



Study

Tackling the Diversity Challenge

Ethnic Diversity and Student Success in the German Higher Education System

Summary

German universities are still struggling with ethnic diversity. More than four out of ten international students drop out of German universities without completing a degree. The dropout rate of first- and second-generation migrants in Germany is also higher than average. There is *no one single* explanation for the lack of degree completion among international students and first- and second-generation migrants as the groups are extremely heterogeneous: they include students from China who come specifically to Germany to study mechanical engineering as well as second-generation Turkish migrants pursuing university degrees in German studies who have lived in Bavaria since their childhood. Despite these differences, however, they often face similar problems: they struggle more often than their native counterparts with linguistic, technical and financial difficulties as well as social isolation. The extent and causes of these problems vary and depend mainly on whether the students grew up in Germany or only came to Germany as adults specifically to study.

International students come to Germany as adults to study. More than 250,000 of these kinds of 'educational nomads' study at German universities. They not only have to adapt to new conditions for studying, but also to life in a foreign country. Just under one third of them speaks no German (initially); the German culture of studying and learning is also new for many.

Fellow students can help them become familiar with the new learning and living environment. Many of the international students would also like to get to know their domestic peers better. But, as almost half of them lamented, their attempts to do so are often not successful. There are several reasons, e.g. language barriers and separate residences. The triple load of studying, learning German and working part-time also really hits some students hard, making informal contact almost impossible.

Refugees who study in Germany will also be likely to face these kinds of problems in the future. But they often have a much longer road before they are even admitted to university. Refugees who are interested in studying first have to satisfy the admissions requirements and ensure that their studies can be financed.

First- and second-generation migrants have often spent their whole lives in Germany and completed their school education here. There are nearly 500,000 of these young academics at



German universities. Unlike their fellow international students they have no problems communicating in German in their day-to-day lives. Nevertheless, many of them still have difficulty writing academic texts and discussing complex topics in seminars. They also tend to grasp complicated subject matter more slowly. This is due to the fact that first- and second-generation migrants often end up at university in a roundabout way and with more moderate academic achievements at school. 56 percent of them are the first in their family to go to university. These university pioneers are often on their own because their families don't have enough money or any personal experience at university to contribute.

Early contact to their fellow students is therefore important. They play a central role in helping international students acclimate to the university environment, not only by giving tips on studying and part-time jobs, but also as friends. However, contact doesn't just come about on its own. As others who are the first in their family to study, some first- and second-generation migrants also report that they aren't accepted by their fellow students and feel alienated. As in the case of international students, this isolation combined with linguistic, subject-related and financial problems can act as major obstacles to academic success.

To provide targeted support to international students and first- and second-generation migrants, universities should only rely on special programmes whenever there is a group-specific requirement, e.g. by helping non-EU citizens renew their residence permits. First and foremost, universities should take greater account of the interests of different immigrant groups in the **design of their regular student services**. It is particularly important that support is provided at an early stage. More support should be provided than previously within the **structure of the first two semesters**. It should not only include classes to make up for deficiencies in language and specific subjects, but should also encourage social networking among the students. For the duration of the academic studies, **early warning systems should** identify inadequate academic achievements as quickly as possible and offer tailored support. This doesn't just benefit international students and first- and second-generation migrants, it also helps all other students to realise their potential.

Equal-opportunity university practices and policy also ultimately requires more in-depth knowledge of which factors foster or hinder the academic achievements of international students and first- and second-generation migrants. There has been little reliable information to date about the causes and conditions of success. Which is why more needs to be done to **systematically close these knowledge gaps**.