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RESEARCH UNIT

Countering Demographic Decline

How Germany's shrinking universities attract and retain international students



SVR's Research Unit: Study 2019-1

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Table of contents

Executive summary	4
1 Reversing the demographic trend thanks to international students?	6
2 Recruiting international students	8
2.1 The bumpy road to a German university.....	8
2.2 Shrinking universities: Smoothing out the bumps in the road.....	17
3 Fostering academic success	20
3.1 Obstacles during the introductory phase.....	21
3.2 Shrinking universities: A lot done, a lot more to do.....	24
4 Retaining international students on the local job market	26
4.1 Difficulties finding work.....	26
4.2 Shrinking universities: Project-based funding useful but sustainability doubtful.....	30
5 Refugees: Both a challenge and an opportunity	31
6 Conclusion and recommendations for action	35
6.1 More flexible admissions procedures.....	36
6.2 More structured introductory phase.....	38
6.3 Strengthen local job entry support systems.....	39
7 Outlook	41
Bibliography	43
Appendix	49
Tables.....	49
List of figures.....	53
List of tables.....	53
List of boxes.....	53

At a glance

- More students than ever before are studying for a degree in Germany. Nonetheless, 41 of the country's 263 public universities have significantly fewer enrolled German students now than they did in 2012 (-11 per cent).
- Twenty-six of these 41 shrinking universities are tackling demographic change by recruiting more international students (+42 per cent).
- The challenge which these particular higher education institutions face is that they are barely visible on the international stage, which is why many of them are making an extra effort to reach out to prospective international students at their various "pit stops" on the way to Germany, for example at language schools and partner universities/schools and, increasingly, on the Internet and social media.
- Since Germany's shrinking universities are often located in regions where there is a shortage of skilled workers, more should be done to retain international students on the local job market after they graduate. Although pilot projects do exist, they are not always sustainable. Once project-based funding has been spent it is not always clear whether and how services will continue to be delivered.
- International students are a valuable means of slowing down the decline in the domestic student population. German universities and subsequent access to the local job market in Germany should, therefore, be opened up more to international students.

Executive summary

More students than ever before are studying at German higher education institutions. However, these young talents are unevenly distributed across the country. One in six of Germany's 263 public universities and universities of applied sciences currently has (significantly) fewer enrolled students than it did in 2012. The reason is demographic change. Low birth rates and the depopulation of certain regions of Germany mean that the number of domestic students is declining in some areas. That, in turn, is the reason why 41 universities are currently shrinking – and the trend is upward. This downturn is also exacerbating the skills shortages which are already being experienced in some sectors, for example in mechanical engineering.

Germany's shrinking universities are responding in different ways to the drop in domestic student enrolment. In 26 of them this decline in domestic students goes hand in hand with a big increase in international students from as far afield as China and India, among

other countries, who are moving to Germany to study. In just five years, the number of international students enrolling at these universities has increased by an impressive 42 per cent. And although international students still only account for a fraction of the student population at these institutions (namely 12 per cent), they are already helping to compensate for the declining numbers of domestic students. Going forward, these students will also help to increase the visibility of these universities at international level.

The latest population forecasts indicate that Germany's shrinking universities are giving a foretaste of the challenges which other institutions in Germany and other European countries will soon be facing, too. The ways in which they are tackling the decline in domestic students could, therefore, come to be of great relevance to many of the others. That is why the SVR Research Unit conducted a study to find out what shrinking universities are doing to attract international



students, to prepare them for their study programmes and then to retain them on the local job market once they graduate.

The universities included in the study are less well known internationally and are less visible than top-ranked universities or universities which are located in major cosmopolitan cities. However, even shrinking universities benefit from the fact that having a German university education is widely seen as a desirable attribute and tuition fees are much lower than in most other countries. Nevertheless, systemic obstacles make it more difficult to attract international students: Germany's university admissions process is complicated, student visas are often issued quite late and many prospective students have to spend a lot of time and money proving up front that they have the necessary language and academic skills. The study shows that shrinking universities are getting better at overcoming these stumbling blocks. They reach out to prospective international students at their various stopping-off points en route to Germany, for example in language schools in Germany and partner universities/schools abroad, as well as, increasingly, on the Internet and social media.

Nevertheless, student recruitment is only part of the story. Dropout rates are a matter of concern, too. In Germany the average dropout rate among international students is 45 per cent for those studying for a bachelor's degree and 29 per cent for those enrolled on master's programmes. That is higher than the proportion of their German counterparts (28 and 19 per cent respectively). To help reduce dropout rates, the shrinking universities included in the study at hand offer international students German language courses, an orientation programme and other support. However, this support is not always available on all programmes or is only accessed by those who actively seek help and guidance. Many international students wait too long before finding out what support is available, or never do so at all. This is the reason why poor exam marks and other warning signs are often not picked up on until it is too late. Germany's *Studienkollegs* have traditionally been responsible for running one-

year preparatory courses for international students. To complement these, some universities have now introduced their own one- or two-semester preparatory courses. This alternative pathway to higher education in Germany could prove to be a key factor for academic success. So far, however, only universities in five out of the 16 federal states are legally permitted to offer prospective international students the opportunity to gain their university entrance qualification in this way (Brandenburg, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland and Thuringia). And even these federal states are still in the process of developing and testing the relevant programmes.

Increasingly, international students are not only seen as students, but also as skilled migrants who can help offset looming talent shortages in the German economy, especially in and around shrinking university towns. That is why universities in these towns are offering those who intend to stay support and some are even cooperating with regional partner organisations. The aim is to help graduates make the transition onto the German job market. Shrinking universities offer international students the opportunity to take part in career development workshops which are tailored to their needs and to put them in contact with local businesses. So far, this custom-fit support has been funded by project grants from Germany's Federal Government and federal state governments and the European Union. However, it remains to be seen whether this temporary funding can be continued once the temporary government grants run out.

Germany's shrinking universities are already facing these and other challenges. In future, though, others across Germany and other European countries will be confronted with the same problems. That is why universities and their partners should **provide international students with more flexible options for accessing higher education** as well as the relevant support. The **introductory phase of each degree programme should be more structured**. Finally, the transition to work should be facilitated through a **local job entry support system**. Targeted government investment could be used to support this.

1 Reversing the demographic trend thanks to international students?¹

A total of 2.9 million students were enrolled at German higher education institutions in the winter semester 2018/19 – more than ever before and a new record (Federal Statistical Office 2018a). Nevertheless, not all of Germany's 263 public universities (*Universitäten*) and universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) are benefitting from this overall growth trend. One in six of these universities already has (significantly) fewer German students than it did five years ago (Fig. 1). The reason is demographic change. Low birth rates and the depopulation of certain regions of Germany mean that in future more universities will be concerned about maintaining their student enrolment figures. Projections by Germany's Federal Statistical Office (2015) and the Federal Institute for Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Research (2017) predict that the domestic student population (aged between 18 and 24) will drop across Germany by around 15 per cent by 2035.² Two decades after the eastern part of the country suffered demographic decline, it is now in areas of western Germany in particular that this age group is likely to decline by more than one quarter (ibid.: 75–76).

Although increasing numbers of young people are leaving German secondary schools with a higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*) or a subject-related higher education entrance qualification (*Fachabitur*) and plan to go on to university,³ the projected demographic decline across various parts of Germany will likely lead to a significant drop in the number of domestic students. This drop in numbers is already in evidence at 41 German universities, including 12 larger universities and small and medium-sized universities

of applied sciences with between 1,000 and 5,000 enrolled students. Almost two thirds of those universities which are (currently) classed as “shrinking” are in eastern Germany, where demographic change began much earlier than in other parts of the country. However, even universities in western Germany are set to shrink significantly (see BBSR 2017: 12; 75–76; Federal Statistical Office 2015; German Science Council 2019: 17). If the trend continues, then in the medium to long term this divide will widen into a deep split between booming (urban) areas and (more remote) shrinking regions which are at risk of economic decline (see German Council of Economic Experts 2018: 47–48; German Science Council 2016: 20–28). If universities in the latter regions were to close, this would have serious consequences, because they not only provide local businesses and civil society with the academically qualified specialists they need, they are also a valuable source of scientific know-how, innovative capacity and international networks of knowledge (Pasternack 2013: 40–42).

Such closures are avoidable, though, since universities are not powerless in the face of demographic change. On closer examination, the student population at shrinking universities reveals a trend which few in Germany have yet noted, namely that 26 out of Germany's 41 shrinking universities are both registering a drop in domestic students (by, on average, 11 per cent since 2012) and a considerable increase in the number of international students (by 42 per cent).⁴ Despite this remarkable increase, their share of the student population is still small (12 per cent). And yet, international students can already to a certain degree compensate for the drop in domestic students and ensure their universities become more visible on the international stage in the long run.

1 The author would like to thank Prof. Dr. Viola Georgi, member of the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration (SVR), for her support. Responsibility for publication lies with the SVR Research Unit. Arguments and conclusions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the SVR. The author would also like to thank Alyona Fedina, Antonia Haring, Kamila Labuda, Viktoria Latz, Hendrik Stille and Serkan Ünsal for their support.

2 A drop in this cohort is already being forecast for 2025, albeit a lower drop than is being predicted for 2035 (Federal Statistical Office 2015).

3 In 2017, a total of 53 per cent of 21- to 30-year-olds living in Germany had an *Abitur* or *Fachabitur*, up from 40 per cent in 2005 (Federal Statistical Office 2018d, SVR calculation). Up to 80 per cent of these secondary school leavers are now planning to go to university, compared to only 72 per cent in 2008 (Schneider et al. 2017: 128).

4 For the purposes of higher education statistics, international students are categorised as non-German nationals who have come to Germany to study.

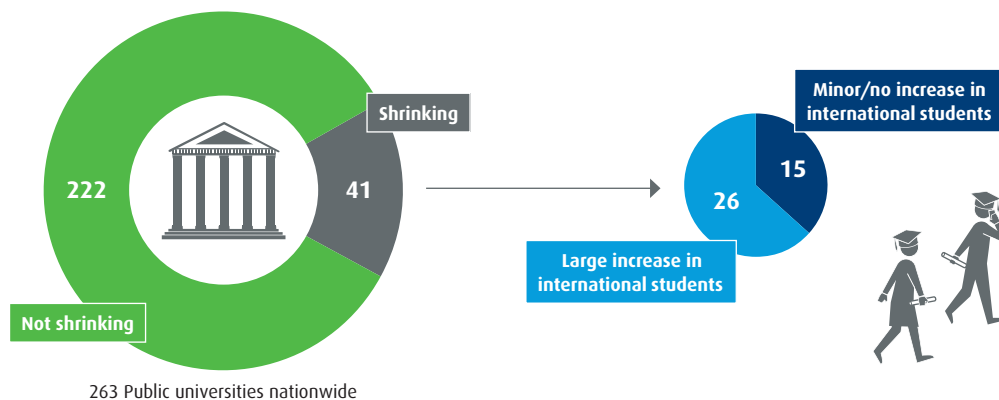


Study objectives and structure

For years now there have been efforts to promote the internationalisation of Germany's higher education system (see Grothus/Maschke 2013: 6–7; HRK 2014: 12–19; German Science Council 2018: 7). Higher education funding in Germany is still by and large public and strongly linked to the number of enrolled students. Against this backdrop it is, therefore, to be

expected that more shrinking universities will in future seek to admit even more international students (see Federal Ministry of Education and Research 2016). The present study investigates what practitioners are currently doing in that regard. The study combines key findings from the pertinent research literature with the SVR's own data analyses and semi-structured expert interviews. Internationalisation⁵ at shrinking univer-

Figure 1 Shrinking universities in Germany



NB: Shrinking universities recorded a decline in domestic students of more than five per cent between 2012 and 2017. Data were collected from all of Germany's public universities and universities of applied sciences, except for four sites which enrolled fewer than 100 students in 2017. Universities with a "large increase in international students" grew their international enrolments by more than 10 per cent.

Source: Federal Statistical Office 2018b, SVR Research Unit/Ellen Stockmar

Box 1 Shrinking universities, a definition

Universities are defined as "shrinking" for the purposes of this study if the domestic student population has dropped by at least five per cent over the last five years (for an overview of universities affected in the 16 German federal states (*Länder*), see Table 3 in the Appendix). The calculations were done by comparing enrolment figures for public universities and universities of applied sciences in the period between the winter semester 2011/12 and the winter semester 2016/17. Data for the winter semester 2006/07 were used as reference values to identify statistical outliers and exclude these from the analysis.

Statistical bias – for instance due to more students completing their schooling following the recent reforms of Germany's secondary school system, the abolition of compulsory military service and the discontinuation of civilian service – can to all intents and purposes be ruled out (see Kühn 2014: 11).

5 The study investigates student mobility to Germany (i.e. incoming mobility) and thus a key area of multidimensional internationalisation within the higher education system which encompasses curricular reforms as well as international research collaboration, technology transfer, and diversity-sensitive student services and administration (Grothus/Maschke 2013: 9–10; HRK 2014: 28–33; German Science Council 2018: 8–15; Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2014: 4). As a result, the universities' approaches to recruiting, advising and supporting international students investigated here need to be regarded in the overall context of internationalisation efforts. However, a full presentation of all these activities would go beyond the bounds of the present study.

sities is a phenomenon which has largely been ignored by research thus far in Germany (Box 2). Therefore, this study focuses on what shrinking universities are doing to recruit international students (see Chapter 2), to support them to achieve academic success (see Chapter 3) and retain them on the local job market after they graduate (see Chapter 4). In addition, Chapter 5 looks at the challenges and opportunities which presented themselves in the face of increasing numbers of refugees arriving in Germany in 2015 and 2016. Building on the study findings, Chapter 6 then presents recommendations for action when it comes to recruiting international students and keeping them in Germany once they graduate.

2 Recruiting international students

International students are currently neither over- nor under-represented at shrinking universities in Germany. In 2017 their share of the total student population at shrinking universities was roughly the same as at all the other German universities, namely 10 per cent (Federal Statistical Office 2018b, SVR calculation). Nevertheless, the five-year trend presented in Figure 2 leads one to expect that recruiting international students makes an important contribution to maintaining the student body at shrinking universities (see Chapter 1). Between 2012 and 2017 the number of domestic students enrolled at Germany's 41 shrinking universities dropped by a total of 35,314 (11 per cent).⁶ Over the same period the number of international students rose by 8,396 (33 per cent) (see Table 3 in the Appendix) and by 42 per cent at those 26 universities with a particularly large increase in international students. In view of the varying regional population trends across Germany, the domestic student base will in future not be sufficient to ensure a stable student intake at many institutions (Pasternack 2013: 46).

Section 2.2 investigates whether, and if so how, the affected universities are attempting to compensate for the drop in domestic student numbers by re-

cruiting more international students. Section 2.1 first describes the international student journey to Germany, including the various circuitous routes and detours this group encounters along the way.

2.1 The bumpy road to a German university

Germany is a popular study destination (OECD 2018: 228). When it comes to recruiting international students, shrinking universities in principle face the same situation as all other German universities. They benefit from the good reputation enjoyed by Germany's higher education system – especially when it comes to STEM subjects⁷ – and the fact that tuition fees are very low or virtually non-existent (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 61; Beine/Noel/Ragot 2014: 51; Ripmeester et al. 2013: 69). There are, however, systemic obstacles which make it harder to attract international students: Germany's university admissions process is very formalistic and bureaucratic, student visas are often issued quite late and many prospective students spend a lot of time and money proving up front that they have the required language and academic skills (see German Bundestag 2018a: 9–13; DAAD 2014: 2; German Science Council 2016: 120–125; Kiefer 2014: 293–295). When prospective students choose to enrol in a German university despite facing these obstacles, they then come up against an extremely confusing array of admissions requirements, support services and responsibilities.

There are four stages along the typical path to a German university (Fig. 3). During the **exploratory phase** prospective international students develop an interest in the range of study programmes on offer in Germany and make an initial selection of what and where they want to study. During the **application phase** they need to prove they have the necessary level of language and academic ability for their chosen programme and then submit a full application. The universities'

6 There was a drop of more than 20 per cent at seven of these universities, of between 15 and 20 per cent at 12 universities, between 10 and 14 per cent at 14 universities, and between five and nine per cent at nine universities.

