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THE INTERNATIONAL  
STUDY EXPERIENCE  
IN GERMANY

Findings from the International  
Student Barometer 2018 (2019)

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# THE INTERNATIONAL STUDY EXPERIENCE IN GERMANY

Findings from the International Student Barometer 2018 (2019)

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**NANNETTE RIPMEESTER**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The International Student Barometer (ISB) is a benchmarking survey aimed at providing higher education institutions (HEIs), regions and countries with information concerning their international students in a multitude of aspects in comparison to both national and international benchmarks. Responses to the 2018 International Student Barometer survey at universities in Germany form the basis of this report, shedding light on what aspects of the learning and living experience matter most for international students studying in Germany. This report is based on 14,115 international students from 17 German higher education institutions, with an average response rate of 24%.

### HAPPY STUDENTS

The number of international students enrolled in higher education institutions worldwide has skyrocketed in the past two decades. Understanding what impacts students' experience on campus is key to promoting student wellbeing and attracting international students to a particular country and a particular institution. As a new addition to the 2018 ISB survey, we asked international students questions about their happiness. The top five responses with the highest correlation with the happiness question in Germany were *"making good contacts for the future"* (good contacts), *"the social activities"* (organised events) (social activities), *"confidence about managing a research project as a result of my experience so far"* (only asked to PhD students) (managing research), *"the surroundings outside the institution"* (good place to be) and *"learning that will help me to get a good job"* (employability). Students who felt a high level of satisfaction with these aspects of their experience were likely to also report a high level of happiness with their overall study experience. The fact that "employability" and "good contacts" appear in the top five for happiness highlights the importance of the next step after graduation.

### HOW DO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DECIDE TO STUDY IN GERMANY?

What makes international students decide to attend a particular university, often in a country they have never visited before? One of the most prominent trends we noticed is the importance of getting a job upon graduation as a key driver for student choice. *"Future career impact"* is the major driver for international students to opt to study in Germany (96%), followed by the reputation of the country (93%), closely followed by the reputation of the institution (92%). In comparison with the Global ISB benchmark, the importance of Germany as a key driver in prospective student decision making is higher than any other country reputation elsewhere, highlighting the strong brand that a German academic degree provides.

## GETTING THE WELCOME EXPERIENCE RIGHT MATTERS

The overall satisfaction with the arrival phase for international students is 6% lower in Germany compared to the Global ISB. The main points for concern are getting to/arriving in the accommodation for the first night's stay, the accommodation condition itself upon arrival and the support from the accommodation office as well as the orientation towards living in the new place. However, the lowest score is for the welcome and/or pick up at the airport, train or bus station, scoring 24% lower than the Global ISB and 15% lower than the continental European ISB. The debate around “spoon-feeding” international students has been a recurring theme during the ISB feedback presentations in Germany. However, a certain level of guidance and support is needed to ensure an international student gets off to a good start in their student journey and settles in quickly with their new academic life in the host country. Yet, the arrival process is just the start of the student journey. To ensure international students truly recommend their experience to other prospective students thinking of applying to a university abroad, it is essential to get the whole student journey right, from arrival to integration to career prospects “...because a good welcoming culture does not end with graduation but should include the first steps into the German job market, too” as Jan Bensien from [Kiel University](#) said in one of the good practice interviews that were held for this report.

## WHAT DO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS VALUE MOST ABOUT THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

The overall satisfaction with learning is slightly lower in Germany, but with 84% satisfaction among international students, there is no reason to worry. In particular, Germany outperforms both the Global and the European benchmark with regards to two areas at the heart of learning at any higher education institution; the expertise of the lecturers and the quality of the lectures. These two elements are key to the learning experience and Germany can be proud of this excellent achievement. Room for improvement within learning entails explanation of marking criteria and more transparent assessment. Both these concerns could be resolved rather simple, by ensuring international students have a better understanding of the German grading system.

However, what has the largest impact on learning satisfaction is “*learning that will help me to get a good job*”. Over time, this focus (labelled “*employability*” within the ISB), has become more important. The 2018 ISB data shows employability having globally the highest correlation (35%) with recommending the study experience.

Today's international students expect to be prepared for the next step upon graduation. In Germany “*employability*” and “*learning overall*” both show a 34% correlation with recommending the study experience in Germany. The importance of “*employability*” in learning, coupled with the importance of “*future careers impact*” during the orientation phase,

means that a preparation for entering the (German) labour market is a topic of imminent importance for institutions. Attracting and retaining international talent has become tremendously important, not just for higher education institutions, but also for regions and countries. For Germany and the German institutions, creating a more international classroom with more attention on the next step upon graduation may prove to be the most beneficial to attract international students to stay in Germany.

## **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' SATISFACTION WITH LIVING IN GERMANY**

The ISB asks international students about their arrival experience in the new country, how they perceive the actual learning at their institution and also about their living experience while studying. The importance of the living experience should not be underestimated, as it may be a cause of joy or of anxiety colouring how international students feel about having studied abroad. The ISB 2018 data shows a lower overall satisfaction with living in Germany than in the Global ISB. The difference with the continental European ISB is just over one percentage point. However, Germany outperforms both benchmarks with 17% when it comes to the costs of living. Costs are a sensitive issue, as “low cost” is occasionally seen as “low quality”. For Germany, the issue is finding a balance between providing a high-quality education while the cost of living is low. Although the affordability of studying in Germany can attract more international students, the low or absent tuition fees can also have a counteractive result, namely holding off students who attach a price to high-quality education.

## **HOW TO SUPPORT THE INTERNATIONAL STUDY EXPERIENCE IN GERMANY**

Support services is another topic we survey within the ISB. Student well-being is slightly lower in Germany than in continental Europe (89% vs 91%). Comparing this globally, it is mainly due to the lower level of satisfaction surrounding the connection between international and domestic German students. However, the German Welcome Centres score very highly with a 95% satisfaction rate. The main area for improvement for most German universities is with regards to the accommodation office (*Studentenwerk*).

The importance of employability and careers in support services shows that higher education institutions can no longer afford to treat careers advice as a “nice extra”. Career centres at German higher education institutions are an area of concern, scoring 5% lower than the Global ISB, although we have to acknowledge that satisfaction has improved over the years by 24%, which is a considerable improvement.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding what attracts international students to opt for a study destination and what will make them recommend the experience to others is key. Germany outperforms other regions in the expertise of its academics and the quality of its lectures, combined with a high score on the “welcome centres”, the low cost of accommodation and the high score on the value for money question. Based on the ISB 2018 data, Germany offers a high quality degree at a relative low cost. The advice for German higher education based on the ISB 2018 dataset is two-fold: Firstly, to make sure the arrival experience is excellent, and secondly, to ensure students feel well prepared for the next step after graduation.

An arrival phase that works well makes students feel welcome from the start, well-integrated and happy to recommend the initial experience. Traditionally, the topic “arrival and accommodation” of incoming international students is not considered the responsibility of German universities. For example, *Studentenwerk* is responsible for allocating rooms in dormitories. If German universities wish to meet the expectations of international students, they may have to up their game. International students anticipate a certain welcome and are not interested in the local or national organisation of that welcome or who is responsible for the delivery. Closer institutional cooperation, more comprehensive pre-arrival information and exhaustive support on arrival may be areas of improvement for the German higher education institutions. Currently, the German system does provide this only to some extent, as the institutions in Germany also expect a certain level of self-management from students. Whether it is best to “spoon-feed” students or prompt them to “learn-by-doing” is open for discussion, but managing expectations is certainly key here to ensure students know upfront what to expect.

Since the German higher education institutions are 8% behind in satisfaction on employability, this would be a key area offering room for improvement. Particularly given the importance of the topic for both satisfaction and recommendations. Yet, employability is not “just a career workshop” towards the end of the curriculum. To truly support students in their career goals, employability should be integrated into the curricula, allowing students to think about their future career and supporting them with their next step into the global world of work. Whether students decide to stay in Germany, return to their home country or go to a third country, when sufficiently prepared for the next move after graduation, they will become brand ambassadors for Germany.

# / 1 METHODOLOGY EXPLAINED

Essential to any discussion of the international student experience is an understanding of what students want and how they perceive their international study experience. The International Student Barometer (ISB) is an indicator of how successful institutions are in meeting the hopes and ambitions of international students who decide to study at that institution. The ISB is the largest annual survey of international students in the world, and since 2005 has been used by over 1,400 higher education institutions in 33 countries.

The International Student Barometer is a benchmarking survey aimed at providing HEIs with information concerning how they perform in a multitude of aspects in comparison to both national and international benchmarks. The ISB is a quantitative empirical study, allowing HEIs and (national) governments to track students' perceptions and satisfaction over time. Taking place annually, at the beginning of the academic year, the survey engages international students in providing feedback on their experience studying at their chosen higher education institution and providing insight into why they chose to study in a particular country. During 2009, 2010, 2011, 2016 and 2018 the ISB has run in Germany in cooperation with GATE-Germany. This report reflects the 2018 survey results and is based on 14,115 international students from 17 higher education institutions, with an average response rate of 24%. In order to be included in the benchmarks, an institution had to have a minimum response rate of 10% and a minimum number of 100 responses.

The survey tracks and compares the decision-making factors, expectations, perceptions and intentions of international students from application to graduation. It enables institutions to make informed decisions to improve the international student experience and drive successful recruitment and marketing strategies. Most importantly, it will help identify whether international students would recommend their German institution to others.

The international student experience at the participating German institutions was analysed for both institutional-level and national-level comparison against the global ISB benchmark, to gain insight into each institution's performance as well as Germany-wide issues. The dimensions of the international student experience include (amongst others) arrival, learning, living and support services. Within each of those areas, students were asked to rate their satisfaction with several elements, including the quality of teaching, social activities and facilities, the surroundings outside the university, the library facilities, internet access, accommodation quality and cost, making friends with local people and students as well as with students from other countries. Moreover, the ISB asked final year international students how well-prepared they felt for the job market. Students were also asked about their use of and satisfaction with the support services provided by their university.



For the learning, living and support elements we also calculate the global derived importance. This is a measure of the correlation between satisfaction with the different elements and the willingness to recommend the institution with regard to that particular element relative to the Global benchmark. Derived importance is purely based on correlation. Correlation shows whether there is some sort of coexistence between two variables. However, it does not say what impact one variable has on the other one.

The ISB focuses on providing information with the objective of improving the standards of educational service of higher education institutions and national higher education governmental bodies that i-graduate works with. The data from the ISB survey is reported to each institution involved, including both institution-specific and international results. Each ISB partner institution can use their results comparatively to understand their strengths and weaknesses in the international market and put into place the necessary structure and financial measures for improvement. Participating institutions can customise their survey to a certain extent, with a close watch on ensuring the ability to benchmark the results.

The ISB's legitimacy is bolstered by the number of respondents; the ISB has received over 3.7 million student responses to date.

## HOW ARE RESPONDENTS SOURCED IN THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BAROMETER?

The ISB can be completed by all currently-enrolled international and EU students, including study abroad and exchange students, at all years and levels of study. Each higher education institution contacts its own international student body during the live period of the survey, in 2018 this was from October to December and included 195,182 international students from 212 institutions in 21 countries. The institution-specific results are compared against comparator groups and national and international benchmarks and reported back to the individual institutions. The benchmarks are based on a two-year research period. This so-called rolling benchmark combines the data of institutions who participated in the 2017 and 2018 Student Barometers, in both the Northern and Southern hemisphere waves. For those who participated in both years, we only use the most recent data. Institutions that do not reach the benchmark cut-off (minimum 100 responses and a minimum of 10% response rate) are taken out. As a result, the benchmarked data is based on 199 institutions globally, 55 in Continental Europe<sup>1</sup> and 16 in Germany<sup>2</sup>.

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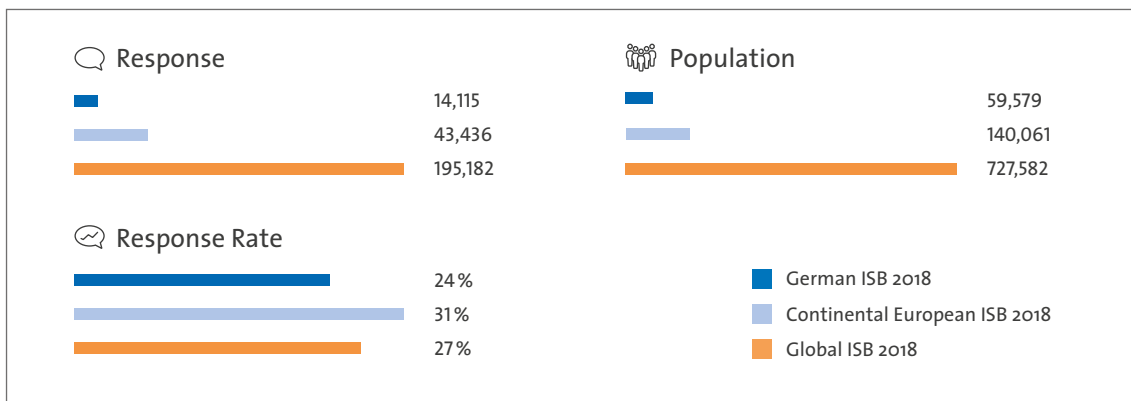
<sup>1</sup> The Continental European ISB benchmark excludes the UK and Ireland. The UK and Ireland form part of the Global ISB benchmark.

