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IN THE ZONE
New take: Cultural acumen combats coronavirus blues

BACK IN ACTION
Already ahead: Universities gear up for blended learning

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The worst of times can also be the best of times. When ZEIT Germany went to press in late September, the country had fared comparatively well in the coronavirus pandemic – so far, at least. This was thanks to a strong healthcare system, a levelheaded government, and a bit of luck. Yes, universities had to shutter campuses overnight. But many transformed this hurdle into an opportunity to position themselves for a future of digital learning. Is Germany a safe bet? Foreign students seem to think so: they are registering for the winter semester at universities in almost record numbers. If you’re considering a similar move, discover Germany with us – and enjoy the read!

The ZEIT Germany Team

ZEIT, a German weekly newspaper, covers education and more. ZEIT Germany’s print edition is available via the network of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Goethe-Institut, and the Federal Foreign Office, among others. A digital version is at www.zeit.de/germany

4 THE NEW NORMAL
The year in Germany, from protests to stand-up paddling

12 FUN FACTS
Higher education at a glance, from quirkiest degrees to student’s word of the year

14 SPEND IT!
Living and studying in Germany can be dirt cheap

16 STREET TALK
Munich students on university life in the most unusual of years

22 STUDYING (WITH) THE GERMANS
A British comedy writer’s pop quiz on all things related to studying in the German world

26 LEARNING BY DOING
The coronavirus pandemic leads German universities into a future of digital learning

34 SO CLOSE YET SO FAR
Ada Pellert, head of Germany’s largest distance university, explains online studies

36 DEFINING VOCABULARY
Key terms to help you cut through all that university jargon

38 SHOWCASE
Seoul to Berlin, Karachi to Freiburg: Two leading ladies share their immigration stories

42 RESEARCH THIS!
From Alpine glacial modeling to a Leipzig rock concert that explores Covid-19

48 EARN WHILE YOU LEARN
How to finance your studies

50 BABY STEPS
German higher education introduces new academic degree programs for midwives

55 DOCTOR’S ORDERS
Navigating Germany’s universal healthcare system

58 FIRST DATES
A humorous take on the dating scene in Berlin

60 ON THE MOVE
What you need upon arrival, from registration to insurance

65 MASTHEAD
The staff. Plus: Distribution partners and further details

66 WORD PLAY
For the bilingual student brain
THE NEW NORMAL
Countries around the world face a new way of living due to the coronavirus pandemic, and Germany is no exception. But its coping mechanisms may be. How Germans made the most of a tough situation

BY DEBORAH STEINBORN
The beaches may feel sandier in France, the sea is certainly warmer in Spain, and the Alps are higher in Italy. But if ever there was a time to spend time in Germany, this could be it.

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the EU’s most populous country has fared well – so far, so good, at least. By the end of September (when ZEIT Germany went to press), the number of Covid-19 cases had remained relatively low. Intensive-care units at the country’s well-equipped hospitals had not overfilled. And the federal government, known worldwide for its frugality, had easily pumped hundreds of billions of euros into the economy to stave off disaster.

Indeed, due to a mix of responsive government, a strong healthcare system, and plain old dumb luck, Germans have not yet experienced a full-throttle Ausgangsperre (lockdown). Even when the virus first hit in March, restrictions resembled more of a “lockdown light.”

For residents of Madrid, Milan, and New York City, the lockdown of spring 2020 meant restrict-
Some enjoyed lockdown on a deserted bike path north of Berlin. Others camped out at the Baltic Sea.

When restaurants briefly shut down in spring 2020, diners sought out acceptable alternatives. One option: pizza night on a Hannover rooftop.

ing their movements outside the home to just one masked trip to a nearby supermarket per day. Residents of Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich, in contrast, could range fairly freely for exercise – jogging, biking, hiking, or simply walking – at any time of day. It was undoubtedly still a tough time for some parts of the population, but for many Germans, the quarantine offered a chance to rediscover the joys of sports and leisure activities, gardening, and home improvement. Local Baumärkte (hardware stores) were closed for just a few short weeks and were among the first stores to reopen when restrictions were loosened again. And business boomed. The lines of customers waiting outside them were, with few exceptions, extremely long – with everyone at 1.5 meters of distance, of course.

Germany is notorious for the insatiable wanderlust of its citizens. The birthplace of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose “Italian Journey” inspired generations of travelers, was not going to let the “new normal” put an end to this noble tradition. Germans,
who consider themselves Reiseweltmeister – the travel champions of the world – had no intention of giving up their long vacations or even their short weekend jaunts. When flights came to a standstill, they simply took to the roads instead.

This meant exploring their own country and others within driving distance. Often, they took their accommodations along. In the month of August alone, Germans bought 10,246 campers and caravans – 58.8 percent more than in the previous year, according to the Caravaning Industry Association. In the first eight months of 2020, 80,797 newly purchased vehicles hit the roads for the first time.

For some, the Ausgangssperre translated into time alone at home. For others, it meant discovering urban wildlife.
In the homeland of Bier and Riesling, the coronavirus didn’t only increase healthy activities. Alcohol consumption rose, too. According to a recent study by Germany’s Central Institute for Psychiatric Health, 37 percent of adults said they consume more alcohol now than before the coronavirus outbreak. The same thing goes for sweets. Springtime brought an unusual youth fad to German cities and towns alike: frozen muschi, Japanese rice cakes filled with ice cream. While other countries faced shortages of meat and eggs, Germany saw exploding demand for Japanese ice cream.

How did the pandemic connect to this odd craving for Asian desserts? It started with TikTok influencers, of course, who posted video clips of the latest flavors they’d discovered on store shelves. Indeed, the Chinese video platform and social network was more than ever a trend in the German-speaking world in 2020, morphing into an integral part of youths’ and young adults’ daily lives while schools and university campuses were closed. According to
Reif graduated from high school with honors and quickly found herself a lot of fans on Instagram, amassing roughly six million followers on the platform. While her audience was at first limited to her home country, she’s recently gained global attention. Reif does fashion, fitness, and food; she models, works out, and cooks healthy meals. And she presents all these actions at nearly every opportunity on social media.

By so doing, she’s parlayed her TikTok videos into an estimated net worth of about three million euros. Call her Germany’s answer to Kylie Jenner.

Pamela Reif was not the only German to experience a popularity boost during the pandemic. The most prominent person in the older set was of course Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had been considered a lame duck at the start of 2020. She had just handed over leadership of her party, the Christian Democratic Union, and announced she wouldn’t run again in the next federal election in 2021.

Then the coronavirus hit, and Merkel hit crisis mode, reacting with calm, empathy, and reason. With a background in science (she has a Ph.D. in physics), she took a methodical approach to combating the virus, too. By the fall of 2020, she was once again Germany’s most popular politician, according to national educational certificates and roughly 170 international polls repeatedly show that most Germans approve their government’s handling of the crisis.

Yet protests against Covid-19 restrictions — that “lockdown light” that Germany experienced in the spring of 2020 — are nonetheless gaining momentum.