7 STEM=Science, technology, engineering and mathematics



Box 2 Methodology

This study draws on three main sources of data: First, a systematic review of the pertinent research literature on international students at German universities. Second, a secondary analysis of official data provided by Germany's Federal Statistical Office and data from two large-scale surveys of international students and university staff across Germany conducted by the SVR Research Unit in 2014 and 2017. Third, 13 semi-structured interviews with experts at shrinking universities.

The **literature review** was based on preliminary work done as part of a previously published study by the SVR Research Unit (2017a) which included a systematic literature review of the academic achievement of international students in Germany. The study's literature corpus included 463 publications, 114 of which were selected based on pre-defined criteria, then categorised and analysed as to content. The ensuing research database was used to identify further literature.

As part of the present study the relevant **survey data** collated by the SVR Research Unit (2015; 2017b) were reanalysed, this time focussing specifically on the current situation at shrinking universities. The data were gleaned, first, from a survey of middle managers in student service departments which serve international students planning to stay in Germany after graduation. The SVR Research Unit (2015) conducted this survey between September and December 2014 in the international student offices and career services of 116 public universities. Other data were taken from a longitudinal study entitled "Study & Work" in the course of which the SVR Research Unit (2017b) conducted an online survey of 5,167 international students at 50 German universities and universities of applied sciences. The first wave was conducted between July and August 2015, the second between December 2016 and February 2017. The purpose of asking students twice was to be able to compare their original plans to stay and live in Germany with what they had actually done after completing their studies.

In the autumn of 2018, a total of 13 semi-structured **expert interviews** were conducted with middle and top-level management and faculty members at four shrinking universities. The number of enrolled domestic students at these universities had dropped between 2012 and 2017 while the numbers of international students had increased significantly over the same period. This part of the study is based on a qualitative analysis. As is customary in qualitative research, the interviewed experts did not constitute a statistically representative sample. However, the diversity of the sample and the detailed analysis of the experts' responses allow initial conclusions to be drawn about current practice at these shrinking universities.

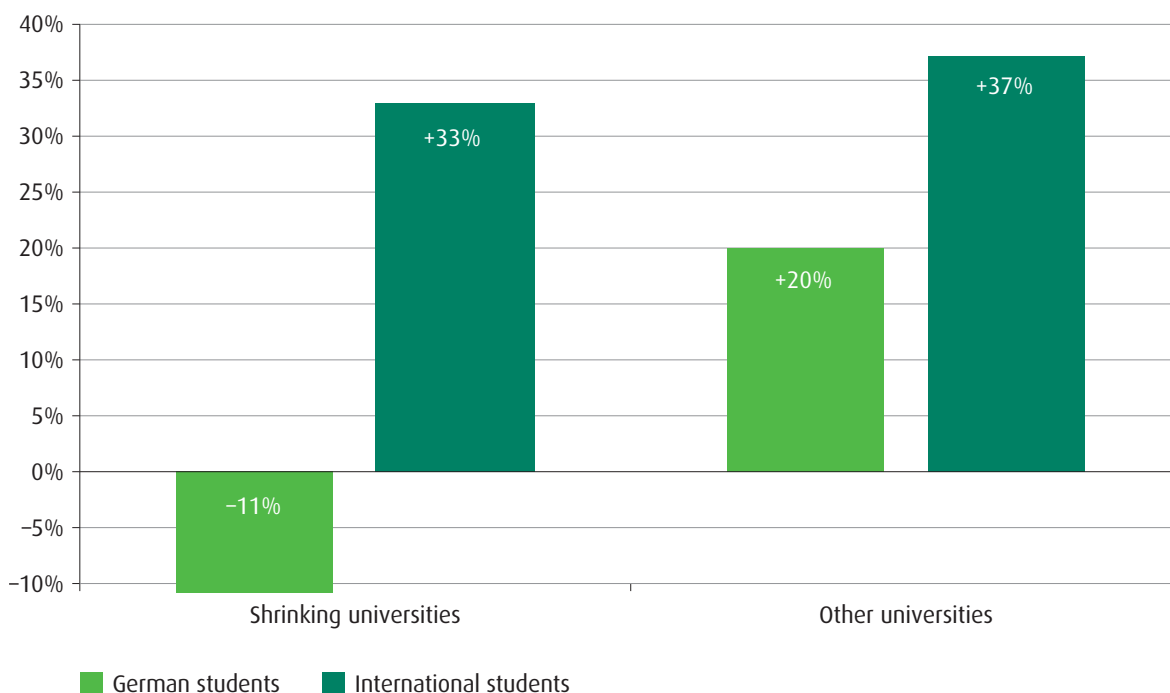
Findings are exemplified by citing quotations from the expert interviews. No changes have been made to the content of these quotations. However, for ease of reading they have been lightly edited. Some sentences which merely repeated the content of the cited statements or which touch on other topics have been deleted. "[...]" has been used as a placeholder for such deletions and editorial changes.

responses to their applications mark the start of the **acceptance phase**, in which students make their final choice. It is during this phase, at the latest, that prospective students need to show how they plan to finance their studies and living costs in Germany. That

is particularly important when it comes to applying for a visa.⁸ After moving to Germany, international students then begin the **arrival phase**, during which they start to adjust to living in a new country. Over the course of their journey along the path outlined in

8 Prospective students from the European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland do not need a visa to study in Germany.

Figure 2 Change in numbers of domestic and international students at German universities between 2012 and 2017



NB: The graph shows that between 2012 and 2017 the number of international students at shrinking universities increased by 33 per cent, while the number of domestic students dropped by 11 per cent over the same period. The data refer to all public universities and universities of applied sciences, with the exception of four sites with fewer than 100 enrolled students in 2017. Source: Federal Statistical Office 2018b; SVR calculation and graph

Figure 3, international students can draw on support provided by universities and other organisations.⁹ However, many risk getting lost in the maze of support services and responsibilities for delivering those services (see DAAD 2014: 4; German Science Council 2016: 120–125).

Exploratory phase

International students’ journey to a degree in Germany normally begins when they first take an interest in studying abroad. That interest can be based on the

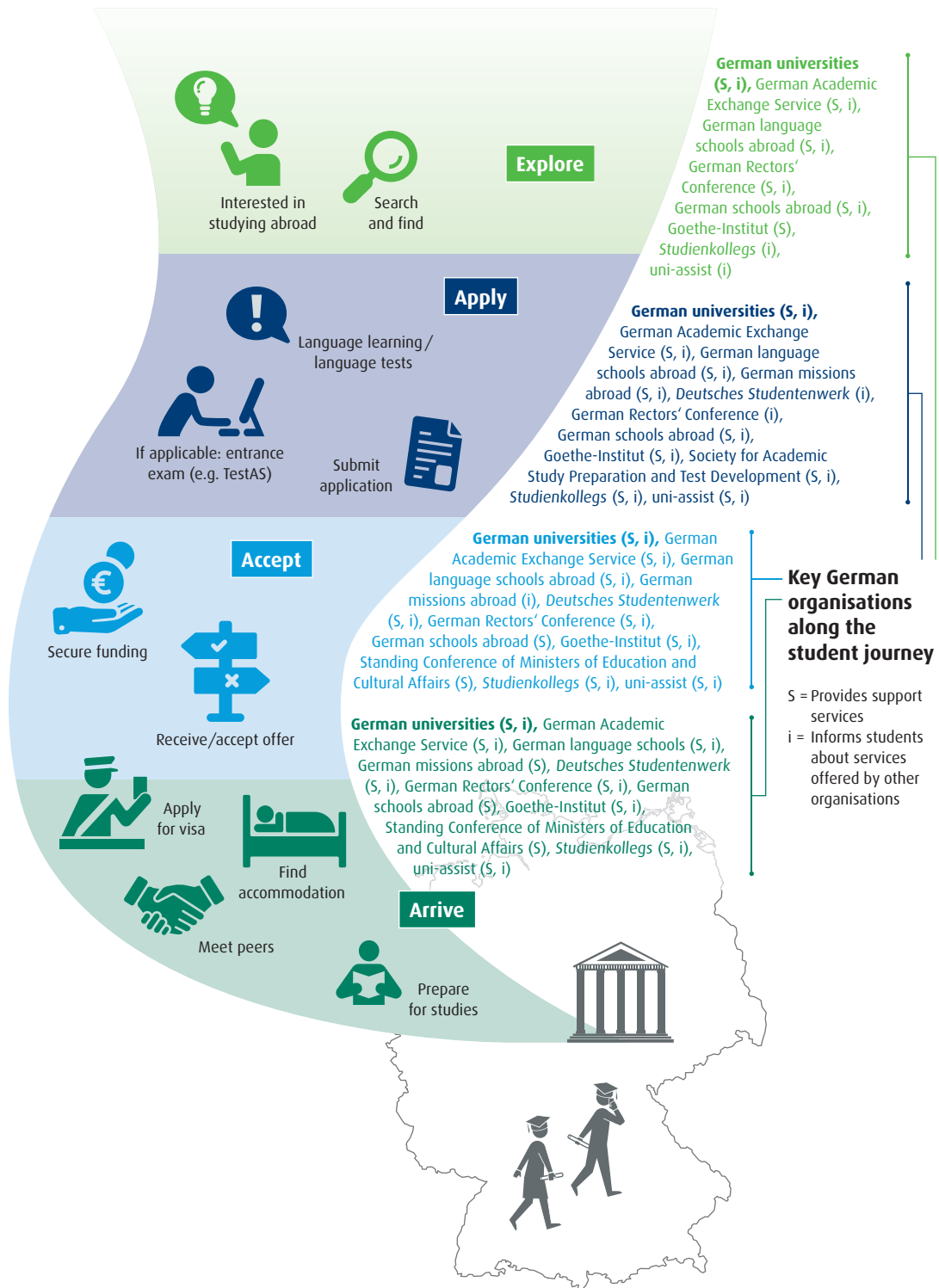
fact that studying abroad is seen as personally and professionally enriching (a “pull factor”) or on the possibly disadvantageous consequences of staying at home, for instance the slim chances of getting a place at university (a “push factor”).¹⁰ Many first consider going abroad to study while they are still at school or at the latest while doing an undergraduate degree (see Bode et al. 2008: 50–52). Prospective international students and their families face the challenge of having to wade through information about a plethora of study programmes on offer around the world. As

9 A few already receive structured support, for example those on the Goethe-Institut’s *Studienbrücke* programme. This study pathway, which is funded by the Federal Foreign Office, provides talented pupils from China, Russia and other countries with a direct pathway to a degree at seven universities in Germany at present. Unlike many other prospective international students, those taking part in this programme receive language and academic support in their home countries. After completing the programme, they have a guaranteed place at one of the German partner universities (<https://www.goethe.de/en/spr/eng/stb.html>, retrieved 29 Jan. 2019).

10 Prospective international students have many reasons for wanting to study abroad. Push factors range from a personal wish to gain experience abroad to more existential reasons, such as a lack of career prospects or political conflicts in their home countries. This was revealed in a 2013 survey of 4,542 former international students who stayed in Germany after completing their studies. Respondents mentioned professional opportunities and the standard of living and academic quality of study programmes in Germany as being particularly strong pull factors (Hanganu/Heß 2014: 217–222).



Figure 3 The international student journey to Germany



NB: The student journey depicted above does not apply to all international students. For example, students from EU member states do not need a visa to study in Germany. Information on German organisations was drawn from their official websites.

Source: SVR Research Unit/Ellen Stockmar, illustration inspired by student recruitment funnels in Bode et al. (2008: 50) and Universities UK (2014: 9)

well as information about studying in Germany, prospective students will find information about higher education institutions in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and several other destinations. These countries all provide information about what programmes are on offer and they market target group-specific portfolios at schools, universities and international education fairs in various source countries, as well as in online databases of study programmes and on social media. Leading English-speaking study destinations have been making increasing use of fee-based recruitment and counselling services provided by student recruiting agents.¹¹ German universities, by contrast, primarily advertise their programmes via partner universities and German schools abroad, the Goethe-Institut as well as through the wide-ranging activities of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

Young people who are interested in studying abroad tend to choose where to study on the basis of the (perceived) quality of teaching in a particular country and a particular university and what long-term benefits they believe they will derive from studying abroad. Their considerations often include how likely they are to get a student visa and post-study work and residency rights.¹² This initial selection is primarily made based on advice from family members as well as the prospective student's own Internet and social media searches (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 59; QS 2017: 16–17). The German higher education sector provides wide-ranging information via more conventional online services,

including websites and newsletters. In addition to their bilingual or multilingual websites, many of Germany's 429 state and state-accredited universities have started using social media to reach out to potential (international) students.¹³ Meanwhile, the DAAD online portal www.study-in.de, for instance, provides an overview of the range of study programmes taught in German and in English across Germany and practical hints and information about studying in Germany and the application process. The portal incorporates into its own search mask the vast majority of study programmes which are available across Germany. It acts as a guide to help prospective international students navigate the German university landscape – and is reasonably successful in achieving that aim. Using mostly short texts, videos and a multimedia Student Journey,¹⁴ the DAAD portal manages to portray Germany as an attractive study destination and at the same time indicates the many direct pathways as well as diversions en route to a place at a German university. Nevertheless, the admissions process to German universities is complex and in practice prospective students need individual advice and support. That is why the website www.study-in.de is not yet sufficiently geared to the very varied needs of prospective international students. For instance, the Student Journey provides a modern and visually appealing introduction to the German higher education sector. However, the further, more in-depth information still needs improving. Users of the Student Journey page in search of a bachelor's degree programme are redirected and have to click three times

11 These recruiting agents select international applicants on behalf of Australian, British, Canadian and US universities in their home countries and support them through the application process. They receive a fee from those universities which students eventually enrol in. Tuition fees are normally used to cover the costs of this commission fee. As most German universities do not charge tuition fees and generally have only a small marketing budget, only very few are as yet drawing on the services of such recruiting agents. As a result, they are missing out on opportunities to attract prospective students. On the other hand, they are also exposed to less of a risk that these agents will spread misleading or wilfully incorrect information about studying in Germany – a problem which many universities in English-speaking study destinations have been facing for years (DAAD 2018a: 83–84; Nikula/Kivistö 2017: 535–538).

12 In a global survey, 18,706 out of 62,366 prospective international students stated that they wanted to study in Europe. Around half of them stated that the quality of teaching was particularly important when choosing their destination country, university and degree programme. Other key considerations were how friendly and welcoming the local population was perceived to be (almost 40 per cent) as well as living costs, residency requirements and the university's reputation and ranking (QS 2017: 8–10).

13 More than three quarters of the 167 universities included in a 2016 Germany-wide survey stated that they had an English website which was regularly updated by their international student office or press office. The same number reported that both their international student office and press office were responsible for blogs, newsletters as well as social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat (GATE Germany 2017: 42). Respondents included universities (38 per cent), universities of applied sciences (53 per cent), and art and music colleges (8 per cent). Teacher training colleges and other types of higher education institutions were not included in the survey (ibid.: 28).

14 <https://pageflow.daad.de/student-journey>, retrieved 10 Dec. 2018



and read more than 1,000 words of text before landing on the page where they can actually search for degree programmes – after first having to select from among six possible databases of bachelor’s, master’s and PhD programmes.¹⁵

The DAAD’s portal is not the only online resource available to prospective international students in their search for degree programmes in Germany. The German Rectors’ Conference’s Higher Education Compass¹⁶ and the website of the *Deutsches Studentenwerk* (German National Association for Student Affairs) are also valuable sources of information.¹⁷ Those seeking information online will also come across a number of unofficial information portals, most of which are operated by for-profit agencies and private individuals in Germany and abroad. The information provided on these websites is not necessarily of a lesser quality, and the websites themselves are hardly less attractive than official websites. The portal www.studying-in-germany.org, for example, is run by an advertising agency based in Kosovo which has for many years been providing information about studying in Germany. The portal is available in seven languages and contains frequent references to the DAAD, specific universities and other official sources of information. Nevertheless, the sheer amount of insufficiently curated information which can be found online increases the risk that prospective students will come across incorrect, misleading or outdated information during this exploratory phase. At the end of 2018, the Kosovan portal, for instance, was still quoting 2012 tuition fees.¹⁸

Application phase

As soon as Germany and some of its (shrinking) universities and study programmes make it onto a prospective international student’s shortlist, the labour-

intensive application phase begins. Depending on their educational background, prospective students may have to acquire additional language or subject-related qualifications before being allowed to study at a German university. For a bachelor’s degree, for example, with classes taught in German they will have to furnish proof of advanced German language ability as well as a German *Abitur* or *Fachabitur* or an equivalent foreign school leaving certificate. School leaving qualifications from EU member states and certain third countries (e.g. the United States) are regarded as equivalent to a German *Abitur*.¹⁹ Prospective international students with other leaving certificates will be required to take what is normally a one-year preparatory course in Germany. Depending on the federal state, these are run either by public or private *Studienkollegs* (Box 3) or by the universities themselves.²⁰

To provide evidence of their German language ability prospective students can take the German as a Foreign Language (TestDaF) test. The test can be taken at one of more than 400 test centres in over 80 countries. The test is also available in Germany (TestDaF Institute 2018), although that option means students will then have to enter the country earlier than they would otherwise have to. Another language test which can be taken in Germany (sometimes at a university) is the German Language Examination for University Entrance (DSH).²¹ Language and academic entry requirements can prove a huge hurdle for those planning to study for a bachelor’s in Germany. Without having taken German classes in their home country, prospective students will hardly be able to achieve the required level of German. In order to learn the language and attend a *Studienkolleg* or another preparatory course that means that many have to move to Germany long before their degree programme begins. As a result, they

15 https://www.study-in.de/en/plan-your-studies/university-degrees-and-programmes_26610.php, retrieved 10 Dec. 2018

16 <http://www.hochschulkompass.de> (German only), retrieved 11 Dec. 2018

17 <http://www.internationale-studierende.de> (German only), retrieved 11 Dec. 2018

18 <https://www.studying-in-germany.org/scholarships-and-financing>, retrieved 11 Dec. 2018

19 If these countries’ school leaving certificates qualify someone to study in their home country, they will normally also be allowed to study in Germany.