<sup>2</sup> 17 Higher Education Institutions in Germany participated in the 2018/19 benchmark study; one institution was not included in the benchmark as it had not the minimum response rate of 10% and the minimum number of 100 responses.

## 2 THE INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE IN GERMANY

The number of international students enrolled in higher education institutions worldwide has skyrocketed in the past two decades, increasing from two million in 1999 to around five million at present according to OECD data. Responses to the 2018 International Student Barometer (ISB) survey at universities in Germany form the basis of this report, shedding light on what aspects of the learning and living experience matter most for international students studying in Germany. In 2018, 14,115 international students studying at 17 universities in Germany took part in the ISB.

Of those 14,115 international students, 53.7% are in the process of acquiring a master's degree, 33.5% a bachelor's degree, 9.8% a PhD degree and 3% are pursuing a different kind of degree. The STEM fields and medicine are well-represented amongst the respondents. The two largest nationality groups are Chinese students (12%) and Indian students (11%), followed by a wide variety of other nationalities.



In the 2018 ISB survey, we asked for the first time what would make students most happy. The five elements that most frequently correlated with international student happiness were “making good contacts for the future” (good contacts), “the social activities” (organised events) (social activities), “confidence about managing a research project as a result of my experience so far” (only asked to PhD students) (managing research), “the surroundings outside the institution” (good place to be) and “learning that will help me to get a good job” (employability).

Students who had high satisfaction with these aspects of their experience were likely to also report a high level of happiness with their overall study experience. The converse is also true – those with low satisfaction in these areas were more likely to report lower happiness with their study experience.

<sup>3</sup> “Improving the Student Experience: Learning From a Comparative Study of International Student Satisfaction”, Journal of Studies in International Education, May 2018.

These top five most influential elements highlight the importance of employability skills, future job prospects and the fact that students' surroundings do impact student happiness. A word of warning though; there is not one single recipe for international student happiness, because when we dig deeper into the ISB data it reveals that happiness is impacted by different elements depending on various student characteristics, including nationality.

**Top 5 Happiness Correlations for Learning and Living Elements (Autumn 2018 ISB)**

\*\* only asked to PhD students

All nationalities studying in Germany	Chinese students studying in Germany	Indian students studying in Germany
Good contacts	Worship facilities	Accommodation quality
Social activities	Eco-friendly attitude	Course organisation
Managing research**	Managing research**	Employability
Good place to be	Social activities	Good place to be
Employability	Social facilities	Social activities

For example, for international students from China, who comprised 1,754 of the ISB respondents in this 2018 study and represent Germany's leading group of international students, worship facilities and the social aspect are very important.

Responses from students from India, the second-largest undergraduate sample in the German 2018 ISB (1,565 respondents) and second-largest source of German universities' international enrolments, reveal another area with a high impact on happiness: accommodation quality and course organisation have the largest correlation with happiness for them.

Data supports the notion that international students' happiness with their studies is influenced by characteristics such as nationality, gender and stage of their studies. International students' subjective satisfaction with their experience is determined by a myriad of interconnected factors – it would be a mistake to assume that student support should target nationalities without taking into consideration the context and characteristics of individual students. Nevertheless, identifying the top elements related to the happiness of international students allows institutions to better serve their needs and help them achieve both professional and personal development goals.

Though there are apparent differences between nationalities, international student marketers and recruiters would be wise to dig deeper and consider what other variables may be mediating the link between nationality and student happiness. While the factors identified by the ISB play a role in student happiness, the correlation is not 100%, meaning that there are other factors at play.

As the number of students pursuing higher education outside their home country is now at an all-time high, understanding what factors exert the most influence on their international educational experience is a top priority for the educators and administrators who work with them. An awareness that the needs of students are influenced by their backgrounds, courses of study and future plans has ignited interest in measuring student well-being and happiness to offer tailored support.

#### Participating German Universities/ISB 2018–19

(14,115 international students responded)

- / Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel
- / Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder)
- / Freie Universität Berlin
- / Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena
- / Hochschule Neubrandenburg
- / Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
- / Ostbayerische Technische Hochschule Regensburg
- / Philipps-Universität Marburg
- / Ruhr-Universität Bochum
- / RWTH Aachen University
- / Technische Universität Berlin
- / Technische Universität Chemnitz
- / Technische Universität Darmstadt
- / Technische Universität Kaiserslautern
- / Universität Bayreuth
- / Universität des Saarlandes
- / Universität Hamburg

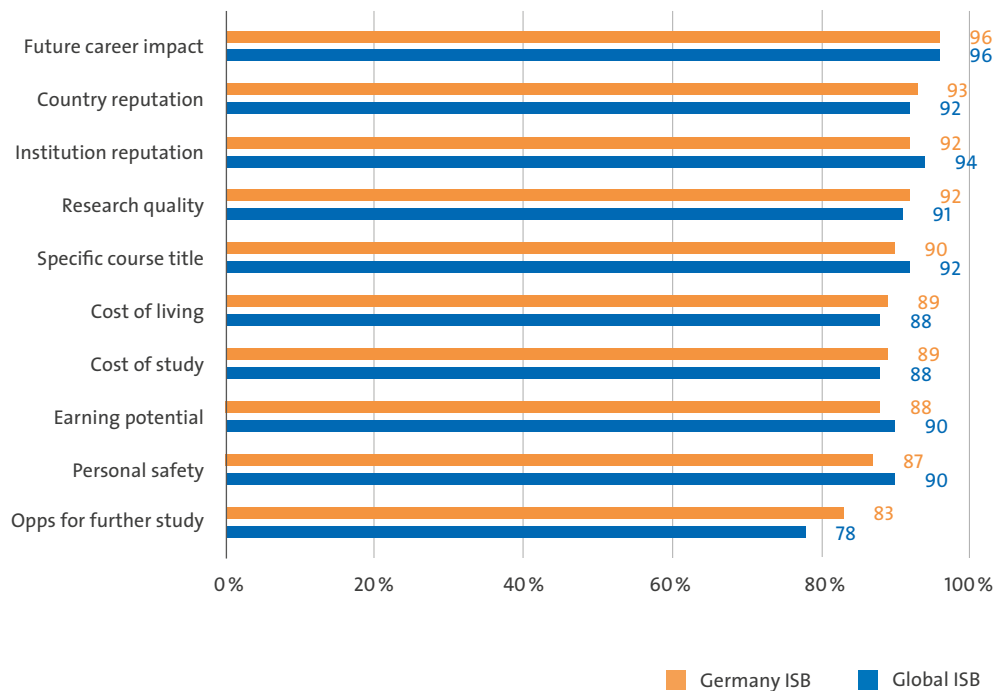
### 3 ORIENTATION PHASE

## WHAT MAKES INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DECIDE TO STUDY IN GERMANY?

What makes international students decide to attend a particular university, often in a country they have never visited before? Do international students first choose a particular country and next find an institution in that country? One of the most prominent trends we can see among key decision drivers is the importance of getting a job upon graduation. “*Future career impact*” is the major driver for international students making the decision to come to Germany (96%), followed by the reputation of the country (93%) and subsequently the reputation of the institution (92%). In comparison with the Global ISB benchmark, the importance of Germany as a key driver in prospective student decision-making is higher than any other country reputation elsewhere, highlighting the strong brand that a German academic degree provides. As mentioned previously, the importance of the next career step upon graduation is a key driver for study choice, which seems a stronger driving force for non-EU students (97%) than for EU students (92%).

#### Top 10 factors in study decision (in %)

How important were the following factors when deciding where to study?



The fact that Germany has very low, sometimes non-existent, tuition fees in comparison with other countries is a constant source of discussion. Does the low cost of study play a role in the decision-making of international students? The truth is, only partly. Both Cost of Study and Cost of Living are just 1% more important for decision-making in Germany than in the Global ISB. Nevertheless, both Cost of Living and Cost of Study are in the top 10 elements that influence the decision of where to study. International students were presented with 20 factors and Cost of Living rates the 6th most important with 89%, followed closely by Cost of Study. Therefore, cost is certainly a factor that features into decision-making but not the most important nor most decisive factor. The fact that Germany offers high-quality education at a reasonable cost – with a degree that prepares students well for their career goals according to 41% of international students – strongly supports the message that Germany is a good study destination. For non-EU students, the cost factor is markedly more important than for EU students.

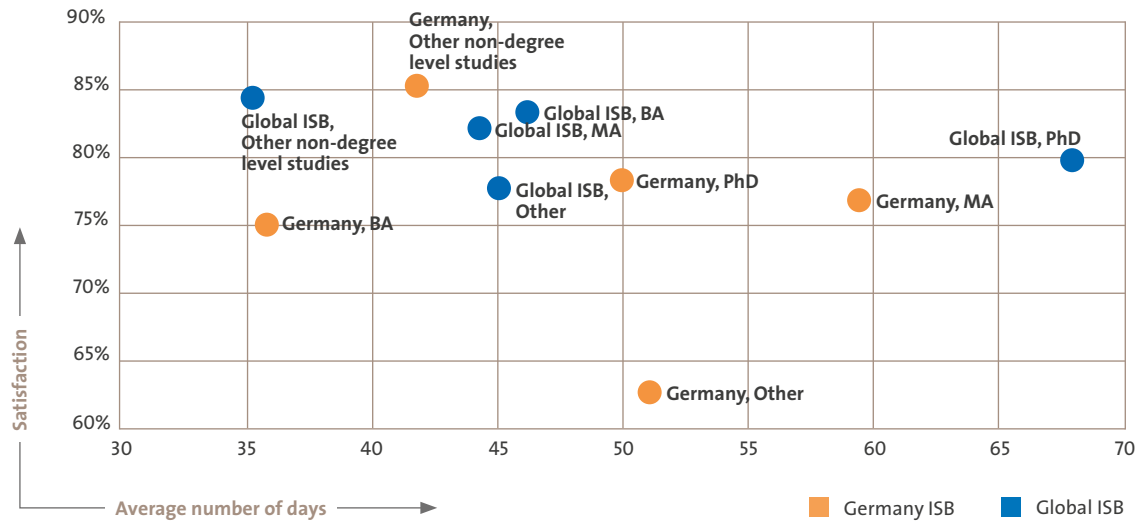
For 82% of international students, Germany was their first choice of location of study, and if asked “*which was most important in your decision of where to study: country or institution?*” 50% would say the country is more important compared to 36% in the Global ISB, again highlighting the strong brand name of German higher education.

The institution’s website is the main influence when we look at what helped international students to choose. But, of course, we should not underestimate the factors that lead prospective students to look at an institution’s website (such as DAAD-supported events across the globe, alumni, current students, league tables and rankings). League tables and rankings are the 6th most important factor for study-related decisions (20%); word of mouth from friends, current students and alumni is of far more importance. For German institutions, recommendation via current students (27%) and alumni (24%), play a larger role than on average. Agents are used by relatively few German higher education institutions.

When asked how long students had to wait between applying and receiving an offer from their university, Germany outperforms the Global ISB for PhD and BA students when it comes to the duration, but for MA students this process takes longer (51 days in Germany vs 47 days globally). Although the process for non-EU students takes approximately 10 days longer, they are more satisfied than EU students with the application process. In the application process, both speed and feeling a personal connection matter. International students can apply to any institution in the world and they usually sign up to a number of institutions. For a student waiting for an answer regarding whether or not they are being accepted onto the course that will shape their future life at an institution where they are going to spend the next few months or years, 4 weeks is already a long waiting time. However, if that institution connects with the student early on in the process and lays out the steps, you can start building such a connection, even more so if you combine it with responding to the student as fast as possible. Therefore, the institution that combines building a connection with speed is probably also the institution that will be able to handpick the best-fitting students out of the pool.

### From application to offer – number of days and satisfaction

How long did you wait between applying and receiving your offer from this institution?



## 4 ARRIVAL PHASE

### FINDING YOUR WAY AS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IN GERMANY

Overall satisfaction with the arrival phase for international students is lower in Germany compared to the Global ISB benchmark (18% very satisfied in Germany vs 25% very satisfied globally). However, the orientation programme received a response rate of 85% satisfied international students, a good satisfaction score; the issue may be that only 59% of international students attended the orientation programme. The major reason (40%) given for not attending was that they arrived after the orientation programme took place. This underlines the importance of having students attend orientation events and represents an area that offers room for improvement for German institutions. It also suggests that not just emails, but also other social media should be used to deliver the message to international students and get the attendance rate of orientation programmes up.

