

FINTIBA INSIGHTS

Integration of Internationals in Germany



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INTRODUCTION

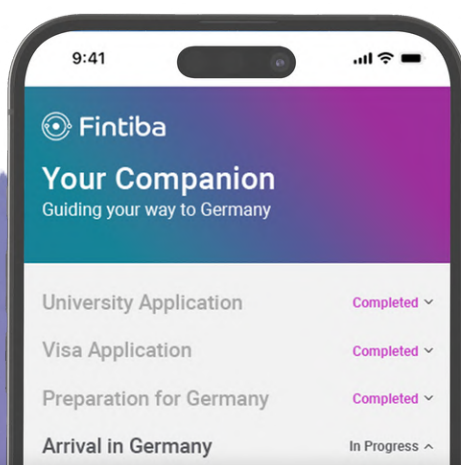
Germany's demographics are changing. As baby boomers retire, the population is shrinking – reducing the size of the workforce and putting intense pressure on the labour market and economy. At the same time, a high-quality education system; wealth of career opportunities; and an open, cosmopolitan society has turned the country into the top non-English speaking study destination for international students. This growing cohort has enormous potential to help revitalise Germany's ageing workforce.

Fintiba publishes regular Insights Papers to illuminate the key issues affecting internationals in Germany. This edition explores how international students could be better supported to integrate more fully into German society – and help plug the skills gap.

Our findings are based on Fintiba survey data. Topics addressed include **how integrated into German society international students and expats feel; the challenges they face; and the advantages of successful integration.**

One of our most important conclusions was that there can be no substitute for internationals taking proactive steps to exploit the many opportunities for integrating into German life that are already available. We, therefore, analysed our data to identify the most effective actions new arrivals can take.

The paper concludes by recommending actionable measures that the German government, universities, and companies can adopt to smooth the path of international students and expats as they arrive in Germany, and gradually start to make the country their home.



ABOUT FINTIBA

Since January 2017, Fintiba has been the leading digital solution provider for international students and job seekers who want to study or work in Germany. Fintiba offers innovative solutions for the visa application, study preparation, university enrolment and daily life in Germany by combining online processes and personal services.

Fintiba's mission to guide people to Germany has led to the support of over 200,000 international students from over 190 different countries.

INTRODUCTION

The survey data was collected online between July and September 2022. A total of **9,106 international students and expats** from **129 countries** took part.

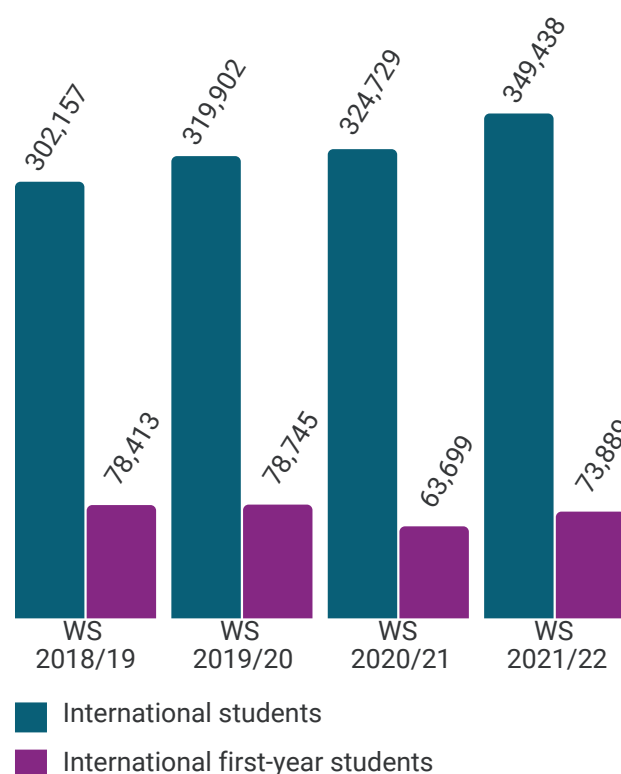
Our goal was to understand if and how **the level of integration reported by international students affects how likely they are to pursue a career in Germany**, and what can be done to provide more effective support.



International students in Germany

Home to more than 400 state-recognised higher education institutions, Germany is one of the world's most attractive study destinations.

According to data in *Wissenschaft Weltoffen* 2022,¹ more than 70,000 new international students have joined a German university each year since 2018/19 – apart from in 2020 when the number dipped to 64,000 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even the pandemic, however, did not derail the steady growth during this four-year period. The total number of international students at German universities hit nearly 350,000 in the winter semester 2021/22 – a 16 percent increase from 2018/19. (See graph).




Source: *Wissenschaft weltoffen* ; Federal Statistical Office student statistics

¹ German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW), "Wissenschaft weltoffen 2022", <https://www.wissenschaft-weltoffen.de/de/publikation/>, Bielefeld 2022

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KEY FINDINGS



Successful integration is the key driver for motivating **international students to start a career in Germany** and help bridge the talent gap in the labour market.

84%

of the internationals felt that they lived in an **international and diverse environment**

57%

of students intend to **stay in Germany after graduation**, while 37% were undecided

32%

of the surveyed internationals **felt well integrated** in Germany - suggesting there is substantial room for improvement

Integration Opportunities

Students who felt **more integrated** were **more likely to stay in Germany** after completing their studies.

Respondents who felt **more integrated** were also **better prepared to start a career** and enjoyed a **smoother job search**.

Students who **participated in extracurricular activities** (41%) felt **better integrated**.

Fellow students, neighbours, and colleagues were among the **top five integration enablers**.

Integration Challenges

65% of the respondents encountered **language and communication barriers** while trying to integrate.

22% of all respondents described **immigration authorities as an obstacle** to their integration journey.

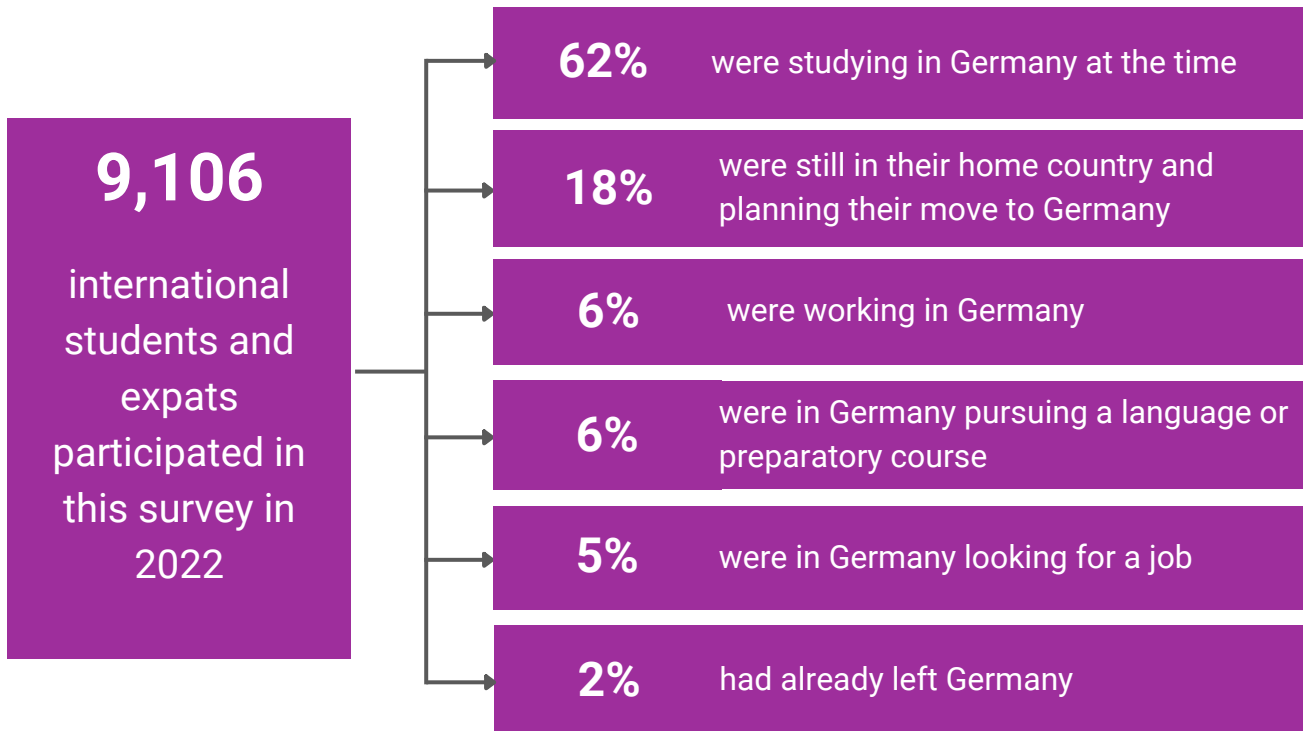
36% of students who **suspended their studies** cited **financial difficulties** as the main reason.

