

# German Universities Woo International Students

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**M**ore students than ever before are studying at German universities. These young talents are unevenly distributed across the country. In our recent study *Countering Demographic Decline – How Germany's Shrinking Universities Attract and Retain International Students*, we found that one in six of Germany's 263 public universities and universities of applied sciences currently has (significantly) fewer students enrolled than in 2012. The reason is demographic change. Low birth rates and the depopulation of certain regions of Germany mean that in some areas the number of domestic students is declining. That, in turn, is the reason why 41 universities are currently shrinking—and this trend is increasing. This downturn is also exacerbating skills shortages in the German labor market, which are already being felt in some sectors, for example in mechanical engineering.

## International Recruitment

Germany's shrinking universities are responding in different ways to the drop in domestic student enrollments. In 26 of them, this decline goes hand in hand with a significant increase in numbers of international students. Between 2012 and 2017, the number of international students enrolling at these universities has increased by an impressive 42 percent. And although international students still account for only a fraction of the student population at these institutions (namely 12 percent), they are already helping to compensate for the declining numbers of domestic students. Going forward, these students will also help to increase the international visibility of these universities.

The latest population forecasts indicate that Germany's shrinking universities are giving a preview of the challenges that other institutions in Germany and in other European countries will soon be facing, too. The ways in which they are tackling the decline in domestic students could, therefore, become greatly relevant. That is why we at SVR Migration conducted a study to find out what shrinking universities are doing to attract international students, prepare them for their study programs, and retain them in the local job market once they graduate.

Germany's shrinking universities tend to be less well known internationally and are less visible than top-ranked universities or universities 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 that tuition fees are much lower than in most other countries. Nevertheless, systemic obstacles make it more difficult for shrinking universities 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 upfront that they have the necessary language and academic skills. Our research shows that shrinking universities are getting better at overcoming these obstacles. 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 at partner universities/schools abroad, as well as, increasingly, on the Internet and on social media.

## New Pathway Programs

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 percent for those studying for a bachelor's degree and 29 percent for those enrolled in master's programs. That is higher than the proportion of their German counterparts (28 and 19 percent, respectively). To help reduce dropout rates, the shrinking universities

## Abstract

In Germany, universities in certain areas are facing challenges due to shrinking domestic enrollments. Other universities across Germany and in other European countries will soon be confronted with the same problems. Universities and their partners should provide international students with more flexible options for accessing higher education, as well as relevant support during their studies and in their transition from study to work.

*Germany's shrinking universities are giving a preview of the challenges that other institutions in Germany and in other European countries will soon be facing, too.*

included in our study offer German language courses, an orientation program, and other support. However, this support is not always available in all programs, or it 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 at all. This is the reason why poor exam marks and other warning signs are often not noticed until it is too late. Germany's pathway colleges (*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 pathway programs. These alternative pathways to higher education in Germany could prove to be a key factor for academic success. So far, however, only universities in five of the 16 federal states are legally permitted to run pathway programs with integrated university admission tests (Brandenburg, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, and Thuringia). And even these federal states are still in the process of developing and testing relevant programs.

### **Future Labor Migrants**

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 support to those who intend to stay, some even in cooperation with regional partner organizations. The aim is to help graduates make the transition into the German job market. Shrinking universities offer international students the opportunity to take part in career development workshops that are tailored to their needs, and 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 from the European Union. However, it remains to be seen whether this temporary funding can be continued once the temporary government grants run out.

### **Lessons for an Aging European Continent**

Germany's shrinking universities are already facing these and other challenges. In the 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 relevant support. In addition, their transition from study to work should be facilitated more. Starting in April 2020, the second installment of Germany's government program "Integrating Refugees in Degree Programmes" (which is open to all international students) can be regarded as a step in the right direction. ▲

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