



## Policy Brief

# One Step Ahead. International Students Improve Professional Opportunities through Practical Experience

## Summary

International students who start volunteering outside of their university early on in their studies significantly improve the chances that their careers will get off to a good start on the German labour market. **In addition to internships, these educational immigrants can also improve their professional opportunities through volunteer work:** Active involvement, e.g. in sports clubs, neighbourhood initiatives and church congregations, helps many students who would like to stay in Germany improve their German and gain important skills and contacts to facilitate their career start in Germany. Volunteer work doesn't just serve the common good, it also positively impacts the careers of international students. This is the conclusion drawn by the Policy Brief of the Expert Council's Research Unit conducted under the scope of a research project entitled "Study & Work". Based on a survey of international students, it asks to what extent internships and volunteer work outside of the university can help international students successfully begin their professional careers in Germany.

International students are seen as 'ideal immigrants' for the German labour market. They make up around ten percent of the student bodies at German universities; most can imagine staying in Germany after they finish their degrees. But many are not able to successfully integrate into the labour market after graduation or the integration process takes a long time. This can be attributed, among other things, to insufficient proficiency in German and a lack of knowledge about the German labour market.

Internships that accompany a degree programme are important stepping stones to the working world. For domestic students, they have become simply a matter of course; but many international students fail due to residence requirements, financial obstacles or reluctant employers.

**In the summer of 2015, the Expert Council's Research Unit surveyed 2,565 international master's degree students throughout Germany. The results show that only nearly one-third (32.0%) of international students had completed an internship in Germany at the time of the survey.** Most had either gained practical experience abroad or had not yet done an internship. This percentage is consistent with the requirements of degree programmes in which mandatory internships play a less important role: according to the curriculum, only one in three international master's students (32.1%) and one in four (26.7%) international master's students enrolled in English language programmes is required to gain practical experience.

It is much more common for international students to volunteer at their university or outside of it. Three-quarters of those surveyed (74.6%) were involved in at least one volunteer activity, working, for example, in student university committees or supporting social organisations. This raises the question of whether volunteer work, similar to internships, has a strong potential to tie international students to



Germany and foster successful entry to the labour market. The analyses of the Expert Council's Research Unit show: even though the university is still the main place that international students improve their German and form friendships with German students, **social and cultural bonds to Germany are deepened outside of the degree programme**: international students who have more practical experience and students who volunteer have more German students as friends and speak better German. And, how much they work in the interest of the common good even determines to a large extent whether or not they ultimately feel a sense of belonging in Germany.

International students who are well informed about the different legal possibilities for staying in Germany and are familiar with local customs also have better odds of being successfully integrated into the German labour market. It also helps when they know professionals who can help them get off to a good start in their career. It has also been shown that **internships and volunteer work in particular is very important for acquiring skills relevant to the job application process and for creating the respective networks**: international students who volunteer are more aware of residence laws, have more effective problem-solving strategies and know more people they can ask to help them find an internship or with applications. They benefit when they actively volunteer in different areas, regardless of how often. Long internships (six months or more), on the other hand, enhance the application skills of international students, e.g. their ability to present themselves well in a job interview.

Most international students want to stay and work in Germany after they have completed their degree. Many also begin laying the groundwork to stay already during their studies and develop the skills and networks necessary through internships and volunteer activities. The findings of the survey show that volunteer work pays off. International students should take advantage of these opportunities to increase their chances of a good career start. In the interest of attracting skilled workers, universities and other actors in education and labour policy should also support these students in two ways:

- (1) International students need easier access to internships.** Mandatory internships can be beneficial here. To this end, universities and the individual degree programmes should systematically target the private sector in the region to create networks. In addition, students need intensive advice when looking for an internship and during the practical period.
- (2) International students need opportunities for volunteer work.** The universities can help them look for relevant opportunities by integrating 'service learning' activities related to the content of the degree programmes into the curricula in cooperation with local actors (e.g. volunteer organisations).