17% of international students said a **lack of support from their university** had made integration harder.

Integration comes with time - the longer the respondents had lived in Germany, the more integrated they felt.

GET TO KNOW THE RESPONDENTS

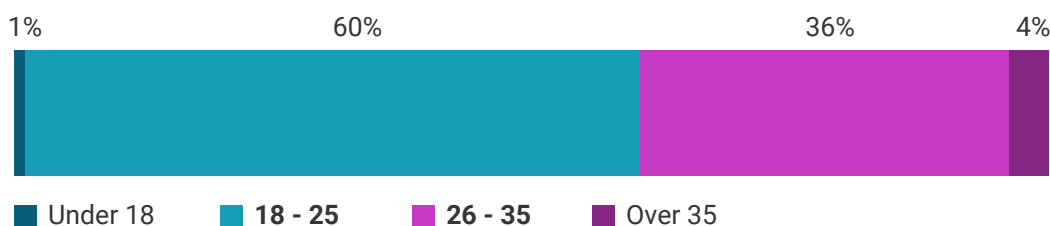
The following graphs provide an overview of the respondents' demographic profile.



Gender



At what age did (will) the respondents move to Germany?



GET TO KNOW THE RESPONDENTS

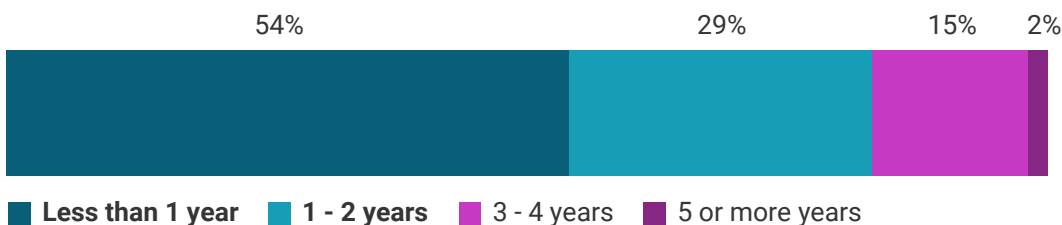
Top 10 nationalities of respondents



A total of 129 nationalities were represented in the survey data. This graph shows the 10 most prevalent countries of origin, which accounted for 61.2% of respondents:

- India
- Pakistan
- Turkey
- Bangladesh
- Morocco
- Egypt
- Jordan
- China
- Nigeria
- Syrian Arab Republic

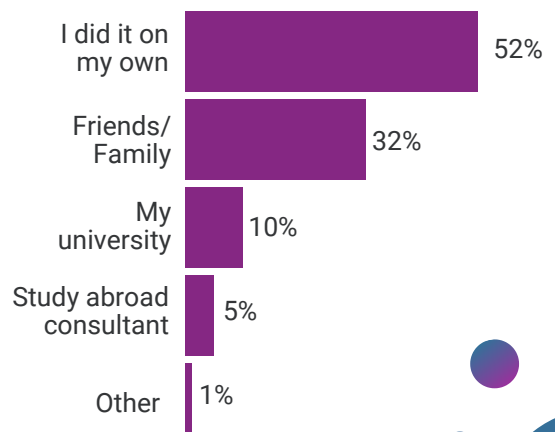
How long have (had) respondents been living in Germany?



Guidance en route to Germany

The survey showed that **just over half of international students and expats** relocated to Germany **without any assistance**, meaning they had to seek out relevant information online, including from social media. About **30% of respondents obtained guidance from friends and/or family**, while **10% turned to their universities for help**. Only 5% of respondents reported using a **study abroad consultant**.

Who guided on your way to Germany?



INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN GERMANY

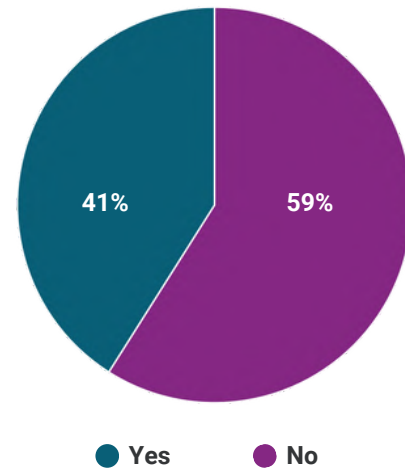
International students enrolled in a German university formed the majority of respondents (61%), with roughly a third of those surveyed (37%) attending a university of applied sciences (*Fachhochschule*). Only 1% of students had enrolled in an art, music or film academy (see Appendix 1).

The survey revealed that **the three most popular fields of study were engineering (43%), business, economics and law (24%), and natural sciences and mathematics (15%)**. These figures underscore the appetite for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses among international students.

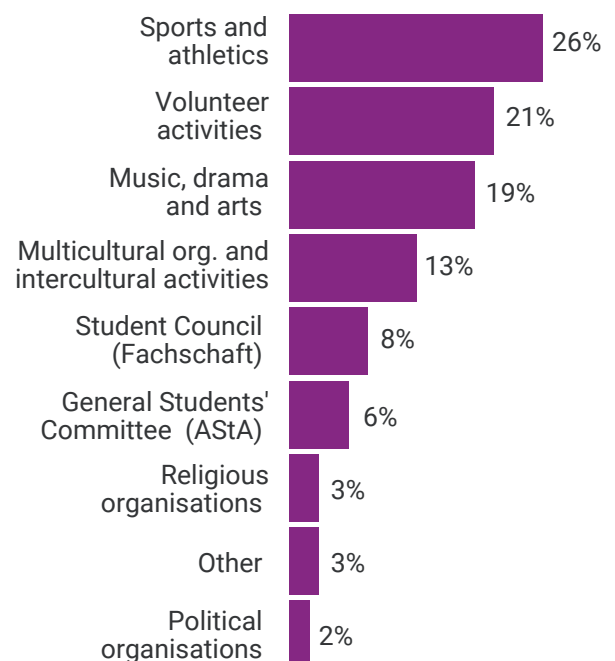
Extracurricular activities offer excellent opportunities for students to develop new skills; expand their circle of contacts; and establish new friendships. Nevertheless, almost 60% of international students reported that they had not taken part in any extracurricular activities – meaning that the majority are unfortunately **missing out on important opportunities to integrate** more fully, explore, and meet new people.

For those that did pursue extracurricular activities, sports and athletics were the most popular (26%), followed by volunteering (21%), and music, drama, and art (19%). Multicultural organisations and activities were also popular (13%).

Do you take part in any extracurricular activities?



Which extracurricular activities do you participate in?



INTEGRATION IN GERMANY

General Integration

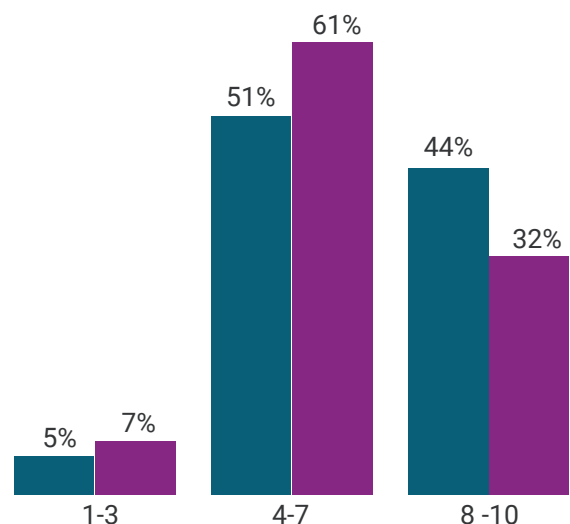
International students and expats can be said to have integrated successfully when they enjoy the same social, economic, and cultural opportunities as German citizens. But integration is not just a function of the activities people pursue: It is also a reflection of how people feel. The sense of belonging that lies at the heart of successful integration can only develop if everyone in the community is prepared to participate and contribute.²

While German society bears a responsibility to remain open, and celebrate diversity, international students and expats can reciprocate by learning German, and familiarising themselves with the country's laws and traditions.