20 Prospective students from some countries are not required to take these preparatory courses, depending on their school leaving certificate, for example students from Syria who back home achieved an overall mark of 70 per cent of the maximum points awarded in their secondary school leaving certificate (KMK 2018).

21 Prospective international students who can provide other evidence of advanced German language ability (e.g. an *Abitur* taken at a German school abroad) do not need to take either of these two tests.

Box 3 *Studienkollegs* – preparatory courses for (some) international students

In order to study on a bachelor's programme at a German university, prospective students from outside the EU first have to get their level of school education up to the standard of a German school-leaver (*Abitur* or *Fachabitur*). To do that they either need to have studied abroad for one to two years or they have to have attended a one-year preparatory course at a *Studienkolleg* in Germany.

Studienkollegs are located outside of universities and offer three broad qualification tracks – humanities, social sciences and sciences – through which prospective international students can meet the basic requirements for studying at a German university. However, unlike some foundation courses in Australia, Canada and other popular study destinations, completion of a preparatory course at a *Studienkolleg* does not guarantee admission to the desired study programme. After completing the course, *Studienkolleg* leavers need to (re)apply just like any other prospective (international) student.

face additional living expenses and study costs.²² Uncertainty is another factor. Once prospective students have taken and passed the required examinations in Germany, they will normally have to reapply to the university like every other prospective (domestic and international) student.²³

International graduates applying to join an English-taught master's or PhD programme in Germany have to jump through significantly fewer hoops. Most do not have to take a German language or a one-year preparatory course.²⁴ At some universities, however, applicants have to prove their academic readiness by

taking the Test for Foreign Students (TestAS) to be admitted to study. The test can be taken in test centres both in Germany and abroad.

Many prospective international students thus invest a great deal of time and money in getting a place to study in Germany. Other popular destination countries have high entry requirements for regular degree programmes too, though. Universities in England, for example, also require proof of advanced English language ability and school qualifications equivalent to English A levels.²⁵ Therefore, the academic requirements for foreign nationals wanting to study at a

22 One alternative is the German *Studienkolleg* in Indonesia, which is largely financed through endowments. Indonesian nationals take a preparatory course, including an exam, after they leave school, similar to that available at *Studienkollegs* in Germany (<http://www.studienkolleg-indonesia.de> (German only), retrieved 17 Dec. 2018).

23 Some private *Studienkollegs* guarantee a place to study at select partner universities to all those passing their exams. The Freshman Institute in Aachen, for instance, promises direct entry to one of five partner universities in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (<https://www.fh-aachen.de/hochschule/freshman> (German only), retrieved 21 Jan. 2019). The Goethe-Institut's *Studienbrücke* programme also guarantees prospective students a place to study at partner universities in Germany after completing the programme.

24 This group has to provide proof of their English language ability, though. Some universities also require proof of basic German language ability.

25 Entry requirements for a bachelor's degree vary from university to university. Generally speaking, English universities require one or more A levels or an equivalent foreign school leaving certificate. Many prospective international students thus need to ensure their qualifications match the level of English qualifications, or else take additional classes to prepare them for their chosen study programme. Students from many countries will have to put in the same amount of effort as they would if they wanted to study in Germany. For example, in both Germany and England, a Russian school leaving certificate (*Attestat o (Polnom) Srednem Obshchem Obrazovanii*) is classed as equivalent to the school leaving certificate awarded after 10 years of education. Prospective Russian students therefore need to take a one- or two-year preparatory course before beginning their study programme to gain this qualification. What they need to do to achieve this varies greatly, though. German universities require a combination of time spent studying in Russia and at a *Studienkolleg* in Germany. Programmes in England, by contrast, require students to complete preparatory courses which are affiliated to a university in England so that students can quickly get acclimatised to the English higher education system (UCAS 2014: 57; KMK 2018).



German university at any rate do not require more effort to fulfil than in many other study destinations. The main difference is in whether, and if so how, admission to their chosen degree programme is guaranteed and how clear-cut the admissions pathway is. Australian, British and Canadian preparatory courses clearly signpost available study pathways at a much earlier stage. Attending a *Studienkolleg* in Germany often does not, by contrast, guarantee that a student will be given a place on a chosen study programme. **In short, study pathways in Germany are less transparent than in other countries.** And they are made even more complicated by the fact that language and degree subject-related preparatory courses are run by many different organisations (Fig. 3). Many prospective international students not only contact their university of choice during the application phase, they will also come across Goethe-Instituts and other institutions offering language courses both online and offline, as well as language and aptitude tests developed by the Society for Academic Study Preparation and Test Development (g.a.s.t.) and the application checking service provided by uni-assist.²⁶ These and numerous other German organisations mainly use the Internet to provide information about application and admissions procedures at German universities which even specialists find quite untransparent (see also Table 4 in the Appendix).

Acceptance phase

Once prospective international students have submitted their applications to uni-assist or directly to one of the shrinking universities, they have to wait for

a decision on whether they will be offered a place to study. This process generally takes at least four to six weeks.²⁷ Those who do not yet have a full DAAD scholarship or a scholarship from a German or foreign organisation need to use this phase to clarify how they will pay their living costs during their first year of study. They need at least EUR 8,800 to be granted a student visa (DAAD 2019a).²⁸

As soon as applicants receive an answer from their chosen universities, they need to decide which offer to accept. Often they are not only spoilt for choice both for which university and study destination to select. Fifty-seven per cent of the 4,204 international students taking part in the Social Survey conducted by the *Deutsches Studentenwerk* in 2016 stated that Germany was their first choice of study destination. Other respondents stated, in retrospect, that Germany was their second or third option (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 56). During the application and acceptance phase prospective international students attach a great deal of importance to being in regular contact with the universities and other organisations referred to in Figure 3. Around 80 per cent of those who are planning to study in Germany or in another European country expect to be contacted at least once a week, preferably by email, after submitting their application (QS 2017: 18–19). If universities do not stay in contact with applicants, then it is shrinking universities in particular which risk losing prospective students to other universities in Germany or abroad if these stay in regular communication with applicants, are easy to contact and quickly take decisions on applications (ibid.).

26 uni-assist is a membership-based service which checks foreign school leaving and higher education certificates on behalf of almost 180 German universities as part of the application processes. Universities can opt in and out of membership (<http://www.uni-assist.de/> (German only), retrieved 12 Dec. 2018).

27 According to uni-assist, the application checking process takes around four to six weeks, but less in the autumn and winter months when fewer applications are submitted. If all the necessary documents have been submitted correctly, they are passed on to the prospective student's chosen universities. The decision whether to admit a prospective student is up to each university, and this decision-making process can also take some time (<https://www.uni-assist.de/bewerben/abschicken-verfolgen/status-pruefergebnis-zulassung> (German only), retrieved 12 Dec. 2018). Prospective international students who submit their application directly to a university may get a response more quickly. However, the interviews conducted in the course of this study indicate that even those universities which have so far hardly ever or never used uni-assist would consider membership if it provided an expedited procedure which would enable the universities to admit prospective students as quickly as they can under their own in-house procedures.

28 Prospective students from EU member states, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland are not subject to this requirement, as they do not need a visa to study in Germany.

Arrival phase

For non-EU international applicants, being admitted to a German university can be seen as an entry ticket to Germany and Europe. They can use this and other documents²⁹ to apply for a student visa at a German mission abroad. Delays in the visa application process are, however, frequent and applicants often have to wait significantly longer than eight weeks for an appointment at some foreign missions. A poll done in September 2018 showed that applications by Pakistani and Serbian nationals took almost six months to process. Some prospective students in the Iranian capital Tehran even had to wait more than a year (Table 5 in the Appendix). In China, Mongolia and Vietnam students wanting to study in Germany cannot book an appointment at the embassy or at a consulate right away because they first have to have their documents checked by a designated academic test centre (*Akademische Prüfstelle*) and must provide evidence of their German or English language ability in a personal interview.³⁰ In view of the difficulties encountered getting an appointment, it is hardly surprising that some international students are not able to enter the country until their chosen study programme has already started. That means their arrival phase is much shorter and they have less time to prepare for their studies. That, in turn, can place excessive demands on newly arrived international students and, in the medium to long term, jeopardise their future success (see Ebert/Heublein 2015: 69–70).

The day they arrive in Germany can be a turning point in the life of many visiting students: from one moment to the next they not only have to adapt to their new life as a student but also to living in a foreign country. Many are left to their own devices when it comes to finding accommodation and many have to work part time to earn the money they need to cover their expenses. These multiple burdens, including be-

ginning a new study programme (sometimes first at a *Studienkolleg*), learning German, finding accommodation, dealing with red tape and holding down a part-time job is particularly difficult for those who come to Germany with little time to spare before their study programme begins. They also often lack the time to get to know other students in a more relaxed atmosphere (see Esser/Gillessen 2014: 107; Kiefer 2014: 304–308). As a result, many have no social network. This, plus the overall pressure they are under, can mean things eventually get too much for them and they end up dropping out (see Ebert/Heublein 2015: 69–70). Although university and other student services advise and support international students during this phase – both in person and online – international students often turn to these support systems too late or do not do so at all (Stemmer 2014: 121; Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 69). This could be due to the fact that they do not feel that the support available is meant for them, the support may not be available on a continuous basis or advertised properly. Also, in some cultures, seeking and accepting this kind of help has negative connotations (see Stemmer 2014: 55). (Shrinking) universities may possibly have insufficiently trained staff to be able to deal with these and other specific difficulties faced by this group of students (see SVR Research Unit 2015: 26–29; Karakaşoğlu 2014: 11).

Alternative pathways to a German university

Not all international students embark on the typical student journey to a (shrinking) university as set out in Figure 3. More than two thirds have already studied in their home country or elsewhere³¹ and take alternative pathways to a German university:

- **English-taught master's programmes:** An increasing number of those coming to Germany to study have already completed an undergraduate programme abroad and then decide to study for a master's in

29 Prospective international students need to prove, among other things, that they are qualified to go to university, that they have health insurance and that they have enough money to cover their living expenses in Germany (at least EUR 8,800 in the first year) (DAAD 2019b).

30 International students who switch to a German university from a partner university abroad do not have to take this language test (decision of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German Federal States on access to German universities for students from countries with an academic test centre of 17 March 2006).

31 Twenty-eight per cent of the 4,204 international students included in a student survey in 2016 stated that they had begun their studies in Germany straight after leaving secondary school. Eight per cent stated that they had first studied at a university abroad and 63 per cent that they had graduated abroad (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 16).



Germany. Around one quarter of economics, science and engineering programmes at German universities are already being taught in English (DAAD/DZHW 2015: 138). These programmes are particularly interesting for those with a good command of English who have already completed a bachelor's abroad, because it enables them to go straight onto a master's programme in Germany. They are then not required to attend a *Studienkolleg* in the same way as many of those who wish to take a bachelor's. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that nearly as many international students are now found studying for a master's (36 per cent) as are taking a bachelor's programme (37 per cent).³² For the sake of comparison: the majority of German students are aiming to do a bachelor's (64 per cent), but only one in five is studying for a master's (18 per cent).³³

- **Language schools in Germany:** There are significantly fewer English-taught bachelor's programmes in Germany than German-taught bachelor's.³⁴ That is why most international students taking a bachelor's degree have to start learning German long before their programme begins. But without taking intensive language courses in their home country or attending a German partner school abroad³⁵ it is likely to be difficult for them to acquire the required advanced German language ability (see Bischof et al. 2016: 6–8). That is why several tens of thousands of prospective international students come to Germany long before their degree programme begins in order to attend a language school in Germany³⁶ and, depending on their educational background, then go on to a *Studienkolleg* or another institution to take a German *Abitur* or *Fachabitur*.

- **Special study and exchange programmes:** Some students spend short periods in Germany on a student exchange or international double degree programme, for instance the Double Bachelor's Degree Programme in Economics at the Chemnitz University of Technology and the University of Naples.³⁷ In addition, those who have begun a study programme in their home countries can switch to a German university as part of specific partner university agreements and then go on to complete their degree in Germany. The courses they have already taken abroad may be recognised as study preparation.

The analysis which follows in section 2.2 shows that many shrinking universities have not only identified these and other pathways, they are already putting them to targeted use to attract international students. Nevertheless, these insights from the field also reveal that they have no standardised toolbox to work with. *How* universities draw attention to themselves and get potential students to commit to their own institution during the application process depends, among other things, on their staffing levels, their involvement in international networks and the degree to which they (and their staff) regard their own institution as an international university.

2.2 Shrinking universities: Smoothing out the bumps in the road

Shrinking universities are generally less well known and visible than so-called “lighthouse” universities which have their own particular draw based on their

32 Other international students were studying for a PhD (10 per cent), another degree such as a German *Diplom* (8 per cent) or were enrolled on a non-degree programme (10 per cent) (DAAD/DZHW 2018: 53).

33 Other German students in the winter semester 2017/18 were working towards a PhD (3 per cent) or another degree (14 per cent) (Federal Statistical Office 2019, SVR calculation).

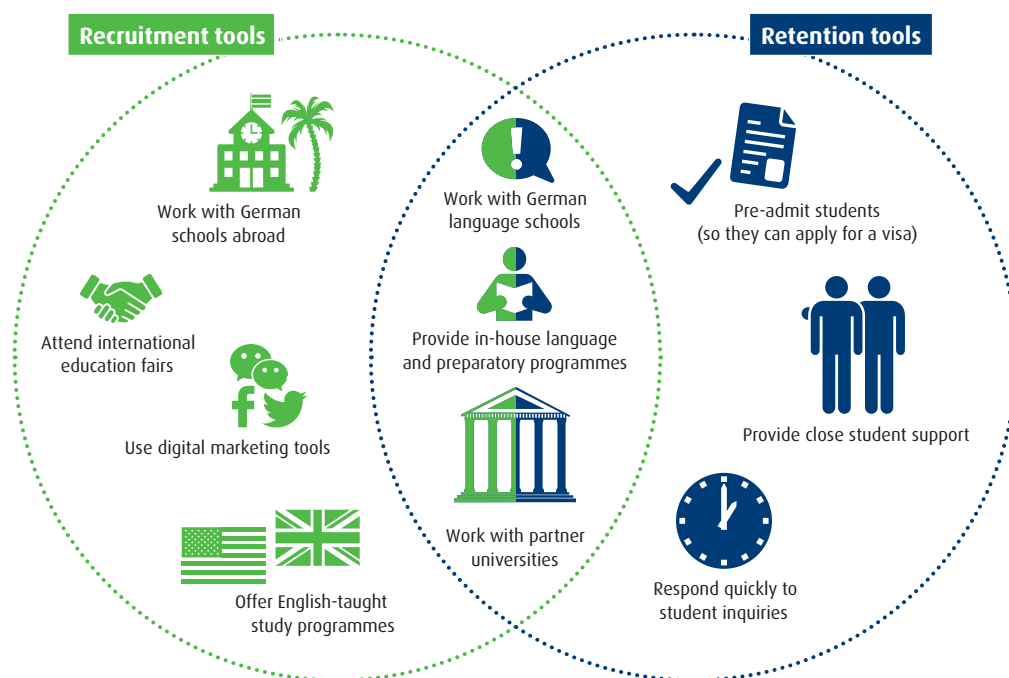
34 According to the DAAD's database of study programmes, there were 109 English-taught bachelor's and 904 English-taught master's programmes available in Germany in late 2018 (<https://www.daad.de/deutschland/studienangebote/international-programmes/en>, retrieved 13 Dec. 2018).

