

DISRUPTIONS AND NEW PATHWAYS INTO STUDENT MOBILITY

Germany's Internationalization Strategy: Staying Open While Others Close Doors

Simon Morris-Lange and Jessica Schueller

Germany's 2024–2034 internationalization strategy diverges notably from the restrictive study-migration policies adopted by other leading destination countries. While Germany has historically followed a distinct, less marketized approach to international education, it is not immune to global market disruptions. Salient risks, like overrecruitment, insufficient oversight, and political complacency, could weaken Germany's internationalization efforts if not addressed in the years ahead.

In 2025, Germany's universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS) are expected to surpass 400,000 international student enrollments for the first time in their history. Meanwhile, countries like Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands seek to curtail growth by tightening immigration policies and institutional oversight, and by scaling back study programs tailored to attract international students. This is a stark contrast to Germany's 2024–2034 internationalization strategy, which explicitly prioritizes an increase in student mobility and international cooperation, positioning the country as an outlier amid the [trend toward restrictions](#) and renationalization seen in other leading study destinations.

Much of the recent pushback in other countries stems from concerns over unbalanced growth, which has often been linked to declining educational quality, housing shortages, and immigration fraud. Germany has largely sidestepped these issues, not least thanks to its distinctive approach to internationalization. By comparison, universities and UAS in Germany are less reliant on tuition revenue and student recruitment agents, mostly due to relatively generous public funding, long-standing partnerships with foreign universities and other student-sending institutions, and supportive migration policies. This framework has allowed Germany to cultivate a reputation as an affordable, high-quality study destination with strong labor market prospects—a combination valued not only by international students but also by many policy makers and business leaders across Germany, who by and large continue to see international graduates as important contributors to addressing the country's demographic and labor market challenges.

Germany's [internationalization strategy](#), passed under the previous government, reinforces these priorities by building on proven practices to attract, train, and retain international students. These include enhancing student services, expanding English-taught programs while improving access to German

language courses, streamlining cumbersome visa processes, and easing labor market transitions. The strategy vows to promote the “crisis resilience” of the sector—notably by encouraging it to do more of the same. There is, however, one exception: stakeholders are called upon to increase flexibility in university admissions and to experiment with innovative study preparation programs, both digital and in-person. These measures are meant to enable larger numbers of talented individuals to study and stay in Germany. The newly elected centrist government is expected to maintain support for this course, as its coalition agreement explicitly promotes international talent retention.

Compared to policy documents and debates in other destination countries, Germany's strategy appears virtually unfazed by the policy reversals occurring around the globe. This is hardly surprising, given that Germany has long pursued a distinct approach to international education—one that diverges significantly from the market-driven models favored by its Anglophone counterparts.

However, Germany is not immune to the current disruptions in the international education market. To uphold its strategic objective of fostering “crisis resilience,” it must adopt a more proactive stance that includes sustained, cross-national dialogue. This article aims to contribute to that effort by assessing Germany in the context of its international peers, drawing attention to the potential risks of overrecruitment, lax oversight, and a failure to engage with rapidly evolving political dynamics.

Enrollment Growth: Balancing Opportunity and Risk

Germany's push to expand its international student population comes at a pivotal moment when other major destinations are scaling back. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Canadian province of Ontario, where a heavy reliance on international

student revenue has led to unprecedented overrecruitment, resulting in a highly politicized public debate over declining program quality and intensified housing shortages, especially in the Toronto metropolitan area, where international students make up an estimated 5 percent of the population.

As countries like Canada and Australia impose enrollment caps, Germany's nearly 2,000 English-taught programs may well see a surge in applicants. Plans to expand programs taught in English and languages other than German, coupled with more flexible admissions processes, could further enhance Germany's appeal to a growing population of globally mobile students. However, this may also include groups needing greater academic or language support—particularly in learning German, which remains critical for realizing their economically desired contribution to offset Germany's aging workforce.

For a country facing demographic decline, these developments offer both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, Germany could draw from a larger applicant pool and tailor preparatory programs to unlock their potential. On the other hand, such initiatives demand that public institutions invest substantial resources, which are already stretched thin. Many universities' and UAS' international offices, career services departments, and student support units are underfunded and understaffed, struggling to meet existing demand.

Without a substantial long-term investment, Germany risks undermining its internationalization goals and inviting quality issues. Dropout rates among international students are already high—nearly double those of domestic students—which underscores the need for better support. To seize the opportunities of future enrollment growth, Germany must strengthen its institutions' capacities, so that quality can become a more central focus in the implementation of its strategy.

Private Higher Education: Underestimated, Yet Growing

While Germany's higher education system remains predominantly public, the rapid expansion of private institutions—now totaling 116 state-accredited providers—still warrants closer investigation vis-à-vis the country's internationalization goals. So far, research into private higher education in Germany has shown the sector to be a productive and in many cases more labor market-oriented alternative to the public system, which continues to educate roughly 90 percent of

international students. Since 2018, however, the number of international students at private institutions has nearly tripled, reaching just over 42,000.

Judging by these numbers, private providers are emerging as a viable option for international students, offering a pricier, yet more accessible and career-focused, alternative. They also provide the same visa pathways as public institutions. Unlike Australia and Canada, where some private providers have faced pushback for prioritizing the procurement of student visas and work permits over genuine education, limited investigations in Germany have so far found no evidence of such practices. Nonetheless, ensuring transparency and accountability is essential to maintain Germany's reputation.

One area requiring vigilance is the rise of private preparatory colleges (private *Studienkollegs*), many without full state recognition. For fees of up to 11,000 euros annually, these for-profit institutions fill gaps in the public system, promising a reliable pathway to select undergraduate programs and a student visa. Whether these programs adequately prepare students—some of whom are admitted with no German language skills—is still pending a systematic evaluation. Furthermore, although there are no confirmed cases of private colleges serving as “visa factories,” as was the case for some Australian colleges, Germany must remain proactive. Striking a balance between growth and integrity is crucial as private providers are poised to play an increasingly significant role in the system.

No Time for Political Complacency

Germany's strategy is a reflection of the country's partnership-driven approach to international education, which has long enjoyed political support. However, the growing influence of far-right and populist political sentiments could foreshadow a shift. These sentiments are a potential threat to public backing for the country's zero-tuition model and international students more broadly. In this regard, the Netherlands offers a cautionary tale, as political sentiment toward international students has steadily shifted from welcoming to wary in just a few years.

There are no one-size-fits-all solutions to these political uncertainties, but Germany's policy makers and higher education leaders are encouraged to engage in an honest debate about salient risks. Learning from how counterparts in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, among others, are navigating the pushback will be an important step toward a truly crisis-resilient internationalization.

Simon Morris-Lange is an international higher education expert with over 15 years of experience in think tanks, research, and consulting. E-mail: simon.morrislange@gmail.com.

Jessica Schueller is a researcher and consultant specializing in the internationalization of German higher education. E-mail: schuelljd@miamioh.edu.