Survey respondents were asked to score how easily they had found opportunities to integrate into German life on a scale of 1-10. Only 5% of respondents felt that they had found little or no opportunity to integrate (1-3), while 51% reported that opportunities had been sufficient (4-7). The remaining 44% scored their opportunities at 8-10, having encountered few difficulties settling in.

Respondents were also asked to rate how well integrated they felt in Germany on a similar 1-10 scale. Only 7% of the respondents felt "not well integrated" (1-3), while 61% felt "somewhat integrated" (4-7).

About a third (32%) of respondents felt "very well integrated" – a significantly smaller proportion than the 44% who had rated their integration opportunities highly. **This discrepancy suggests that internationals are not making full use of all the available pathways to greater integration.** Universities and other organisations could provide more encouragement and information to help close this gap.



- On a scale of 1-10, how much do you feel you had the opportunity to integrate yourself in Germany?
- On a scale of 1-10, how well integrated do you feel in Germany?

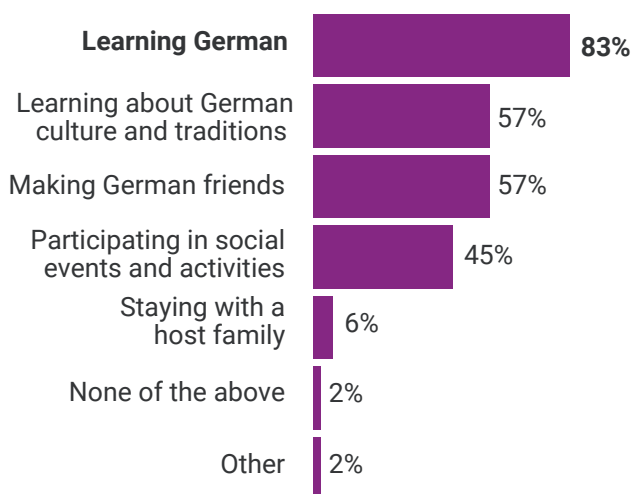
² Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, "Integration", <https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/community-and-integration/integration/integration-node.html>

INTEGRATION IN GERMANY

Integration Measures

Successful integration will depend to a large extent on the kinds of steps international students and expats take to familiarise themselves with German society. **Making an effort to learn German** was by far the most important single step taken by the majority of respondents (83%). Most (57%) also reported that they had familiarised themselves with German culture and traditions, while another 57% had made German friends. Almost half (45%) of respondents had participated in social events or activities organized by cities, universities, or workplaces. Only 6% stayed with a host family, while 2% practiced other approaches, such as travelling around Germany, or working in a mostly German-speaking environment.

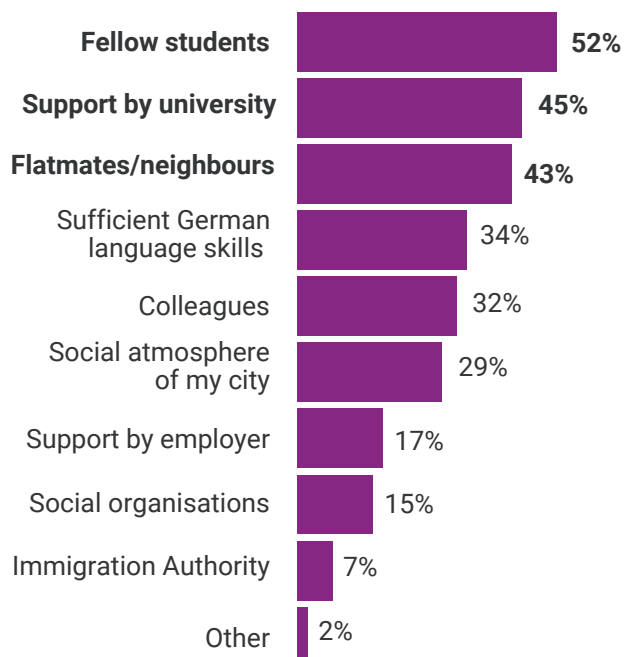
Which steps have you taken to integrate yourself in the German society?



Integration Enablers

While internationals stand to benefit from proactively working to integrate into German society, various kinds of people, institutions, and other factors can make the journey easier. More than **50% of respondents reported that their fellow students had aided their integration process**. Almost half (45%) reported benefiting from university support, while 43% said flatmates or neighbours had helped them. Gaining proficiency in German helped a third (34%) of participants to feel more integrated, while about the same proportion (32%) described work colleagues as a primary source of support.

Which of the following have made it easier for you to integrate?



INTEGRATION IN GERMANY

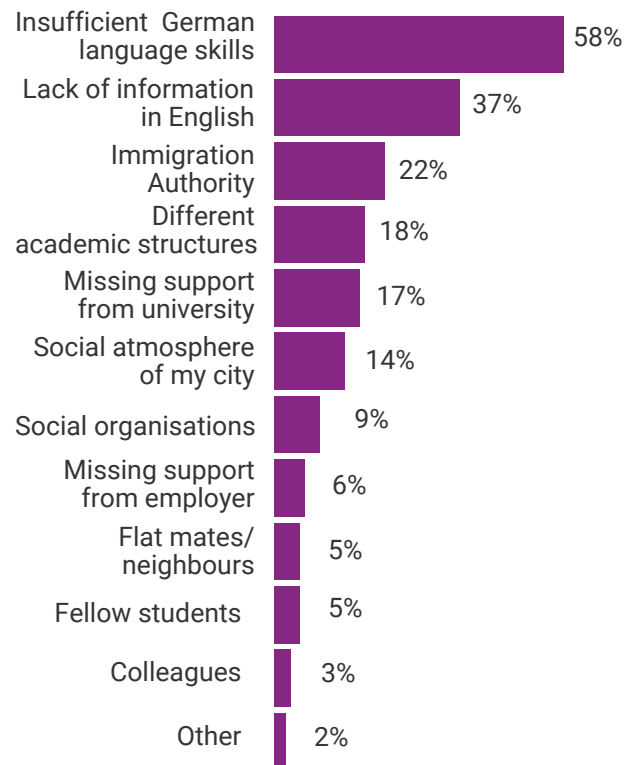
Nearly 30% of participants said that a welcoming atmosphere in the city where they were living had made integration easier. Only 17% felt that support from their employer had helped, while a slightly smaller proportion (15%) had turned to social organisations.

Although the immigration authorities play a critical role in the transition to living, working and studying in Germany, only 7% of respondents said that the officials had helped their integration process. Other supportive factors included: friends from the home country and international community; sports teams; social media; and apps.

Integration Inhibitors

Similarly, several clearly identifiable factors made integration harder. **Nearly 60% of the respondents reported having insufficient German language skills**, while 40% cited a lack of relevant information available in English. About one in five (22%) of the participants reported difficulties with the immigration system. Slightly fewer (17%) reported struggling with unfamiliar academic structures, or a **lack of support from their university (18%)**. Some 14% of respondents found that an unwelcoming atmosphere in their city had made integration harder.

Which of the following have made it harder for you to integrate?



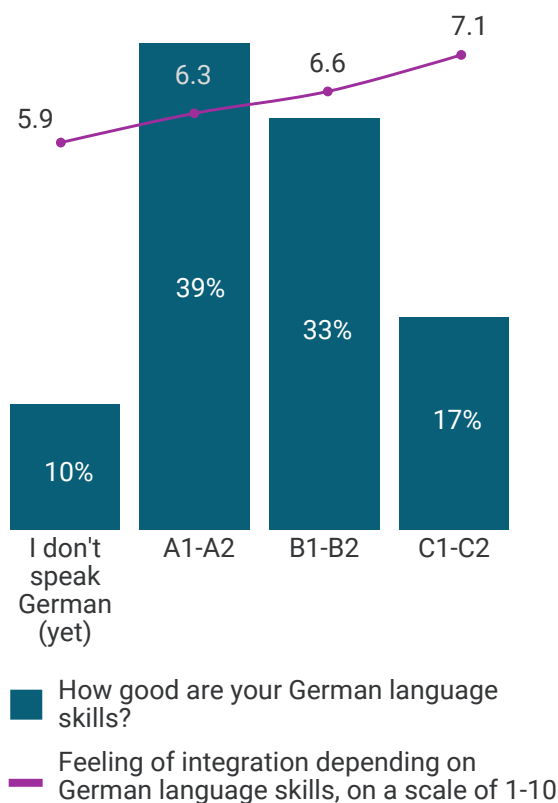
Only 5% said that their fellow students, or flat mates and neighbours, had made the integration process more difficult. A minority of respondents also cited a lack of support from social organizations (9%); employers (6%); and work colleagues (3%). Social anxiety; the COVID-19 pandemic; a lack of community spirit; discrimination; and financial difficulties were also referenced in some cases.