The grousing began in the Swabian city of Stuttgart in April, initiated by a local group of contrarian Querdenker (literally “lateral thinkers”) who demanded an immediate end to all coronavirus-related restrictions. This faction loves conspiracy theories — for example, the claim that Bill Gates is encouraging the virus’s spread in order to profit financially from any resulting vaccines, or that Covid-19 is a figment of the imagination altogether. By the end of August, the protests had gained steam. According to Berlin’s police department, roughly 38,000 people gathered in Berlin on a single Saturday afternoon, often ignoring social distancing and other safety measures, for a demonstration that made international headlines.

A de facto coalition of coronavirus skeptics was out in force that weekend: libertarians and alternative-fact populists, anti-vaxxers, frustrated citizens (many of them from eastern Germany who feel that society has abandoned them), and plain-vanilla opponents of democracy, some of them decked out in Neo-Nazi trappings. QAnon, the far-right conspiracy theory that originated in the US, has its hand in this mishmash group. So does RT, the Russian government-sponsored media network formerly known as Russia Today. Members of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany party, too, support (and are trying to profit politically from) the protests.

This may prove to be Germany’s biggest coronavirus challenge: defending open democracy against attacks from a small but growing number of estranged citizens who oppose the majority’s levelheaded approach to combating Covid-19.

So far, this disparate mix of groups protesting Germany’s coronavirus policies is very small compared with the country’s overall population. National polls repeatedly show that most Germans approve their government’s handling of the crisis. It’s possible, however, that the voices of discontent will grow louder in coming months.

The good news: this movement hasn’t discouraged foreigners from moving to Germany in order to study or do research. In fact, the country’s comparative state of normality seems to be calling to them. According to Uni-assist, the central point of contact between applicants with international educational certificates and roughly 170 German universities, more than 60,000 foreign students had applied for the winter semester by early September.

 Chancellor Angela Merkel’s no-nonsense approach to combating the coronavirus has left a lasting impression

futurebiz.de, TikTok subscriptions have jumped to 5.5 million in Germany, with a particularly sharp rise between March and June 2020.

TikTok’s growing popularity, in turn, has given some German influencers worldwide attention they might not have received otherwise. Take Pamela Reif, a 24-year-old resident of Karlsruhe, a midsized city in southwestern Germany, who models, works out, and cooks healthy meals. And she presents all these actions at nearly every opportunity on social media.

By so doing, she’s parlayed her TikTok videos into an estimated net worth of about three million euros. Call her Germany’s answer to Kylie Jenner.

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Others feel very differently, however. Call it the coronavirus paradox. Germany wasn’t nearly as hard-hit as Spain, Italy, or France. Yet protests against Covid-19 restrictions — that “lockdown light” that Germany experienced in the spring of 2020 — are nonetheless gaining momentum.

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Protests against the government’s coronavirus response have drawn a motley crew
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Higher education in Germany has more to offer than just low or no tuition. For the record ...

By Miriam Karout

Illustration: Alina Günter

Germany is a popular destination for students from near and far. In 2019, 14 percent of university enrollees came from abroad. While some come for comparatively low tuition fees, others are just plain curious. And there’s a lot to learn—inside the lecture hall and well beyond campus. Did you know, for instance, that you can get a master’s degree in cycling, sexology, or even strollogy, the science of strolling? That most bachelor’s programs take six semesters to complete? That Chancellor Angela Merkel is afraid of dogs? Impress your fellow students with some tidbits about life and learning in the country.
**THE PEOPLE**

**POPULATION**

83 MILLION

Largest country in the EU in both population and GDP

**WORDS**

Most popular German word among university students in 2020

FERNWEH (a longing for distant places)

**TIDBITS**

Last year, the average German

... ate 60 KILOS of meat

... drank 92 LITERS of beer and 166 LITERS of coffee

... used 242 KILOS of paper

... smoked 900 cigarettes

... produced more than 20 KILOS of plastic waste

... recycled 70% of all waste

**THE POLITICS**

**IN THE SYSTEM**

Germany is a REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

709 members in the Bundestag, Germany’s federal parliament

**3 MAJOR TYPES OF ELECTIONS**

KOMMUNALWAHLEN local elections

LANDTAGSWAHLEN state elections

BUNDESTAGSWAHL federal election

**NEXT FEDERAL ELECTION**

will be held on or before OCTOBER 24, 2021

**THINGS YOU DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT CHANCELLOR ANGELA MERKEL**

Europe’s longest-serving elected woman leader

Holds a Ph.D. in physics

Nicknamed Mutti (Mommy) although she has no children

Loves to cook. Favorite recipes: plum cake and roulade

Afraid of dogs

**ON THE RADAR**

**KAI GEHRING**
Green Party Bundestag member and party spokesman for research and universities. Member of Union for Lesbians and Gays

**KONSTANTIN KUHLE**
Free Democratic Party (FDP) member of the Bundestag. Focus on media, digitalization, and domestic policy

**CEMILE GIOUSOUF**
First-ever Muslim Bundestag member from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party (through 2017)

**MAHMUT ÖZDEMIR**
Social Democratic Party (SPD) member of the Bundestag. Child of Turkish migrant workers. Started his political career at 14

**ALICE WEIDEL**
Leader of the controversial right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in the Bundestag. Openly gay, she nonetheless opposes same-sex marriage
## Cost of Living and Studying (in euros)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Annual Tuition</th>
<th>Monthly Rent (1 BR Apt)</th>
<th>Monthly Transportation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Greifswald</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen</td>
<td>316 *</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESADE Business &amp; Law School Barcelona &amp; Madrid</td>
<td>14,550</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>47,011</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Non-EU students pay an additional 3,000 euros/year

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### STUDY AND DO RESEARCH LOCALLY, THINK GLOBALLY

- Germany
- Z
- SPEND IT!
Living and studying in Germany is cheaper than in other Western countries. The numbers speak for themselves

**BY CHRISTIAN HEINRICH AND DEBORAH STEINBORN ILLUSTRATION ALINA GÜNTER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly Health Insurance</th>
<th>Monthly Groceries and Food</th>
<th>Monthly Telecom</th>
<th>Cup of Coffee</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Percentage of Foreign Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>10,019</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>33</td>
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<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>419</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>16,424</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Check24.de; city administrative offices; UNICUM; university websites; ZEIT calculations
Students in Munich talk about university life in an unusual year of closed campuses and new long-distance approaches to learning

**STREET TALK**

Barbara Böhm, 22

*second-semester computer science major at LMU*

I found the coronavirus-related online studies quite refreshing. I didn’t have to drive to lectures, to work, or to the library to study.

I jobbed in the restaurant business for two years. I didn’t like it at all anymore, but somehow I couldn’t break away. When restaurants had to close because of the lockdown, I quit working with food. Luckily, I was able to work more often as a tennis coach, which I much prefer.

During the outbreak’s peak, I started to play basketball. Once, two policemen approached and told me to stop. When they were gone, I started playing again. A short time later, they came back and fined me 150 euros!

My best friend visited recently and we built a desk. It turned out really nice. We also sewed a lot. When Covid-19 hit Germany, I was in Ghana because my mother comes from there. Whenever I’m there, I go to a dressmaker who teaches me how to sew traditional clothes. I bought some fabric and sewed clothing for all my friends. My friend and I also bought a sound mixer so we could DJ and start making music. We wanted to be productive. If you ever get so much time, use it!

Stefania Plougarli, 19

*second-semester anthropology and law student at LMU*

I was always able to concentrate well, and I enjoyed the lectures when they were moved online due to the pandemic. But by now, I’ve lost all my motivation and energy. I live with my parents, and it’s hard to concentrate there. I can always shut my laptop during a lecture and lie down or check my mobile phone.

