



## Countering demographic decline – How Germany's shrinking universities attract and retain international students

### Summary

More students than ever before are studying at German higher education institutions. The educated elite of tomorrow is unevenly distributed across the country, though, and one in six of Germany's 263 public universities and universities of applied science 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.

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, amongst other countries, who are moving to Germany to study. The number of international students enrolling at these 26 universities has increased by 42 per cent. Although international students still only account for a fraction of the student population at these universities (namely 12 per cent), they are helping to compensate for the declining numbers of domestic students. And they will also in future help to increase the visibility of these universities at international level.

The latest population forecasts indicate that those universities which are already having to contend with declining student numbers are giving a foretaste of the challenges which others will soon be facing. The ways in which they are tackling this issue 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 courses of study and then to retain them in the regional labour market once they graduate.

The shrinking universities included in the study are less well known internationally and are less visible than Germany's so-called lighthouse universities which manage to attract students on account of their position in university rankings or being located in major cosmopolitan cities. But even shrinking universities benefit from the fact that Germany continues to be a very popular study destination, not least because tuition fees are lower than in other countries. Nevertheless, systemic obstacles make it more difficult to attract international students: the university admission process is complicated, student visas are often issued rather late and many prospective students have to spend a lot of time and money proving they have the necessary language and academic skills. The study shows that shrinking universities are getting better and better at overcoming these stumbling blocks. They seek out prospective international students at their various stopping-off points en route to Germany, for example in language schools and foreign partner universities, as well as, increasingly, on the Internet and social media.

Dropouts are a matter of concern, though. In Germany, the average dropout rate amongst international students is 45 per cent for those studying for a bachelor's degree and 29 per cent for those enrolled in master's courses. That is higher than the proportion of their German counterparts (28 and 19 per cent respectively). To help reduce dropout rates, shrinking



universities offer international students German language courses, orientation sessions and other assistance. Nevertheless, this support is not always available on all courses 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. It 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. 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 potentially prove to be a key factor for academic success. So far, however, only universities in Brandenburg, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland and Thuringia are offering prospective international students the opportunity to gain their university entrance qualification in this way. And even these federal states (Länder) are still in the process of developing and testing the relevant programmes.

International students are also to be of benefit to the labour markets in the university towns included in the study. That is why universities in these towns are offering those who intend to stay support, for example by cooperating with local employment agencies and other partner organisations. The aim is to help graduates make the transition into the German labour market. Shrinking universities offer international students the opportunity to take part in career development workshops which are tailored to their needs and put them in contact with local businesses. This custom-fit support is funded by project grants from Germany's federal government and Länder governments and the EU, however, and it remains to be seen whether this temporary funding can be converted into ongoing local programmes once the projects end.

Germany's shrinking universities are already facing these and other challenges. In future, though, others across Germany will be confronted with the same problems. That is why universities and their partners across the whole of the country should provide international students with more flexible options for accessing higher education as well as the relevant support, particularly during the first two semesters of each degree programme. Finally, job entry support at local level should be coordinated more to facilitate the transition between university and the world of work. Targeted federal and Länder investment could be used to support this.