For more on the integration challenges faced by internationals in Germany, see Appendix 2.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND INTEGRATION

Impact of German language Skills

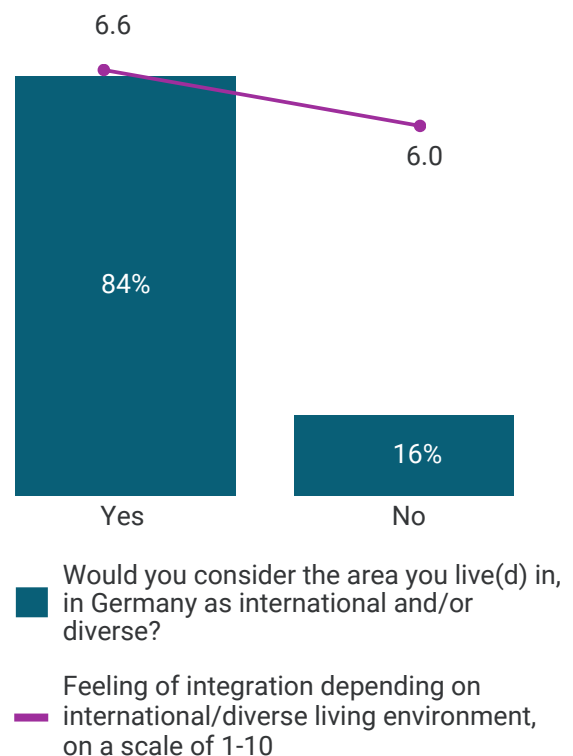
Successful integration goes hand-in-hand with good German language skills, the survey showed. Previously discussed survey data where respondents rated their feeling of being integrated into Germany on a scale of 1-10 was hereby analysed along with the respondents' German language level. The 10% of international students and expats who did not speak any German scored an average of 5.9. Those with beginner A1-A2 German skills (39%) scored 6.3. The score rose to 6.6 for those with B-level German (33%). Those with near-native C-level German language skills (17%) felt the most integrated, with an average score of 7.1.



These results demonstrate that **the greater their proficiency in German, the more integrated a respondent felt.**

Impact of Living Area on Integration

The survey also suggested that the environment shapes the integration experience. The vast majority (84%) of respondents considered the area where they lived as international and/or diverse – and had an average feeling of integration of 6.6. By contrast, 16% of respondents who reported living in a more parochial environment scored 6.0.



DEMOGRAPHICS AND INTEGRATION

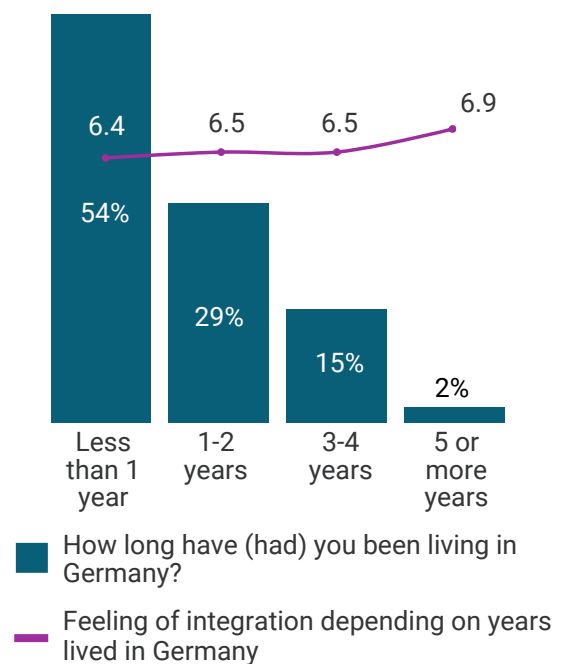
A potentially counterintuitive finding was that **respondents living in small towns with less than 5,000 inhabitants reported higher average feelings of integration (6.8) than those in much bigger cities.** Respondents living in municipalities with more than 50,000 or 100,000 inhabitants scored an average of 6.5 and 6.4 respectively on our integration scale (see Appendix 2). Those living in cities with more than half a million inhabitants scored 6.6.

A possible explanation could be that international students and expats found it easier to quickly learn German, and immerse themselves in daily life, in the close-knit confines of rural towns.

No clear correlation between the integration experience and specific federal states was found. Internationals living in Bremen reported the highest average integration score (6.8), while Saarland had the lowest (6.1). (For a more detailed breakdown, see Appendix 3).

Impact of Years Lived in Germany on Integration

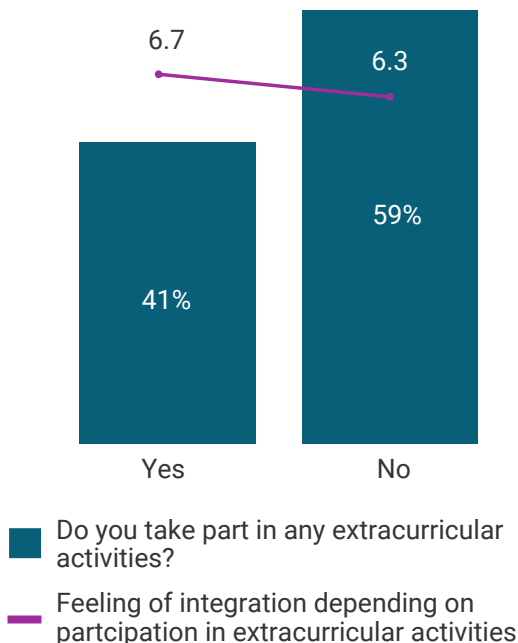
The survey supported a simple hypothesis: **The longer respondents had lived in Germany, the more integrated they felt.** This correlation presumably reflected a combination of improving German language skills; growing familiarity with the culture and environment; and the gradual maturing of deeper connections and friendships.



INTEGRATION AMONG STUDENTS

Students attending art, music and film academies reported feeling more integrated relative to counterparts studying at universities, or those pursuing applied science degrees – perhaps due to the smaller class sizes in the academies. Smaller classes may also help to explain why international students attending private universities reported feeling more integrated than their peers in public educational establishments (see Appendix 1).

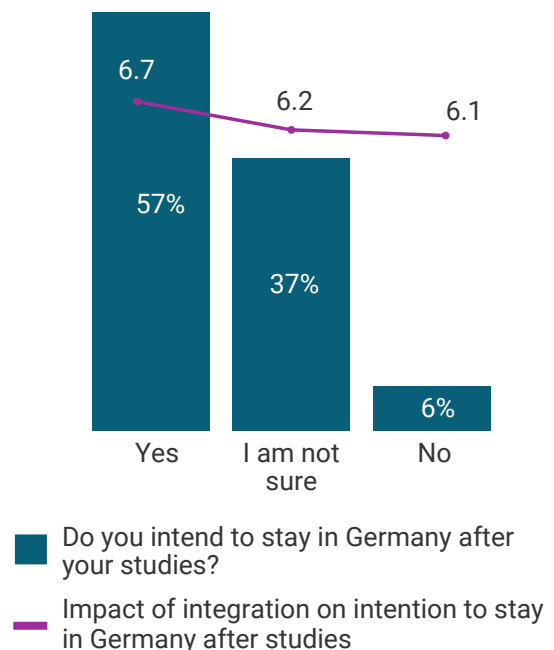
The survey further demonstrated that **international students who participated in extracurricular activities felt better integrated** – scoring an average of 6.7 – compared to those who did not (6.3).



While the advantages of extracurricular activities area clear, it is important to bear in mind that the demands of coursework, or part-time jobs, may hinder many students from participating.

Do You Intend to Stay in Germany after your Studies?