Right now, actually, I should be writing a paper. When I heard that the next semester would also take place online, I got depressed, even though everything will go smoother now. But other things make me laugh. The other day a fellow student left the video on during a lecture and then walked by in his underwear.

Alexander Koenig, 24

*fourth-semester master’s student in robotics, cognition, and intelligence at TUM*

My wild semester in Tel Aviv ended up back in my childhood bedroom near Munich.

I’d been in Israel for just a few weeks when I had to break it off due to the coronavirus. Because I had sublet my room in Munich, I moved in with my parents in Rosenheim and finished my semester abroad via internet. There wasn’t much else to do, so I poured myself into my studies and earned almost 40 credits instead of the usual 30. Now, my master’s thesis looms ahead. I’d planned to do the thesis at Harvard University’s Biorobotics Laboratory. I’d have started in November 2020. But there are no visas at the moment, so I’m starting remotely. I hope I can go there early next year.
Our training is very practice-oriented. So during the spring semester, when everyone was in lockdown, we developed a magazine called BREAK. It’s a collection of statements by people working in cultural fields who reported on how and what they were doing during the lockdown. We planned the magazine entirely via Zoom and GoTo meetings. It was really efficient. In live lessons, you often don’t get to the point so quickly.

I spent two months back home in Vienna in the spring semester. I could study from there and do my part-time work at Jameda, an internet portal. Before Corona hit, I had been in Milan for a few months on an internship. I liked it so much that I can’t wait to visit Italy again. But at the moment you can only plan from one day to the next.

For me, the spring semester of 2020 was a phase of not being seen. I felt unobserved, free of any evaluation or feedback. I started to draw. YouTube was my teacher. I often watched anatomy and drawing classes and art documentary films. I drew bodies, not anatomically correct ones, but very bruised, heavy bodies. Before, I had mainly worked digitally. But now, I am really interested in installations in physical spaces.

The summer semester was mega-chaotic. We didn’t know which subjects would be taught despite the lockdown, and if so, how they would be taught. We also had no idea how we would take exams.

Every day brought a new realization. Most lectures were moved online. So if you missed a lecture, you could listen to it later. But if you were unlucky, the lecture wasn’t recorded at all. Sometimes, attendance was mandatory. And if you didn’t attend the lectures, you wouldn’t be able to take the final exam.

What I missed most this year was the freedom to just go out and meet people, or simply to stand in a subway car full of passengers at rush hour. I live in a shared apartment with three other students. In the evenings, we often just hung out together at home. We also took long walks together.

That was in the spring. By the summer, everyone was able to move around Munich much more freely again. So we could go down to the Isar River or over to the English Garden without worrying that a policeman patrolling the streets would ask where we were headed. People are tense, though, no matter where you go. If you get too close nowadays, they look at you strangely.

The winter semester will start soon. I’m hoping that things will be more clearly defined and less chaotic than early this year. And I hope that the outdated overhead projectors some of my teachers have had to rely on this year are replaced by then.

The pandemic is making it possible to think differently.
Berg Tuncer, 22
fourth-semester sculpture student at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich

I’ve been living in Munich for two years now. The first year, I often traveled back to Istanbul to visit my family. Since the pandemic hit, though, Munich has felt like home. I feel like I have really arrived. Suddenly, I was no longer homesick for Istanbul.

Of course, my family started to worry about me. They would have preferred me to come home, but I thought it was more sensible not to travel.

Ironically, I had wanted to move to Paris in September 2020. But now, it feels like I would be leaving my homeland all over again. I already left my greatest love, Istanbul, when I came to Munich.

Next week, I finally will be going back to Turkey to visit my family for the first time in eight months. If there were no Covid-19, I am sure I would be lying on the beach there now, under a parasol. In Munich, I miss the proximity to the sea and good, fresh fish.

When the academy and all the studios were closed, I had no place to work on my installations. So instead, I took photos and videos, wrote concepts, and read a lot. Two of my roommates are also artists, so we often wound up just talking about art all day long.

I hope that soon more exhibitions will be possible again. I really missed the material work during the peak of the lockdown.

And I hope that the future will also bring about positive change in my home country, Turkey. It would be great to see a new generation of creative people and politicians come to the fore.

Julia Pfeiffer, 26
third-semester master’s student in robotics, cognition, and intelligence at TUM

I am in a long-distance relationship, and before Corona, I flew back and forth to London to visit my boyfriend relatively often.

Because of entry restrictions due to the pandemic, this became impossible overnight. The longest we had ever gone without seeing each other was two months.

Two weeks ago, he visited me in Munich. We talked about the future more than usual. When he was visiting, we bought a camper together. We said, “Let’s just do it!” We have to get some proper insurance for it, but then we plan to drive to Italy or France.

With everything moving online, I’m very concerned with digitalization and privacy.

At TUM, I am doing a seminar with the association Think-Tech e.V., which I co-founded. The seminar is called “Ethik für Nerds.” Digitalization is a great opportunity, but we have to deal with the impact it has on our privacy and the data we disclose.

What did I like about online lectures in the summer semester? The professors seemed a lot less authoritarian. We had views via video of their living rooms and bedrooms.

Once, a professor left the lecture for ten minutes and when he came back, he said the postman had been there. We watched through the camera as his child pulled him away. All 40 students giggled at that.

I was in the UK for my practical year when infections started to rise across Europe. The first eight weeks in Newcastle were all good. Then I was supposed to go to Scotland for an additional two months, but because of Covid-19 I was sent back to Germany.

At the last minute, I was granted a place at the university hospital and could finish the year there. I was in trauma surgery, and it was pretty chaotic. Only the most essential operations were being done. Often, I just changed bandages in the morning and was sent home at 10 or 11 a.m.

Exams were also different. Instead of physically examining a patient, we got his or her files and were asked questions. The fourth exam subject, which is assigned by lottery, was omitted completely.

I had actually planned to use the summer months to travel and visit my family, because I won’t really have much time when I start to work. But I was very careful and waited to visit my parents. Now I am applying for jobs. The situation for young doctors is still really good, I hear.
STUDYING (WITH) THE GERMANS
Welcome to Germany, *Ausländer*! You’ve joined us at rather an odd time. That said, we’re happy you’re here and sure you’ll love studying in the country that gave the world Goethe, Schiller, and Marx, as well as Bach, Birkenstock, and Bratwurst. Are you ready for German University Life? Take this quiz from the British humorist and author of “How to Be German” to find out.

**The Questions**

1. You’re heading in for *Anmeldung* (registration). You’re excited. You will ace this study-abroad thing. S-T-O-P. Look down. Are you dressed …?
   
   A … to kill?
   
   B … to maim?
   
   C … to confuse?
   
   D … to maximize your invisibility?

**HINT**

In Germany, your work ethic should be legendary; your reading tastes exotic; your music playlists eclectic; your movie favorites obscure (make your go-to director a one-eyed Hungarian communist who died without completing a single film) — but your clothes …? Your clothes must be Ordinary. Average. Minimalistic. Muted. The only statement they should make is one of unwavering understatement. Blend in with your body, stand out with your beautiful mind.