35 According to Federal Foreign Office statistics, in November 2018 there were 140 German schools abroad, 1,698 foreign partner schools where German is taught at advanced level and 393 foreign schools cooperating with these partner schools (<http://weltkarte.pasch-net.de>, retrieved 13 Dec. 2018).

36 The total number of people coming to Germany well ahead of the start of their degree programme to learn German can only be estimated. Statistics for the relevant language exams can only be a first guide: 26,209 people took the German Language Examination for University Entrance (DSH) in Germany in 2017 and 25,348 took the TestDAF at a test centre in Germany (FaDaF 2019).

37 <https://www.tu-chemnitz.de/wirtschaft/studium/bachelor/wiwi/doppelabschluss.php> (German only), retrieved 13 Dec. 2018.

Figure 4 International student recruitment and retention tools used by shrinking universities in Germany



NB: Tools with larger symbols were mentioned more frequently. Tools denote reported practices which were recorded during 13 expert interviews at shrinking universities in Germany.

Source: SVR Research Unit/Ellen Stockmar

university ranking or reputation for being cosmopolitan places to live. Shrinking universities are thus at a disadvantage in the global competition for international students. They have a number of tools at their disposal for recruiting and retaining prospective international students (Fig. 4).

Networking with **partner universities** abroad helps to attract international students to universities in Germany for short courses such as summer schools or exchange programmes. To get these students (and, through them, their fellow students back home) interested in a full study programme following their short-term stay, universities offer additional **individual student support**. This individual support is available to all international students, regardless of whether they are planning to work towards a degree in Germany or not, as the following quotation illustrates:

Actually, our strategy's always been to trust in word of mouth more and delivering a good ser-

vice, so those students who are happy here spread the word.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Some of the university staff interviewed for this study reported that visiting students also apply for double degree programmes. These programmes enable them to do part of their degree abroad and part in Germany. Once they have passed their final exams they walk away with two degrees. One of the shrinking universities included in the study engages in another form of collaboration to attract prospective students who are already studying in their home country: together with its foreign partner university this institution gets prospective international students' language and degree subject skills up to speed while they are still at home so that they can switch from their chosen undergraduate degree programme in their home country straight into the second or third semester of a programme at the German university. The entry requirement is that



students first have to complete a one-year preparatory course at a *Studienkolleg* when they come to Germany.³⁸ This study pathway benefits both parties, as the university gets to recruit numerous international students who have undergone in-depth preparations and the students know early on that they are guaranteed a place to study in Germany if they pass all the required exams.

Another way in which students are given an early signal about whether they will be offered a place which staff at shrinking universities addressed on numerous occasions is a **conditional offer**. This is issued to some prospective non-EU students so that they can apply for a visa. Universities issue conditional offers, for instance, when applicants fulfil most of the entry requirements but do not yet have all the language or degree subject-related qualifications needed for the university to be able to guarantee them a place. Prospective students can use their conditional offer to apply for a visa to attend a language school, for example, or a preparatory course in Germany. For shrinking universities, though, conditional offers have proved to be of only limited benefit. The staff interviewed stressed that only few of those who are issued with conditional offers actually enrol in their university after gaining language and/or degree subject qualifications. Most apply to another university (in Germany) instead. It is not least on account of that fact that smaller universities in particular are increasingly advertising in **language schools in Germany**, where several thousand prospective international students take language courses each year to prepare for their study programmes (see FaDaF 2019):

And so we found out that that's what we need to do. Picking them up when they're already in Germany and in the last stages of learning German. Because given that we're a small university we don't have that much pulling power [...].

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

What "picking them up" actually involves varies in practice. According to the interviewees, shrinking universities close to metropolitan regions actively approach potential students by presenting their study programmes at language schools in neighbouring big cities. In other regions, collaborations with language schools are based on a services model: language schools address students much more actively, refer potential students to specific partner universities and even offer to run language courses on the premises of the university in question – in the case of shrinking universities these are often quite far away from metropolitan regions. The following quotation shows how much language schools tailor their courses to potential international students:

And, in the best case, they're German language schools. You know, they recruit their language students abroad and the whole language school package is easier to sell if you tell them they'll not only be able to go to language school in Germany because afterwards we have another pathway, we cooperate with universities, so they can study here too.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

However, some shrinking universities run **their own language and subject-related preparatory courses**, the aim being to draw attention to the university and get those taking the courses to sign up for one of its degree programmes. These preparatory courses are as yet only available in five federal states³⁹ in which universities are legally permitted themselves to run the preparatory courses which in the past only the *Studienkollegs* were allowed to deliver. These universities manage to retain students by dovetailing their preparatory courses with normal classes, the aim being to better prepare students before they start their degree programmes. In some cases, once the programme has started there are few other possibilities, since in contrast to language schools and *Studienkollegs*

38 The exam taken at the *Studienkolleg* only entitles pathway participants to study at the German partner university. That way, the university prevents prospective international students from applying to another university after passing the *Studienkolleg* exam, a practice which, according to the member of staff interviewed, is widespread.

39 Brandenburg, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland and Thuringia

the preparatory courses run by the universities are university-specific, that is other universities do not recognise them or only to some extent. The courses which shrinking universities have themselves developed thus serve as both a marketing and a retention tool (Fig. 4).

Staff at nearly all the shrinking universities in this study addressed the possibility of recruiting more international students through **English-taught degree programmes**. This is regarded as especially desirable in the case of master's programmes. Nevertheless, staff at universities of applied sciences in particular mentioned that this requires significant in-house co-ordination and staff development, which in many cases are still in the early stages. The same goes for **digital higher education marketing**. On the one hand, the responses indicate that some attempts are being made to step up the digitalisation of higher education marketing at international level. According to the interviewees, though, the shrinking universities' on-line activities are still geared more to domestic target groups. International advertising and the provision of information via Facebook, Google AdWords, webinars and other channels is still at quite an experimental stage:

Our degree course marketing has a Facebook page, is on Instagram, you know the usual. [...] Our colleague uses WeChat and Weibo in China, and then there's VK for Russia, we're still working on that region. We've got YouTube videos. We just produced some new ones. Students like using them to prepare for their study programme, during the arrival phase and during their first semester. And they've had lots of clicks. [...] Degree course marketing, which tends to address the German market, we're still working on that, so that we can target the international market more.

(interviewee at a university)

Preliminary conclusion: International students help stabilise shrinking universities

Overall, the increase in the number of international students at shrinking universities and universities of applied sciences indicates that this group is helping to maintain the range of study programmes on offer for future generations of (domestic) students. Never-

theless, international students can only offset the drop in German student numbers to a certain extent (see Table 3 in the Appendix). The specific value added of this "new" target group is that it can help shrinking universities in regard to their internationalisation efforts and make them visible on the international stage. Ultimately, the local economy will also benefit, though. Interviewees at the shrinking universities had the following to say about their need to act in the face of demographic change:

Our doors are open and we need international students.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

And yet, we're a small regional university and have to, well we're being forced to look abroad. Otherwise we won't get any bums on seats here.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

In order to get more international students to enrol, the universities included in this study are attempting to emphasise the benefits of studying in Germany as well as compensating for the complexity of the German higher education admissions procedure by directly addressing prospective students at various "pit stops" along the way, for example at language schools. Despite or perhaps because of their success in recruiting students in this way, the surveyed universities are gradually placing more emphasis on achieving a balance between international and domestic students and on student success. That is the conclusion drawn in the following chapter.

3 Fostering academic success

International students are still not achieving the same academic success as their German counterparts – and that is not only true of shrinking universities. International students at German universities often achieve poorer results and are more likely to drop out (see, e.g., Heublein/Schmelzer 2018: 5–20; Huhn et al. 2014: 7–9). Forty-five per cent of international students do not achieve a bachelor's degree and almost one third fail their master's programme. Those fig-



ures are significantly higher than for German students (Table 1).⁴⁰

There is no one answer to the question of why so many international students are failing to graduate. Statistical averages should not be used to hide the fact that these are not simply statistics but real people with very different social, cultural and educational backgrounds. These are all factors which have a significant influence on academic success. Like their German counterparts, international students are by no means a homogeneous group (see Stemmer 2014: 20–23; Heublein/Schmelzer 2018: 19; Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 38). Because they have such diverse backgrounds, the last few months before a degree programme begins and the first year of a study programme will be decisive for most international students. For most, this introductory phase will have a key influence on whether they will be able to acquire the necessary academic and (specialist) language skills in time, to settle into their study programme and, ultimately, to graduate (see Bosse 2016: 129; Heublein et al. 2017: 265; Bargel 2015: 4–5). The next part of the study shows what concrete difficulties international students are faced with during the introductory phase of their programme and how Germany’s shrinking universities have so far been responding to those difficulties.

3.1 Obstacles during the introductory phase

The majority of international students already have some experience of studying in their home countries or elsewhere. Nevertheless, many do not know what to expect when they arrive in Germany (see Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 16). They not only have to get to grips with the new situation they find themselves in, but also to living in a foreign country. Around one

Table 1 Dropout rates for German and international students (2016)

	Dropout rate (in %)
Bachelor’s programmes	
German students	28
International students	45
Master’s programmes	
German students	19
International students	29

NB: Dropout rates were calculated based on the numbers of 2016 graduates.

Source: Heublein/Schmelzer 2018: 5–20

third of international students do not (initially) speak any German. They often know little or nothing about German study and learning culture. Many also have to earn money right from day one to pay for their living expenses. In addition to suddenly having a much longer to-do list, the expectations they themselves and their families have are often high, too. All this can mean that students feel overwhelmed and end up dropping out (see SVR Research Unit 2017a: 21–24; Ebert/Heublein 2015: 69–70). The biggest challenges international students face during the introductory phase of a degree programme are the following:

- **Poor command of German:** International students’ language problems are not limited to the need to use German as an academic language, because many of them also initially find communicating in everyday situations difficult. In a national survey conducted by the SVR Research Unit in 2015, four out of 10 international students stated that they spoke very poor German (SVR Research Unit 2016a).⁴¹ Staff at shrinking universities also addressed the need these students have to improve their language ability:

⁴⁰ Few data are currently available since no long-term studies have yet been conducted (with the exception of the German National Educational Panel Study, or NEPS). In Germany, dropout rates are calculated using estimates, that is the number of graduates in a particular year is compared with the number of students beginning a degree programme (Heublein/Wolter 2011: 217; Heublein/Schmelzer 2018: 1–2). Under Germany’s University Statistics Act, which entered into force in 2016, however, statistics will in future have to chart student progress. This will enable dropout rates for German and international students to be extracted straight from official statistics.

⁴¹ This is, not least, linked to the fact that 38 per cent of international students are on study programmes which are only taught in English (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 28). Their programme thus offers them little incentive to learn German.

Their German, especially when they start their study programme, is often quite poor.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

But even those international students who speak fluent German often struggle with technical jargon and German as an academic language. Many need additional support when it comes to academic writing so as to overcome their fear of writing in a foreign language, to learn new writing skills and to learn how to revise their own texts (see Brandt 2007: 158–161; Voigt 2011: 38–39).

- **New study methods:** Sixty-three per cent of international students are postgraduates, that is their studies in Germany are their second degree and they already have wide-ranging knowledge of their subject. Nonetheless, many of them have great difficulty finding their bearings on a German programme (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 16; Stemmer 2013: 150–152). Depending on how much their own study culture and methods differ from those in Germany, they may have to adapt quite significantly in order to achieve academic success in Germany (Kaiser 2010: 16–18). That takes a lot of time and hard effort. International students thus often have to work considerably harder than their German counterparts (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 7). Often, though, diligence alone is not enough. Many of them have to learn an entirely new way of working which requires them to be much more independent and pro-active. It is, for example, normal for students in Germany to engage in discussions with teaching staff and fellow students in class. That is new to some international students and some even feel uncomfortable engaging in such discussions. Many students from East Asia in particular have to get used to the fact that teaching staff actually welcome their questions and that this is not seen as implicit criticism (Stemmer 2013: 150–152; Luo 2015: 127–129). This form of

academic culture shock is clearly in evidence at shrinking universities, too:

They [international students] come from very different academic systems [...]. In Germany exams are not there for you to merely regurgitate what teaching staff have told you, it's not about learning things by rote. Here, exams are about showing that you've got a good overview of a subject, that you can link various different issues together, that you can ask questions, that you can show that you've thought about a topic, had some own ideas about it, and even gone beyond what was addressed in the seminar.

(interviewee at a university)

Now we try to talk about academic work methods in our German language courses, because we can see that some international students lack information and skills in that regard.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

- **Financial difficulties:** Although the vast majority of shrinking universities do not require international students to pay tuition fees, studying in Germany places a high financial burden on many of them.⁴² According to a national student survey, international students have EUR 776 at their disposal per month on average – that is significantly less than their German counterparts, who have an average of EUR 918 to spend (Middendorff et al. 2017: 39; Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 39). International students from low-income countries, who on average have EUR 718 at their disposal, often live close to the poverty line.⁴³ Moreover, because many international students are not eligible to receive financial aid under Germany's Federal Training Assistance Act (known as "BAföG"), they earn around one third of their income waiting tables or doing part-time jobs (Apolinarski/Brandt

42 The federal state of Baden-Württemberg introduced tuition fees for students from non-EU countries in the winter semester 2017/18 (section 3 Baden-Württemberg Act on University Tuition Fees of 1 Jan. 2005, as last amended on 9 May 2017).

43 If the poverty line is set at Germany's personal tax-free allowance of EUR 9,168 per year (as at: 2019), then many international students have to be classed as at acute risk of poverty (section 32a Germany's Income Tax Act).



2018: 42).⁴⁴ Because many part-time jobs require them to be permanently on call, international students find it difficult to get into a routine, join study groups and do leisure activities, which makes social integration more difficult (Stemmer 2014: 49; Kiefer 2014: 296).⁴⁵ This also applies at shrinking universities, as the following quotation shows:

Many international students have to work a lot to fund themselves, and that means they're not focusing all their attention on their studies.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

- **Social isolation:** In contrast to their German counterparts, international students normally have no friends in Germany when they start their study programme. Almost one third, especially students from East Asia, still have difficulty getting to know German students after they have been here for some time. However, even students from countries neighbouring Germany, such as Poland, also report finding it hard to get to know other students, and especially German students (Nowicka 2010: 5; Zwengel 2012: 70; Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 62). One key obstacle is the language barrier. But even those who have a good command of German do not necessarily know and have frequent contact with many German students (Esser/Gillessen 2014: 98). One sixth of international students stated that they have no German friends at all though they wish they did (SVR Research Unit 2016a). Given that they are more likely to live in student accommodation reserved for international students where there are only few domestic students, their housing situation often makes it difficult for them to get to know local students (Kiefer 2014: 304; Lux 2013: 84). The housing market in towns and cities with shrinking universities is often less tense, but the risk of feeling left out still exists:

Forty-six per cent of students in our halls of residence are foreigners, which is not that easy. Because German students don't want to live in international halls of residence [...] and international students want to learn German. [...] And that's one of our biggest problems at the moment.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Social isolation not only has a negative impact on international students' well-being, it also makes it hard for them to navigate through the German university system. German students often have family and friends locally and know what to expect at university. Also, they have already spent many years in the German education system. Their knowledge about the system could be very valuable for international students who are struggling on their own. Universities, whether shrinking or not, make efforts to promote social networking at the beginning of each study programme, usually by organising orientation programmes. Although these events are very popular, they are only a very short-lived means of getting to know other people (see DAAD/IHF/Fern-Universität in Hagen 2018: 30–31; German Science Council 2016: 135).