The survey also pointed to positive trends in Germany's labour market. **More than half of respondents (57%) intended to stay in Germany** after graduating, while about a third (37%) were uncertain. Only 6% were sure that they would not stay in Germany.

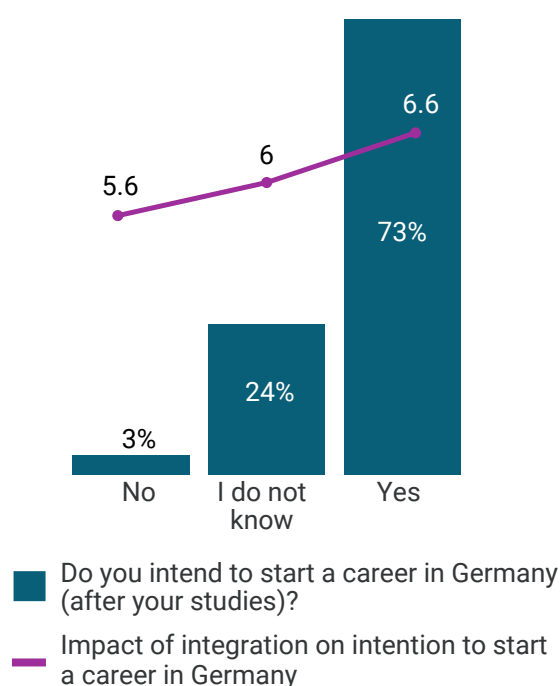


The survey revealed that **respondents who did plan to stay in Germany had a significantly higher average feeling of integration** (6.7) than those who were unsure (6.2), and those who had no intention of staying (6.1).

INTEGRATION AND CAREER

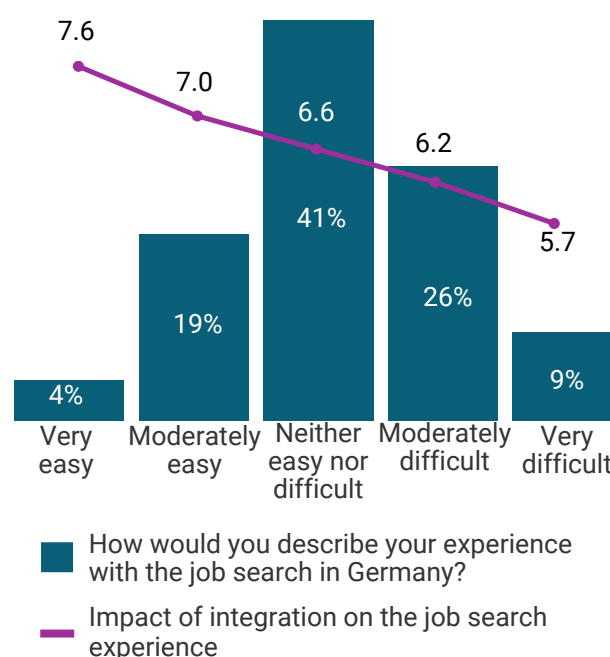
Intention to Start a Career in Germany

The clear majority of respondents (73%) who planned to pursue a career in Germany felt more integrated, the survey found. Those who intended to work in Germany scored an average of 6.6 on our integration scale, while the 3% of respondents who did not intend to stay scored an average of 5.6. The remainder of students who were unsure whether to pursue a career in Germany scored somewhere in between.



More than half of the respondents who did not immediately plan to pursue a career in Germany said they had plans to further their education – leaving open the possibility that they might stay on in the country to study. About a third (32%) of the remainder planned to move back to their home country, and a fifth (18%) intended to move to a third country instead (see Appendix 4).

The survey also revealed that the more integrated a student felt, the easier their job search was. About a third (35%) of respondents defined their job search experience as “moderately difficult” to “very difficult”, while a larger group (41%) describe the process as “neither easy nor difficult.” Just under a quarter (23%) of the internationals found the job search process “moderately easy” to “very easy”.



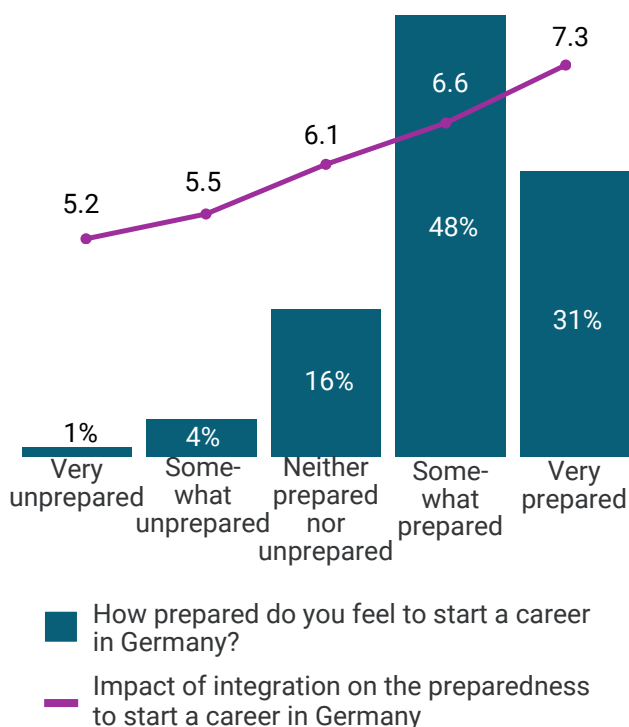
Predictably, those who described their job search as “very easy” scored 7.6 on the integration scale, while peers who reported a “very difficult” search scored an average of 5.7.

INTEGRATION AND CAREER

Preparedness to Start a Career in Germany

The survey also found that **the more integrated a student felt, the greater their sense of preparedness to start a career in Germany.**

Encouragingly for the labour market, nearly 80% of respondents said they felt “very prepared” to “somewhat prepared” to start working in Germany. As anticipated, the “very prepared” group (31%) felt more integrated (7.3) relative to those who felt “very unprepared” (5.2).

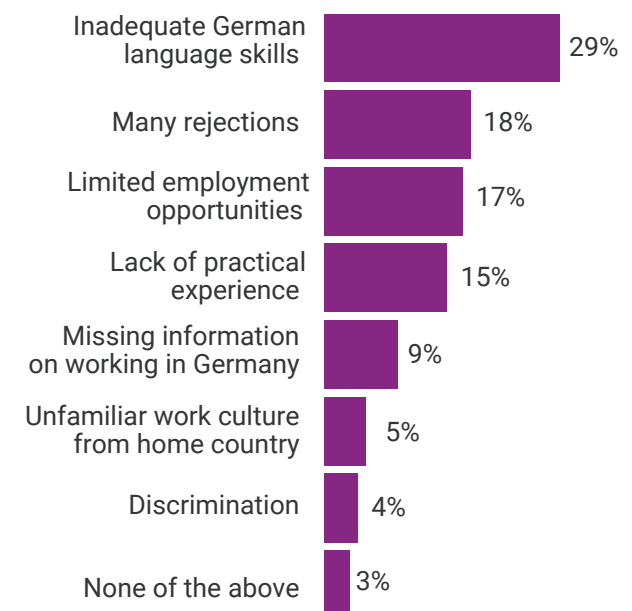


Challenges while Starting a Career in Germany

Starting a new career can be challenging – especially in a foreign country.

Approximately 29% of the respondents cited **inadequate German language skills as a hurdle to starting work in Germany.** Almost a fifth (18%) of internationals experienced multiple rejections after applying for jobs, while 17% saw limited employment opportunities. Some 15% of respondents cited a lack of relevant experience as a significant hurdle in their job search.

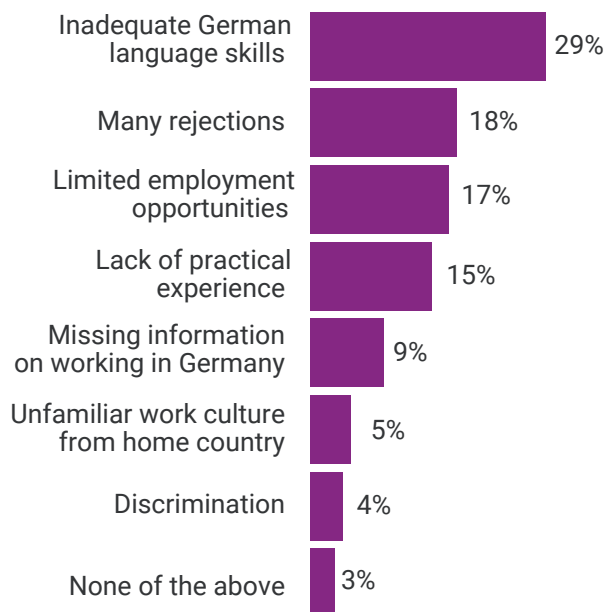
Which challenges have you faced while trying to start/starting a career in Germany?