2. On your way to class you must cross a road. You stop at its edge. You look left. You look right. The Ampelmännchen is red. What do you do?

   A Wait without shame: *Ordnung muss sein* (rules are rules).
   
   B Wait, but nervously look left and right. Hope that a car comes, or that a child is also waiting to cross so that you feel less silly refusing to cross an empty road until a green lightbulb gives permission.
   
   C Cross gingerly and if anyone shouts *Halt* pretend to be a confused tourist.
   
   D Cross confidently and if any passerby reprimands you, lay down in the middle of the road and make star shapes to emphasize just how empty it really is.

**HINT**

While there are some regional variations, the German reputation for rules-loving is largely fact-based. Jaywalking, even if the road is empty, means risking the scorn, tuts, and shouts of nearby natives, who will consider you an irresponsible, possibly suicidal, social renegade. If you break rules here, even seemingly innocuous ones like riding your bike on the sidewalk, prepare for admonishment.
3
It’s time for class. But no one has told you which class, or where? Is this a problem? How much structure do you need?

A  Lots! Structure’s great. It stops you from drowning in a puddle of possibility.

B  Very little. You’re just flexible like that.

C  None. You’ve never met structure you didn’t try to knock down.

D  Some. A bit of structure is always good.

HINT
At a German university, while you might find some spoons lying around, no one will feed you with them. During your studies, you’ll largely be left to your own devices – and we’re not talking about your phone. This might sound bad at first to a foreigner. But it actually offers a lot of opportunity. It’s hard to free your mind when your body’s trapped in a repetitive routine you didn’t choose. But this new freedom will take some getting used to. So ask questions. Be proactive. Make a nuisance of yourself. Explore all your options.

4
Who’s that up ahead? It’s him again, the guy you’ve had two seminars with today, the one who made that point about post-modernism being post-Marxist. You didn’t understand it, but he sounded very intelligent. He’s on his own. He has excellent hair. He could be your friend. How do you approach him?

A  You don’t. You ignore him. If you’re meant to be friends it will happen, somehow, via osmosis.

B  You stare at him a lot and see if he gets the hint and makes the first move.

C  You sidle up and try small-talk: How about this weather we’re having?

D  You sidle up and try big-talk: How about this neo-liberalism we’re suffering from?

HINT
Germans aren’t really small talkers. They build friendships slowly, on a firm base of proximity, honesty, and repetition. Once built, they’re rock solid. So give it time, don’t be too forward. Enjoy staring. It isn’t frowned upon here, so no need to keep your eyes to the floor.

5
Over lunch, in a lively discussion about independent Hungarian cinema, a Kommilitone (fellow student) mistakenly attributes the 1969 movie “Those Who Wear Glasses” to Ildikó Enyedi. You know it’s the work of István Bujtor. What do you do?

A  Nothing. It’s a simple mistake.

B  Nothing. But make a mental note not to trust this student from now on, for he plays fast and loose with the truth.

C  Immediately interrupt! Say, “I don’t want to be a pedant, but I think you’ll find it was directed by István Bujtor, his second after the criminally unappreciated ‘A Holiday with Piroschka,’ released on the 19th March 1969, at 3 p.m. Oder?”

D  Plan to slip that Kommilitone of yours a passive-aggressive
note after class, in which you chastise him for his intellectual sloppiness.

HINT
You might have heard the expression, never let the truth get in the way of a good story. In Germany, it’s more like never let a good story get in the way of truth. It’s your duty to correct people when they say something incorrect, no matter how utterly inconsequential it may be. Germans call it Klugscheißen (smart shitting, literally translated), and if you dare do it, you will win their respect.

6
In the final seminar of the day, you join a table with three other people. How do you greet each other?

A The handshake.
B The hug.
C The abrupt nod.
D The elbow bump.

HINT
One day in the future, social distancing will end. On that day, in Germany, few people will notice the difference. Germans have been socially distanced since Covid-1. If a short, sharp nod is inappropriate, there’s little they like more than a crisp, long, platonic handshake. To get this right, lock eye contact, slide back one full meter, and then thrust out your hand. Ideally, one of you should be on tippytoes. Really stretch yourself out. That’s it. Lovely …

7
You hear through the grapevine that classmates are going to the Studentenkneipe (bar) tonight for First Semester Party. What do you do?

A You pre-game at home with Jack: Jack Daniels. Once the world is sufficiently wobbly, you sashay to the bar and order the cheapest drink that comes in a bucket. You don’t return home until you’re wearing someone else’s underwear.

B You go, but only for an hour. You dazzle people with your intoxicating wit but are sure to get home nice and early so you’re fresh for class tomorrow.

C You’ll turn up at the agreed time, shoot for a nice conversation or two, perhaps double as many drinks, then leave with three new friends and a few old ones, riding your bicycles home as a big giddy group.

D The bar? Ugh. No thanks. Hungarian independent cinema isn’t going to watch itself.

Thank you, Ausländer, your Probetag (test day) is over. To see if you’ve passed and will be invited back, count the points for each answer and compare with the table below. Did you make the grade? Will you earn a full term on campus?

Points & Results

The Points
1) A: 1pt, B: 3pts, C: 2pts, D: 4pts
2) A: 4pts, B: 3pts, C: 2pts, D: 1pt
3) A: 1pt, B: 4pts, C: 2pts, D: 3pts
4) A: 3pts, B: 4pts, C: 1pt, D: 2pts
5) A: 1pt, B: 2pts, C: 4pts, D: 3pts
6) A: 2pts, B: 1pt, C: 4pts, D: 3pts
7) A: 2pts, B: 3pts, C: 4pts, D: 1pt

The Results
24+ points = 1.0 – You aced it! Outstanding work. We think you will fit in well here. You struck the right balance between being intellectually intriguing and socially aloof. You worked hard; you worked efficiently, but crucially, you dressed anonymously. You started the party, kept it rocking at its midpoint, left before it fizzled out, and you’re still in a fit state for tomorrow’s classes. Gut gemacht (Well done).

16–19 points = 4.0 – Not good enough, but you get another chance. Sorry, but you’re not ready for life at a German university. You got in late; you left early; you didn’t sign up for anything; and you drove to campus. In a car. A CAR. All we can do is offer you a place in a Studienkolleg (a foundation course) and hope that your rough, anti-intellectual edges get sanded down enough that you can reapply again smoothly next year. Netter Versuch (Nice try).

11–15 points = 5.0

Less than 15 points = 6.0
You failed! Thanks for nothing, Ausländer. While you tried, sort of, you’re not a good fit for intellectual Germany. You expect to have your hand both held and shook. You dressed in a shiny gold shirt that distracted fellow students and a crow who fell off a windowsill and broke its wing. This isn’t for you. We could go on, but we’ve organized a little party to celebrate your exit, with coffee and cake. Auf Wiedersehen (Until next time).
LEARNING
When the first wave of coronavirus hit, German universities got to work on digital alternatives.
It’s no secret that global higher education is struggling with the ripple effects of Covid-19. But the pandemic may also give German universities a chance to leapfrog into digital learning approaches. Students – across the street and around the world – could benefit

BY DEBORAH STEINBORN  PHOTOS DAVID AVAZADEH

Take a course in pole dancing while enrolled at Europe’s largest sports university. Explore the salt marshes of Hallig Hooge, an island in the North Sea, with one of the continent’s biggest public research institutions. Create riveting art from the unpredictability of life in a Stuttgart lockdown. Protest social injustice and learn about the EU’s political system while you’re at it. Or simply learn corporate finance at your own pace.