	GERMANY ISB	GLOBAL ISB	EUROPE ISB (EXCL. UK & IRE)	GLOBAL ISB +/-	EUROPE ISB (EXCL. UK & IRE) +/-
ARRIVAL AVERAGE	77,3 %	84,4 %	80,4 %	-7,1 %	-3,1 %
ARRIVAL OVERALL	83,3 %	89,0 %	87,3 %	-5,6 %	-4,0 %
<b>ARRIVAL</b>					
Pre-arrival info	82,1 %	86,9 %	83,9 %	-4,8 %	-1,8 %
Accommodation condition	70,6 %	81,2 %	75,3 %	-10,6 %	-4,7 %
First night	67,2 %	83,3 %	77,3 %	-16,2 %	-10,2 %
Welcome	54,2 %	77,8 %	68,8 %	-23,6 %	-14,6 %
<b>ORIENTATION</b>					
Finance Office	89,2 %	90,9 %	92,7 %	-1,7 %	-3,5 %
Formal welcome	87,4 %	90,1 %	90,5 %	-2,7 %	-3,1 %
Institution orientation	86,0 %	88,5 %	87,7 %	-2,5 %	-1,8 %
Home friends	84,5 %	84,9 %	84,3 %	-0,4 %	0,1 %
Social activities	82,8 %	84,6 %	83,1 %	-1,8 %	-0,4 %
Social orientation	80,2 %	83,3 %	79,9 %	-3,0 %	0,4 %
Local orientation	84,6 %	85,2 %	85,9 %	-0,7 %	-1,3 %
Other friends	88,5 %	88,0 %	90,8 %	0,4 %	-2,3 %
Admissions Office	86,3 %	86,3 %	86,3 %	0,0 %	0,0 %
Registration	84,3 %	88,7 %	88,7 %	-4,4 %	-4,4 %
Internet access	75,8 %	82,6 %	80,8 %	-6,9 %	-5,1 %
Campus and facilities intro	81,0 %	84,0 %	80,6 %	-3,0 %	0,4 %
Meeting staff	81,9 %	90,2 %	87,8 %	-8,2 %	-5,9 %
Bank account	67,5 %	78,0 %	66,1 %	-10,4 %	1,5 %
Study sense	75,4 %	84,2 %	79,6 %	-8,7 %	-4,2 %
Clubs and societies intro	65,1 %	74,7 %	67,3 %	-9,6 %	-2,2 %
Accommodation Office	71,6 %	85,0 %	77,2 %	-13,3 %	-5,6 %
Living orientation	66,3 %	77,7 %	67,3 %	-11,3 %	-1,0 %
Host friends	65,4 %	73,2 %	66,1 %	-7,7 %	-0,6 %



The satisfaction with the welcome phase in general (Welcome Overall) is 6% lower in Germany compared with the Global ISB and 4% lower than the continental European ISB. If we look at the average score of all the various questions under the “welcome” heading, we also see a lower satisfaction (7% lower than the Global ISB and 3% lower than the European ISB). The main points for concern are getting to/arriving in the accommodation for the first night’s stay, the accommodation condition itself upon arrival (not clean is the most common criticism) and the support from the accommodation office as well as the orientation towards living in the new place. However, the lowest score is for the welcome and/or pick up at the airport, train or bus station; this is 24% lower than the Global ISB and 15% lower than the continental European ISB. During the feedback presentations this has been discussed regularly; how much should one “spoon-feed” international students? Traditionally in Germany students should find their own way and sort their own issues as part of the (international) study experience. Although this may support young individuals’ personal growth, some guidance is essential to make an international student get to grips quickly with the new situation.

At the [Philipps-Universität Marburg](#), they put considerable effort into the social activities upon arrival, hence we asked Carmen Fels from the university’s International Office and Family Services what they do. *“For many students, studying at Philipps-Universität is a new beginning in a foreign place. To ease their transit, we ask new and old students to join our events, activities and trips to meet new people and learn more about the university, the city of Marburg, and its surroundings. From mentoring training to international potluck feasts: Our International Office and Student Club “Marburg International Student Club” host a variety of educational and cultural events that are offered up to 1 month before classes start and continue throughout the semester:*

- / Students are offered intensive German classes which take place after the Orientation Programme and last 4 weeks prior to the beginning of the semester term. These language classes feature 2 one-day field trips during which students travel to other cities in the state of Hesse and get to know German and Hessian traditions and culture.*
- / On a regular basis, the International Office of the Philipps-Universität offers interesting trips and excursions with the aim of introducing international students to Germany, its history, culture and people. These getaways take place mainly during the lecture period and are either completely free of charge or very low-priced.*
- / Dramarasmus is a European theatre project which aims to unite international and German students. Being in the theatre will offer you the opportunity to experience values such as trust, respect and solidarity. In short, this group sees the theatre as a place of and for intensive encounters. The motto of Dramarasmus: “I play, therefore I am”. During the semester, the mem-*

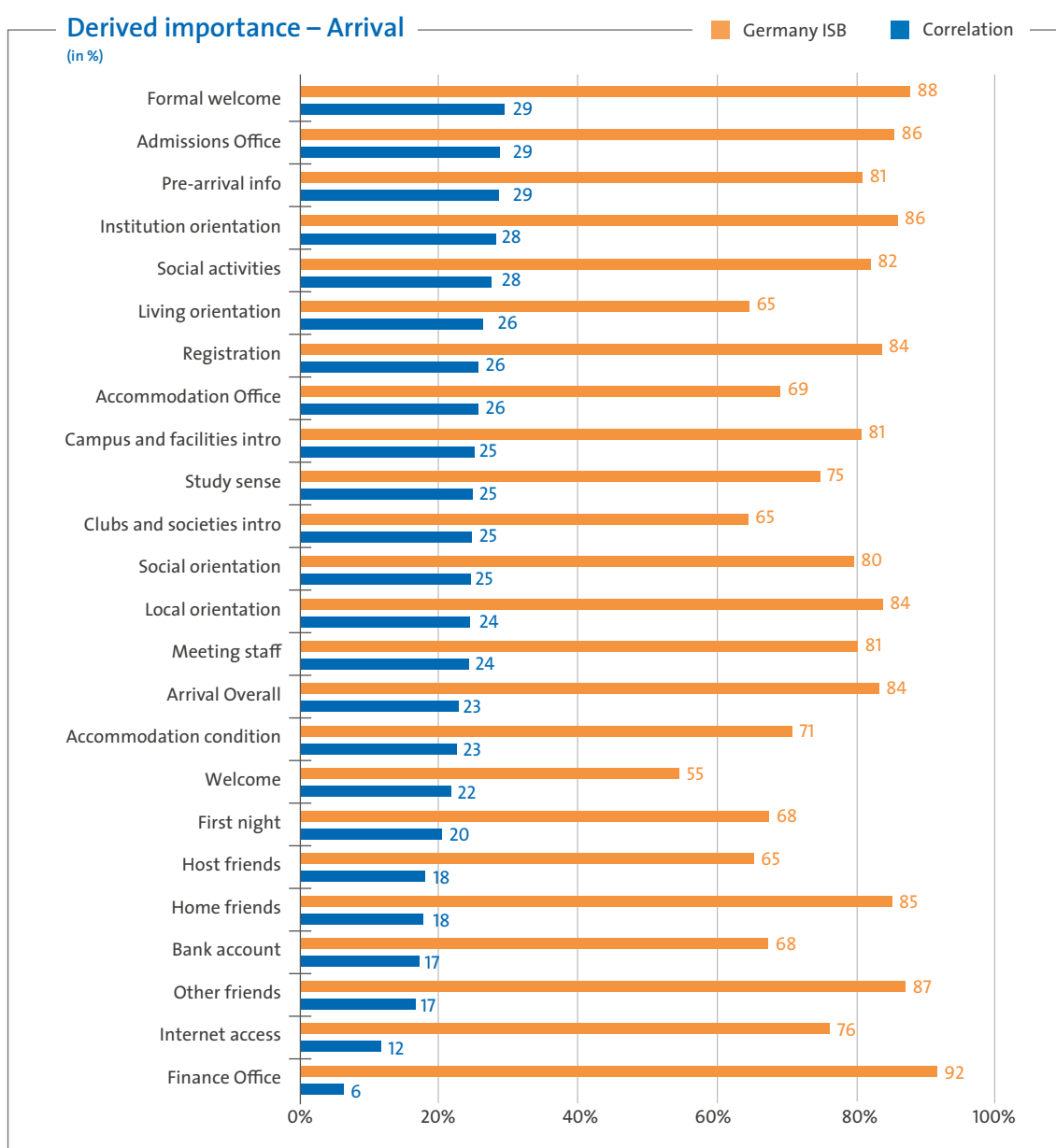
*bers of Dramarasmus meet in weekly workshops. At the end of the semester, the group will present what they have rehearsed. International students will have the opportunity to improve their German within the Dramarasmus project. Everybody who is interested in theatre is welcome!*

*/ Marburg International Club also offers numerous leisure activities throughout the semester.”*

In the arrival phase, students across the globe are trying to find their path within their new host country. Some hurdles in this adaptation phase are institution or location specific, others are regional or national, and some are more universal when it comes to settling in. Making friends is one of those global concerns that plays an important part in finding your way and feeling happy in the new study destination. Hence the question “*Making friends from this country*” is considered a very important one. In Germany, the overall national score is 8% lower in satisfaction than the global benchmark and just 1% lower than the continental European benchmark when it comes to the connection between domestic and international students. However, German universities strive to get creating a truly international classroom right, as is also underlined by the many discussions around this theme during the ISB feedback presentations. The variety of these satisfaction scores amongst the German universities is wide, ranging from just 41% to a high 86%. The climate is often seen as a reason, with fewer opportunities for outdoor activities, and so is the culture where people are less welcoming to invite new friends to their homes. The open comments often indicate language issues for making friends, but also indicate that when friendships are formed with German students, they are considered to become deep and long-lasting friendships.

One of the universities that score well on the social aspects of the arrival process is [Ruhr-Universität Bochum](#). According to Ulrike Herrlich from the International Office, support is part of their DNA. “*Ruhr-Universität Bochum is a relatively new university, it opened in 1965. It was founded with the mission to be open to reform and alternatives to traditional university structures. Today, Ruhr-Universität is among the biggest universities in Germany but results of our founding mission can still be felt. E.g. we have very flat hierarchies between the members of the university, from student to professor. So, students find personal support and approachable academics alongside high professional expertise. We are convinced that feeling comfortable at the university and in the city is essential to being able to concentrate on your studies. As the International Office, we are responsible for creating this feeling of being welcome, well-oriented and worry-free about administrative or formal tasks. Hence our support is strongly connected to the arrival process. And you can see from the ISB results that RUBiss international student services has established itself over the years as a favoured support institution. We provide an open door and ear to all student questions, in addition to our many events we organise.*

*For us at Ruhr-Universität, the big challenge is to provide a personal service despite the number of students, faculties and contact persons. During the arrival phase, we offer different orientation events for different groups (degree seeking students, exchange students and refugees preparing to study in Bochum). Each addresses the specific needs of these groups. A central element of all these events is to help students find their way at our big university. We provide contacts to the different support facilities (from language centre to careers service), tours of the campus and its institutions and help students to get to know the social and cultural offers. It isn't just the entire team of the International Office, but also a great number of volunteer students who are on the spot. Those students act as peer tutors, who guide the new international students in how to set up their class schedule, find their way in the different faculties and of course also socialise with each other. In addition to the on-site events, we provide webinars for students who are not yet in Bochum. Besides the information we provide, students benefit from getting to know their contacts in the International Office. As we see it, personal support is the foundation of the arrival process here."*



As well as global concerns about the arrival phase, there are some common European troubles such as the ease of opening a bank account. For modern-day student life, having a bank account in your country of study is often a necessity, especially if we think about the multiple online services that require a national bank card. However, EU rules to overcome money laundering issues have had a negative side effect on any foreigner who wants to open a bank account, which means that across continental Europe, international students struggle in doing this. Germany as a whole, though, outperforms the continental European benchmark by 2%, but scores less than 10% in satisfaction when compared to the Global ISB benchmark. This clearly shows it is a continental European issue, but apparently some German universities have overcome it. During feedback presentations, the discussions around this area highlighted that several universities have made an effort to set up good connections with local branches of banks, creating a smoother process for their international students, whereas it remains an area for concern for others (showing a wide spread in the satisfaction levels from 48% to 82% satisfaction). Irrespective of direct contact to local branch offices of banks, a university can decide to provide strong support in the welcome phase such as Kiel University. We asked Jan Bensien, International Student Advisor, what Kiel University does in this respect. *“Upon arrival, all international students (degree-seeking as well as non-degree students) are welcomed at the International Centre. After handling the administration, our international tutors (experienced international students, funded by the DAAD), take care of all incoming students and help them with major tasks for settling in. They are invited to the orientation programme which takes place during the week before the semester starts. One major highlight of the orientation programme is the seminar “How to handle Germany”, a workshop which has been created as a cooperation between all three Universities in Kiel, the Studentenwerk and the Protestant Student Church: Where can I get a health certificate? Which part-time jobs are suitable for me? How do I open a bank account? What do I have to pay attention to when dealing with the authorities and what is the “broadcasting fee”? We will answer these and many other questions.*

*Throughout the semester the International Centre offers a variety of events, including excursions, cultural events and sports activities. Moreover, the International Centre puts, in cooperation with Kiel University’s Graduate Centre, a special emphasis on doctoral candidates and has created the project “Docs-Build-Bridges”, which offers several activities: a tutoring programme (“Doc-Pilot”), a round table (“Docs-Gettogether”), a German langue programme for doctoral candidates and their spouses and several seminars.”*

**Kiel University** does not make a distinction between degree and non-degree seekers, which is considered positive. If we look at the overall German dataset, we can see that exchange students are in general more satisfied with the arrival process than degree-seeking students, most noticeably around the accommodation office, the accommodation upon arrival and all aspects of orientation. It is a well-known fact that this group is easier to deal with, but universities should always remember the value of degree-seeking students as

they turn into alumni and, if handled well, into brand ambassador alumni. Over time, from the first GATE-Germany-supported ISB wave in 2009 to this current ISB wave in 2018, registration (6%), institution orientation (5%), formal welcome, local orientation and social activities (each 4%) have increased in satisfaction Germany-wide.