Nearly 10% of respondents said that they did not have enough information about working in Germany; 5% struggled with the unfamiliar work culture; while 4% cited discrimination as a barrier.

INTEGRATION AND CAREER

Which challenges have you faced while trying to start/starting a career in Germany?



Nearly 10% of respondents said that they did not have enough information about working in Germany; 5% struggled with the unfamiliar work culture; while 4% cited discrimination as a barrier.



SUSPENSION OF STUDIES

The survey sought to establish why a small minority of students suspended their studies – and found that a **lack of integration does not tend to be a significant factor**.

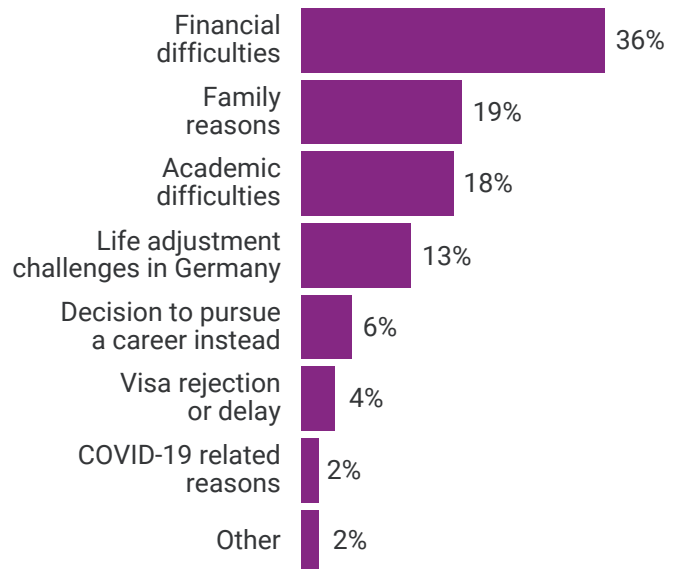
Factors affecting suspension of studies

Only 70 respondents (0.77% of the total) reported that they had been forced to suspend their studies, with **financial difficulties the most common cause** (36%). Although this group might seem small, it could reflect more widespread, but less visible, money constraints affecting many more international students.

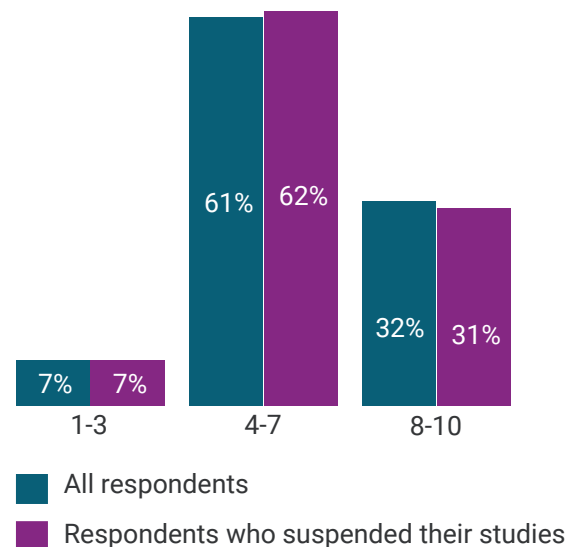
Students also suspended their studies for family reasons (19%) and because of academic problems (18%). Difficulties in adjusting to German life also played a part (13%), and a small minority (6%) reported that they had decided to pursue a career instead of further education. Visa rejections or delays prevented 4% of students from completing their courses, while COVID-19 was cited in 2% of cases.

Significantly, our findings did not suggest that that students tend to suspend their studies because they do not feel integrated – the above factors play a much bigger role. Respondents who suspended their studies reported similar opportunities to integrate into German society, and subjective feelings of integration, as the rest of the sample. (See page five and Appendix 5).

Which factors caused you to suspend your studies?



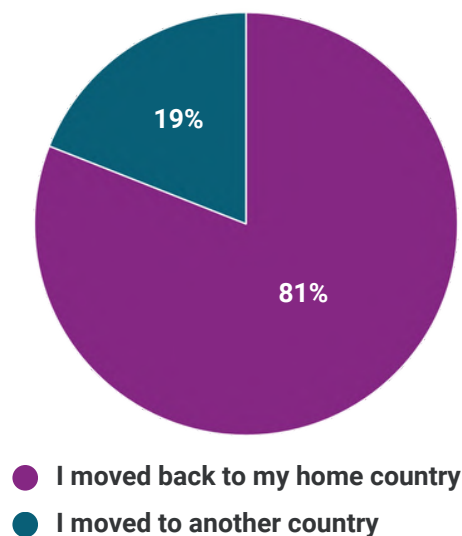
On a scale of 1-10, how well integrated do you feel in Germany?



LACK OF INTEGRATION AND RELOCATION

The survey explored why 188 respondents (2.1% of the total) decided to leave Germany; where they went; and whether a lack of integration may have influenced their decision.

If you aren't currently living in Germany, which of the following is applicable to you?

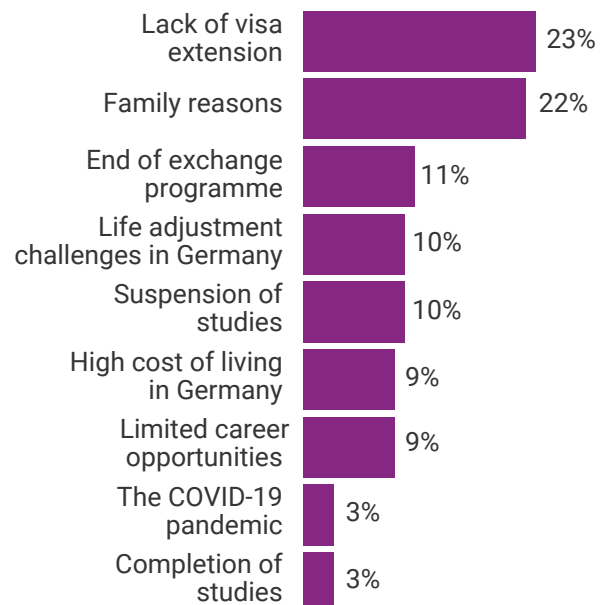


Just over 80% of respondents who left Germany moved back to their home countries, while about 20% relocated to a third country.

Almost a quarter (23%) of those who returned home **had failed to secure a visa extension**, while 22% moved back for family reasons. A further 11% of those who returned home had been exchange students, while 10% had suspended their studies.

Difficulty adjusting to life in Germany was cited by 10% of those who returned home, while 9% found the living costs in Germany to be high. Other reasons included: limited career opportunities in Germany (9%); the COVID-19 pandemic (3%); and completion of studies (3%).

Which of the following influenced your decision to move back to your home country?



Most internationals who relocated to third countries are currently living elsewhere in the European Union. The most common motivations for moving on from Germany were the pursuit of better academic (30%) and career (24%) opportunities. A further 16% of respondents reported difficulties adjusting to life in Germany, while 11% had suspended their studies. Other factors included: the cost of living (10%); family reasons (7%); and problems with immigration (4%).

SUMMARY

Our survey suggests that **successful integration is key to building a career in Germany**. Nevertheless, international students and expats have yet to fully exploit the wide range of integration opportunities on offer – despite being aware of at least some of them. It is not clear why students are missing out in this way, but it is important to emphasize that **integration will always remain primarily a personal responsibility** – however much support organisations choose to offer.

The survey results suggest that **learning German is an essential pillar of successful integration**, but also showed that the language barrier remains the single biggest challenge. This finding should prompt universities, other educational establishments, and companies to offer internationals more support to learn the language. While Germany is quickly diversifying, the environment is not developing evenly across the country – and a lack of access to essential information in English remains a challenge.

The survey found that **individuals such as neighbours or fellow students can play a vital role in supporting successful integration**. When society is welcoming and inclusive, internationals are more likely to reciprocate by becoming active community members themselves.