These days you can do it all virtually, from afar, without setting foot in a lecture hall or walking across a college campus.

Welcome to Germany’s rapidly evolving Hochschullandschaft, or higher-education landscape. Literally overnight, some of the country’s largest public universities and its smallest private colleges have vaulted forward with technological tools for learning. Covid-19 gave them little choice, but they’re benefiting from the change.

Of course there are kinks to work out. In some cases, basic infrastructure is still lacking, from telecom cables to adequate recording systems. Legal constraints also pose challenges to conducting courses entirely online. But many believe the change is here to stay. University administrators claim this digital transition will make Germany a more attractive destination for higher education even after the pandemic is over. Some students think so, too. Even when “old” campus life returns – the jostling through classrooms, cafeterias, and hallowed halls – new forms of digital learning will remain.

“At first, it was just an emergency solution,” says Parag Saurabh, a 34-year-old MBA student at the European School of Management and Technology in Berlin. “The best possible alternative was online instruction.”

In spring 2020, when Germany was in lockdown and campuses were shuttered, Saurabh caught the last flight back to his hometown of Gurgaon, near New Delhi in India, to be with his family. He finished up the semester online from there, returned to Berlin in the summer, and plans to write his thesis this fall while starting a job in the German capital.

Today, Saurabh sees the long months of online instruction in a positive light. “Sure, it was a little hard when I was sitting all alone in a hotel room in India, in quarantine,” he says. “But after a couple of months, it seemed some things, like corporate finance, were better to learn digitally. I could go back and review parts I didn’t understand. It was easier to participate and follow the lessons.”

Saurabh’s experience isn’t an anomaly. According to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), about 80,000 international students headed home in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic. That’s more than a fourth of all 300,000 foreign students who were registered at German universities at the time. The majority of those who left did complete the semester’s work digitally from abroad, according to a representative survey conducted by the DAAD. In a country of long-standing academic traditions – including paper-based, in-person final examinations mandated by law – this was no small feat.

“Covid-19 was an incredible accelerator for digitalization at German universities,” says Alexander Knoth, head of digitalization at the DAAD. Knoth has been preaching the potential benefits of e-learning since his days as a doctoral student and researcher at the University of Potsdam more than a decade ago. “For me,” he says, “the coronavirus outbreak was a bull’s eye.” Universities that had already explored digital learning were pushed to step up their plans, and fast. And those that hadn’t? They had their work cut out for them.

That’s where, clichéd as it is, the characteristic German tendency to think and act methodically started to kick in.

RWTH Aachen University, Germany’s largest technical university, offers a case in point. Located at the scenic border to both Belgium and the Netherlands, the historic university had been looking forward to the 2020 festivities to mark its first 150 years. As
late as mid-March, administrators were still planning a special party in Berlin. Chancellor Angela Merkel was on the guest list, the stage was set. Just a couple of days later, the event had been canceled and RWTH’s campus shut down. Written exams and lab courses were called off indefinitely. And foreign students, who make up 25 percent of the student body, were scrambling to return home.

“It’s an understatement to say we were all taken by surprise,” says Aloys Krieg, RWTH’s vice president for education. “But it is also no exaggeration to say that we got to work immediately to find solutions. We knew that students needed to take their final exams and that we had to transition to online teaching as smoothly and rapidly as possible.”

Working mostly out of their own homes, administrators joined forces with representatives of the general students committee. Commonly referred to by its German acronym, AStA (for Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss), the committee is rather like a student union in Anglo-Saxon countries. “AStA’s involvement made a crucial difference,” says Krieg. “We were in telephone contact every single day, often several times a day. When problems in the transition to digital coursework arose, we knew right away, thanks to the student association. We were able to react.”

In the first weeks of the crisis, student representatives recall, they left their desks only to get some sleep. And they are still on the job. “It’s like a marathon,” says Alexander Schütt, a master’s student in sociology at RWTH whose student-rep duties morphed into a full-time job when the coronavirus struck. “We are all a little exhausted now, but we keep going.” He ticks off the challenges they tackled in recent months: How to ensure all students get to take their final exams and round out the semester? How to get students up and running online? How to help foreigners return to campus in the fall? And the list goes on. “With so...
many thousands of students, there is always something that needs to be clarified,” Schütt says.

In hindsight, RWTH’s biggest challenge had nothing to do with technology. Rather, how would all those students actually fit into the quaint city of Aachen while adhering to new rules for social distancing? The overall population is 245,000, and there are 45,000 students at RWTH.

German law specifies that university exams must take place in person, with just a few exceptions. This may seem like no big deal, but Aachen lacks a convention center or other large facility, which would have enabled physical distancing for large numbers of test takers. How could students take their tests? Staff and student reps tackled the task with mathematical precision. They rented all the extra rooms they could find. They agreed on a new, delayed exam schedule. And for foreign students who had left town in the outbreak’s first days, they tried hard to find loopholes for course completion. Matters were often resolved on a case-by-case basis — by assigning an additional paper, for instance, or postponing an exam until the university board could clear the exceptions.

By late summer, RWTH staff felt confident that the winter semester could proceed smoothly — whether on campus, online, or in a combination of both — even if Germany faces another virus outbreak. Accommodating foreign students still presents a challenge, however. China accounts for 22 percent of RWTH’s international enrollments, followed by India at 12 percent. Due to restrictions on international mobility stemming from the pandemic, “it will be extremely difficult for these students to return to Germany for the winter semester,” admits Krieg, the VP for education.

Partly to address this, the university recently adopted a new initiative introduced by the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia called a Kann-Semester — literally, a “can-do semester.” In this format, students
can complete a semester’s coursework, but they don’t have to if, midway through, they change their minds or encounter too many logistical obstacles. This applies to all university enrollees, but it should help international students in particular.

Indeed, universities are working diligently toward blended-learning, e-learning, and off-campus solutions. A study published by the DAAD in July shows that in dealing with the pandemic, German universities have seized the opportunity for progress in digitalization and committed to helping students from abroad.

Half of all universities surveyed had compensated for the cancellation of in-person classes with completely virtual events, while the other half relied on a mixed model of classroom and digital teaching. At 98 percent of these universities, staff could work from home, and almost 90 percent offered virtual counselling hours to students.

Indeed, throughout the country, universities have introduced digital laboratory experiments, reinvented research excursions and cross-cultural internships in virtual formats, and developed hybrid course offerings – half online, half analog – to be flexible for the pandemic’s duration and beyond.

When ZEIT Germany went to press in September 2020, the cloud of the coronavirus was still hovering over Europe. Germany has been something of a model in its systematic, scientific, and orderly handling of the pandemic. When the number of infections escalated in March, politicians brought public life to a grinding halt. They introduced rigorous testing and later loosened restrictions step by step.

Higher education has moved in a similar vein. Concerned that the virus could again spread rapidly if campuses reopen too soon, universities have postponed the winter semester several times, most recently to November 2.

Yet some students have found that the cloud has a silver lining: learning in totally new, creative ways and places. Alexander Schütt, the student-rep at RWTH, can imagine a career in politics after completing his master’s studies. He has put his studies on hold in order to focus fully on his leadership role in student governance during the pandemic. “If ever there was a situation that calls for change and development,” he says, “this is it.”