One of the universities that score well on the above aspects of the arrival process is [RWTH Aachen University](#), so we spoke to Cathrin Urbanke from the International Office. *“The support services of our International Office focus on the introduction to student life and institution orientation. A decisive feature is our new Welcome Week, which is an entire week dedicated to welcoming new international students and helping them settle in right before the general orientation week for all new RWTH students. The Welcome Week opens with a special Welcome Day that includes a formal welcome to the university, an introduction of the week’s events (orientation sessions as well as social events) and a get together of all the people involved. As far as institution orientation is concerned, there are campus tours, library and gym tours, special events for different target groups (we differentiate between degree and exchange students, for example) and events organised by different central services such as the IT centre, the Admissions Department and the Immigration Office. During the Freshers’ Fair, students have the opportunity to meet various service centres of the University and the city of Aachen, the faculties and faculty councils and ask questions all in the same place at the same time. We work closely with many different student associations, which support students in getting to know each other during social events in their peer groups, and we also organise a Talk Show during which senior international students talk about their own experience in Aachen and at RWTH. The arrival phase is also facilitated by a BeBuddy programme (matching new international students with experienced RWTH students) and our Housing Advice Service.*

*Throughout the Welcome Week and then throughout the year, we offer intercultural workshops to prepare the new students for their cultural experience. The earlier you think about cultural differences, the better prepared you are to understand situations which might otherwise be awkward or problematic. What has really paid off and has been positively evaluated was the social media attention through Instagram and Facebook for our activities.”*

The factors that contribute most to recommendation of the institution are the formal welcome, the admissions office, the pre-arrival information, the institution orientation and social activities. The [Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz](#) has worked hard over the past years to improve their arrival experience and that has paid off. We asked Moritz Wolf from the university’s Center for Quality Assurance and Development what changes they have made. *“We have seen an expansion of the welcome services through the establishment of the “Gutenberg International School Services”, which acts as a Service Centre for international students. We did a fundamental conceptual redesign of our “Info Days” for exchange students and work continuously on the conceptual improvement of our “Orientation Days” for degree-seeking students. And on top of that, we published lots of new information materials, ranging from brochures and flyers to our website for international students. Our proximity to Frankfurt airport helps us, although we do not organise special shuttle or pickup services.”*

Another university that has worked hard to enhance their arrival process is the *Friedrich Schiller University Jena*. Dr Britta Salheiser from the university's international office explains how they have worked on speeding up admissions office work: *"Students often tell us that we were the institution that answered almost directly and that gave them a good feeling about the adequacy of the institution. We aim to answer questions within a day and that seems to pay off. But we also have learned that we sometimes need to send out emails more than once to make students respond quickly, too. However, I believe our YouTube videos about the arrival and settling-in phase are the most efficient step we took recently."*

Yet, the arrival process is just the start of the student journey. To ensure international students truly recommend the experience to other prospective students thinking of applying at a university abroad, a higher education institution has to ensure the full student journey. This spans from the application process to delivering an education complemented with support services that fulfil the sought-after career prospects of the student.

Jan Bensien from [Kiel University](#) explains what their institution does to provide their international students with the entire student-cycle, from application to career (prospects). Kiel University has used both ISB results and focus groups with international students to sharpen their international strategy and this is one of the outcomes: *"The International Centre has created the project 'JobStarter', which offers information programmes, Business German language classes and advising for international students who are seeking employment after studying in Germany, because a good welcoming culture does not end with graduation but should include the first steps into the German job market, too."*

## 5 LEARNING

### HOW DO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS VALUE LEARNING IN GERMANY?

The overall satisfaction with learning is slightly lower in Germany than in the Global ISB, but at 84% among international students, it is a perfectly adequate score. The difference between the German ISB and the continental European ISB is less than a percentage point. Germany outperforms both the Global and the European benchmark regarding the expertise of the lecturers and the quality of the lectures; two areas at the heart of learning in any higher education institution. The main areas for improvement within learning are the explanation of marking criteria and the transparent assessment of students' work. Both these factors could be improved if international students had more of an understanding of the German grading system. Simply understanding how the German examinations work (i.e. how many exams they will have and when during the course, whether there is a test exam or whether all exams count), helps to get to grips with the way a student's work is assessed. Things such as grading and examinations are straight-forward for people who have consistently been exposed to the system but may cause a lot of uncertainty if they are new and different from what you are used to.

Also, more attention to “*course organisation*” (i.e. “*the organisation and smooth running of the course*”) can be beneficial to get the entire satisfaction levels up. Over time this area has improved by 10%, but it is still lagging behind internationally. Again, this may be an area where the manner and style of communication need to be adjusted to take international students' needs into account.

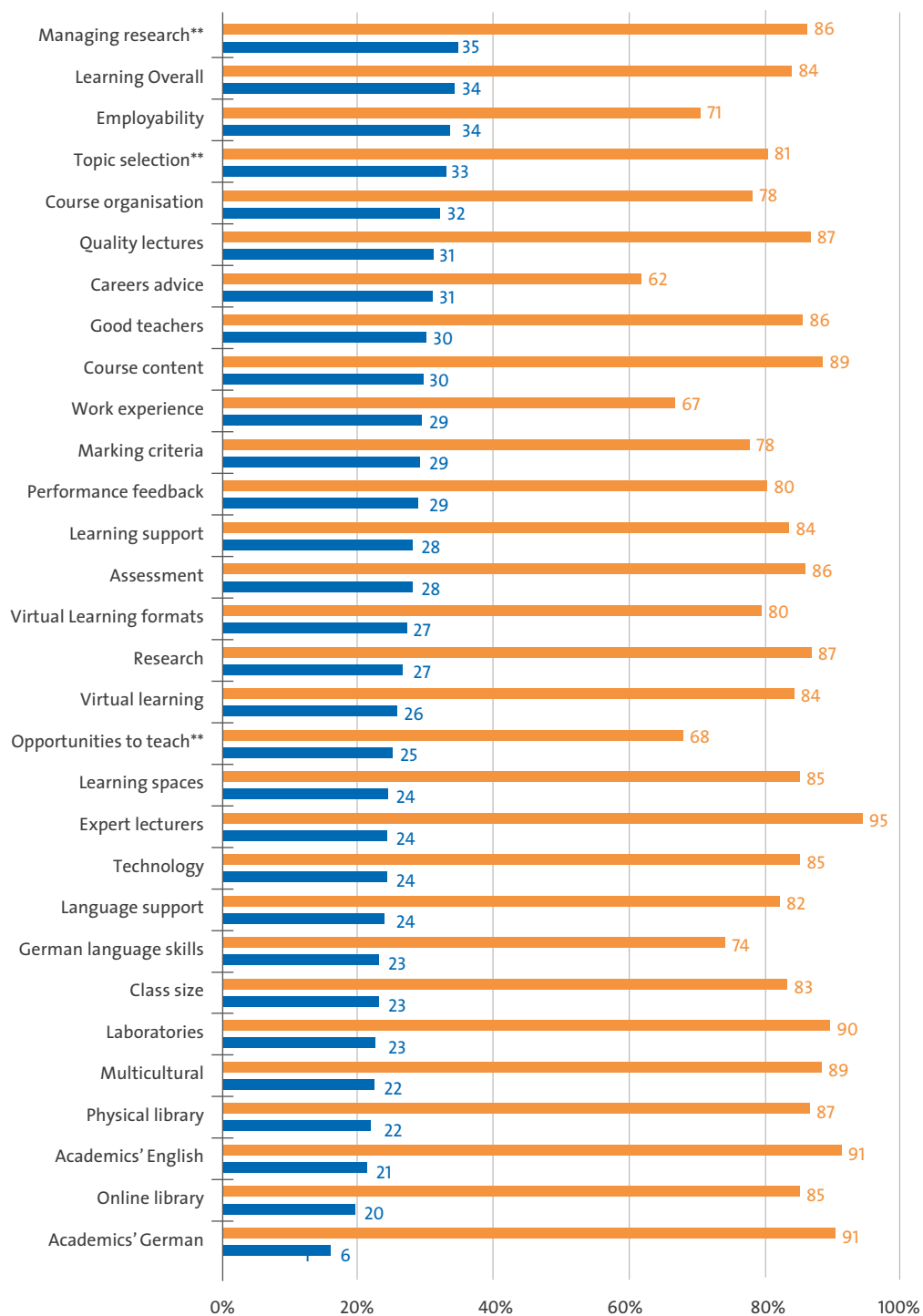
An institution that performs well with regards to the explanation of marking and assessment criteria is the [Philipps-Universität Marburg](#). We asked Carmen Fels from the International Office and Family Services of the [Philipps-Universität Marburg](#) what they do in this area to receive a high satisfaction score from their international students. “*Students who participate in programmes such as the International Undergraduate Study Program (IUSP) and International Summer University (ISU) are given unambiguous instructions on how their work is graded at Philipps-Universität and how their grades can be translated into their home educational system. We use percentage-wise composition of grades based on participation, attendance, essays, in-class examinations and tests, etc. and are upfront about how this works. All in all, each department and all the study programmes are deeply engaged in giving clear-cut and transparent information on our local grading system(s) and how to earn credits. We explain that independent, self-directed study is heavily emphasised at German universities and that at a German university students are expected to do independent reading and primary and secondary research during the course of their studies. Independent study is a crucial element of the academic freedom of a German institution and is designed to encourage self-motivation and promote interesting discussion, since not everyone has read the same material. Being clear and explaining the German system helps a lot.*”



### Derived importance – Learning

(in %)

Germany ISB Correlation





The largest impact on learning satisfaction will come from *“learning that will help me to get a good job”*. Over time, this area labelled *“employability”* within the ISB, has become more important. Today’s international students make a conscious decision to invest time, money and energy into studying abroad, and *“expect”* return on investment in the form of being prepared for the next step upon graduation. Within the ISB we have noticed the constant growth in the importance of employability; in the ISB data of 2018, employability has the highest correlation globally (35%) with the recommendation of the study experience. Within Germany, it ranks equally high, at a similar level as *“learning overall”* (i.e. the question *“Overall, how satisfied are you with the learning experience at this stage in the year?”*) – these both show a 34% correlation with recommending the study experience in Germany. The highest recommendation is for the element *“managing research”* (i.e. the *“Confidence about managing a research project as a result of my experience so far”*), but this question is only asked to PhD candidates, and not to Master or Bachelor students.

The importance of *“employability”* in learning, coupled with the importance of *“future careers impact”* during the orientation phase, means that what young graduates do after university is a matter that can no longer be disregarded. It is a question that is of imminent importance for institutions, from both a recruitment and a retention perspective. Attracting and retaining international talent has become tremendously important, not just for higher education institutions, but also for regions and countries. For Germany and the German institutions, creating a more international classroom with more emphasis on entry into the world of work may prove to be the most beneficial way to attract international students. This is because employability has the largest impact on learning satisfaction, but the current levels of satisfaction regarding employability in Germany (i.e. the question: *“Learning that will help me to get a good job”*) are lagging behind when compared internationally for all levels of education (8% lower in Germany than the Global ISB).

