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New strategies in the race for international students...

Over the last decade, soaring international student enrolments have catapulted Germany to a leading position in international student recruitment.

Germany's tuition waivers and post-study work options continue to enable the country to attract a large and ever-growing number of international students, but is the education funding situation in Germany viable, and what kind of new strategies is the nation using to maintain a hold on its position as a strong study destination? *ICEF Monitor* explores these questions below.

Germany's rise to the top

At a German Federal Education Ministry press conference held in January, a ministry spokesperson took a moment to reflect on Germany's changing fortune as a destination for international education. In the year 2000, only 75,000 international students had elected to study at German institutions; in 2011, [international student enrolment reached over a quarter million](#), making Germany the fourth most popular study destination worldwide.

And as the number of enrolments has surged, so too has the number of graduates. In September 2012, the Federal Ministry for Statistics announced that the number of [international students graduating from German institutions](#) had reached almost 38,300 in 2011 – up 2,900 or 8% from the previous year. By contrast, in 2000, graduating students from abroad had numbered less than 14,000.

Increasing student diversity

Of all the international students who graduated in Germany in 2012, 13% came from China, 7% from Turkey, and 5% from Russia.

These three countries aside, international media coverage suggests that the appeal of studying in Germany is spreading around the world:

- In February of last year, *ICEF Monitor* reported that [more and more Indian students](#) are choosing to pursue their studies in Germany. Additionally, the German Ambassador to India has announced [a goal](#) that by 2017, one million Indian students would have learned, at least, basic German.
- Due to the instability of some economies in Europe, Germany is rising in esteem as [a path to more secure employment](#).
- This past January, journalists from the UK's *Telegraph* investigated a [growing tendency among British students](#) to enrol at German institutions.

Why international students choose Germany

In a recent article that probed the reasons [why Chinese youth chose to study in Germany](#), the *Deutsche Welle* learned that many students from China would have preferred to study elsewhere, but settled for Germany. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), reached [similar conclusions](#) in a summer 2012 poll of 6,000 international students from non-EU countries.

Classic destinations such as the US or UK will always top an international student's choice, however, low or no tuition fees has often been cited as one of the reasons for Germany's appeal, as well as [post-study work rights for foreign students](#). The German government is eager to attract immigrants to the country to offset a shortage of skilled labour, and its implementation of the EU Blue Card scheme introduced last summer has met with immediate success.

Early success for Blue Card in Germany

Similar to the US's Green Card, the [EU Blue Card](#) "is designed to make Europe a more attractive destination for highly educated persons from outside the European Union. All 27 EU member states, except the UK, Denmark and Ireland, participate in the EU Blue Card scheme."

According to the business magazine [Wirtschafts Woche](#), in the first six months since it was introduced, the card has already been issued to 4,126 applicants, far outstripping the 3,600 cards that the government had expected to issue in the first year. The top four origin countries for card recipients are India, China, Russia and the US.

Many of the applicants had previously graduated from German higher education institutions, thus the card serves as a clear student pathway to employment.

How viable is free tuition?

As mentioned, [tuition costs](#) factor heavily in student decision making, and Germany's fee waivers do well to pull in students from all shores, but is it sustainable?

In the last few years, an unexpected [surge in domestic undergraduate applications](#) has swamped Germany's higher education institutions. This situation has been exacerbated by the [implementation of the Bologna process](#); as German institutions introduce mandatory attendance at lectures and a tighter schedule of examinations, many have discovered that they

lack the facilities and the staff to accommodate the current student population (nevermind the incoming classes), a problem that went unnoticed under the more relaxed provisions of the previous system.

According to a [Spiegel summary](#) of commentators, these conditions have created a desperate need for additional funding; however, due to the country's political structure, regular funding for education is the exclusive responsibility of the state governments, which are already unable to cover the costs of current enrolment levels.

Recent attempts to restore regular funding from the Federal government [have failed](#), and Germany's new Minister of Education Johanna Wanka has signalled that she is not willing to accept the [demands of opposition parties](#).

In the meantime, Germany's leadership has attempted to fill the gap with temporary injections of funds, the so-called "[Higher Education Pact 2020](#)." However, these funds, which were intended to last until 2015, are expected to run out by the [summer of 2014](#).

The DAAD's "Strategy 2020"

Even if Germany can continue to afford to subsidise tuition in the future, the country will have to further develop its internationalisation strategies in order to remain an attractive destination.

According to an estimate by the DAAD, Germany needs to attract 350,000 international students by 2020 merely to retain its current position.

To achieve that goal, the DAAD recently adopted a new strategic plan for the next decade. The plan, titled "[Strategy 2020](#)," consists of several measures aimed to improve Germany's position as a centre of learning and research, including:

- Scholarships for the best German and international students;
- The development of programmes that will help German universities raise their profile internationally;
- Improvement and expansion of the DAAD's network of branch offices, information centres, and German studies language assistants around the world;
- Educating staff to increase understanding about foreign cultures and education systems to help build international partnerships.

Transnational partnerships to promote German higher education

The first of these measures, which aims to support international collaboration, was launched in February. [According to the DAAD](#),

"German higher education institutions can receive up to EUR 250,000 per year from a new DAAD programme aimed at strengthening their international profile. A first selection round has produced 21 projects which will be funded for a maximum of four years.

The programme supports these projects in building up strategic partnerships and thematic networks with foreign universities. Higher education institutions from 29 countries are involved in the selected projects. The USA and China are particularly well represented. The programme ‘Strategic Partnerships and Thematic Networks’ is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education, which is providing almost EUR 3 million in the first year alone.”

The programme is expected to foster scientific and academic cooperation and promote Germany as a destination for study abroad.

Present appeal and future promise

Tuition waivers coupled with a well-regarded education will continue to present a persuasive argument to prospective students around the world, especially since the costs of study are rising steadily in countries such as the US, UK and Australia.

In addition, Germany’s implementation of the Blue Card scheme, as well as the DAAD’s “Strategy 2020” appear likely to attract greater student numbers and to increase the profile of German higher education – and perhaps even to help Germany become an attractive destination in its own right, rather than a prudent second choice.