The survey also found that **universities could offer more support to international students**. While 45% of the respondents reported that the university provided enough integration support, almost a fifth (17%) said a lack of backing from their university had made integration harder.

One possible factor hindering integration could be the **study culture** in Germany, which unlike many other countries is mostly based on **self-organisation, with little to no guidance**. This contrast is more obvious in public universities than in private educational establishments and universities of applied sciences.

While the percentage of international **students who suspended their studies was low**, the fact that **financial difficulties** were cited as the main reason should serve as a red flag. Financial challenges do not just force students to abandon their studies prematurely: money worries also make it harder for students to adapt to their new surroundings, and fully engage with the wealth of academic and social opportunities on offer.

Administrative hurdles present additional challenges. A [previous Fintiba Insights Paper](#) showed that **late admissions** from universities, as well as **long waiting times for visa appointments and processing**, have caused international students to arrive late in Germany. Many were left feeling overwhelmed by the task of catching up on their studies and establishing a social life, after missing vital orientation procedures, and the first few days – or even weeks – of lectures.

The following section recommends **concrete steps that all parties can take** to better support international students and expats to integrate more fully into German society.

RECOMMENDATIONS



For Educational Institutions

Expedite the admission process to ensure that students can apply for their visas in a timely fashion and move to Germany before lectures start.

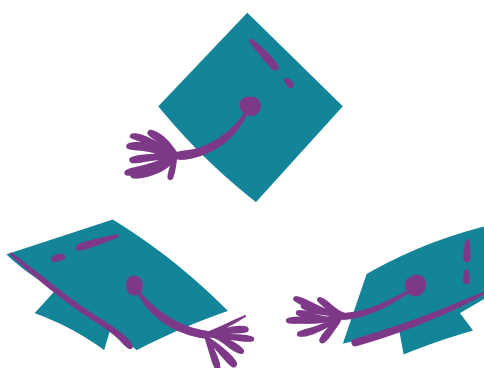
Recognize the challenges international students face on their way to Germany and **offer dedicated support**, such as study abroad consultants, to help with visa applications.

Inform international students of the **extracurricular activities on offer, communicating both in English and German**, and encourage them to participate.

Create opportunities for international and German students to exchange and socialise, such as by organising an orientation week; a buddy system; and intercultural events.

Offer German language courses to international students and provide incentives for taking part.

Offer scholarships or publicise scholarship opportunities, to support international students facing financial stress.



For Authorities

Recognize that authorities are the first point of contact for internationals moving to Germany and ensure the reception is always welcoming.

To retain international talent, the **visa and residence permit processes** should be **streamlined and fully digitalised where possible, in both English and German**.

Provide timely support for internationals to extend their residence permits, so they do not have to pause their studies and/or move back home due to a lack of documentation.

Be understanding and show empathy to internationals who are only starting to get to grips with learning German.



For Companies

Recognize that **international students can fill the skills gap** faced by many German companies.

Set up **bilingual hiring and onboarding processes in English and German** and offer support during the visa application and relocation processes.

Offer paid German language classes as an additional employee benefit.

Consider **social onboarding and other activities to provide opportunities for internationals and existing teams** to get to know each other.

RECOMMENDATIONS



For Social Empowerment

Politics and authorities should emphasise that **individuals and civil society organisations – not government institutions – bear primary responsibility for creating open, diverse societies**. Such an approach will help strengthen personal connections and cultivate a shared sense of responsibility.

Educational initiatives and media campaigns could be used to **promote greater tolerance and intercultural competence**.

Incentivise companies to hire international talent, for example by offering tax credits for sponsoring German classes or creating targeted scholarships and internships.

Boost funding to social organisations assisting internationals to integrate.

Raise awareness about existing initiatives to help international students and expats to integrate, including integration courses and welcome centres.

Promote **intercultural training and meet-ups** for both locals and internationals, on a district level.

Foster an ongoing societal dialogue through media campaigns and public discussions **on how to best help internationals integrate** in Germany.

Sensitise the public that integration is a two-way street, requiring a **welcoming attitude from society at large**.



For Financial Support

Public and private institutions should offer **more scholarships and grants** to international students and **encourage private individuals and companies to provide financial support** and occupational training.

We encourage more federal states to offer a **monetary welcome gift for all students**.

Universities or NGOs should offer all students **financial counselling or financial literacy training** in English and German.

Local authorities should promote the **construction of more affordable student accommodation** across the country.

Students in flat-shares should **receive a year-long rent subsidy** for taking in an international student to **incentivise intercultural exchange**.

Financial institutions or other organisations should offer **emergency grants or loans to help international students** who are having a hard time meeting the proof of finance requirement for **extending their residence permit**.



SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS



For International Students

Even if your course is in English, **try to learn German before arriving in Germany**. While in Germany, **continue to improve your language skills and strive to reach business-level proficiency** (min. B2) to **ease your job search**.

Research life in Germany and German study culture before you move. Helpful websites include [German Academic Exchange Service \(DAAD\)](#), [Goethe Institute](#), [MyGermanUniversity](#), and the [Fintiba Blog](#).

If possible, **take part in your university's orientation week so you can meet other students** and gain a rapid introduction to Germany, your city, and your university.

Carve out time to participate in extracurricular activities offered by your university. These are usually free and represent a great way to meet international and German students.

Network early with employers via internships and job fairs.



For Expats and Job Seekers

Start learning German before relocating and continue to practice your language skills once you arrive.

Gather information about living and working in Germany, and German work culture, by consulting websites and blogs, such as the "Working in Germany" articles by [Fintiba](#) or [Make it in Germany](#).

Familiarise yourself with **the job application process**, including the German style for CVs, cover letters and interview etiquette.

If you already studied in Germany, **attend networking events, alumni gatherings, and career fairs** to expand your circle.

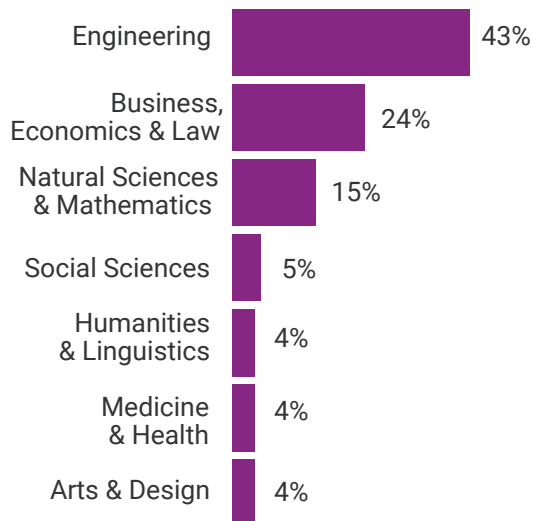


Remember that integration takes time. Do not be too hard on yourself when you get homesick.

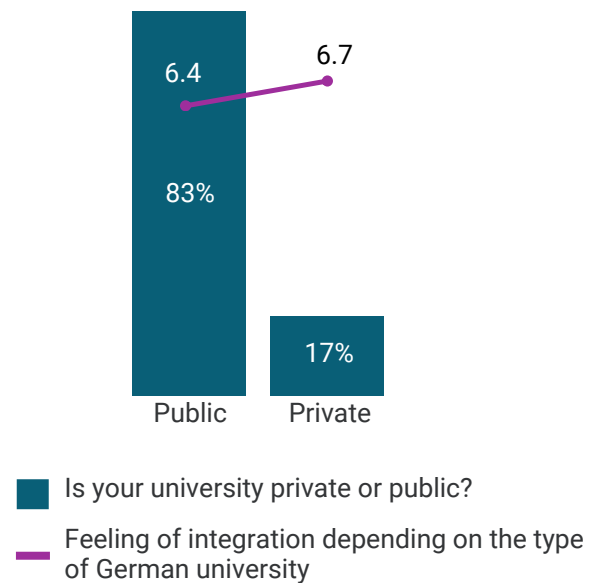
APPENDIX

Appendix 1: International students in Germany and their integration situation

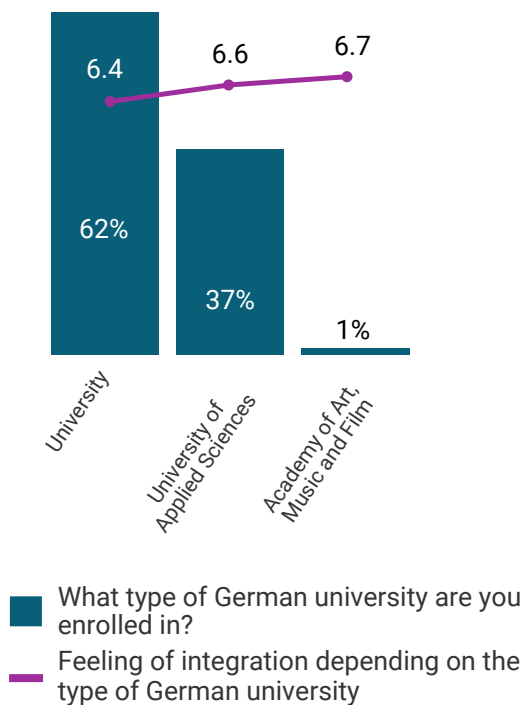
What is your field of study?