The [University of Bayreuth](#) scores highest on employability of all the German higher education institutions that took part in the 2018 ISB. According to Dr Arnim Heinemann, Director of the International Office at the university, the focus is on employability throughout – from recruitment to graduation: *“Even in our matchmaking conversations during recruitment fairs we talk with international students about what they want to do after graduation.”*

Another institution that scores well on employability is the [University of Kaiserslautern](#), which has a strong focus on natural sciences and engineering subjects. According to Dr Parya Memar, Director of the Department of International Affairs ISGS at the [TU Kaiserslautern](#) (TUK), these *“study programmes have proven to have a very strong current global relevance for employability”*. To support this, TUK offers *“research-oriented study programmes that tackle struggling with the “nagging” questions of innovation, technology and science of today and tomorrow and prepares the prospective graduates with skills und qual-*

*ities necessary for now and the near future. We enable our students to learn with the best, most modern and relevant infrastructure currently available. Moreover, approximately 25% of TUK's budget includes grants with third-party funded research projects for innovative assignments. The development and the result of these projects is a part of the lectures and study projects. The students also benefit directly from the huge amount and variety of these projects and the fact that they can work on them, e.g. as a student assistant. Hence, they gain related work experience even during their studies. For instance, one of the Fraunhofer Institutes offered over 800 student assistant positions in 2015 for work on their research projects, thus increasing the employability of the students, not just by gaining work experience but for getting a PhD position directly after graduation."*

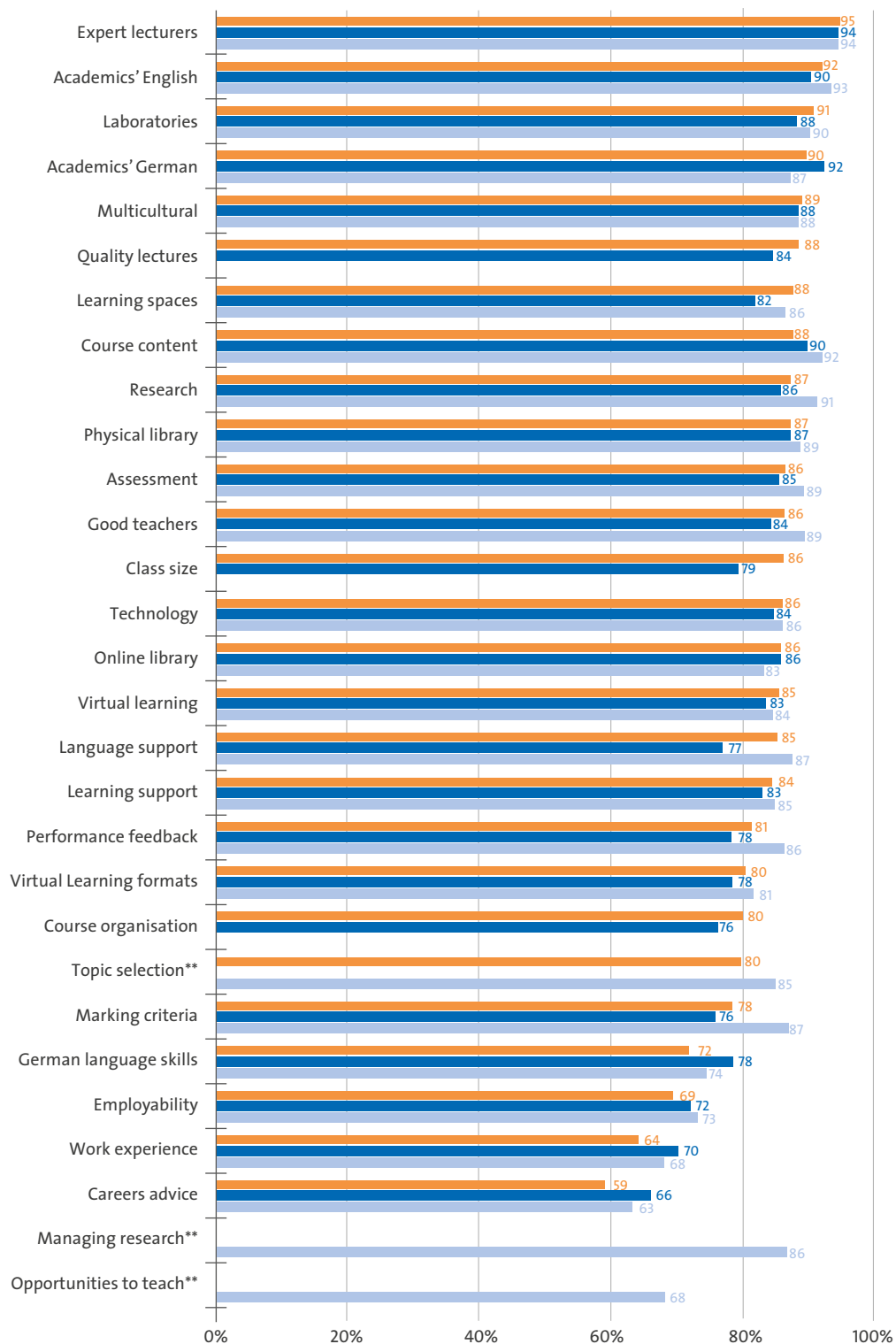
Learning that will help me get a good job works best when combined with a high score on the actual learning. The [Friedrich Schiller University Jena](#) is one of the universities that took part in this year's ISB survey that scores high on learning and the subject area expertise of their lecturers. Dr Britta Salheiser from the International Office of the [Friedrich Schiller University Jena](#) mentions that *"all faculty members aim to be best in their field, but what I think helps most is that we truly focus on international students and providing an international classroom. We adapt our teaching to serve an international audience, we try to pair our students, both international and domestic, because we believe it supports the international learning outcomes for all those involved. We have relatively small classes, supporting a good student-teacher ratio. In addition, in our curricula we systematically address questions on how to enter the labour market upon graduation. Similarly, we focus on the language capability of our international students. Even the students in English-spoken MA programmes are encouraged upfront to take German language classes and we have integrated into many of our curricula the need to increase the German language capability of our international students to support their transition into the German labour market upon graduation. Based on the ISB results of the previous years we learned how important the aspect of career planning and employability is for the students, so we took that up and also launched a careers service last year. The excellent work of my colleagues in the careers service has certainly paid off in this respect."*

The *"English being spoken by academics"* has improved significantly over time (13% between 2009 and 2018), slightly behind the Global ISB (93% vs 91%), but with consistently high scores in both the 2016 and 2018 German ISBs and with high scores for all participating German institutions. The question of German language skills occasionally confused university representatives during the feedback presentations. Needless to say, German academics speak good German, but they may not be aware that international students are answering the question *"Academic staff whose German I can understand"* and that the speed of the spoken language can be too fast to entirely follow an academic course in German. On the other hand, the fact that German is used for academic purposes in programmes aimed at internationals can be beneficial when one takes the step into the German job market into account.

Learning satisfaction (by level of study)

(in %)

MA (7096) BA (4440) PhD (1336)



The ISB also asked about “learning engagement challenges”. The overall conclusion could be that international students in Germany might be slightly more challenged academically, as the overall scores for these questions are below the Global ISB benchmark. Nevertheless, the differences here are rather large between the German institutions, up to 24% between the highest and lowest scoring institution. The data does not suggest that research universities provide a more academically-challenging environment than universities of applied sciences, as the picture is mixed here. One should always remember that the ISB is a benchmark survey and that the students of a particular higher education institution score the satisfaction they experience with their own institution. Hence, a university of applied sciences can outperform a research university in any area, provided that they have recruited the type of students that fit their type, style and level of education.

## 6 LIVING

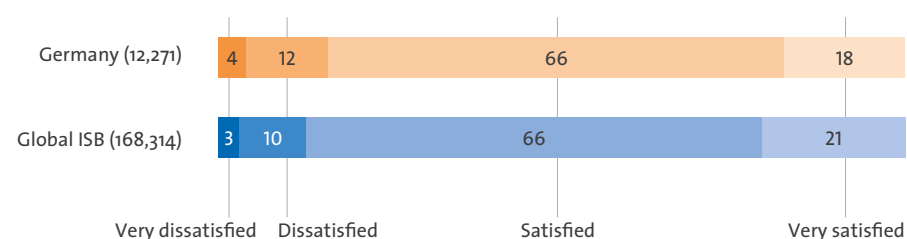
### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' VIEW OF LIVING IN GERMANY

The ISB asks international students not only about their arrival in the new country and how they perceive the actual learning at their institution, but also about their living experience whilst studying. The importance of the living experience should not be underestimated, as it may be a cause of joy or of anxiety colouring how they feel about having studied abroad. The ISB 2018 data shows a lower overall satisfaction with living in Germany than in the Global ISB. The difference between the German ISB and the continental European ISB is just over one percentage point. However, Germany outperforms both benchmarks by 17% when it comes to the costs of living. Costs are always a sensitive issue, as people sometimes perceive “low cost” to mean “low quality”. For Germany as a whole, it’s about the right balance between high-quality education and low living costs. The fact that Germany has low or absent tuition fees is not necessarily something to underline. The focus should be on the overall cost of living in combination with the high quality of education.

#### Overall satisfaction – Living

(in %)

Overall, how satisfied are you with the living experience at this stage in the year?



A key part of the living experience is the social aspect of an international study experience and in particular the connection between international and domestic students. In comparison with the rest of continental Europe (the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Spain, Italy) the German higher education institutions do quite well when it comes to connecting international and domestic students. Nevertheless, during many of the feedback presentations in Germany, this has been an area of concern. During those discussions, it becomes rather clear that connecting people from various nationalities requires a lot of hard work that covers all areas of the university experience, from the initial ar-

rival to learning, living and support services. For the [European University Viadrina](#), located on the German-Polish border and re-established in 1991 as a bridge towards Eastern Europe and in particular to Poland, “internationality” has always been a hallmark. According to Petra Weber, Head of Department of International Affairs of the [European University Viadrina](#), *“Learning to appreciate different perspectives as well as intercultural differences is a matter of course at the Viadrina, particularly with an international student population of 25% coming from over 100 countries worldwide. We therefore have been consistently evaluating orientation programmes and arrival assistance as an immensely important feature for study success of our international students. Communication is a key issue in the pre-arrival phase and generally within the orientation phase of international students. The Viadrina communicates via many channels using social media as well as traditional face-to-face meetings or printed materials in order to help students feel welcome and prepared for their studies. Our International Office, ranked at 96% satisfaction within the ISB, coordinates communication and acts as a link to other support structures within the university. To enhance the living experience we host sporting events, intercultural seminars, writing courses, plus we have an excellent buddy programme. At Viadrina we believe student services are an important feature of student satisfaction, in particular during the challenging time of first arriving to a foreign country. The fact that living costs are very moderate and housing is very accessible helps, of course, to alleviate fears for those coming from afar. And last but not least, everybody loves our incoming coordinator!”*

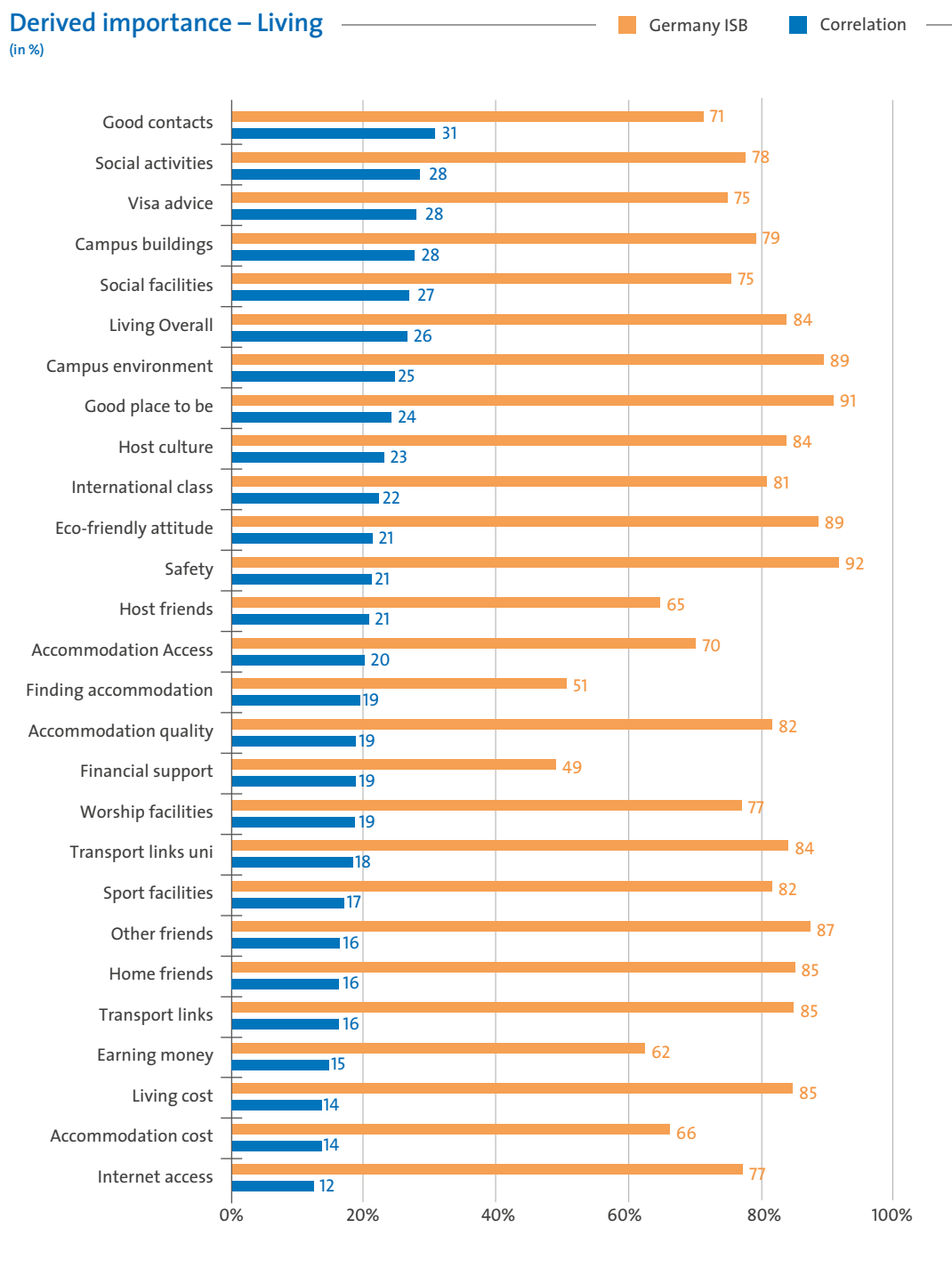
For Germany as a whole, social activities offer room for improvement, and given their importance for recommending the international study experience to others thinking of applying to a German institution, it should be a focus point for the German institutions.