Ultimately, like their domestic counterparts, international students are (and should be) themselves responsible for overcoming these and other obstacles and for ensuring that they manage to graduate at the end of their programme. To help them, many German universities offer a wide range of student services, especially at the start of their degree studies. In addition, one in two universities across Germany has specific support services tailored to international students (see DAAD/IHF/FernUniversität in Hagen 2018: 30; SVR Research Unit 2015: 29). Many international students are generally aware of what support is available at their university. Nevertheless, with the exception of

⁴⁴ Exceptions only apply to refugees and EU nationals, for instance (section 8 Federal Training Assistance Act). A total of only 3 per cent of all international students receive funding under the Federal Training Assistance Act, compared to 30 per cent of German students (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 40; Middendorff et al. 2017: 22).

⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it would be far from the truth to say that all international students are in financial dire straits. Scholarships are an important means of funding living expenses. Fifteen per cent of international bachelor's and master's students are on scholarships in Germany, compared to only five per cent of German students (Middendorff et al. 2017: 42; Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 40).

introductory welcome events, the occasional German classes and in-session tutorials, only few of them use these services (DAAD/IHF/FernUniversität in Hagen 2018: 31; Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 68). Despite the problems they have adapting to their new surroundings, only 38 per cent of international students took workshops on German learning culture, for example. In the experience of staff providing this support, those who do seek help tend to regard it as one-off, short-term assistance, for example when writing assignments or preparing for an exam. That is hardly suitable for making any long-term improvements to a student's study and work methods (see Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 68; Esser/Gillessen 2014: 102; Voigt 2011: 38–39). The following section addresses how teaching and administrative staff at shrinking universities are responding to international students' problems with their studies during the introductory phase.

3.2 Shrinking universities: A lot done, a lot more to do

In order to ensure that the increase in numbers of international students does not lead to an increase in the number of dropouts, shrinking universities, too, offer international students German courses, orientation programmes and other support services. However, as is the case in other universities, these are not always available on every degree programme or only to those who actively seek help (Stemmer 2014: 121). Many international students do not seek advice and help until it is too late, though, or never do so at all (ibid.). That means that shrinking universities also run the risk of not noticing poor exam results and other warning signs until it is too late. This is confirmed by dropout rates at shrinking universities, which according to the interviewed experts are just as high as the rates in Table 1.

According to the interviewees, shrinking universities also run **preparatory courses**. These are often very short, voluntary and geared to prospective German students, though, and take place before the start of the

semester, at which point some international students are still at home waiting for their visa. As a result, some of the universities surveyed are unable to prepare international students or only to a very limited degree. At other universities, staff use collaborations with partner universities abroad and private *Studienkollegs* to get international students up to speed in bespoke courses. Partners in Germany and abroad prepare students – generally for a fee – for the specific requirements of certain courses or programmes, which the German university guarantees they will then get a place on:

Some things need to happen while they're still at home. And, if you take [name of institution], for instance, they've been running preparatory courses for years. They do that with selected universities [abroad] with whom they created pathway programmes where you can learn the language to some extent and do some of the work while still at university at home and then the rest in Germany.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Although public *Studienkollegs* in Germany also prepare almost 6,000 prospective international students each year to meet the basic requirements of a degree in the humanities, social sciences or sciences,⁴⁶ according to the interviewees, it is hardly possible for public *Studienkollegs* to prepare students specifically for their individual study programmes. In addition, shrinking universities find it very difficult to retain students who attend a *Studienkolleg* for their obligatory preparatory year and then plan to study at another university in Germany. In some federal states, prospective international students are not only able to do their *Abitur* or *Fachabitur* at a public or private *Studienkolleg* – these courses are also available at a few universities. Some of those interviewed stated that their university **runs its own in-house preparatory courses for international students**, which students often have to pay for. These programmes offer prospective international students a double safety net: qualified applicants are not only given a conditional

⁴⁶ In the winter semester 2017/18 a total of 5,699 prospective international students were enrolled at 29 *Studienkollegs* across Germany (Federal Statistical Office 2018e: 422–424, SVR calculation).



offer for their chosen study programme (that is if they pass the preparatory course), but are also promised help by the university in accessing and successfully completing their subsequent programme. The following quotations make this clear:

And then you've at least got them [international students on in-house preparatory courses] here at the university. And we get them integrated into the whole institution, they have a place to live, get to know a few people. I believe that social interaction alone helps to get them to commit to stay at the university.

(interviewee at a university)

We'd like to get them [international students on in-house preparatory courses] to stay here, and so we get them into the labs at some point during the programme [...]. And we get professors to teach on the courses, so students can already get to know them.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

In principle, that's exactly what we want [legislative changes to pathways to higher education in the federal state in question]. We wanted this alternative pathway, and it'll help create new structures, and universities will offer qualifications, which students have to pay for, and then hopefully a few university consortia will be set up, because [name of university] believes we don't need to do it alone, we can work with [name of another university close by], for example, and others. That's hopefully the direction things will go in, so that we'll be able to provide much more tailored training.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Only some of the shrinking universities in Germany are already providing degree subject-related preparatory courses. However, all the surveyed universities provide in-house pre-sessional and in-sessional **language courses** in which international students learn German and, in some cases, English as an academic language. The spectrum of classes ranges from obligatory German lessons during the introductory phase to voluntary preparatory language classes and language part-

nerships ("tandems") with domestic students. Some universities also use their preparatory German courses to teach some degree programme-related content, the aim being to get those taking part enthusiastic about the degree programme at the university and to get them to apply for a place:

The idea is that we check out, before the pre-sessional German course, whether they want to stay here to study and whether they fulfil all the entry requirements, and that we only enrol those applicants and potential students on the German course who actually want to study here. And because they take the course, [...] around 80 per cent end up enrolling at the university for a full degree programme.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Digital learning tools are another source of support. Prospective students can use them whenever they want, wherever they are to do language and academic preparation. Only few of the shrinking universities surveyed use such digital learning tools, however.

The range of support available at shrinking universities for fostering **social integration** varies only very little from what is provided at other universities, the main focus being on orientation programmes and events (see Bargel 2015: 32; Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 68–69; DAAD/IHF/FernUniversität in Hagen 2018: 31). Smaller universities also promote contact between domestic and international students, for example by organising mixed study groups, sports events and student clubs. Some also foster contact with the local community:

We run tandem partnership programmes; [...] Language tandems, we have those in town too. So, if people in town want to learn an exotic language, we have the right people ready to hand [i.e. international students]. And at the moment we've got this series, too, in a local free newspaper, where for a whole year a student from a different country is introduced to readers each week.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

University staff regularly recommend scholarships, especially to talented international students, to help

cover maintenance costs. Many universities also have emergency funds available for those who get into financial difficulties. This is part of the additional individual administrative support available to international students during the introductory phase of degree programmes at the shrinking universities surveyed.

4 Retaining international students on the local job market

Attitudes towards international students have changed over the past 10 years. In Germany and other popular study destinations they are no longer regarded merely as students, but increasingly also as an “ideal” source of skilled immigrants to fill the growing number of job vacancies.⁴⁷ Once they graduate, international students are highly qualified, often have a good command of German and have already spent some time living in Germany. Those parts of the country which have been dealing with depopulation and skills shortages for many years are also beginning to realise that this potential is available to them. The federal state of Thuringia, for instance, is using its “Hochqualifiziert.International.Thüringen” (HighlyQualified.International.Thuringia) project to attempt to retain students after they complete their studies.⁴⁸

If the current trend continues, more than 270,000 international students will have graduated from a German university in the period between 2019 and 2025 (DAAD/DZHW 2018: 58, SVR calculation). More

than two thirds of them wish to stay and work in Germany after graduation, some even plan to live and work locally – at least for the time being (SVR Research Unit 2012: 37; 2017b: 22; Esser/Gillessen 2014: 110; Hanganu/Heß 2014: 235). Germany’s post-study visa scheme is very generous.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, many international graduates fail to find adequate employment after graduating. Some 30 per cent of those who stay in Germany beyond the end of their studies are unemployed for at least a year (Fig. 5).⁵⁰ German graduates manage to find employment considerably more quickly.⁵¹

4.1 Difficulties finding work

Research on graduates shows that if international students manage to stay in Germany after they graduate, they are just as successful professionally in the medium to long term as their German counterparts (Fabian 2014; Schomburg/Kooij 2014).⁵² Nevertheless, they initially face more obstacles if they look for a job locally straight after completing their studies. There are various reasons for this, as experience gained at shrinking and other universities shows:

- **Poor command of German:** The SVR Research Unit conducted a survey of university career services and international student services at 116 sites across Germany in the winter semester 2014/15 to find out how international students find their first job after graduation (SVR Research Unit 2015). Well over

47 See, e.g., BMAS 2011: 31–35; BMI 2012: 54–56; GWK 2013: 5; BDA/HRK 2014: 3.

48 The project, which runs for three years until the end of May 2019, is being financed by the Free State of Thuringia with funding from the European Social Fund (ESF).

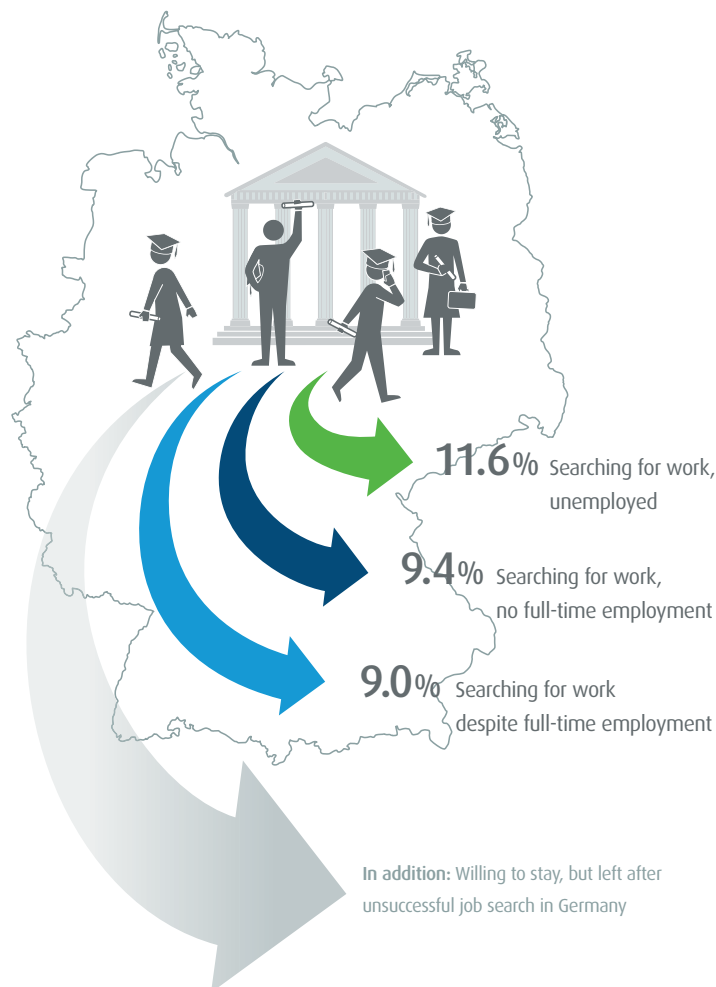
49 Upon graduating, international students are entitled to a temporary residence permit for the purpose of seeking employment (section 16 (5) Residence Act). That means they are allowed to seek employment commensurate with their qualification for up to 18 months. During that period, they are permitted to work full time. After having held their residence title for two years and having worked in a job which is commensurate with their degree, they are permitted to remain permanently in Germany (section 18b Residence Act). Compared to other popular study destinations such as France, the UK, the Netherlands and the United States, these rules are exceptionally graduate-friendly (SVR 2015: 46–49; Morris-Lange/Brandt/Crysmann 2015: 88–92; Berquist et al. 2019).

50 The estimated number of unrecorded cases is likely to be much higher, because some of those who had left the country at the time of the survey had previously (and unsuccessfully) sought to find a job before leaving Germany.

51 Precise comparative data are unavailable. According to the Graduate Panel of the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW) (2015), 2 per cent of German students leaving university with a bachelor’s degree are still unemployed 18 months after graduation and 11 per cent are working part time.

52 However, there are differences (in some cases quite considerable differences) between different countries and regions of origin. In early 2013, only 54 per cent of graduates from countries in Africa who stayed in Germany after 2005 were in full-time employment. Another 32 per cent were working part time, were self-employed, still in education or taking parental leave. Almost 14 per cent were looking for work at the time of the survey (Hanganu/Heß 2014: 130).

Figure 5 Former international students who stayed in Germany but were still looking for work more than one year after graduation



NB: Data refer to non-EU citizens who graduated from a German university between January 2011 and April 2012 and were still living in Germany in early 2013.

Source: SVR Research Unit/Deniz Keskin, reanalysis of survey data taken from Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees' Graduate Study (Hanganu/Heß 2014)

two thirds of those surveyed stated that the lack of (specialist) language ability presented the biggest obstacle to finding a job. This was confirmed by staff at shrinking universities:

And then, of course, there's always the question of how good their German is. Local employers normally require good German and in [name of big city close by] of course that's also important, but in a way less so.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

And, naturally, German is a problem, too. Local employers aren't that flexible that they would say 'Oh it's fine if they don't speak perfect German'. Well lots of them at least won't. Of course, there are some employers that are flexible, that take some on.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Although the majority of international students do not have any problems getting by in everyday situations, many have difficulties in job interviews which

are held in German, for instance (Arajärvi/Drubig 2014a: 56–58). The fact that many English-taught study programmes are now available in Germany exacerbates this problem. Thirty-eight per cent of international students in Germany attend study programmes in which the language of instruction is English. Another 17 per cent only take few lectures and seminars in which the language of instruction is German (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 28). That makes it even more difficult for them to learn German. And this lack of German makes it hard for those who want to stay and work. German is still a key prerequisite when it comes to finding a job, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Arajärvi/Drubig 2014b: 8).

- **Lack of knowledge about German workplace culture:** Many international students do not know enough about professional opportunities and workplace culture in Germany. If they do not have any early contact with German employers, they often lack important practical know-how⁵³ and the professional contacts which play a key role when looking for a job (see Klabunde 2014: 29; Kratz/Reimer 2013: 1–5). Many international students do not, for instance, realise that Germany's countless SMEs could be potential employers. The regions of Germany with shrinking universities are home to many SMEs:

Student expectations are really high. When they see us here at Career Services, most in fact expect me to just pick up the phone and somehow magic them a job, preferably at Daimler-Benz, BMW or Volkswagen.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

A longitudinal study conducted by the SVR Research Unit between 2015 and 2017 in the course of which international students were interviewed before and after graduation revealed that early exposure to German SMEs and other businesses is an advantage (SVR Research Unit 2017b). Those who had worked

for some time in Germany and were able to apply what they had learned on their course were more likely to stay in Germany and find work after completing their course (ibid.: 30).

- **Lack of personal and professional networks in Germany:** International students often have a dense network of contacts in their home country. However, that is of little use to them when they are looking for a job in Germany. Many lack professional and personal contacts in Germany, as the SVR Research Unit's longitudinal study showed (ibid.). Although most international graduates know people in Germany who can help them write an application, only just over a third have any private or professional contacts with people living in Germany and working in a profession relevant to their own studies, that is who know both the country and the industry (ibid.: 19). In addition to providing professional support, friends, acquaintances and colleagues can also help international students get to know and appreciate Germany and the Germans better. Volunteering in churches, sports clubs and other charities in their university town promotes social integration. That, in turn, often increases international students' chances of finding their first job in Germany (SVR Research Unit 2016b: 16–17). Experience gained by staff at shrinking universities shows what a lack of an adequate network means for their everyday counselling services:

We spend a great deal more time supporting and advising international students. [...] When they come to us, it's often not enough to just go through their CV with them and give them a few tips, because they haven't got their father or mother at home who's already given them some input and maybe some other students as well. The only thing we often have to work with is a template they've downloaded from the Internet, and some templates are better than others, and some are 20 years old.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

53 Doing an internship, part-time job and final project in a local business can be useful when looking for work after graduation, because students learn what level of language ability a company requires, for example, or what strategies work well when looking for a job in a specific area (see Arthur/Flynn 2011: 234).



