expert on UK and European immigration policies. "This study should be invaluable to policymakers because it shows that, while different European countries are beginning to compete for international students, none have really managed to maximise the benefits of this group of potential migrants." Opposing trends are evident in the countries surveyed: while Germany introduces an overdue liberalisation, in the UK and the Netherlands an opposite trend can currently be observed. In the UK, the ability to



stay on after graduation has been made more difficult and in the Netherlands eligibility criteria for international students have intensified. As the study shows, such political decisions are closely monitored by international students.

The two main motives for remaining in the country of study are good prospects on the labour market and the desire to gain international work experience. "We need to understand the trends in studying abroad in far more detail, rather than assume that all international students are 'migrants in waiting' ", said Dr. Balch. The survey showed that the majority of students would like to remain only temporarily in the country of study. Only a small share of respondents – between 5.3 percent in the UK and 12.5 percent in Germany – are planning to stay on for more than five years. The notion that international students may be looking to use their study abroad experience as a stepping stone to permanent immigration in a highly developed country, appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

A direct comparison between students who plan to stay on and those who plan to leave shows that the former are more likely to have already gained work experience in the country and tend to be younger and to have no children. Differences are also clear across fields of study and country of origin: engineering students and those in the natural sciences are more interested in staying on than those in the social sciences and humanities. Students from Asian countries (mainly China and India) and Eastern Europe plan to stay more frequently than students from North America, South America and Africa. Those who are better informed about the legal conditions for international students and are more satisfied with their study experience are also more likely to stay on. These are important starting points for specific actions by policy-makers and universities.

The study also identifies barriers, for example due to a lack of information on the legal opportunities for remaining in the country after graduation. In all of the countries surveyed, a significant proportion of students perceived the access to information about legal regulations as "difficult or very difficult". In the UK the frequent and confusing changes in the rules and regulations for international students created frustration. Encountering discrimination can affect how good students feel in the country of study. Respondents said they had experienced prejudice or discrimination against foreigners in all countries, but the extent varied significantly. The highest proportions of respondents that reported problems were in France (39.9 percent) followed by Germany (39.4 percent). Although the UK had the lowest (27.4 percent) this is still more than 1 in 4 students.

International students are well placed to become highly qualified migrants. But studying abroad cannot in itself eliminate all of the obstacles that immigrants face, such as language difficulties or the lack of a professional network. "The policy debate in the UK has descended into a 'numbers game' that has effectively closed off rational political discussion of immigration", said Dr. Balch. "The irony is that most international students do not actually contribute to net permanent migration, and there is little public concern over this type of migration in any case." This study makes an essential contribution to the debate because it gives a rare voice to the students themselves, what motivates (and what frustrates) them about the regulatory systems they face. The report also provides a comparative analysis that demonstrates how competition in Europe is increasing. According to Dr. Balch, "more and more



governments in Europe and beyond are recognising that international students represent an important source of highly skilled migrants.”

In presenting the preliminary results of the study for Germany in November 2011, the Expert Councils’ Research Unit called for the very limited working hours during the job search period after graduation to be eased. This was then included in Germany’s implementation of EU highly qualified directive. In addition, graduates will now have 18 months instead of the previous 12 months to find a job that corresponds to their level of qualification. In contrast, the UK government has reformed the student visa system (expected to reduce the number of non-EU students by around 50,000) and removed the post-study work route for international students. The ‘best estimate’ provided by the government’s own impact assessment in 2011 was that the reform would cost around £2.4 billion to the UK over five years. As Dr. Balch explains: “While the argument over numbers continues in the UK, and more restrictive regulations are put in place, other countries such as Germany are beginning to identify international students as a key target group in the race for international talent.”

The study in English and a selection of images are available for download at [www.svr-migration.de/Research-Unit](http://www.svr-migration.de/Research-Unit).

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### **About the Expert Council’s Research Unit**

The Expert Council’s Research Unit conducts independent, practice-oriented research projects in the field of integration and migration. The project-based studies focus on emerging trends and issues with education as one of the main research focal points. The Research Unit complements the work of the Expert Council. The core funding is provided by the Stiftung Mercator.

The Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration is based on an initiative of the Stiftung Mercator and the VolkswagenStiftung. The initiative further includes: Bertelsmann Stiftung, Freudenberg Stiftung, Gemeinnützige Hertie-Stiftung, Körber Foundation, Vodafone Foundation Germany and ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius. The Expert Council is an independent nonprofit, monitoring, evaluating and advisory committee on integration and migration policy issues that provides action-oriented policy recommendations.

### **About the Migration Policy Group**

The Migration Policy Group (MPG) is an independent non-profit European organisation committed to contributing to lasting and positive change resulting in open and inclusive societies in which all members have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities in developing the economic, social and civic life of Europe’s diverse societies.

MPG stimulates well-informed European policy debate, cooperation and action to achieve this goal in the three programme areas of Migration & Mobility; Anti-discrimination & Equality; and Diversity & Integration. MPG takes a consistent and dynamic approach to all three inter-related programmes.