The University of Applied Sciences Regensburg, [OTH Regensburg](#), does really well in this area, so we asked Dr Wilhelm Bomke, Director of the International Office at OTH Regensburg ([Ostbayerische Technische Hochschule Regensburg](#)) what – according to him – supports these high levels of satisfaction. *“Regensburg is a lively, perfect-sized (160,000), historical city with a high percentage of student citizens. It is very beautiful, but not very well-known. Thus, coming here often is a positive surprise. We take in international students from across the globe and have a devoted group of students who want to support incomers, very often as a result of their own experiences abroad. The offer of sports programmes, student jobs and things to do in- and outdoors is very substantial. Our public transport network and our cycling infrastructure is very good. We offer support for all international students who are open to and engaging with it and we are constantly trying to further develop and optimise our work in this area.”*

Under the heading of the living experience, the ISB also asks about “good contacts for the future”. We do not specify whether these good contacts are the academics that have taught them, the peers they have met and formed relationships with or whether it may be employer contacts that some international students have gained at their Institution of

Higher Education. We simply ask their satisfaction with those “good contacts for the future”. For Germany, this is an area for improvement scoring 7% lower than the Global ISB. It is important to realise this is by far the most important element within the concept of “living” when it comes to recommendation, given the 33% correlation between the question and the likelihood the student will recommend the institution. If we combine the importance of “good contacts” with the importance of “future career impact” when deciding where to study, as well as the importance of “employability” in learning, this issue deserves attention.

**Derived importance – Living**  
(in %)



Another important element of the living experience is institutional support in dealing with bureaucratic or official issues. The provision of visa advice in Germany paints a very mixed picture, mainly due to the different ways of dealing with this support by the different institutions. Altogether it has improved over time by 7%. The institution that outperforms the other participating German universities in this area is the [University of Kaiserslautern](#). According to Dr Parya Memar, Director of the Department of International Affairs ISGS at the [TU Kaiserslautern](#) (TUK), this is because *“we have very experienced and extremely well-educated staff at our ISGS department of International Affairs. They truly know about foreigner rights and law in Germany, also due to their personal experiences. We have extensive opening hours, making the possibility to consult with ISGS staff easy. We actively help with troubleshooting for our students and scholars, such as contacting the related offices or offering special help for the paperwork. On top of that, TUK has applied for the status of host institution for research in the last 10 years. This makes the visa process easier and faster for our international PhDs and post doctorates. Furthermore, TUK maintains an intensive and strong relationship with the municipal foreigner office in Kaiserslautern, likewise with different German embassies and consulates around the world. So, in case there is a need for extra papers or any additional questions to the status of the applicant we can quickly respond. And last but not least, TUK is the first university in Germany with a branch office of the Municipal Foreigners’ Office on campus, aimed only at international students and scholars. Some other German universities have followed this initiative as you can clearly see it results in convenient on-site services with quick access to support, front of fice services, high quality and a secure network.”*

International students perceive student life in Germany to be generally positive, as the country offers the possibility of acquiring a high-quality education in a safe environment, with good transport connections to the rest of Europe and a low cost of living. Room for improvement lies in establishing “good contacts for the future” and the social aspects around student life.



## 7 SUPPORT SERVICES

### HOW TO SUPPORT THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN GERMANY

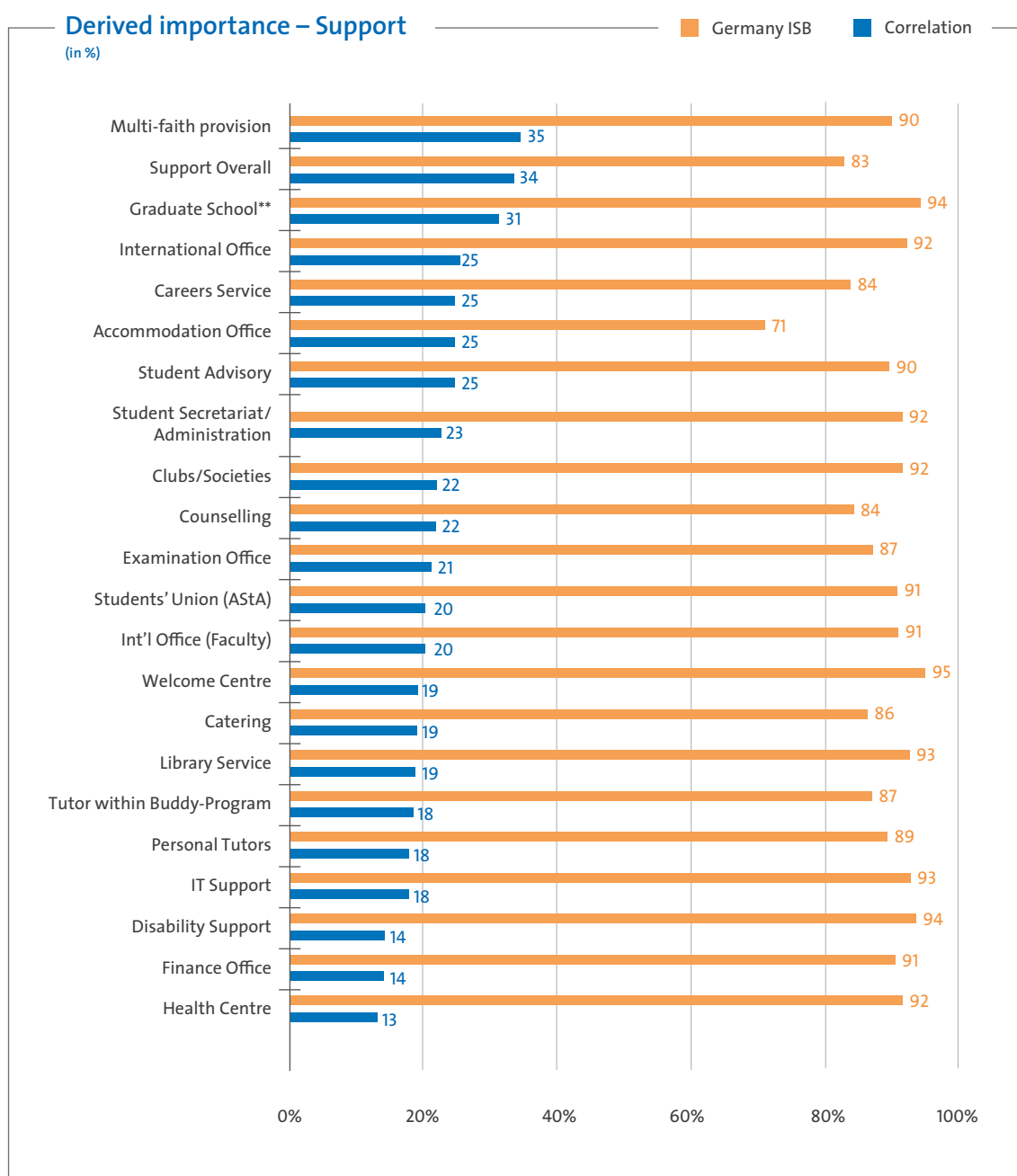
Support services is another area we survey within the ISB. If a student has used a particular support service, they are routed through the survey to comment on that service. Student well-being is slightly lower in Germany than in continental Europe (89% vs 91%). In a global comparison, this is mainly due to the lower levels of satisfaction about the connection between international and domestic German students. If we look at the “happiness-factor” of international students in Germany, 89% answer this question positively against 91% in the Global ISB.

The overall satisfaction for support is lower in Germany than in the Global ISB, but the German Welcome Centres score very high with a 95% satisfaction rate. To understand the satisfaction or dissatisfaction rates within the support area at the German universities, we have asked an extra question in the German ISB questionnaire around the Welcome Centres that most German universities have started up or are in the process of starting up.

[Saarland University](#) scores best on their Welcome Centre, so we asked Dr Johannes Abele (Head of the International Office) which factors contribute to a positive arrival and integration into student life. The factors that he believes may contribute to the good assessment of Saarland University’s Welcome Centre are: *“The Welcome Centre has a high visibility on campus – it has a very prominent location right in the middle, making it easy to access and impossible to miss. The colleagues at the Welcome Centre are very open to receive a wide variety of requests and provide support for all kinds of concerns. The Welcome Centre quite often serves as an “intercultural interpreter” between the German university administration and our international students. The colleagues at the Centre have developed a high level of competence regarding the university administration, study organisation, residence permits, insurances etc., making them the ideal ‘go-to’ person for questions related to the entire study process. On top of that the colleagues at the Welcome Centre have established a truly good working relationship and strong networks with the administration, faculty and student service agencies like the Studentenwerk.”*

The main area for improvement for most German universities is the accommodation office. The situation around accommodation and accommodation support is differently structured in Germany compared to most other countries, with *Studentenwerk* being responsible for housing. Nevertheless, other universities in continental Europe face a similar situation and intensified cooperation between the higher education institution and the housing organisation may lead to good results. The [Neubrandenburg University of Applied Sciences](#) has put a lot of emphasis in this area to get this right and it seems to have worked well. According to Dorina Mackendanz, Director of the International Office at the

Neubrandenburg University of Applied Sciences, it helps that they work closely together with *Studentenwerk*, start advising accommodation early in advance and have accommodation on campus, “but it is not just the availability of accommodation on our campus. The main reason for the good satisfaction rates in this area is because of the personal attention we give to all our students. We are really focused on the issues they encounter and try and solve each of them. The easy access to me and my colleagues helps certainly, but also the buddy programme we put in place helps to answer immediately if a situation arises. As well as that we offer German language courses at different levels as we noted that this helps to make the international students feel more at ease and ensures they can integrate easier into our community. But the panacea for us seems to be personal attention.”



As highlighted in the previous chapters, the importance of employability for today's students is high and this seems to be increasing. As a result, higher education institutions can no longer afford to treat careers advice as a "nice extra". However, if we compare continental Europe with the rest of the world, the investments in resources and opportunities for career support in general and career support for international students in particular is lagging behind considerably. Because of this, career centres at German higher education institutions are an area of concern, scoring 5% lower than the Global ISB. In the ISB we asked international students how satisfied they were with several careers support elements. From providing information and job-hunting workshops to opportunities to meet employers at career fairs, the German institutions score considerably lower than the Global ISB. Given the importance of employability for international students in relation to the satisfaction with the institution, the likelihood to recommend the institution, as well as regarding the decision-making to opt for a particular institution, careers support is of imminent importance in today's higher education. However, the good news is that over time (from 2009 to 2018) the satisfaction with Careers Services has improved by 24% in Germany.

### Careers Support

CAREERS SUPPORT ELEMENTS	GLOBAL ISB	GERMANY ISB
Information	79%	70%
Training	73%	58%
Careers fairs/networking opp.	73%	65%
Support	71%	52%
Advice	71%	57%
Opp. to network with alumni	64%	52%
Placement	62%	49%
Representation	59%	46%
Employment	55%	43%

## 8 THE NEXT STEP AFTER GRADUATION

Given the increasing importance of employability, both for selecting and recommending an institution of higher education, we have added some new questions to the ISB. The key question in this area is “how well has your institution experience prepared you for your career goals”? This question has only been asked to final year students. Across the globe, 67% of students say they feel prepared, and in Germany 63% of international students feel prepared.

An exception is the [University of Bayreuth](#) where 84% of international students say they feel prepared for their career goals. On top of this, the university scores best in Germany regarding the “happiness question”, with 94% of international students saying they are happy with their life at the university. We asked Dr Arnim Heinemann, Director of the International Office at the [University of Bayreuth](#) whether the two questions were maybe interrelated. *“I would find it difficult to claim this, but I do know that over the past years we have used the ISB and internal evaluations to constantly improve our education and our services. I have spent many hours myself leading focus groups with international students to understand what worries them, what they like and where we can improve. This constant and structured process has paid off.*

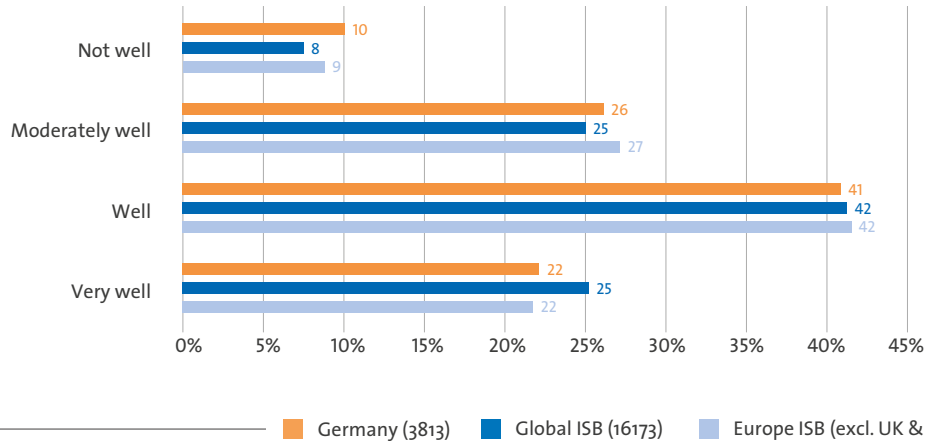
*We have developed a structure of counselling and support for our international students. Already in the orientation and recruitment phases, we highlight that not all students can stay at a university for an academic career. We tell them from the very beginning of their journey with us that they need to focus on their next step after graduation and try and define their career goal as early on as possible. Based on ISB feedback from previous years we expanded our careers orientation and now have a central careers office with a strong connection to SMEs and international firms. They organise career days, career fairs, employer presentations and all other kinds of events but we are also aware that different people have different (career) needs and that some have no problem asking a question in a large room, whereas that may not work for others.*

*We try to cater for all these different needs. As well as the central careers office, we have very focused disciplinary careers advice in the faculties. But this support would not work without the English language training that we provide for staff at all levels to ensure we can support our international student population better. At the same time, we have also made more language classes available for our degree-seeking students to help them integrate better into the German community.”*

### Career Goals

(in %)


How well has your experience prepared you for your career goals? (final year only)



The ISB data shows that 42% of international students in Germany plan to enter the labour market. Of this group, 71% are satisfied that their course will help them to get a good job versus 72% in the European ISB. 71% are satisfied with making good contacts for the future versus 73% in the European benchmark, and 62% are satisfied with the career advice from academic staff versus 60% in the European ISB. The fact that the German universities outperform the continental European benchmark for such an important issue is remarkable and well worth noting, particularly given the fact that, traditionally, attention on the job market after graduation outside of academia was rather low in Germany. 24% of international students are planning on going travelling or are undecided and 32% of students are planning on doing further study.

