

Germany's International Career Services: Marketing Mismatches and Sustainable Structures

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Retaining international students is a policy goal for many countries in light of labor shortages, demographic changes, and economic innovation. Examples of integrating international students into labor markets in the Anglosphere are abundant. Policies and practices for integrating graduates into non-English-speaking countries such as China, Russia, and Turkey, which all host considerable numbers of international students, are lesser-known. This article examines the case of Germany, arguably a traditional destination, but one of the non-Anglo-Saxon countries hosting a high number of students and researchers. A glimpse into the German case offers a perspective to other countries outside of the Anglosphere that are interested in sustainably attracting, recruiting, supporting, and retaining international talent.

International Student Mobility and Poststudy Employment

Similar to other non-Anglophone countries, the appeal of studying in Germany has expanded due to public and private marketing campaigns, ever-increasing numbers of English-taught programs, and a generous poststudy work visa scheme. Initiatives that aim to improve the academic success, sociocultural integration, and German language skills of over 300,000 international students in Germany have long been part of a system that was designed to improve the mobility experience.

Abstract

Retaining international students is central to many countries' economic development policies. One manifestation of these efforts is the development of international student career services, which are established to support international students in pursuing careers in the host country. Examples of international student career integration in the Anglosphere are abundant. This article examines the German context, offering perspectives to non-Anglophone countries interested in sustainably attracting, recruiting, supporting, and retaining international talent.

International students who attend German universities account for 11.1 percent of the total student population, nearly double that of the proportion of international students in the United States. Germany's numerous population of international students is geographically diverse, and outgoing mobility is also high. Both aspects starkly contrast other economically advanced countries. Becoming a leading nation in hosting students has not come without its costs, however. Since the international student population has increased by over 75 percent over the last decade, calls for greater transparency around the effectiveness of internationalization agendas have also multiplied. In particular, Germany's integration of its growing international student population into the labor market has gained the attention of a wide variety of stakeholders. Political and socioeconomic developments have influenced the establishment of special career services for international students, programs created to sensitize students to what awaits them upon graduation—and to convince them to stay.

Career Services for International Students

The institutionalized set-up for informing international students about, and preparing them for, working in Germany is a recent development. Unlike students heading for English-speaking countries, many international students in non-Anglophone countries are not fluent in the host country's language when they arrive. This impacts academic performance, sociocultural integration, and labor market prospects. In Germany, a generous poststudy work visa scheme allows graduates to look for work for 18 months upon degree completion, and research indicates that about half of all international graduates find gainful employment.

To address labor market integration, contextualized career advising programs seek to help students in the process. These are special services that have been curated to inform international students about the expectations of German employers and offer strategic preparation support. While there is no unifying name for the career services provided to international students, one of the more established terms is "international career services" (ICSs). The acronym "ICS" combines "international office" and "career services" to represent the collaborative effort among these two departments.

ICSs often focus on integrating students from English-language master programs, German-language bachelor programs, and, more recently, early career researchers. The range of services may include a mixture of coaching, workshops, seminars, job shadowing, or company visits. ICSs are primarily temporary, project-funded programs. Some states have partnered with employer associations to provide funding for ICSs; in other cases, universities have reacted to student demand or initiated ICS programming to attract international students. Some universities have stand-alone ICSs, whereas others provide ICSs in partnership with multiple offices. Roughly 20 percent of German higher education institutions offer some form of tailored labor market preparation and individual coaching, but the extent of ICS provision varies drastically between institutions. However, providing these services is not about benchmarking—each institution has a different international student population that requires individualized solutions.

Labor Market Tensions

Some government initiatives and institutional ICSs emphasize supporting international students interested in science and research careers in Germany. Simultaneously, German academia is experiencing tensions while trying to expand capacity for early career researchers plagued with short-term, precarious contracts, leaving them without long-term perspectives. While marketing initiatives seek to attract foreign talent to Germany, many researchers already in the country face fierce competition in advancing their careers or obtaining stable employment. The movement #ichbinhanna criticizes the system of temporary contracts and provides information in English to foreign academics employed in the country. This tension also exists in the nonacademic labor market, where pandemic-induced unemployment has been particularly high for young graduates and is even more troublesome for those with foreign passports or migrant backgrounds.

The Consequences of Misaligned Marketing

Attracting and supporting international talent in a country facing labor market shortages is a fundamentally sound and common approach. Germany has advanced a clear logistical, financial, and staffing commitment to providing career services to international students interested in staying in the country. However, the rise of ICSs in Germany also illustrates a need for aligning marketing to prospective international students with German labor market demands. On the one hand, public and private marketing efforts often recruit students to English-language programs. On the other hand, employers are often interested in graduates who speak German. A discrepancy results when marketing is aimed at one student demographic, but the demand is for another. This has given way to a need to internationalize career services that then sensitize students to what they need to do to increase their employment prospects—the backbone of which is learning German.

Once the language expectations needed to pursue employment in Germany become more transparent, a key advantage will be that these students are familiarized with Germany and committed to starting careers in the country. And yet, this phenomenon sheds light on the wider inconsistencies between internationalization stakeholders—including employers—and raises questions about Germany's internationalization strategy. More holistic decisions around internationalization, considering the whole pipeline, are necessary. Previous marketing initiatives have led to enrollment increases in English-language programs. But if the graduates of these programs are not in areas facing skilled labor shortages, or if they do not learn German, higher education institutions and students will bear the negative consequences in the form of unemployed, unsatisfied students, and unhappy employers. More transparent marketing of available career opportunities, the crucial importance of German language skills, and sustainable funding of ICSs could, however, serve the country's larger economic development and innovation goals.

Ultimately, many countries welcoming international students seek to integrate them into their societies and labor markets. Germany's ICSs provide a noteworthy model, with many good-practice initiatives from which to derive ideas and inspiration. ICSs play a central role in connecting international students with employers. But for Germany's ICSs to adequately support the integration of students into the labor market in the long-term, transparent country marketing and permanent funding for ICSs is necessary. While developing English-language programs may expand international enrollment, a domestic degree alone may not translate into employment. If the intention is to retain international students, then it is important to set clear expectations while marketing programs, and later on, provide students with tailored employability preparation.

Cases such as Germany's offer insight into the challenges and opportunities that non-Anglophone countries face in attracting and retaining foreign talent. While internationalization has been central to economic strategies for decades, a comprehensive approach needs to include sustainable structures for international student labor market integration. ▲

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