

Student Migration

– Many Roads and Routes

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Apologies to Christina that this article did not appear in Mozaik 20 on Migration. Ed.

In recent years international cooperation and exchange between universities and students has become ever more important. In order to be competitive in the global market and to participate in a world society, international and intercultural know-how is crucial. Therefore, more and more importance is given to the internationalization of higher education.

Student Migration trends

According to an OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) report, the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship has grown dramatically from 0,6 million in 1975 to 2,7 million in 2004. The flow of student migrants is concentrated towards European and North American countries. Student migration from the North to the South is still an exception. The transfer of technology and know-how is in most cases still an asymmetric one from the so-called developed to the less developed countries. France, Germany, United Kingdom, and the United States receive more than 50% of all foreign students worldwide. In 2005 there were about 220.000 international students at German universities, many of them coming from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The reasons why young people decide to

leave their home, family, and friends to go to a foreign country and face the difficulties of a new language, university system, and society vary. Some are driven by the adventure of a new cultural experience and some are seeking a special subject or degree which they can't find in their home country. As Patricia from Venezuela reports: *"I felt the necessity to travel to Germany to learn the language, experience a new world and its culture. I hope this opens new job opportunities for me."*

Challenges Abroad

In comparison to other migrant groups such as refugees, the student migrants make a free and conscious decision to go to a foreign country. They finance their stay through their parents' money, scholarships, or part-time work. Therefore, at first sight, this group of migrants appear to be very privileged. However, the problems and burdens young students face in making their way through the German university forest should not be overlooked. Many have difficulties in financing their stay or finding orientation in the university system. Many are lonely since it is not easy and takes much time to make friends with German students. Many have difficulties to find rooms, get a work permits or deal with bureaucracy in general.

44

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About 100.000 students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are enrolled in study programmes at German universities. Most of them live in Germany for many years and finance their education by themselves. After graduation they have to make decisions on whether to return to their home country, stay in Germany, or migrate to a third place. It is a hard decision since many integrated themselves into the host society, made friends and perhaps even married.

The legal situation has improved, although graduates from the South are still treated as “second class” in the job market in comparison to European graduates. As Amin, an Iranian graduate of German literature, states: *“Unless you are very qualified in technical science, you will not find work. There is a small elite group who will get a green card, most others don’t have a chance.”* Many graduates decide or are forced to return; some stay in Germany or move to another European or North American country. Others become working migrants or political migrants because of the situation in their home countries. When he was asked on how he will decide, Amin said: *“It is an economic question. If I will be able to work, then I will stay here ... I have not been in Iran for three years and I am a little afraid. I want to work in an academic field. When I work as a professor I can not say everything. I have to leave out certain texts and this will not be satisfying. As long as I have the choice I don’t want to do this.”*

Global Links

In times of expanding global markets, the need of highly skilled migrants with international and intercultural expertise is very high. European and North American countries compete for the highly skilled migrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Regarding the various possibilities highly qualified international graduates have, it is a hard decision.

Suggested readings:

Education at a Glance. OECD Indicators 2006; OECD Publishing.
Luther Verlag. *Warum wir hier sind. Ausländische Studierende aus Entwicklungsländern finden ihren Weg im deutschen Unialltag.* 2006.

The question of returning home or staying in the host country moves more and more into the focus of public debate. In the context of “migration and development,” scientists, politicians, and economists look at the situation of student migrants from the south. When graduates decide to stay in Europe or North America, many speak of a “brain drain” from developing countries. It is argued that those returning would have brought skills, knowledge, network and financial resources to their home countries which are lost once a graduate decides not to go back. The return of graduates from the North strengthens the ability of developing countries to integrate into global markets.

In recent years, however, this view has changed and people highlight the beneficial aspects of graduates from the south staying in Europe more and more. Migrants also often enhance the welfare of their sending countries, and thus highly skilled immigrants are not lost for their countries. They send remittances, invest in business in their country of origin, and build diasporas, keeping close ties to their home society. Highly qualified migrants are today seen as part of transnational networks and as cultural, political, and economical ambassadors to their home countries. They are links between the North and the South.



The Student Christian Movement of Germany (ESG) is the umbrella organization for approximately 150 Christian and/or ecumenical student and university congregations (ESGn, HSGn) from various German universities, which are either autonomous or integrated in the regional church. ESG offers national and international events and functions as well as assistance in the students’ administrative committees. It supports the work of the student congregations as well with seminars, training and services. The ESG has a strong international focus organizing international events, supporting international students and informing German students in going abroad.

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Internet links on International Students in Germany:
www.daad.de
www.his.de
www.wusgermany.de