### Future plans and career prospects


(in %)


**42%**  of your students are planning on entering employment

71% are satisfied that their course will help them to get a good job  
72%

71% are satisfied with making good contacts for the future  
73%

62% are satisfied with the career advice from academic staff  
60%

**24%**  of your students are planning on going travelling, or are undecided

**32%**  of your students are planning on doing further study

Germany (14,115) Europe ISB (excl. UK & Ire) (43,436)

In continental Europe we have also asked international students what would make them decide to leave their host country. *“Feeling unwelcome as a foreigner”* is the biggest reason to leave Germany (39% versus 32% in the European ISB), followed by *“employers not being interested in foreign candidates”* (33% in the German ISB vs 35% in the European ISB) and *“visa restrictions”* (32% in the German ISB vs 23% in the European ISB). The hurdle international students experience in Germany with visa restrictions may be a perceived hurdle but given the large difference with the rest of Europe, it should most definitely be an area that requires attention, in which pointing students to the right sources of information is probably very useful.

## 9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### WHAT MAKES (OR BREAKS) THE INTERNATIONAL STUDY EXPERIENCE IN GERMANY

Understanding what attracts international students to choose a study destination and what will make them recommend the experience to others is key in “*Hochschulmarketing*”. The good news is that Germany outperforms the Global ISB by 7% on the new ISB question “*To what extent do you feel that your current course is good value for money?*”. One could argue the low cost of living in Germany and the very low (often non-existent) tuition fees play a role here, but, more importantly, Germany is seen as a “*good place to be*” by 91% of international students (the question is “*the surroundings outside the institution*”).

When diving deeper into recommendation, 79% of international students in Germany would recommend their study experience (against 81% in the Global ISB). Non-EU students are more positive (80%) than EU students (77%). The higher the level of education, the more positive international students are, i.e. 81% of international PhD students would recommend the experience in Germany against 78% of international Bachelor students. It is important to highlight that exchange students are more positive in recommending the experience than full degree-seeking students (i.e. 83% vs 79%). Nevertheless, most international students in Germany will not discourage others from applying (only 5% in Germany vs 4% in both the Global and European ISB, who say they will either if asked (3%) or actively (2%) discourage others from applying). Compared to the ISB survey in 2016 international students in Germany seem to have taken a more neutral view regarding recommendation.

Yet Germany outperforms the ISB benchmark when it comes to the expertise of its academics and the quality of its lectures, both areas are at the heart of any education experience. Moreover, the German “*welcome centres*” get a lot of praise from international students and researchers. The combination of low cost of accommodation and living with a high score on the expertise of lectures provides a good starting point for German higher education in the internationalisation process.

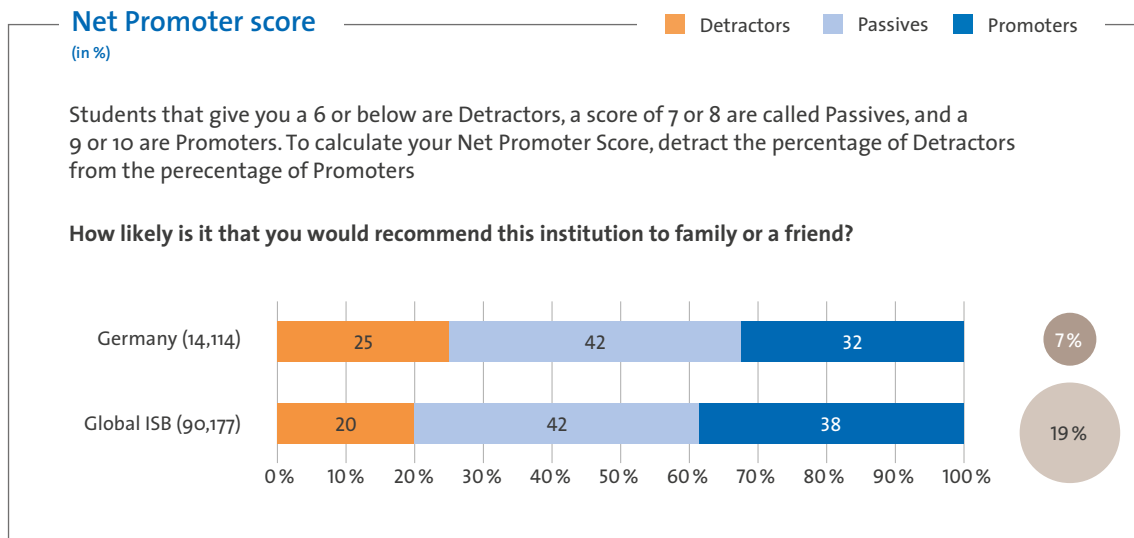
However, when trying to understand the decrease in likelihood to recommend, deciphering the reasons behind the lower satisfaction with the international study experience in Germany seems essential. The overall satisfaction is lower in comparison with rest of world (2% more dissatisfied students), which in turn yields a lower Net Promoter Score<sup>4</sup> of 7% compared to a 19% Net Promoter Score in the Global ISB. If we look for reasons for this 12%<sup>5</sup> lower Net Promoter Score in Germany based on the ISB data, there are two

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<sup>4</sup> The Net Promoter Score is calculated based on students’ scoring of the institution: those that give an institution a 6 or below are called the “Detractors”, students that give a score of 7 or 8 are called “Passives” and those students that give a 9 or 10 are the so-called “Promoters”. To calculate the Net Promoter Score, we detract the percentage of “Detractors” from the percentage of “Promoters”.

<sup>5</sup> Please note, i-graduate data is calculated to several decimal places. When reporting, numbers are rounded to the nearest 1 decimal place for easy interpretation, which means that figures can appear to not add up to 100%, or the +/- score may appear to be out by 0.1%.

main areas that should be noted: the lower satisfaction around the arrival phase and the lower satisfaction around employability. It is likely that both areas are also responsible for the decrease in recommendation since 2016, as across the globe higher education institutions have been putting in extra focus on the arrival phase and on employability/career support as both are key elements for enhancing student satisfaction.



Germany scores 6% lower than the Global ISB for the overall satisfaction during the arrival phase. In particular, the airport and train/bus station welcome scores considerably lower in satisfaction (24% lower than the global average), alongside getting to the first night of stay (16% lower than the Global ISB).

In addition to the arrival phase, the lower Net Promoter Score is most likely due to the lower satisfaction levels regarding how well-prepared international students in Germany feel for their career goals (4% lower satisfaction than the Global ISB), particularly as employability is the main driver across the globe for recommending the international study experience to others. Based on the ISB 2018 German dataset, one can draw the conclusion that international students are attracted to Germany for the expertise of the lecturers and the quality of the lectures. However, there is room for improvement in several other areas to support the international student experience in Germany. The best advice for German higher education institutions seems two-fold:

- 1) make sure the arrival experience is excellent,
- 2) ensure you send off your students well-prepared for the next step after graduation.

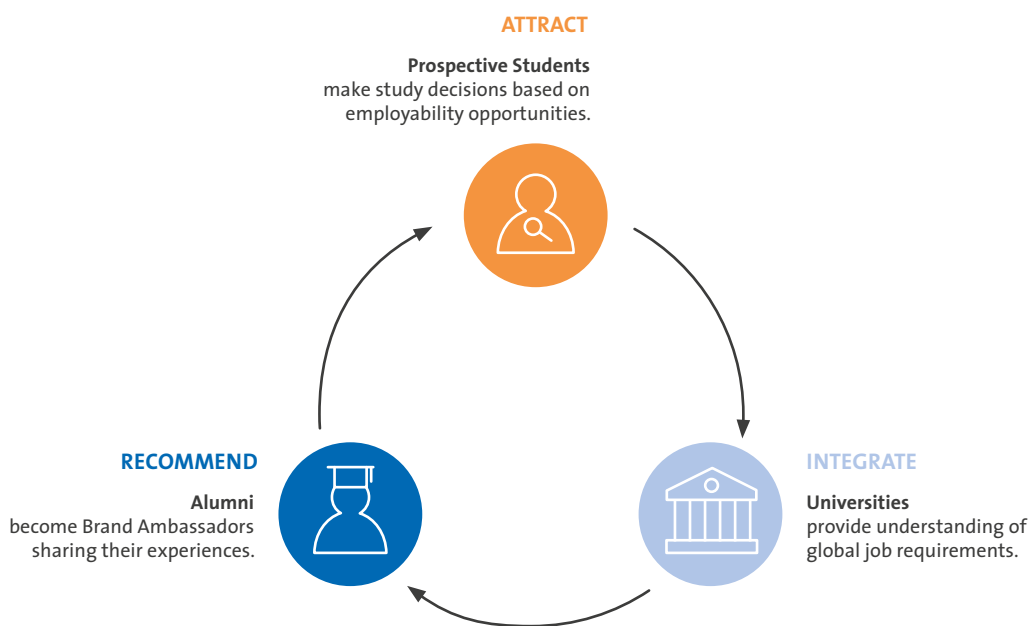


An arrival phase that works well makes students feel well-integrated and welcome from the start, helping them to hit the ground running. If a newly-arrived student needs to spend weeks sorting all kind of issues ranging from accommodation matters to setting up a bank account, lots of valuable time is lost from an academic point of view, but also from an integration point of view. However, if the arrival phase supports the student's integration into their new academic and social environment, it works miracles: students are more willing to see other issues that may arise at a later stage as less severe. It is like arriving at a hotel and finding a bottle of water and some snacks on your bed. If the next morning they forget the spoon to stir your coffee, you have less of an issue with it. During the feedback presentations, the discussion around “spoon-feeding” became a recurring theme. Whether an institution decides to pick up students from the airport or train/bus station is their own choice, but providing ample guidance is highly recommended. Managing expectations is essential to ensure students know upfront what to anticipate and how best to prepare.

Any institution that is able to truly support the employability of their (international) students, is most likely going to win “the war for talent”. The ISB data clearly points out that employability is the most important factor behind students recommending their international study experience to others. The German higher education institutions are 8% behind in satisfaction with employability and show a much lower satisfaction for all questions around career support provided. Hence supporting students in the next step after graduation would be a key area for concern. However, employability is not “just a career workshop” towards the end of the curriculum. To truly support students in their career goals, employability should be integrated in the curricula, allowing students to think about their future career and supporting them towards their next step into the global world of work. Attraction and integration of international students, and recommendation through the provision of integrated employability and careers advice are both areas where the German higher education institutions can set themselves apart and create brand ambassador alumni for Germany.

The figure below shows the employability AIR circle which shows how Attraction, Integration and Recommendation impact each other. The attraction of international students to a particular higher education institution is based on the potential for future career impact. During their studies, the satisfaction of international students comes from employability and career-related elements supporting integration into the academic life abroad. The key element for recommendation of the institution comes from feeling employable and ready for the steps after graduation<sup>6</sup>. Prospective students are keen to find out from the institution’s alumni how they enjoyed their study and how it has contributed to their current career success and job satisfaction. In other words, it is a closed recruitment circle of happy students, employed alumni and prospective (international) students.

Hence, the rationale behind the importance of the AIR circle as the key to more international students is satisfied alumni, having received international and intercultural careers advice that prepared them for the global world of work. “Happy students are good for marketing purposes. However, the ultimate conversion enhancer are satisfied alumni. Happy international graduates working across the globe, with a successful professional life and the skills necessary to cope with the challenges of modern society, are more likely to recommend the university they have attended.”<sup>7</sup>



*Source: “Leveraging data to improve your AIR circle’, All Eyes on Employability, CP Magazine (Summer 2017)*

<sup>6</sup> “What’s Cooking? A recipe book on Employability for Study Queensland”, 2019, [www.tiq.qld.gov.au/iet-strategy/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/EmployabilityCookbook\\_Final.pdf](http://www.tiq.qld.gov.au/iet-strategy/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/EmployabilityCookbook_Final.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> “When Being “Book-Smart” Is Not Enough, Skills Graduates Need to Succeed in the Future Workplace, Internationalisation of Higher Education”, Volume No. 1, 2018, DUZ MedienHaus, [www.handbook-internationalisation.com](http://www.handbook-internationalisation.com).