In Stuttgart, meanwhile, students at the Merz Akademie Hochschule für Gestaltung, Kunst und Medien, a non-profit university of art, design, and media, are taking new ways of learning in their own creative direction.

Were it not for Covid-19, students in a film and video theory class would have spent the summer semester preparing documentaries and art exhibits throughout the surrounding Black Forest region. Instead, the 24 students published weekly video diaries about living and studying under coronavirus restrictions. They turned the lockdown into art. One diary entry offers a hair-raising juxtaposition: the quietude of leftover dishes and a laptop, camera taped over, in the kitchen of a Wohngemeinschaft (shared apartment) with an ever-louder din outside. It’s the sound of thousands of protestors against coronavirus measures marching past the building on their way downtown.

At Justus Liebig University Giessen, a large public research university in the state of Hesse, professors in the field of science found their own creative vibe.

Hans-Peter Ziemek is one of them. The tenured biology professor couldn’t bear to cancel an annual excursion to the North Sea; it’s something he has offered for years to his grad students in education. So, for two weeks in June, 18 students spent time with him on Hallig Hooge, a small German island.

Instead of making the trip in person, they “traveled” to the island via the internet – with videos, live broadcasts, and online presentations. Beforehand, students received a set of packages with secret contents by old-fashioned mail and links to pre-recorded videos and invitations to e-meetings. Their instructions: to open each package on a particular day of the week.

On one day, they explored the salt marshes via video with a guest lecturer who explained how plants and soil interact in this environment. On another morning, each student unwrapped sandpaper, string, a block of amber, and instructions on how to polish the fossilized resin. Janina Heinigk, a student in the group, spent two and a half hours polishing the amber at home. “That was a cool experience,” the future biology teacher says. She now plans to integrate practical and digital elements into her own lessons as a teacher.

Ziemek didn’t want to leave out the usual, final fun either. So he rounded out the digital excursion with a good old-fashioned Umtrunk, or round of drinks. In their final package, students found ingredients for a Pharisäer. This northern German cult drink consists of coffee, two cubes of sugar, a dollop of whipped cream,
and a shot of rum. They toasted their successful online excursion on Zoom.

As recently as a year ago, online art diaries and digital biology excursions might have sounded too futuristic in some corners of German academia. Pole dancing via Zoom still does. Yet in the “Corona semester,” “Pole Dance Fitness via Zoom” was one of the most popular courses at UniSport2, a joint initiative by the German Sport University Cologne (DSHS) and the University of Cologne.

“Demand was high, and the courses were almost always fully booked,” says Eckhard Rohde, head of the sports department at the University of Cologne. And this was despite obstacles, he adds: “Not every student apartment provides enough space, and not all students can afford to buy a pole for 85 euros or more.” Pole dancing as a sport has caught on among students ever since Madonna and other stars claimed it as their secret recipe for staying fit. For the online version, students simply needed to find their own pole.

To be sure, DSHS – Europe’s largest sports university, with about 6,000 students – faced a particular challenge. The courses it had to move online weren’t in calculation-oriented corporate finance but track-and-field, dancing, and other physically oriented subjects. For staff at the school, which is located in downtown Cologne, the pressing question was how to digitally implement courses in practical sports. The answer, at first, seemed to be “not at all!” one professor recalls. But the pandemic inspired a true rethink in many areas, says Thomas Abel, director of digitalization and diversity at the school. And students adapted quickly. (The university was lucky that it had already replaced old, rotting telephone cables the previous year as part of a longer-term plan to update technology on campus.)

Universities still face hurdles. Many foreign students are struggling to enroll in the winter semester. With many embassies and agencies abroad closed, they may not be able to obtain documentation required to register at German universities. And like in the US, enrolling in an online-only course of study isn’t enough for a student visa granting entry into Germany; the federal government placed a ban on that back in July. Only students from one of seven countries on a so-called positive list are exempt from this ban.
“There is still huge interest abroad in studying in Germany,” says Stephan Paulini, the co-founder of MyGermanUniversity, an online platform. “But the paperwork that is necessary to sign up as a student at a German university is a challenge. To get a student visa, you need documents that you simply cannot get your hands on in many parts of the world right now.”

Then there are the travel restrictions, Paulini adds. “Students are wondering if they will actually be let into the country when they get to the border,” he says. His company offers regular coronavirus webinars to international students interested in Germany, and he says this is probably the most common question posed by students attending those webinars.

Some universities are finding ways around the paperwork, while others are allowing students to at least begin the semester online from abroad. Politicians are weighing in, too. Kai Gehring, a member of the Green Party in the Bundestag, made an official plea in August to the Ministry of Education to help foreign students. “It would be a blatant case of double standards if the federal government were to stick to this,” Gehring wrote in a letter to the ministry, referring to the ban on foreign students enrolled in online-only coursework.

International students want to come. Uni-assist is the central point of contact between applicants with foreign educational certificates and about 170 German universities. In September, it said that despite the coronavirus, at least 60,000 foreign students had applied for the winter semester at participating universities. The jury is still out on whether they will ultimately sign up or instead delay or cancel their studies abroad.

“The whole world is wondering what the winter semester will look like,” says Jan Kercher, expert for external studies and statistics at the DAAD. “Decisions will likely be made on short notice. But if universities are interested in international students, they will do everything they can to get them to come.”

At least 60,000 foreign students have already applied for the winter semester at some 170 German universities

“Study at a private!”

www.private-hochschulen.net
What mistakes do university students make when they study from a distance?

The main challenges are the same as in traditional university settings: self-motivation and self-management. No matter where students study, it’s important that they develop strategies to motivate themselves and to structure their studies.

So self-motivation and an app are all that a student needs for distance learning?

Not necessarily. With digital studies, it’s also easier to maintain the illusion that everything is going fine. If a student doesn’t have to physically come to campus, he may not realize that he hasn’t attended a course for a month. He may not notice so quickly whether this is due to initial overload or because he may not want to study that particular subject after all.

Students should reflect regularly on how their studies are going and discuss their progress with peers. The student advisory service also can help.

What mistakes do professors make when they teach from a distance?

The cardinal mistake made by teaching staff is the assumption that formats and concepts developed for classroom teaching can be copied directly into digital formats without adaptation. Effective distance learning takes into account the specific needs and conditions of students and incorporates strategies to meet them.

So teaching staff should think about how to structure learning effectively when students are no longer bound to a particular time or location. They need to support participation and self-directed learning. Choosing the best tools and strategies for specific types of content and teaching situations requires careful planning and reflection.

How can students get to know each other if they don’t physically meet?

Getting to know each other virtually is more difficult at first. But students can and should...
network digitally much as they would on campus: on social media platforms, in reading groups, or through political and social initiatives. Our university has regional centers for this purpose in every federal state, where students can get to know each other personally.

It also really helps to work together on projects. The FernUniversität organized an educational hackathon this summer semester with that in mind. When students cooperate on a project, they automatically learn to work together, even if it’s in a digital format.

**So digital studies are better for team players?**

Definitely. Students who network with each other get through their studies more easily. At home alone, the opportunities to distract yourself are simply greater.