- **Reticent employers:** Businesses are showing an increasing interest in foreign skilled workers. Nevertheless, many still do not have enough information and are very cautious when it comes to hiring international students during or after their degree (Ekert et al. 2014: 59). Staff at only one fifth of shrinking universities can make out that local employers are interested in hiring international students. At non-shrinking universities, though, this is the case for almost a third (SVR Research Unit 2015). The university staff interviewed stated that SMEs in particular are not sufficiently aware of the potential this group of graduates holds, nor of what residency and employment rights apply to international students. Many HR managers know very little about international graduates' educational background and work experience and shy away from the supposed additional administrative and integration effort involved in hiring them (Arajärvi/Drubig 2014b: 8; Hanganu/Heß 2014: 150). And so those international students who want to stay in Germany often fail to get a job due to the lack of knowledge and prejudices on the part of businesses. Moreover, employers especially in towns and cities with shrinking universities are afraid that skilled international workers will soon move on to another job. That is why they prefer to hire young Germans with family ties and friends locally. Some even suspect that international professionals could pass on trade secrets and rule out hiring them for that reason (see also Dömling 2013: 6; Arajärvi/Drubig 2014a: 61–62):

And then, of course, local employers feel strongly that they need to hire local people who stay in the area after completing their studies because they're afraid others will move on once they've got a foot on the career ladder.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

And some are prejudiced against people from some countries, because they're all spies, appar-

ently. That's awful. Our Chinese students are always really sad about that. They find it particularly hard to find an internship.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

- **Legal obstacles:** Germany has undertaken wide-ranging reforms of its residence law in recent years. Nevertheless, many international students still find that German legislation constitutes an obstacle, not least because businesses are often unaware of their rights of residence and do not want to have to deal with any additional red tape (Hanganu/Heß 2014: 148; Arajärvi/Drubig 2014a: 58–60). The students themselves are also often unaware of their specific residence rights. That could be due to a lack of information. It may, however, also be the case that they do not use available information services enough.⁵⁴ In addition, experience shows that the around 600 foreigners authorities (*Ausländerbehörden*) have not harmonised their decision-making on residence titles. Despite all the improvements which have been made, in extreme cases one could say that some have adopted a rather "defensive" approach to students who want to stay in Germany (Barié-Wimmer/Müller-Jacquier 2013: 4; Arajärvi/Drubig 2014b: 16).

One other obstacle is apparent at shrinking universities in particular: shrinking universities are often found in more remote regions of Germany, which makes it more difficult for students to travel to and from an internship or job. One member of staff summarised the problem as follows:

Mobility is another challenge. After all, [name of region] is less developed than the rest of the country in terms of its public transport, I'm sorry to say. [...] And apart from a few hubs that are easy to get to by train it's tough. And many firms are out in the sticks, where buses stop only once or twice a day.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

⁵⁴ Only 11 per cent of international students seek advice about their right of residence while they are studying (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 68). Almost 50 per cent report that they know their residence rights "quite well", "well" or "very well" (SVR Research Unit 2016a).

Table 2 International students planning to stay in Germany

Likely place they will live after graduation	International students	
	At shrinking universities (in %)	At all other universities (in %)
Germany	71	67
Town/city in which the university is located (or within a 50 km radius)	13	33
Elsewhere in Germany	58	45

NB: The share of international students planning to stay in Germany after graduation differs from the sum of the two options as multiple answers were possible.

Source: SVR Research Unit 2017b

Overall, research conducted across Germany on job entry for international students and what experience shrinking universities have gained in that regard shows that those wanting to stay in Germany after graduation have to overcome considerably more obstacles than their German counterparts. That changes nothing about the fact that international students themselves need to be pro-active when it comes to looking for a job. However, in order to lower the quite significant obstacles they face, international students should receive more job entry support than has previously been the case,⁵⁵ including and especially at shrinking universities.

4.2 Shrinking universities: Project-based funding useful but sustainability doubtful

More than two thirds of international students plan to stay in Germany beyond the end of their studies in the hope of improving their long-term career prospects (SVR Research Unit 2012: 37; 2017b: 22; Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 61). However, shortly before finishing their degree few of them have actually decided where in Germany they want to live and work (Table 2). This openness offers shrinking universities and local employers various opportunities. However, the data pre-

sented in Table 2 indicate that more needs to be done to get this target group to stay: only 13 per cent of international students at shrinking universities are already considering staying in the area after graduation. At other universities, 33 per cent are already planning to stay.

The interviews with experts show that shrinking universities are already mounting efforts to retain international students on the local job market once they graduate. As well as universities and universities of applied sciences, local government, regional economic development agencies and branch offices of Germany’s Federal Employment Agency are involved in these efforts. So far, the majority of support services tailored to international students planning to stay in Germany have been financed through project-based funding from Germany’s Federal Government, the federal states and the EU. Funding is available for

- job application training (incl. in English),
- intercultural training,
- in-session German language courses,
- additional help finding an internship,
- getting to know local/regional businesses through study visits and career fairs and
- determining what international students and businesses need.

⁵⁵ What impact existing counselling and support services have on finding a job has not yet been researched much. However, findings from research on graduates indicates that early exposure to the world of work, spending time looking into career entry at an early stage and having good social networks at university are all factors which have a positive impact (SVR Research Unit 2017b: 29-32; Kratz/Reimer 2013: 1-5).



How and by whom these tailored support services are delivered differs from university to university. Some cooperate with employment agencies and other local organisations. Most, though, do no more than provide their own support services. To be able to provide seamless support to international students on their way to finding employment on the German job market, some career services have a dedicated contact person for this group of students. Others combine all their tailored services into a (voluntary) course module. Those who pass the module receive a certificate which is sometimes advertised as an entry ticket to the German job market. Only one of the surveyed universities is in the process of developing digital tools to deliver information to those planning to stay, that is a mobile app with information about the German job market which can be accessed any time, any place and which also supports university staff in doing their job.

The large proportion of project-funded support services raises doubts as to whether they will be sustainable in the long term and whether the range of services currently offered to international students at shrinking universities who are planning to stay will become a permanent feature. One interviewee put it in a nutshell thus:

The challenge is simply how we're supposed to manage all that without ESF [European Social Fund] project funding. [...] If there's funding, then we'll do it; if not, then someone'll have to do it in addition to their other duties.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Those universities whose funding period has already ended are incorporating what they have learned into their regular offerings. However, it is hardly likely that they will be able to continue providing the same level

of service, because their universities' funding is limited and many are chronically underfunded (Pasternack 2013: 30). This problem is also apparent at national level, for example in the DAAD's Scholarship and Support Programme (STIBET), which is financed by Germany's Federal Foreign Office. Only 26 per cent of project managers at the universities surveyed stated that taking part in STIBET had led to their institution getting more material resources in the long term, which could be used to support international students (Esser/Gillessen 2014: 117).

5 Refugees: Both a challenge and an opportunity

As became clear in the previous chapters, shrinking universities are hardly charting new territory in their work with international students. However, not all international students originally came to Germany to study. An increasing number of international students came to Germany as refugees and only applied to study in Germany later on (sometimes significantly later). Most universities have only begun to gain experience of this target group in recent years. It is primarily made up of male refugees, as significantly fewer women refugees are studying at German universities.⁵⁶

No surveys have yet been done to find out how many refugees who fulfil the relevant entry requirements are living in towns and cities with shrinking universities. At any rate, their level of interest in studying in Germany is very high. In 2016 and 2017, universities and *Studienkollegs* across Germany advised at least 90,000 refugees on matters related to studying in Germany. More than 25,000 refugees have since taken part in preparatory courses, and well over 6,000 have already enrolled on degree programmes.⁵⁷ It is

56 In 2017, the ratio of men to women taking preparatory courses for refugees prior to a university degree programme was around 80:20 (DAAD 2018b: 15–21; von Blumenthal et al. 2017: 20). Experience shows that women refugees face different challenges when applying to study. Tailored support services should in future focus more on those different challenges, for example by addressing women in a more targeted manner or by providing needs-based childcare (see DAAD 2018b: 40; von Blumenthal et al. 2017: 15–16; Brücker et al. 2019: 9).

57 These are estimates. More refugees may in fact currently be in higher education. The data were only drawn from universities which a) are members of the German Rectors' Conference or b) receive a specific type of funding, namely that drawn from the EUR 100 million which the DAAD provided towards a package of measures for prospective refugee students in the period 2016 to 2019 from funding from Germany's Federal Ministry of Education and Research. These measures, which are subsumed under the umbrella of the DAAD's "Integra" and "Welcome" programmes, focus specifically on study preparation (DAAD 2018b: 23; DAAD 2017: 21; HRK 2018: 3).

not only the universities themselves which have made this possible (see Schammann/Younso 2016). The Federal Government's and federal states' promotion and strategic development of pathways to higher education has been and is part of Germany's efforts in this area. They are some of the most comprehensive in the whole of Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019: 13).

Over the coming years, demand for higher education among refugees is likely to continue to be high. In 2017, universities and *Studienkollegs* had to reject one in every two applications for a preparatory course, in most cases because of oversubscription or because applicants did not (yet) have the right language and academic qualifications. The latter aspect is not surprising, given that most refugees will not normally have been able to prepare for studying in Germany while they were still at home. Nevertheless, many prospective students overcome this obstacle, improve their German language ability and reapply the following year. On average it takes two years for prospective refugee students to enrol on their chosen study programme (DAAD 2018b: 20–23). At first glance, the barriers to entry are similar to those faced by all other international students. However, taking a closer look reveals that refugees wanting to enter higher education often face slightly different challenges:

- **Educational background and language ability:** Before refugees can pursue a degree in Germany, the school leaving certificate or academic degree they obtained abroad needs to be checked to see whether it is equivalent to a German *Abitur* or *Fachabitur*. That is often not the case.⁵⁸ Prospective students then first have to take a preparatory course at a *Studienkolleg* or university so that they can fulfil the formal entry requirements to study in Germany. Those wanting to study a course taught in German will – like all other prospective international students – also have to show that they have B2 or C1 level German ability.⁵⁹ However, Germany's government-funded refugee integration courses will

not normally get them up to this standard (Morris-Lange/Brands 2016: 11; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016: 14), as was confirmed by one member of staff:

Focusing simultaneously on learning German as well as acquiring subject knowledge really is quite hard [for refugees]. And that's although we've already incorporated these German classes into it [a university preparatory course]. But this is a technical university, after all. Our basic level of maths is generally a bit higher than in many students' home countries.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

To remedy this situation, universities and *Studienkollegs* now offer more German classes to prepare refugees for entering higher education, and some are even teaching English to prepare refugees for English-taught study programmes in Germany (DAAD 2018b: 25–26). These language classes are often part of study preparation courses and they give prospective students an idea about degree subject-related entry requirements:

We ran DAAD-funded 'Welcome' and 'Integra' courses over the last two years. They include courses for refugees with language modules as well as what are essentially introductory courses, where they can slowly get used to the structure of our study programmes and university life and acquire subject knowledge relevant to their programme. Things are going well. We enrolled a number of students full time after the end of the courses. [...] Well, it was about 40.

(interviewee at a university)

Online courses can also help when it comes to learning German, for example the language learning app *ARRIVAL* which was developed jointly by the Goethe-Institut, Germany's Federal Employment Agency and Federal Office for Migration and Refu-

58 As is the case with all other international students, the recommendations of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs in 2018 are in effect.

59 Those who attain C1 level within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) can use German flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. They can understand texts on complex issues without any problems and explain complex subjects without much obvious searching for expressions.



gees and the Bayerischer Rundfunk broadcasting company.⁶⁰

- **Financial difficulties:** Studying at a public university in Germany is normally free of charge for refugees. However, only few refugees will be able to pay for study materials and living expenses without financial support. As soon as they start studying they lose their right to unemployment benefit, though.⁶¹ Most refugees can apply for funding under Germany's Federal Training Assistance Act (BAföG) 15 months after entering the country.⁶² However, BAföG funding will only be approved if the degree programme is regarded as "eligible for funding"⁶³ and refugees can clearly demonstrate a need for funding. Providing such evidence is a bureaucratic headache for many domestic students, let alone for refugees. In addition, an application for BAföG funding can normally only be made once a university has offered the prospective student a place (Schammann/Younsou 2016: 12; BAMF 2016: 35). According to many refugees, these requirements are some of the biggest barriers to entry. Nevertheless, a substantial number of those who actually begin studying after completing a preparatory programme do in fact receive BAföG funding.⁶⁴

These and other special circumstances often apply specifically to refugees, but rarely to other international students. They make it hard for university staff to provide counselling and support (DAAD 2018b: 28; Schammann/Younsou 2016: 30–33). Shrinking univer-

sities also have many unresolved issues in regard to refugees who are interested in studying in Germany. For example, refugees are not able to enrol as regular students at all higher education institutions if they are part of a guest student programme or taking a preparatory German language course. That means they are not normally eligible for a student ticket for public transport ("*Semesterticket*"). That can make it much more difficult for those who need to commute to university, as the following quotation shows:⁶⁵

Of course, [name of federal state] covers quite a large area. And refugees are spread across the whole of [name of federal state]. Many have problems even finding the money to pay for travel expenses. We funded some of these expenses from private donations. [...] Officially, they're not enrolled, which is why they don't get a Semesterticket.

(interviewee at a university)

There are other areas in which there is great (perceived) legal uncertainty: decision-making which has a bearing on whether someone will be allowed to stay and study here can vary from case to case and authority to authority – for instance whether a refugee is permitted to move to another federal state for the purpose of studying.⁶⁶ As a result, refugees are very much dependent on having people working in the university and elsewhere who are personally committed to helping them. Despite these and other difficulties,

60 <http://www.ankommenapp.de> (German only), retrieved 9 Jan. 2019

61 Refugees who pursue a degree are still entitled to a state maintenance grant under the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act for the first 15 months of their time in Germany (German Bundestag 2018b: 2).

62 There is no waiting period for refugees whose asylum application has been approved and who are in financial need. Those whose deportation has been suspended ("*geduldete Flüchtlinge*") can apply for funding under the Federal Training Assistance Act 15 months after their residence becomes legal.

63 Refugees with a degree from a foreign university may be denied BAföG funding, especially if that degree is regarded as equivalent to a German degree by Germany's Central Office for Foreign Education (ZAB). Often, however, refugees with a foreign degree have difficulties finding adequate employment in Germany despite, or because of, their foreign degree and, according to recent court decisions, are being discriminated on account of their educational background (Klammer/Graevskaia/Knuth 2018: 9–12). The draft of a bill to reform the Federal Training Assistance Act published in early 2019 contains no notable changes in that regard (26th Act to Amend the Federal Training Assistance Act of 1 Jan. 2019).

64 Three quarters of those who enrolled on preparatory courses which were funded through the DAAD's "Integra" programme (subsequently) received BAföG funding (DAAD 2018b: 31).

65 Some universities have already come up with stop-gap solutions, as rules on the *Semesterticket* are not harmonised across Germany's 16 federal states (see Schammann/Younsou 2016: 37–44).

66 Under section 12a of Germany's Residence Act, prospective refugee students who are given a place at a university in another federal state within the first three years of arriving in Germany require the consent of the local foreigners authority to relocate. This can prove another obstacle to them starting their studies in Germany.

staff at shrinking universities are very committed and optimistic about their courses continuing to be in demand among refugees and about how well they do on them:

We've got some Syrians who've done extremely well. We just nominated one for a scholarship, he's already had a DAAD scholarship. Some have learned the language very quickly – extremely well – and are well integrated.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

And we had the DAAD's 'Welcome' programme, where [...] refugees are offered the same help and support as other students. And we have very good refugees here. The first who managed it [i.e. to start studying], he did a lot of advertising in social networks and now [...] that's attracting refugees [...] from Stuttgart and Leipzig here.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Staff in shrinking universities, like staff in other universities, are trying out new things to help smooth refugees' often bumpy road to a degree programme in Germany. The universities not only offer them additional language classes, some are even devising in-house preparatory courses, either in cooperation with a *Studienkolleg* or – where legally permissible⁶⁷ – on their own. These innovative initiatives are already providing key ideas for how shrinking universities could improve access to higher education and prepare prospective students for their studies. The universities have time and again proved how very flexible they are in this regard. And all application procedures should in future be just as flexible so that all students can benefit:

We don't have a study preparation course at our university, [...] but we have a course preparing students for the DSH language exam, which lasts one to two semesters, depending on the student's initial German language ability. But it's only open

to those with a higher education entrance qualification. [...] We also let those people take the language classes in our refugee programme who do not meet all the entry requirements, but we always advise that they also need to attend a Studienkolleg.