## 10 OVERVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS ISB SURVEY CONDUCTED IN COOPERATION WITH GATE-GERMANY

The International Student Barometer (ISB) has been conducted previously in cooperation with GATE-Germany: in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2016. The information below mainly describes the survey we conducted in the academic year 2016–17 and draws comparisons between this previous one and the current survey from the academic year 2018–19<sup>8</sup>.

Who took part in the 2016 survey?

- / Over 159,000 international students took part globally from 196 higher education institutions across 17 countries worldwide;
- / this included over 18,000 international students studying at 37 German institutions;
- / those studying at German institutions came from a variety of countries including China (11%), India (8%), Iran (4%) and Turkey (4%);
- / the survey was completed by all international and EU students at all years and levels of study, including study abroad and exchange students.

### RECOMMENDATION (2016)

The appeal of Germany as a foreign study location has increased tremendously over the years. A comparison between the 2009 and 2016 ISB data shows an increase of 13% in terms of international students actively recommending Germany as a study destination. Of all international students in Germany, 42% stated that they would actively encourage other students to apply, against 32% in the 2018 dataset. The overall recommendation (including those that would encourage/actively encourage others to apply) was 84% in 2016 against 80% in 2018. Germany ranked 6th in an international comparison of 9 countries in the 2016 survey. Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK did better, but Germany outperformed Australia, Hong Kong and the USA in terms of recommendation.

### ARRIVAL (2016)

A student's arrival experience is one of the first they have of the institution. It is important for institutions to understand that the experience starts before classes commence; information-gathering, enrolment, the visa process and the arrival into the country of study all adds to the international students' experience.

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<sup>8</sup> In the 2018–19 survey 14,115 international students from 17 German Higher Education Institutions participated with an average response rate of 24%.

66% of students were satisfied in the 2016 survey and 18% were very satisfied with the arrival experience at their German institution. These results are close to the global benchmark, in which 23% are very satisfied and 67% are satisfied. In 2016 there was still room for improvement, but many international offices in Germany have worked hard to provide a good arrival experience and made good improvements. The 2018 ISB data shows very similar results with 66% of students being satisfied and 18% very satisfied with the arrival experience at their German institution. Most individual elements show improvements over time with better results in 2018 than in 2016, apart from “*first night*” (77% in 2016 vs 68% in 2018), “*bank account*” (76% in 2016 vs 68% in 2018) and “*welcome*” (68% in 2016 vs 55% in 2018). Overall, arrival remains an area for continuous improvement for the German higher education sector.

### LEARNING (2016)

It was already rather obvious in the 2016 survey; Germany provides a first-class education and the learning facilities are ranked highly. In 2016, German institutions performed similarly to the global benchmark: 85% of students in Germany are either satisfied or very satisfied, compared to 87% internationally. Online facilities and connections to the job market fell short and this was one of the areas where German institutions needed to pay attention, given that future career is a significant reason why international students select Germany as a study destination. The 2018 ISB dataset shows that future career has increased in importance. The good news is that “*advice and guidance on long-term job opportunities and careers from academic staff*” has improved by 6% over time (from 2009 to 2018). In 2016 this element scored 59% satisfaction, and this improved to 62% satisfaction in 2018.

### LIVING (2016)

The ISB asks a series of questions about what it describes as the “living area” and when it comes to both living costs and accommodation costs, Germany outperforms the global benchmark considerably. In 2016, 84% of students in Germany were satisfied with living costs, compared to the international benchmark of 72%. On the other hand, campus buildings and social facilities rank 9th in the global comparison. So how does living in Germany compare overall to 2016? 84% of international students in Germany were satisfied compared to 88% globally. In 2018, again 84% are satisfied, broken down into 18% of international students being very satisfied and 66% being satisfied.

## SUPPORT SERVICES (2016)

Support in the ISB encompasses services ranging from the cafeteria and accommodation office to the careers advisory service. Across the globe, it is difficult to provide services that thrill students, but it can do a lot of damage to an international study experience and to the reputation of the institution if students feel they lack support.

In Germany in 2016, the majority of students were satisfied (74%) against a global benchmark of 75%. In 2018 this has gone up to 83% of international students being satisfied. The level of satisfaction with support services at German institutions in 2016 had improved considerably over time – by 13% since 2009. For every element surveyed, satisfaction levels have increased. The 2018 results show the same progression; satisfaction with careers services have improved by 24% between 2009 and 2018.

## MAIN CONCLUSION (2016)

When it came to the international student experience in Germany in 2016, positive changes had been made over the years, but competition was strong and there was still room for improvement when compared with the global student experience. This is still the case in 2018; Germany provides a good quality education for a good price, but improvements in the arrival phase alongside focusing on the employability of its international students are essential to remain a key study destination for international students.

In 2016, Germany ranked particularly well in terms of living and accommodation costs and on top of this, there are no (or very low) tuition fees. In 2016, we concluded that in a world dominated by high fees, the fact that international students can get a highly-regarded academic qualification at a relatively low cost is a major selling point. This still proves true for the 2018 ISB, with an important addition: the focus on the next step after graduation. This has increased in importance across the globe. The good news for Germany is that it outperforms the continental European benchmark (62% in Germany vs 60% in the European ISB) when it comes to careers advice from academic staff. However, in comparison to the Global ISB, Germany scores 10% lower for this element. Furthermore, for the question *“how well has your institution experience prepared you for your career goals”* Germany scores 63% – lower than the Global ISB in which 67% of students say that they feel prepared. Given that employability is a key factor for international students when they choose a higher education institution, this should be an important area of focus for the German higher education sector.

## 11 APPENDICES

- / Overview of higher education institutions in the International Student Barometer 2018
- / Topics covered in the International Student Barometer 2018
- / Selected graphs

### OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BAROMETER 2018

Aalto University/Aalto-yliopisto	Dalhousie University
Abo Akademi University	Deakin University
Algonquin College	DePaul University
Anglia Ruskin University	Dublin City University
Arcada University of Applied Sciences	Durham University
Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation (APU)	Edith Cowan University
Australian Catholic University	Eindhoven University of Technology
Australian National University	Erasmus University Rotterdam
Bath Spa University	Estonian Academy of Arts
BINUS University	Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre
Birmingham City University	Estonian Business School
Bishop Grosseteste University	Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences
Bond University	Estonian University of Life Sciences
Bournemouth University	Euroacademy
Camosun College	European University Viadrina
Cape Breton University	Fanshawe College
Centennial College	Federation University Australia
Chalmers University of Technology	Flinders University
Charles Darwin University	Freie Universität Berlin
Chinese University of Hong Kong	Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena
Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel	George Brown College
College of the Rockies	Glasgow Caledonian University
Coventry University	Goldsmiths, University of London
CQUniversity Australia	Griffith University
Curtin Mauritius	Hamk University of Applied Sciences
Curtin Singapore	HAN University of Applied Sciences
Curtin University	Hanken School of Economics
Curtin University, Malaysia	HKU School of Professional and Continuing Education

Hochschule Neubrandenburg	Radboud University Nijmegen
Hong Kong Community College (HKCC)/School of Professional Education and Executive Development (SPEED)	RCSI and UCD Malaysia Campus
HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht	RMIT University
International Medical University	Royal Holloway, University of London
Iowa State University	Ruhr-Universität Bochum
James Cook University	RWTH Aachen University
James Cook University (Singapore)	Sheridan College
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz	SIM Global Education (SIM GE)
Jönköping University	Southern Alberta Institute of Technology
Kent State University	Southern Cross University
La Trobe University	St. Francis Xavier University
Lancaster University	Sunway University and Sunway College
Lane Community College	Swinburne University of Technology
Lappeenranta University of Technology	Swinburne University of Technology (Sarawak Campus)
Leeds Beckett University	Tallinn University
Leiden University	Tallinn University of Technology
Lincoln University	Tampere University of Technology
Liverpool John Moores University	Taylor's University, Lakeside Campus
London South Bank University	Technical University of Denmark
Macquarie University	Technische Universität Berlin
Mahidol University	Technische Universität Chemnitz
Manchester Metropolitan University	Technische Universität Darmstadt
Massey University	Technische Universität Kaiserslautern
Maynooth University	Teesside University
Memorial University	The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS)
Miami University	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Mohawk College	The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
Monash University	The Royal Veterinary College
Monash University, Malaysia	The University of Adelaide
Murdoch University	The University of Law
National University of Ireland, Galway	The University of Melbourne
Northumbria University	The University of New England
Nova Scotia College of Art & Design	The University of New South Wales
Nova Scotia Community College	The University of Newcastle
Ostbayerische Technische Hochschule Regensburg	The University of Queensland
Peking University	The University of Sydney
Philipps-Universität Marburg	The University of Western Australia
PSB Academy	Trinity College Dublin
Queen's University Belfast	Tulane University
Queensland University of Technology	Umeå University
	Universidad Pompeu Fabra

Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore	University of Otago
Universität Bayreuth	University of Oulu
Universität des Saarlandes	University of Oxford
Universität Hamburg	University of Reading
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	University of Salford
Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS	University of Saskatchewan
Universiti Tenaga Nasional	University of South Australia
University College Dublin	University of South Wales
University of Amsterdam	University of Southern Queensland
University of Auckland	University of St Andrews
University of Bradford	University of Stirling
University of British Columbia	University of Strathclyde
University of California, Davis	University of Sussex
University of Cambridge	University of Tampere
University of Canberra	University of Tartu
University of Central Lancashire	University of Tasmania
University of Delaware	University of Technology Sydney
University of Derby	University of Texas at San Antonio
University of Dundee	University of the West of Scotland
University of East London	University of Turku
University of Eastern Finland	University of Twente
University of Gloucestershire	University of Ulster
University of Gothenburg	University of Vaasa
University of Greenwich	University of Waikato
University of Groningen	University of Warwick
University of Helsinki	University of Wollongong
University of Huddersfield	University of Wyoming
University of Jyväskylä	University of York
University of Kentucky	Utrecht University
University of Lapland	Victoria University of Wellington
University of Leeds	Virginia Tech
University of Leicester	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
University of Limerick	Wageningen University
University of Malaya	Western Sydney University
University of Michigan-Flint	Wilfrid Laurier University
University of Minnesota	
University of Nebraska–Lincoln	
University of Newcastle	
University of Nottingham	
University of Nottingham - China	
University of Nottingham - Malaysia	



## TOPICS COVERED IN THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BAROMETER 2018

### Questionnaire flow

#### Background

- / Accommodation
- / Funding
- / Level of study
- / Area of study
- / School/Faculty/Department
- / Year of study

#### Pre-Arrival

- / Choice of destination
- / Key influences
- / Application process
- / Visa Satisfaction
- / Agents

#### Arrival Experience

- / Overall Satisfaction
- / Orientation programme
- / Rating on experience

#### Learning Experience

- / Overall Satisfaction
- / Satisfaction of learning elements
- / Engagement measures

#### Living Experience

- / Overall Satisfaction
- / Satisfaction of living elements
- / Happiness

#### Support Experience

- / Overall Satisfaction
- / Relevance of services
- / Satisfaction with services used
- / Careers support
- / Wellbeing

#### Recommendation & Reflections

- / Recommendation to others
- / Value for money

#### Future Plans

- / Employment and study

## SELECTED GRAPHS

Figure 1

### Propensity to recommend (year on year)

(in %)

Would you recommend the institution to others thinking of applying here?

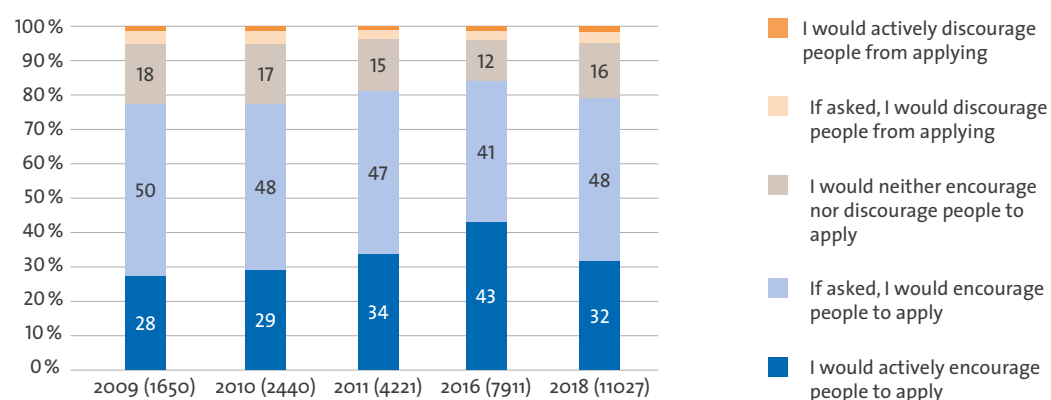


Figure 2