Is your university private or public?



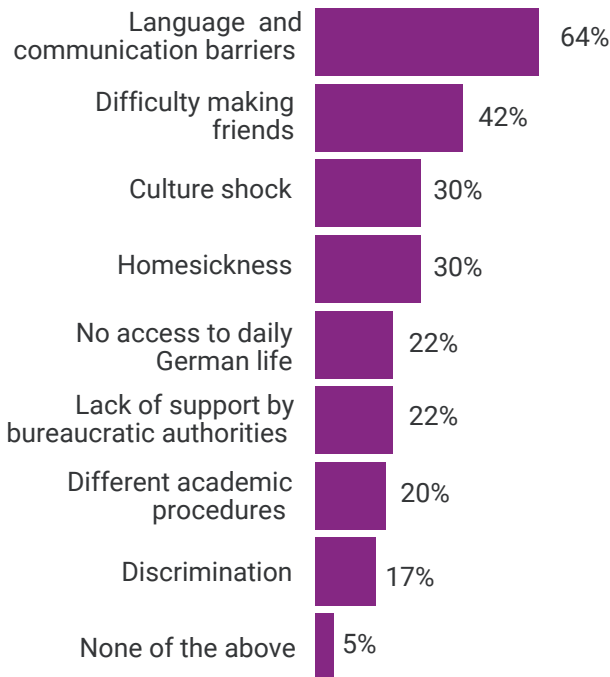
What type of German university are you enrolled in?



APPENDIX

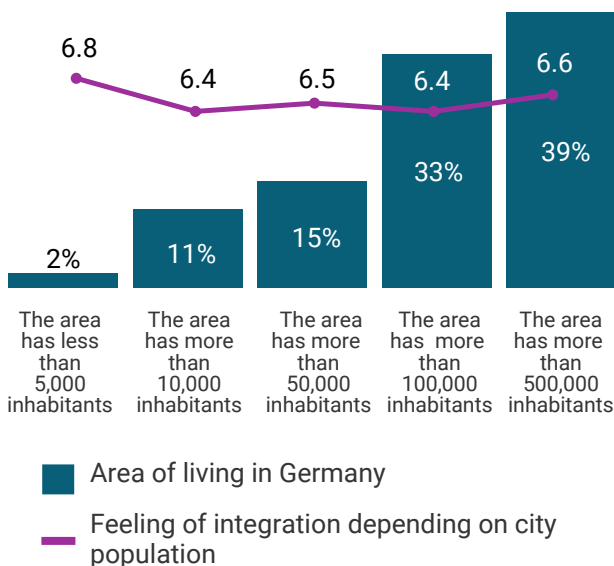
Appendix 2: Integration Inhibitors

What challenges did you face while trying to integrate?

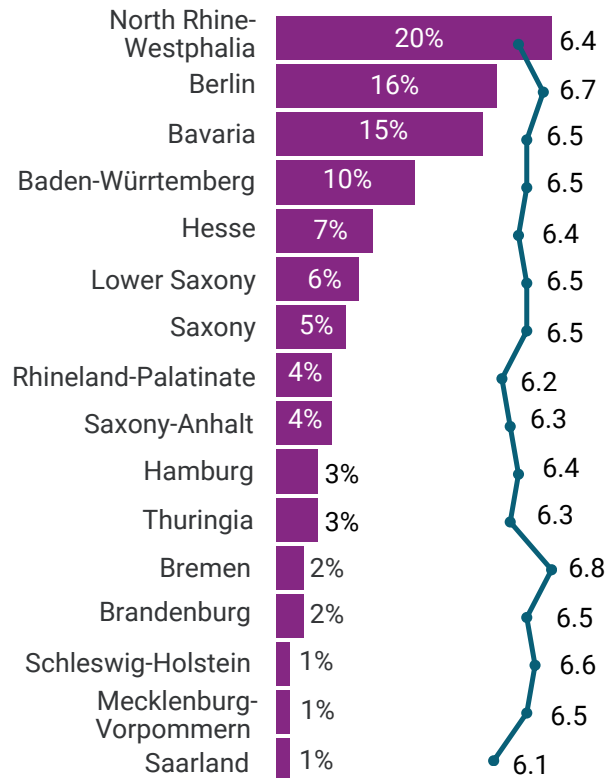


Appendix 3: Integration and Living Area

Which of the following is applicable to the area where you live(d) in Germany?



Which German federal state do (did) you live in?

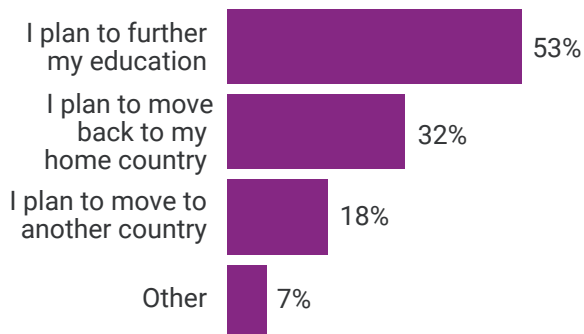


— Feeling of integration depending on German federal state

APPENDIX

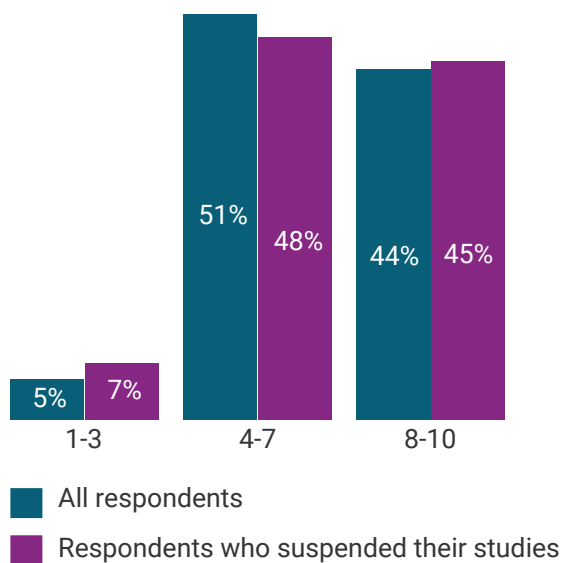
Appendix 4: Intention to start a career in Germany

If you do not intend to start a career in Germany, is there a specific reason for this?



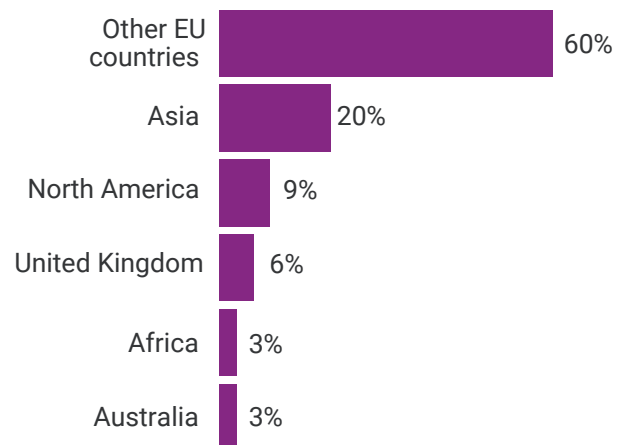
Appendix 5: Suspension of studies

On a scale of 1-10, how much do you feel you had the opportunity to integrate yourself in Germany?



Appendix 6: Lack of Integration and Relocation

If you relocated to another country, which country did you move to?



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