(interviewee at a university)

Refugees [at our university] are normally allowed to enrol straight away. But they tend to take our [in-house] preparatory course to learn the basics, that is we also have subject-related language modules, [...] and they do them even though they could enrol straight away.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

The interviews conducted with the experts indicate that nearly all the universities have recognised the advantages of introducing these preparatory courses. They are not yet in agreement as to whether, and if so how, wavering public opinion in regard to refugees is influencing the overall "integration climate" on the ground, that is attitudes to first- and second-generation migrants in Germany, and thus also the universities' future internationalisation efforts:

It's been noted that the refugees who came in 2015 and after that [...], that it changed the atmosphere in the town to some extent, too. In the past foreign students were mostly regarded as students. Now you get the feeling they're regarded as refugees and get pigeonholed straight away.

(interviewee at a university)

I haven't heard about any problems, [...] that is hostility or suchlike. No, not at all.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

They [African students] always travel to lectures in groups of three or four because they're afraid. [...] They can't travel alone on the train because

⁶⁷ Universities in Brandenburg, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland and Thuringia can admit refugees and other prospective international undergraduates even if they have not attended a *Studienkolleg*, that is if they are qualified to study in their home country and pass an entrance exam. Some universities have therefore begun to design their own preparatory courses and exams – either alone or as part of a consortium.



they get verbally abused or insulted. Of course, it happens, xenophobia that is.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Here, at least that's my perception, here things are quite quiet in that regard [i.e. discrimination against international students and refugees].

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

The trend [i.e. the increase in the number of international students] will continue unless something drastic is done politically to change things. It has to be said. And, of course, that worries lots at the university, because next year we'll be having elections to the federal state parliament.

(interviewee at a university)

6 Conclusion and recommendations for action

The study at hand shows that due to population decline shrinking universities are becoming increasingly reliant on attracting students from abroad and helping them find employment on the local job market. Local businesses across Germany can also benefit from the drive to attract more international students given the growing skills shortages in the affected regions. The staff interviewed for this study recognise, however, that it is not enough simply to recruit as many international students as possible. If shrinking universities are to succeed in their efforts at greater internationalisation, they will also need to strengthen and support international students' own efforts in a targeted manner – both when they start their studies and when they make the transition to the (local) job market after completing their studies. Without that support the risk is greater that international students will drop out of their degree programme and move elsewhere:

Often they [international students] manage the preparatory courses, start studying and then somehow get stuck. Or they get their degree and eventually go back home again anyway, that's a typical problem for Germany, because what we want is for them to stay here.

(interviewee at a university of applied sciences)

Many universities affected by the drop in student numbers are trying to reduce the risk of students dropping out and at the same time to attract as many qualified international students as possible. They are working hard to approach prospective international students on their journey to Germany, to get them to commit to studying at their institution and – either on their own or together with partner organisations – to prepare them to do well in their studies. Preparatory courses are not always available for every subject, though, they can be oversubscribed (especially at public *Studienkollegs*) or do not meet the specific needs of their international clientele. That is why some federal states now allow universities to run their own one-year preparatory courses for prospective international undergraduates, courses which until recently only *Studienkollegs* were allowed to run. As a result, universities will in future be able to recruit more prospective visiting students, to prepare them for their specific course and thus to get them to commit to stay. Shrinking universities have also identified this potential and some are planning and currently trialling such preparatory courses. However, one can only speculate to what extent these measures will actually contribute to students' academic success.⁶⁸

The job markets in towns and cities with shrinking universities are also supposed to benefit from international students. That is why the universities surveyed for this study have either themselves or together with local partner organisations developed fledgling support services for those planning to stay. Project-based

⁶⁸ Experience gained at *Studienkollegs* gives cause for optimism. The Goethe University Frankfurt conducted an analysis of student progress for those beginning their studies between 2004 and 2009 (Goethe University Frankfurt 2010). The study confirms that the preparatory courses run by *Studienkollegs* increase international students' academic success. Almost two thirds of male course participants who went on to do an undergraduate degree were still enrolled at university after four semesters, while only 49 per cent of those who did not take a preparatory course were. The quotas for female students were 75 per cent and 58 per cent respectively.

funding provided by the Federal Government, federal states and the EU has been used to provide international students with services which are tailored specifically to their needs. They include job application training and opportunities to meet and get to know local employers. It is, however, not yet clear to what extent these specific services will be made permanent once the funding ends.

Current population growth forecasts leave little doubt about the fact that the currently 41 shrinking universities are providing a foretaste of what will be in store for many other universities going forward. That in particular applies to those based outside of metropolitan regions. The challenge which the universities surveyed for this study are currently facing will arise in other parts of Germany and other European countries, too. It is not least in these institutions' interests that universities and other organisations should be given more legal leeway to introduce more flexible higher education admissions pathways for international students (see 6.1 below), they should ensure that the introductory phase of each degree programme is more structured (see 6.2 below) and that a sustainable local job entry support system is established to build bridges so that graduates can transition to the job market more easily (see 6.3 below).

6.1 More flexible admissions procedures

Decision-making on who gets to study in Germany after meeting which entry requirements is not only up to the universities themselves. Higher education legislation in Germany's 16 federal states is another determining factor. Most legislation enacted by the federal states specifies that international applicants can only go on to start a bachelor's programme straight away if their foreign school leaving certificate is equivalent to a German *Abitur* or *Fachabitur*. Whether that is the case is to a decisive degree dependent on the recom-

mendations of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German Federal States, which provide a system, as it were, for ranking foreign school systems.⁶⁹ Prospective students' individual aptitude does not play a role in this decision. Put simply, in its global search for talented individuals Germany takes other countries' school systems into consideration but not the skills of those people who are interested in studying in Germany. This approach, based as it is on formal criteria, is inconsistent with the political imperative of recruiting international specialists to study in Germany and then helping them find jobs in towns and cities with shrinking universities (see DAAD 2014: 3–4; German Science Council 2016: 120–122).⁷⁰

Instead of being able to provide evidence of their skills early on in the application process, prospective students from outside the EU⁷¹ first have to get their level of school education up to the standard of a German *Abitur*. To do that they either need to have studied in their home country or elsewhere for one to two years or they have to have attended a one-year preparatory course at a *Studienkolleg* in Germany. However, neither of these steps is suited to ensuring that those wanting to study in Germany will then actually be able to study their chosen subject. That uncertainty acts as a deterrent. Some prospective students also find this requirement unreasonably demanding, especially high achievers who have also applied to other popular study destinations other than Germany. Some of them ultimately decide not to study in Germany as a result (DAAD 2014: 4).

Instead of focusing on the supposed equivalence of school leaving qualifications, universities should introduce admissions tests for international students. Those who pass these tests could be given a (conditional) offer and then, depending on their test results, be required to take tailored language and degree subject-related preparatory courses. University admission would then be based on individual apti-

69 <https://anabin.kmk.org/anabin.html>, retrieved 3 Jan. 2019

70 The same goes for the delays in foreign missions when it comes to issuing visas, which prevent some prospective students starting their studies in Germany on time (see 2.1). Staffing levels in the foreign missions should be adjusted to actual numbers of applications.

71 The school leaving qualifications of EU member states, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and certain third countries (e.g. the United States) are deemed equal to a German *Abitur*.



tude. The building blocks of such a model have been in place for quite some time. Prospective international students can already prepare for language and academic entrance tests in Germany or elsewhere. And they can take these tests (e.g. TestDaF and TestAS⁷²) in hundreds of test centres around the world. There is, thus, not necessarily any need for universities to introduce their own admissions tests. The advantage of TestAS is that its statistical validity has been established and that this standardised test can be taken in Arabic, German and English in more than 70 countries. That means that those whose command of German is not fully adequate at the time they apply to a university will not automatically be at a disadvantage. It does not necessarily lead to a drop in overall standards. Instead, the admissions procedure first takes account of prospective students' individual skills and abilities and then allows universities to prepare students in bespoke one- or two-semester preparatory courses and to get them to commit to a specific university early on. For instance, they can credit exams for their subsequent degree programme, as the University of Cologne is doing in its "Studienstart International" (Starting Uni Internationally) programme.⁷³ **Preparing international students either in courses they run themselves or in conjunction with others** is an especially attractive option for shrinking universities, because they have been struggling for years with retaining prospective students by issuing conditional offers after they have completed a course at a *Studienkolleg* (see 3.2 above). A further option available to shrinking universities is to more closely coordinate their study programmes with existing, third party-run preparatory courses such as the Goethe-Institut's *Studienbrücke* programme. This programme helps its (presently seven) partner universities in Germany in identifying talented school-leavers in Russia, Vietnam and other source countries and preparing them to study at a partner university (both in terms of language ability and their chosen subject).⁷⁴ The programme also helps to reduce prospective stu-

dents' uncertainty about whether it is worth taking the preparatory course, because if they pass it they are guaranteed a place at one of the partner universities.⁷⁵

Universities in the federal states of Brandenburg, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland and Thuringia are already working on and implementing variations of the reformed university admissions process outlined here (German Science Council 2016: 121). Where such models have already been adopted, they not only mark out a very clear path to a degree programme in Germany, but also address potential students in another way by making it clear that academic achievement is what counts, not their home education system. That shows prospective students and their families respect and gives them certainty. That, in turn, will help to recruit international students as well as to get them to undertake those intensive language and degree subject-related study preparations which promote their future success. *Studienkollegs* should be included in the reforms, since universities stepping up their level of involvement in preparatory courses does not necessarily mean that they will have to run those courses themselves. To avoid having redundant structures, the *Studienkollegs'* decades of experience should be put to targeted use and dovetailed more closely with academic teaching so as to enable universities to offer more tailored preparatory programmes (German Science Council 2016: 127).

Online self-assessment tests would be another way of providing certainty. These tests would enable prospective international students in Germany or elsewhere to do a self-evaluation before they start studying to get an idea of whether they are suited to a specific degree programme. Self-evaluation not only helps prospective students learn more about themselves and their chosen subject. Those who have not yet had much experience of independent learning at school and during a first degree programme can get an impression of the study culture prevalent at German universities, which attaches great importance to

72 TestDaF = German as a Foreign Language Test; TestAS = Test for Foreign Students

73 <https://www.portal.uni-koeln.de/6914.html> (German only), retrieved 3 Jan. 2019

74 So far, partner universities are only permitted to take part in the programme if they are located in one of the federal states in which prospective international students can be prepared for their degree programmes and their suitability can be checked at a university as well as at a *Studienkolleg*.

75 <https://www.goethe.de/en/spr/eng/stb.html>, retrieved 29 Jan. 2019

independent learning (see Seidel/Wielepp 2014: 105; Sibley/Nikula/Dinwoodie 2017: 4–5).⁷⁶

Some universities are already testing these and other preparatory measures. To ensure they are implemented in more German higher education institutions, the Federal Government and federal states will have to make additional funding available, though. Such measures are already being incorporated into the introductory phases of some degree programmes (see 6.2 below).

6.2 More structured introductory phase

Although international students are often not sufficiently prepared for studying in Germany (see 3.1 above), their German counterparts also report having difficulties adapting to university life (see Bosse 2016: 129; Heublein et al. 2017: 265; Bargel 2015: 4–5). During the introductory phase of their degree programme in Germany, students are suddenly left to their own devices, having to find their own way around the myriad of faculties and departments, administrative offices and student groups, and they find that they themselves are responsible for organising their own studies. Many are not familiar with academic writing methods, which is why they have difficulty structuring their first written assignment, for instance. International students also often have some catching up to do when it comes to subject knowledge and (specialised) language ability (see Bargel 2015: 4–5).

Only a fraction of students receive any support at the start of their programme in dealing with these problems. In a recent national student survey conducted in the winter semester 2015/16, 57 per cent of respondents stated that their university offered courses which helped to fill gaps in students' subject knowledge (Multrus et al. 2017: 7). However, only 38 per cent of international students said they attended these courses, because they are not obligatory. Many

cannot take part because they do not receive their visa to enter Germany until just before the semester begins (Apolinarski/Brandt 2018: 68).

To ensure that all students manage to complete their degrees, universities and/or faculties should provide supplementary courses, research methods training courses and similar classes and should make them compulsory for all students – not only for those who seek them out of their own accord. These classes should be a more integral part of the curriculum during the introductory phase of each degree programme so that they do not unnecessarily conflict with existing support services. One example is the Wildau Foundation Year specialising in mathematics run by the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau in Brandenburg. This programme helps students refresh their knowledge of mathematics – flexibly and depending on their prior knowledge and what fits in with their timetable. This intensive programme alternates between online and face-to-face learning phases which make it easier for participants to fit them around their other commitments.⁷⁷ **Such blended learning approaches should be used more frequently to teach German as an academic language.** They could help prospective international students to improve their subject-related language ability before arriving in Germany.

Instead of teaching study programmes exclusively in English, universities should also consider offering some bilingual degree programmes. Bilingual programmes would also possibly be attractive to international students, that is if the language of instruction were initially English and, supported by intensive in-session German classes, students then attended lectures and seminars taught in German later on in the programme. This would also increase their chances on the German job market, which is extremely attractive to many international students (see German Science Council 2016: 125–133; SVR Research Unit 2015: 13–21).

76 The self-assessment tests provided by the RWTH Aachen University – which are obligatory for all university applicants – are an interesting example. The test results merely serve to give prospective students a better idea of what they are interested in, though, and have no real bearing on whether they will be given a place on their chosen study programme (<http://www.rwth-aachen.de/cms/root/Studium/Vor-dem-Studium/Studienentscheidung/~eft/SelfAssessments/?lidx=1> (German only), retrieved 4 Jan. 2019).

77 <https://www.th-wildau.de/studieren-weiterbilden/studienvorbereitung/studienvorbereitungskurse/> (German only), retrieved 31 Jan. 2019



Gaps in subject-related knowledge and technical and general language skills are not the only difficulties international students face when adapting to life at a German university. Many face the equally big problem of not knowing any other students (Berthold/Leichsenring 2012: 165). That is why more attention should be paid during the introductory phase to giving students opportunities to socialise. Such socialising is currently often limited to orientation programmes and events at the start of each programme. Although these events are very popular, they are often of limited benefit when it comes to getting to know other students. Learning tandems could be set up by pairing up local and international students, a measure some universities are already implementing. German and international students often have difficulties in getting to know each other (see Bargel 2015: 59; Rokitte 2012: 40–42; German Science Council 2016: 135). Taking part in learning tandems and other networking events should be made as attractive as possible to students. One example is the “International Engagiert Studiert” (International Volunteer Students) study module at the University of Halle-Wittenberg in which teams of German and international bachelor students do volunteer work together. This helps international students get to know other students and to gain experience which can be very valuable on the job market. At the same time they also earn ECTS credits.⁷⁸

Support such as that mentioned in the above can be very labour-intensive for universities. That is why the Federal Government and federal states should also step up their commitment to ensuring that the introductory phase of each degree programme is more structured.⁷⁹

6.3 Strengthen local job entry support systems

Some (shrinking) universities already provide international students with a wide range of career coun-

selling and support. Some international students also have chance encounters with service staff or company representatives outside the university who in some cases help them. However, a few isolated initiatives are not enough to support international students on their path to finding their first job in Germany. What they need is a **local job entry support system** which dovetails the numerous initiatives being implemented by universities, businesses, research facilities, business promotion, employment agencies, local government and councils, and other regional partner organisations and which clearly signposts a path onto the job market (Fig. 6). Domestic students can also benefit from such job entry support.

Local challenges require local solutions

Business and politics are largely agreed that international students can help to mitigate Germany’s shortfall in skilled workers (see Chapter 4). Nonetheless, only eight out of 126 skilled worker programmes and networks across Germany which universities are involved in are actively trying to attract international students onto the German job market (Roth 2015: 40–55), even though relatively close links already exist between higher education institutions, businesses and local government. This could be beneficial when it comes to developing the kind of local job entry support system which dovetails existing support services and programmes and guides international students planning to stay in Germany (Diedrich/Zschiesche 2009: 15). **In order to bridge the gap between higher education and the world of work, all the relevant agencies need to be involved** in this system of job entry support, that is universities, businesses, research facilities, employment agencies, foreigners authorities and local government in the area, migrant organisations⁸⁰ and other partner organisations which play a key role when it comes to finding a first job (Fig. 6). As skills shortages, job market structures, and universities’ and local partner organisations’ level of inter-

78 <https://www.servicelearning.uni-halle.de/index.php?id=68> (German only), retrieved 31 Jan. 2019

79 Between 2011 and 2020, a total of 206 university projects looking into the introductory phases of degree programmes will be funded under the “Qualitätspakt Lehre” (Teaching Quality Pact) programme (<https://www.qualitaetspakt-lehre.de/> (German only), retrieved 4 Jan. 2019).