If you have to write a term paper and would rather go to the swimming pool or tidy up your apartment, you’ll be more motivated if you have a date with a fellow student to work on that term paper than if you were all on your own.

You can think of it like sports. If you make an appointment with a friend to go jogging at 8 a.m., you’re much more likely to get out the door.

**Has student enrollment at FernUniversität in Hagen risen as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic?**

We have seen especially strong demand in our Open Access Studies program, which lets interested students register for individual courses or modules without committing to a full degree program. This gives students the flexibility to pursue learning according to their individual needs, whether they want to expand existing skills and knowledge for professional reasons, pursue a personal interest, or just find out whether distance-learning is a good fit for them.

In the summer semester of 2020, Open Access registrations increased around 35 percent compared to last year.

Overall, enrollment in the 2020 summer semester showed a slight rise compared to the previous year. Preliminary information for the winter semester suggests that enrollment has risen further, but we don’t have final numbers yet.

**As a distance-learning university, how has the coronavirus outbreak changed your approach to teaching?**

Since teaching from a distance was already routine for us, very little changed. The biggest issue was how to run exams. That’s because even though we are a distance-learning university, exams primarily take place in person – either on our campus, at one of our regional and study centers, or abroad through partnerships with other institutions. This has to do with the legal requirements for exams at German universities, which have prevented the widespread implementation of digital exams.

The good news is, the pandemic is driving innovation in new options for legally-compliant electronic assessments. At the FernUniversität, for instance, we have introduced online proctoring and online open-book exams.

**FernUniversität in Hagen has offered support to teaching staff at other German universities during the current crisis. Who has reached out?**

We started a community in cooperation with a think tank called Hochschulforum Digitalisierung to address digitalization in higher education and support colleagues at traditional universities who were forced by Covid-19 to switch to distance learning overnight.

At a kickoff session in April, there were about 200 attendees from all over Germany. Since then, the community has provided a platform for teachers throughout the country to talk about their experiences in the “corona semester.” It has hosted digital events on topics including student engagement, experiences with online exams, accessibility, diversity, and hybrid teaching formats.

Our teaching staff also has made its distance-learning expertise available to other universities. And a training program for e-learning, which we had already developed, was made available to the general public as self-learning courses on our open Moodle platform. These courses cover topics such as instructional design and tools for implementing digital learning. They’ve proven very popular. We’ve had more than 700 external registrations already.
BAFÖG n. (German Federal Training Assistance Act) federal act regulating state-funded financial assistance for students in higher education. Half of this financial support usually takes the form of a grant, and the remaining half an interest-free state loan totalling no more than 10,000 euros. The loan must be repaid in installments after completion of studies.

BOLOGNA-PROZESS m. (higher education reform) 1. a series of agreements between European countries to ensure common standards of higher education (named after the university where education ministers from 29 countries signed a declaration in 1999). 2. introduction of a two-tiered structure of bachelor’s and master’s degrees, as well as easy transfer of credits between institutions within the bloc of countries.

DEUTSCHER AKADEMISCHER AUSTAUSCHDIENST (DAAD) m. (German Academic Exchange Service) 1. a large federally and state-funded, self-governing support organization for international academic cooperation. 2. a popular source of scholarship funding for foreigners studying in Germany. www.daad.de/en

DEUTSCHE FORSCHUNGSGEMEINSCHAFT (DFG) f. (German Research Foundation) an organization that funds research at universities and other institutions through a variety of grants and prizes. It’s the largest funding organization in Europe. www.dfg.de/en

DUALES STUDIUM n. (dual study) 1. a system of combining apprenticeships at a company
or non-profit organization with higher education in a particular field. 2. a program mostly used by students of business administration, engineering, and social services.

**ERASMUS-PROGRAMM** *n.* (Erasmus Program) 1. a student-exchange program financed by the European Union, combining all current EU schemes for education, training, youth, and sports. 2. acronym for European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students.

**EXZELLENZSTRATEGIE** *f.* (excellence strategy) 1. a long-term effort by the German Ministry of Education and Research to promote cutting-edge research conditions for scholars, better cooperation between academic disciplines as well as institutions, and the global reputation of German universities and research institutions. 2. an initiative awarding special status to 11 German public universities. According to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2020, four of these so-called elite universities are among Europe’s top 25: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Technical University of Munich, Heidelberg University, and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

**FACHHOCHSCHULE** *f.* (university of applied sciences) an institution of higher vocational education, often in areas such as engineering or business. On average, an institution of this kind hosts 4,500 students.

**FORSCHUNGSINSTITUT** *n.* (research institute) a research body typically outside of the university system. The top four, Fraunhofer Gesellschaft, Helmholtz Gemeinschaft, Max Planck Gesellschaft, and Leibniz Gemeinschaft, employ about 82,000 researchers.

**HABILITATION** *f.* (post-doctoral qualification) 1. a postdoctoral degree necessary for a full professorship at German universities. 2. highest academic qualification, involving formal defense of a major work of independent scholarship.

**HOCHSCHULRANKING** *n.* (university ranking) a ranking of institutions of higher learning based on diverse factors. The CHE University Ranking, for example, ranks institutions according to student and faculty assessments. [https://ranking.zeit.de/che/en/](https://ranking.zeit.de/che/en/)

**MENSAL** *f.* (dining hall) a location that provides meals to university students and staff and is integral to social life on German campuses; subsidized meals usually cost less than four euros.

**PRÜFUNGSAMT** *n.* (examination office) A university unit that handles all matters related to student exams. Students need to register to take exams in Germany. The office also issues educational certificates.

**TECHNISCHE HOCHSCHULE** *f.* (technical university) a university that specializes in engineering and related fields. Some confer doctorates, while others do not.

**UNIVERSITÄT (UNI)** *f.* (university) 1. an institution of higher learning with facilities for teaching and research that also awards bachelor’s and master’s degrees. It hosts on average 16,500 students. 2. an educational body with the right to confer doctorates.
When she applied to the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts in Berlin in 2017, Eunsoon Jung felt fully prepared for the final round of auditions.

The trained actress from Seoul had practiced all her lines and even built her own stage set out of cardboard. But there was no wireless connection in the building and she couldn’t use her translation app. So before she presented her work, Jung addressed the jury: “Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, please judge my creativity and not my language.”

Today, the 33-year-old is a third-year student of directing at the academy and speaks fluent German. More significantly, she’s part of the first all-female class in the 69-year history of one of Europe’s most prestigious drama schools.

That weekend three years ago, the jury chose six women out of 127 applicants. The decision wasn’t a political statement, school management emphasizes. “They were simply the best,” says jury member and theater director Thomas Ostermeier. Six days after the semester began, the hashtag #MeToo went viral. To Jung and her classmates it felt like a call to arms.

As an actress, Jung had toured India, Mexico, and Japan with a performance group. But she didn’t want to take cues from other directors anymore: “I wanted to decide for myself.”

She looked into studying in Germany, not least because she was fascinated by the playwright Bertolt Brecht. She had heard of his “distancing effect” (Verfremdungseffekt) – a technique to remind an audience of a performance’s artificiality – and wanted to learn more. She was also intrigued that Germany, like Korea, has a history of being divided. There was a practical aspect, too. “I could afford studying here,” she says. Most state universities don’t charge tuition. The only hitch: Jung didn’t speak the language. So in 2015, she arrived in Heidelberg with just two suitcases and began to study toward a language certificate. She researched directing and performance artistry courses and soon became aware of the Busch Academy’s strong reputation in Germany.

