

Refugee Integration and Skilled Migration: A New Role for German Universities?

Accompanying study of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) Integra and PROFI programmes

Summary

There are around 325,000 international students at German institutions of higher education. These students could play a potentially important role in reducing the shortage of skilled workers in Germany. At least two thirds of these students wish to remain and work in Germany after graduating. Policymakers also increasingly see international students who wish to stay in Germany as ideal candidates to fill the growing number of job vacancies. Nonetheless, there are many obstacles to their entry into the labour market. Many simply do not speak good enough German or have the professional networks and experience they need. There is very little research on whether and to what extent these obstacles pose problems for the around 30,000 refugees among these international students. In recent years the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) has used federal funding to develop its Integra and PROFI academic qualification programmes¹ for refugees. These programmes now provide some initial insights into how this target group is managing the transition from university to the labour market. The expert report produced by The Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR) summarises these experiences, compares them with those of other international students and develops recommendations for higher education practice and policy.

Between 2020 and 2022, 88 institutions of higher education will receive Integra and PROFI funding for projects designed to integrate student refugees and other international students in the labour market. These temporary project grants will enable universities to cooperate with regional businesses and to implement measures such as job application training and mentoring programmes which are tailored to the needs of refugees and other international students. The 4,233 students in the Integra programme will initially complete a full degree programme, while

¹ Integra = Integrating Refugees in Higher Education; PROFI = Programme Promoting Professional Integration of Academics with a Refugee Background in the German labour market

the 192 participants in PROFI projects are more likely to choose shorter continuing education courses relating to specific areas of work. Most of the participants are older and have more work experience than those of their graduate peers.

The analysis of the Integra projects shows that the obstacles that refugees face entering the labour market are very similar to those confronting other international students. Both groups struggle with language barriers, lack of professional experience, reluctance on the part of employers and difficulties in writing applications or coping with interviews. In other words, both groups initially face the same hurdles to entering the labour market. The difference between the two groups is that refugees usually require more individual counselling and support services. Refugees are not only likely to have money worries, many of them do not know whether they will be allowed to stay in Germany and may have fragmented educational biographies. For reasons such as these they require more support from higher education professionals, such as with claiming financial aid (BAföG) or with referrals to psychosocial services.

The challenges facing participants in the PROFI projects are very different. The participants in these projects need very specific continuing education courses rather than general preparation for the labour market. They require opportunities to learn in a short space of time and in a form geared to the requirements of specific professions and industries. These participants are consequently looking for compact university-based courses that will enable them to meet the language, professional and technical requirements specific to their desired profession as quickly as possible. As these participants are not only applying for entry-level positions, both their expectations and those of employing firms are in most cases higher than would be the case with recent graduates.

In order to overcome these and other obstacles, participants in PROFI and Integra programmes can choose from over 500 measures designed to facilitate entry into the labour market. Most of these measures were developed from scratch during the current funding period. These include checks on CVs and cover letters as well as application workshops. In addition, higher education institutions concentrate on running tailored seminars on topics such as professional experience in specific industries or organise guest lectures by companies, freelance career advisers and other partners. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, more than 90 percent of these supporting measures are currently being offered in the form of video conferences, on digital learning platforms or using

other technologies. The speedy adoption of digital technologies has meant that most measures continue to be offered, usually by making pragmatic use of video conferences. Nonetheless, in many cases measures have not yet been either evaluated or didactically adjusted to on-screen learning. This would be beneficial for refugees. On the one hand, this group of students often has less previous experience with digital learning platforms and technologies than those able to plan their studies in Germany well in advance. On the other, digital learning formats require a high level of reading and writing skills as well as good listening comprehension. These are even tougher obstacles for students who have not (yet) acquired native-level German or English language skills.

Universities not only need to provide support, they also need to cooperate more closely with businesses, chambers of commerce, the Federal Employment Agency and other local partners to enable international students to enter the labour market. University project officers report a total of over 600 partner organisations they wish to work with using project funding. This is an average of seven per university. So far cooperation has in most cases been bilateral and event based, e.g., as part of guest lectures or referrals for counselling or advice. The advantages are that individual universities and partner organisations have specific reasons for collaborating. This reduces the threshold for cooperation, particularly if use is made of participants' individual strengths. The disadvantage of these and other bilateral links to the labour market is that sporadic cooperation between universities and companies or other partner organisations is often uncoordinated and represents only one aspect of the overall transition from study to work. Universities which rely exclusively on bilateral forms of cooperation thus run a higher risk of creating duplicate structures. What is more, the broad impact of their specific projects is significantly lower than it would be if bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation were combined.

In order for refugees and other international students to transition into the labour market more successfully in the future, there is a particular need for

- **targeted support programmes**, i.e., measures which are designed for all international students, whether or not they have come to Germany as refugees. There is a need for additional measures in certain areas for those taking part in academic qualification programmes and, in some cases, for additional individual counselling;

- **more advanced digital and hybrid supporting measures** that develop and expand the digital infrastructure and skills of learners and staff. Didactically these should be take note of the language skills and heterogeneous learning styles of international target groups;
- **systematic support for the transition to work through a local job entry support scheme** that links up the many initiatives being run by universities, companies, employment agencies and other cooperating regional organisations. Such support can guide the international talent towards (regional) labour markets. German students could benefit as well from such multilateral bridge-building between the world of study and the world of work.