



From lecture hall to landing a job.
International students starting their careers in Germany

Summary

For years, Germany has been one of the most popular countries worldwide for studying abroad. In 2016, more than 250,000 international students were enrolled at a German university. From a political and business perspective, they are regarded as 'ideal immigrants' for the German labour market, and a large proportion of them in fact wish to stay in Germany upon completing their studies. However, despite generous residence arrangements, these international students are often unable to make the transition into the labour market, with the result that many of them leave the country again. Yet, empirical findings on the exact causes of this failure or emigration are few and far between. To close this research gap, the project Study & Work of the SVR Research Unit engaged in a longitudinal study of international students' transition from university to the German labour market. As part of the study, international students participated in online surveys on two occasions, first in summer 2015 and again roughly 18 months later in winter 2016/17.

The results show that although international students are very eager to stay in Germany after graduation, they nonetheless remain mobile. As 'mobile talents', they have access to career opportunities worldwide yet tend to lack the specific skills, experience and networks required for a career start in a German company.

For the results, the responses of 419 university graduates who participated in both surveys were analysed. Compared to the total population of international students, this sub-sample consisted predominantly of master's degree holders of, for the most part, English-speaking STEM programmes. University dropouts are underrepresented. The results from this sample thus allow to issue statements about a group that is particularly sought after in the international job market yet whose preparedness for a career entry in Germany is questionable.

What are the trajectories of international students in the transition phase? During their studies, 7 out of 10 study participants declared wanting to stay in Germany (70.0%). At the end of their studies, the majority of all respondents stayed in Germany: of those who initially declared wanting to stay, 8 out of 10 (81.8%) stayed, and of those who initially declared *not* wanting to stay, 4 out of 10 (40.2%) changed their minds and ended up staying in Germany. This suggests that the latter group's intention to stay took shape in the final phase of their studies and thereafter. However, wanting to stay does not always translate into landing a job. Only 4 out of 10 foreign graduates were gainfully employed (37.9%), and 3 out of 10 were still looking for work (31.3%), with the latter proportion decreasing with time passed since graduating.

Which factors contribute to ensuring that international students stay in Germany upon completing their studies and gain a foothold in the labour market? The analyses show that the foundation for this is laid early on and during a course of studies. Overall, whether a career start is successful or not is determined by the students' desire to stay, their skills and abilities, the prevailing residence and work permit requirements, and the job market:

- An early **decision to stay** paves the way for a later stay in Germany. International students who were originally *unwilling* to stay yet who **volunteered** on a regular basis were more likely to change their minds – an indication of the degree to which community involvement can contribute to social integration.
- **Students who abandoned their studies** are likely to emigrate sooner. That said, graduates with **above-average marks** are also more likely to leave Germany than their fellow students.



- In addition to the university degree, **practical experience in Germany** is a decisive success factor for starting a career in the country. Through internships, graduation projects in companies or theme-related extra-curricular activities, international students gain a realistic insight into the working world, acquire relevant know-how and establish initial professional networks.
- International university graduates who acquire **knowledge about the job application procedures** in Germany at an early stage are better off. They can compensate for lack of knowledge through **competent support networks**.
- **Good command of the German language** has proved less relevant in the survey than expected. Employers seem willing to compromise if applicants have the right technical skills.
- In addition, a foot in the job market depends on the **industry-specific demand** in the labour market. In particular university graduates with a master's degree in a field of study sought after in the job market manage to get a job more easily (e.g., engineers).

The findings presented here make it possible to identify the success factors for starting a career. They validate and complement experience observed from practice and deepen the insights gained from previous scientific studies, which were either based on surveys conducted with experts or on the retrospective views of international graduates looking further back in time.

A key conclusion of this study is that the transition into the labour market needs a lot of advance preparation. **This means that academic success, social integration and the preparation for starting a career in Germany need to be strategically promoted from the very beginning of a course of studies.** In addition, the study underlines the **importance of regional networks, comprised of stakeholders from the universities, industry, the municipalities and the labour market, that promote and coordinate students' integration into the labour market.**