80 In an ongoing research project the SVR Research Unit is investigating the increase in relevance of migrant organisations when it comes to promoting integration in Germany. The results of the research project, which is being funded by Germany’s Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, will be published in late 2020.

Figure 6 Bridging the gap between studying and work: key local actors in a coordinated job entry support system for international students



Source: SVR Research Unit/Deniz Keskin

nationalisation vary from region to region, job entry support should always be adapted to the needs of each university town and region.

The key to success: Joint goals and accountability

Probably the biggest challenge when it comes to managing the transition between higher education and work is that partner organisations have different goals and timelines. Businesses want swift recruitment processes which ensure they hire the right staff as cost-efficiently as possible. Universities, by contrast, primarily support their international students during their studies and, traditionally, only provide limited support when it comes to them finding employment on the local job market after graduating. Local communities want international students to stay in the long term, while the students themselves often have plans to move on after a few years (Roth 2015: 60–61; Henke et al. 2013: 150).⁸¹ The following should be borne in mind to ensure that the various conflicting interests do not jeopardise local job entry support:

- **Creating transparency:** The first step is to identify those key organisations at local level which play a role when graduates make the transition from higher education to the world of work. Their attitudes and goals to international students' career entry need to be recorded, as well as what they are already doing to help students. Conducting these surveys raises awareness among those businesses, authorities and intermediary organisations which are not yet responding pro-actively to the realisation that international students represent a potential source of labour. That helps with the next step, namely setting targets.
- **Setting joint targets:** Achievable targets should be set and the relevant measures and quantifiable indicators determined for those targets (Innovationsbüro Fachkräfte 2012: 14–16). These should be documented in writing. Further, partner organisations should set common rules for solving any internal conflicts which may arise. These, too, should be documented in writing.

⁸¹ The findings of a large-scale survey of international students and graduates conducted by the SVR Research Unit (2017b: 22) and another by Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Hanganu/Heß 2014: 245) show that international students often rethink their plans over the course of their stay. They normally first choose to remain (temporarily), yet many end up staying longer than they had initially thought they would.



- **Establishing networks:** A round table should be set up to lay the foundations for the operative implementation of the agreed strategic targets – alternatively another format or an existing format could be used (see below). The partner organisations should meet at least once every six months to coordinate their support services and set new targets. Successful job entry support requires a basis of trust and the constant sharing of ideas and experience. That is why all those involved should appoint dedicated contacts and release them to attend these meetings. (Former) international students should also be involved.
- **Communicating successes:** Successful job entry support also depends upon the accompanying PR work being done to inform, from a single source, both students and the involved institutions about what successes have been achieved and what services are available (Innovationsbüro Fachkräfte 2012: 18). It is important that those involved do not get locked in silo thinking, something which is still widespread. That is why universities, local authorities and businesses need to be regularly reminded about the benefits of their being involved (Henke et al. 2013: 150). Effective lighthouse projects like annual regional career fairs for international students can be used to do that. The “Your future in Stuttgart – Deine Zukunft in Stuttgart” event which is held in Stuttgart City Hall each year is an interesting example. The fifth such event, held in June 2018, provided international students with the chance to meet local businesses and attend workshops to learn about their rights of residence and the local job market.⁸²

Local authorities acting as coordinators

For local job entry support to be more than mere words on paper, cooperation between the regional partner organisations must be well structured. It is best to appoint a coordinator, otherwise working meetings may not be sufficiently prepared, not well attended or may even end up being cancelled. In addition, a dedicated contact needs to be appointed who represents all those involved (e.g. to the press) and also acts as mediator in the event of internal conflicts.

Existing professional networks and their organisations should serve as the basis for this job entry support. So far there are only few such networks in Germany in which universities are actively involved in thinking about how to integrate students (into the job market). That is why local job entry support systems first need to be established in many university towns and cities. Where these structures already exist, the job entry support system can link into them.

Local authorities should take the initiative when it comes to job entry support. They are in a particularly good position to do so, not least because they have a specific interest in retaining international students in their area in the long term. The local authorities involved in the job entry support system should share the HR costs of coordinating this work. Cash-strapped local authorities might need start-up funding from the Federal Government or federal states. The costs of other materials could be borne jointly by partner organisations, for example through membership contributions, an approach which is already being applied in some established professional networks.

7 Outlook

The above analysis provides first insights into how international student populations are transforming shrinking universities in Germany. These universities are undertaking efforts to attract more international students and to provide more and better support to them before, during and after their studies. According to staff at shrinking universities, the aim of this form of internationalisation is not least to maintain their enrolment figures at current levels. Student enrolment at Germany's 41 shrinking universities bears this out: the drop in domestic students has to some extent been cushioned by the fact that more students from Brazil, Russia and other countries have come to study in Germany. Nevertheless, these developments cannot halt the effect of Germany's demographic decline which is being forecast for both eastern and western regions of the country. Going forward, universities in eastern Germany, for instance, will thus presumably miss out

⁸² <https://stuttgart.de/en/en/your-future-in-stuttgart>, retrieved 2 Jan. 2019

on domestic students who moved there from western parts of the country in recent years, because as soon as student numbers drop in western Germany these domestic students will be able to find a place to study closer to home much more quickly (Pasternack 2013: 30). International students can to a certain extent help buck this trend. Nevertheless, they are no panacea for maintaining student enrolment figures. And “internationalisation” should on no account be defined too narrowly; it encompasses much more than simply having a more international student population (see Grothus/Maschke 2013: 9–10; HRK 2014: 28–33; German Science Council 2018: 8–15; BAMF 2014: 4).

The question which thus arises for shrinking universities which are educating fewer and fewer students is how they can create an added value for their region beyond their mere educational function and how this can be effectively communicated. **Universities should spend more time looking into how they can**

be involved in shaping economic and social developments which are happening right on their doorsteps.

One way could be to assist the many local SMEs in setting up sustainable recruitment processes (Henke et al. 2013: 93). In addition, universities should regard these local challenges as a research task. They could, for instance, bring their academic expertise to bear in regard to issues such as urban development and the preservation of historic monuments by conducting research on the ground, providing advice and ensuring that monuments are preserved for future generations. A few “third mission” projects are already addressing these and other regional development tasks. However, these projects are often not strategically embedded within the higher education system. As the potential value added inherent in universities will not unfold of its own accord, the active involvement of shrinking universities in particular will in future be required – and much appreciated (Hechler/Pasternack 2013: 97).



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Tables

**Table 3 Domestic and international students enrolled at shrinking universities by federal state
(2012 v. 2017)**

	No. of shrinking universities	Domestic students at shrinking universities			International students at shrinking universities		
		2012	2017	Change	2012	2017	Change
Baden-Württemberg	0						
Bavaria	3	6,870	5,626	-18 %	104	385	+270 %
Berlin	0						
Brandenburg	3	12,155	9,817	-19 %	1,468	2,542	+73 %
Bremen	0						
Hamburg	1	2,920	2,347	-20 %	45	71	+58 %
Hesse	0						
Lower Saxony	3	3,287	3,058	-7 %	188	189	+1 %
Mecklenburg- Western Pomerania	4	30,679	26,491	-14 %	1,467	1,808	+23 %
North Rhine- Westphalia	2	64,858	61,884	-5 %	4,714	4,960	+5 %
Rhineland-Palatinate	3	45,801	40,676	-11 %	3,978	3,577	-10 %
Saarland	1	14,995	13,804	-8 %	2,262	2,560	+13 %
Saxony	8	63,012	54,837	-13 %	5,580	9,003	+61 %
Saxony-Anhalt	6	23,958	21,555	-10 %	2,639	3,732	+41 %
Schleswig-Holstein	0						
Thuringia	7	42,348	35,474	-16 %	3,241	5,255	+62 %
Germany	41	310,883	275,569	-11 %	25,686	34,082	+33 %

NB: "2017" refers to the winter semester 2016/17 and "2012" to the winter semester 2011/12.

Source: Federal Statistical Office 2018b, SVR calculation

Table 4 What key German organisations are doing to help prospective international students on their path to studying in Germany

Organisations	Phases on the path to studying in Germany (German organisations: own support services (S) and information provided about existing support services (I))			
	Exploratory phase	Application phase	Acceptance phase	Arrival phase
German universities	(S) Self-advertising at education fairs, e.g., and on multilingual websites (i) Information, e.g., about tests provided by various organisations to help students get a better idea about their interests	(S) Counselling and advising potential applicants, e.g. (i) Information, e.g., about application procedures and central organisations such as uni-assist	(S) Issuing (conditional) offers, e.g. (i) Information, e.g., about organisations assisting with funding such as local student services	(S) Own on-site preparatory courses, e.g. (i) Information, e.g., on visas and finding accommodation, as well as references to available support services
German schools abroad and partner schools	(S) Support finding a place to study (incl. via <i>Betreuungsinitiative Deutsche Auslands- und Partnerschulen</i> [BIDS]) (i) Reference, e.g., to DAAD offices and Goethe-Instituts	(S) German lessons and language tests, e.g. (i) Reference, e.g., to DAAD offices and Goethe-Instituts	(S) Selecting BIDS scholarship holders, e.g.	(S) Subject-related and language preparatory courses
German foreign missions		(S) Checking documents in academic test centres in China, Vietnam and Mongolia (i) References, e.g., to language schools and German foreign missions and local partner schools	(i) References to organisations assisting with funding, especially with scholarships	(S) Issuing visas for study purposes (section 16 (1) Residence Act) and applying to study (section 16 (7) Residence Act)
Language schools in Germany and abroad	(S) Own preparatory programmes, e.g., in Germany (i) Brief portraits, e.g., and references to German partner universities	(S) German language courses and tests, e.g. (i) Information, e.g., about required language and aptitude tests and where to take them	(S) Some direct admissions to German partner universities via preparatory courses (i) Information, e.g., about various sources of funding	(S) Support, e.g., getting a visa (i) Information, e.g., about health insurance, finding accommodation and references to available support services
German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)	(S) Online portal <i>study-in.de</i> , e.g. (i) Information, e.g., about tests provided by various organisations to help students get a better idea about their interests	(S) German classes, e.g., at foreign universities (i) Information, e.g., about required language and aptitude tests and where to take them	(S) Wide range of scholarships, e.g., for international students (i) References, e.g., to other sources of funding	(S) Online database, e.g., on finding accommodation in halls of residence (i) Information, e.g., about entry requirements, visas, health insurance and references to available support services
<i>Deutsches Studentenwerk</i> (German National Association for Student Affairs)		(i) Information, e.g., about application procedures and central organisations such as uni-assist	(S) Processing applications for BAföG funding (after being offered a place) (i) Information, e.g., about various sources of funding	(S) Accommodation services, e.g. (i) Information, e.g., about finding accommodation, health insurance and references to available support services
Society for Academic Study Preparation and Test Development (g.a.s.t.)/TestDaF Institute		(S) Devising and organising language and aptitude tests worldwide, e.g., in particular TestDaF and TestAS (i) Information, e.g., about other language tests on <i>sprachnachweis.de</i>		



Organisations	Phases on the path to studying in Germany (German organisations: own support services (S) and information provided about existing support services (i))			
	Exploratory phase	Application phase	Acceptance phase	Arrival phase
Goethe-Institut	(S) Advertising Germany as a place to study through its own <i>Studienbrücke</i> programme	(S) German classes available around the world (offline and online), e.g. (i) Information, e.g., about preparatory language and aptitude tests and test centres	(S) Scholarships and support for prospective international students on the <i>Studienbrücke</i> programme (i) Information about admissions procedures in partner universities of the <i>Studienbrücke</i> programme	(S) "Fit für das Studium in Deutschland" (Fit to Study in Germany) intercultural training course, part of the <i>Studienbrücke</i> programme (i) <i>Mein Weg nach Deutschland</i> (My Path to Germany) web portal, e.g., provides information about starting out and everyday life in Germany
German Rectors' Conference (HRK)	(S) <i>Hochschulkompass</i> (Higher Education Compass) online database of degree programmes, e.g. (i) Online portraits of 394 German universities with references to their student counselling services	(i) Information, e.g., about application processes and central organisations such as <i>Studienkollegs</i>	(S) Online test to help students decide which degree programme is best for them (i) Information, e.g., about admissions processes at German universities	(S) Support finding accommodation in student flat shares (in collaboration with <i>wg-suche.de</i>) (i) Information, e.g., on available preparatory courses
Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK)		(S) Rules applicable to academic test centres (<i>Akademische Prüfstellen</i>), e.g. (i) Information, e.g., about required language tests and test centres	(S) Online database, e.g., with recommendations regarding foreign educational qualifications	(S) Rules governing access to <i>Studienkollegs</i> , e.g.
<i>Studienkollegs</i> in Germany and abroad (private and state-run)	(i) Depending on <i>Studienkolleg</i> : information about degree programmes at German universities	(S) Conversion qualification, e.g. to get to level of German <i>Abitur/Fachabitur</i> (i) Depending on <i>Studienkolleg</i> : information about required language and aptitude tests and test centres	(S) Help applying for place to study (i) Depending on <i>Studienkolleg</i> : information about admissions processes, incl. guaranteed admission after attending some private <i>Studienkollegs</i>	(S) One-year preparatory course, e.g. (i) Depending on the <i>Studienkolleg</i> : information about visas, finding accommodation and references to available support services
uni-assist	(i) Online overview of almost 180 German universities which are members of uni-assist	(S) Accepting and processing applications to study at one of the member universities (i) Information, e.g., about preparatory German classes	(S) Providing support during the application process; final decision left up to universities (i) Information, e.g., about special procedures such as the centralised allocation of places on medical degree programmes through <i>hochschulstart.de</i>	(S) Issuing documentation for prior check of visa applications for the purpose of applying to study (i) Information about preparatory courses in Germany (e.g. at a <i>Studienkolleg</i>)

NB: The information in this table was drawn exclusively from the relevant organisations' official websites. Support services provided to international students which were not available online at the end of 2018 were not included in the analysis.

Source: SVR, own presentation

Table 5 Waiting times for visa appointments for the purpose of full-time study or applying for a study programme at selected German foreign missions (September 2018)

Country	Location of foreign mission	Waiting time (in weeks)	
		Visa granted for the purpose of full-time study (section 16 (1) Residence Act)	Visa granted for the purpose of applying for a study programme (section 16 (7) Residence Act)
Algeria	Algiers	10	10
Azerbaijan	Baku	9	9
Cameroon	Yaoundé	11	11
Egypt	Cairo	11	11
Hungary	Budapest	12	12
India	New Delhi	16	16
India	Bangalore	13	13
Iran	Tehran	> 52	> 52
Jordan	Amman	12	12
Morocco	Rabat	16	16
Nepal	Kathmandu	10	10
Nigeria	Lagos	9	9
Pakistan	Islamabad	24	24
Pakistan	Islamabad (Visa Application Centre: Kabul)	21	21
Philippines	Manila	16	16
Serbia	Belgrade	25	25
Tajikistan	Dushanbe	12	12
Ukraine	Kiev	9	9
United States	San Francisco	9	9
Uzbekistan	Tashkent	9	9

NB: Figures refer to the time between asking for an appointment and the appointment itself.

Source: German Bundestag 2018a: 29



List of figures

Figure 1	Shrinking universities in Germany	7
Figure 2	Change in numbers of domestic and international students at German universities between 2012 and 2017	10
Figure 3	The international student journey to Germany	11
Figure 4	International student recruitment and retention tools used by shrinking universities in Germany.....	18
Figure 5	Former international students who stayed in Germany but were still looking for work more than one year after graduation.....	27
Figure 6	Bridging the gap between studying and work: key local actors in a coordinated job entry support system for international students.....	40

List of tables

Table 1	Dropout rates for German and international students (2016).....	21
Table 2	International students planning to stay in Germany	30
Table 3	Domestic and international students enrolled at shrinking universities by federal state (2012 v. 2017).....	49
Table 4	What key German organisations are doing to help prospective international students on their path to studying in Germany.....	50
Table 5	Waiting times for visa appointments for the purpose of full-time study or applying for a study programme at selected German foreign missions (September 2018)	52

List of boxes

Box 1	Shrinking universities, a definition	7
Box 2	Methodology.....	9
Box 3	<i>Studienkollegs</i> – preparatory courses for (some) international students.....	14

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