At the time, Jung didn’t know how deeply entrenched gender inequality is in the theater scene in Germany, a country that’s been governed by a woman for the last 15 years. The German Culture Council analyzed national theaters between 1994 and 2014 and found that 78 percent are directed by men. What’s more, men direct 70 percent of all theatrical productions and write 76 percent of all plays in the country.

At the very start of their first semester, the six women decided to work collectively to strengthen their own artistic ideas but also to point out this broader sexism. Seeing that all tenured professors in Busch’s directing department are male, for instance, they repeatedly demanded the appointment of a female professor.

The program is intense, with many weekends devoted to rehearsing. Tuition is free, but in her spare time, Jung covers her living expenses by waitressing. In their second year, the students attended theater workshops in Vienna, Copenhagen, and Seoul, where their workshop took place at Jung’s former drama school. The experience highlighted the different teaching styles, according to Jung. In South Korea, teachers expect you to follow their rules and not ask questions, she says. In Berlin, she feels free.

That’s the case at Busch, but sometimes less so outside of school. She admits she’s sometimes anxious about her safety. “I thought that Germany had really confronted its Nazi past, so I wasn’t prepared to experience racism here,” she says. In the Covid-19 pandemic, racist comments toward Asians became far worse, she adds: “Sometimes, you need good headphones to drown out the slurs.”

Jung and her classmates find inspiration in their solidarity. When they caught wind that a local conference about feminism and solidarity in theater had hired actor Lars Eidinger to DJ the afterparty, they were frustrated that a man had gotten the job. So they jumped onstage with wrestling masks and cardboard signs for a playful protest.

And when the Volksbühne, one of Berlin’s well-known theaters, was looking for a new manager, they collectively wrote to Berlin’s senator for culture suggesting that all six of them be hired for the post. They didn’t get the job. But the Busch Academy will allow them to manage its school theater in 2021. Call it a tryout for their utopian idea of running a theater collectively – six women in charge of a theater historically run by men.
When she first arrived in Heidelberg, Asifa Akhtar was surprised by a phenomenon she observed at bus stops. All over the picturesque riverside town in southwestern Germany, passengers would appear promptly one to two minutes before a bus was scheduled to arrive. Punctual public transportation? This was a big change from London, where she had just received her doctorate in molecular biology.

Decades later, Akhtar still recalls how surprised she was by that sign of reliability, even though she’s lived and worked in the country since 1997. After a long stretch at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, her research took her not around the globe but just two hours by car to the Max Planck Institute of Immunobiology and Epigenetics in Freiburg, where she’s been promoted several times. In July 2020, she was appointed the first international and female vice president of the Max Planck Society’s prestigious Biology and Medicine Section. It’s fair to say she’s now one of the country’s most prominent researchers from abroad.

It wasn’t part of Akhtar’s original plan to stay so long in the EU’s most populous country. After completing her doctorate at London’s Imperial Cancer Research Fund, now part of the Francis Crick Institute, Akhtar looked very broadly at opportunities in the US and the UK. But she also became aware of Germany and, more specifically, Heidelberg’s EMBL. The organization had a very high profile in science and did “beautiful basic research” in the areas that interested her, she says. “And that’s how I decided to come to Germany.”

Akhtar was born in Karachi, Pakistan’s largest city, in 1971, but her family moved around a lot. Her father worked for an internationally active bank, which relocated the family to the United Arab Emirates and then to France’s capital, Paris. Akhtar had expected that her own career would lead to just as many destinations. As a scientist, “it’s very common to move between countries,” she explains.

All things relating to biology fascinated Akhtar early in life. Now, she sees that human cells interact like an orchestra, and biological research could help that orchestra play a symphony perfectly.

Back when she was still a teenager, she chose to study the subject at University College London. Today, her research focus is epigenetics. This rapidly expanding field aims to understand how organisms that contain the same set of genetic information can produce a number of cells with a wide range of functions.
Akhtar has made significant contributions to the field of chromosome regulation, and her work has been recognized with both a European Life Science Organization Award and a coveted Feldberg Prize. In her new role as VP at Max Planck, one of her tasks is advising the society’s president.

But laboratory work is still her first love. “You don’t know what the outcome is going to be, and that is fascinating for me,” she says. Like the outcome of her experiments, her success in the German research world wasn’t at all foreseeable. It gave Akhtar a career track record that she hadn’t expected when she arrived.

She spent more than a decade at EMBL, then was named an investigator at Freiburg’s Max Planck Institute, where she still works. The investigator post is part of a program to draw young researchers to Max Planck institutes, a network of about 80 highly regarded research institutes hosting 15,000 scientists. Soon thereafter, she was promoted to director, a coveted, tenured position that offers scientists the freedom to choose their research topics.

In her new role as vice president, Akhtar intends to focus, among other things, on increasing the demographic and cultural diversity of the researchers themselves. Akhtar, who has a son and a daughter, says pursuing a career as a parent in Germany can be challenging. “You have to sometimes make very difficult decisions to go forward,” she says. She wants to encourage young researchers to persevere and find a supportive environment. For her, a major pillar of support has been her family. “I think that Germany is very progressive,” she says, adding that she sees the local society developing positively in this respect each and every year.

There is one thing, after all these years, that Akhtar still struggles with: the language. “I’m not perfect in German, and my kids are always joking that I cannot speak it properly,” she laughs, noting that she tends to gesticulate with hands and feet to get her point across. People, however, “are very accommodating,” she adds.

The pleasure she takes in German reliability, which she experienced early on, has only grown over the years. She still appreciates the general culture of organization and orderliness, and she emphasizes that for scientists with a heavy workload, it greatly enhances quality of life. “I love the German tendency towards organization,” Akhtar says. “A lot of stress that you’d find in some other places is just taken away from you here.”

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RESEARCH THIS!

Glacial modeling in the Alps, a rock concert that doubles as a Covid-19 experiment in Leipzig ... Groundbreaking science is underway in the German-speaking world

BY CHRISTIAN HEINRICH AND DEBORAH STEINBORN
Research climate change on an Alpine mountaintop in Austria. You have super computers and advanced mathematical modeling to help you, but you still have to take the classic route to the top: by hiking up a tall, icy mountain with a heavy backpack on your shoulders and a pickax in hand.

That’s how researchers approach science at Ice and Climate, as it’s called — one of the world’s leading climate research groups. It is housed within the Department of Atmospheric and Cryospheric Sciences at Austria’s University of Innsbruck. Since Innsbruck is situated in the glacial Ötztal region, the glaciers are just a hike away.

In recent years, climate research has gained more and more public attention due to global warming. The university has a long tradition of glaciological and climate research in the Alps, the Polar regions, the Himalayas, and the tropics.

Back in 1952, the ice and climate unit began to record annual mass balance of two large glaciers in the Ötztal Alps, Hintereisferner and Kesselwandferner. Today, these are among the most extensive full glacier mass balance records in the world. Researcher Lindsey Nicholson leads the 18-person-strong team. The Scottish national came to the Alps via, of all places, the Himalayas.

While researching in the Asian mountain range, Nicholson heard about the groundbreaking research underway in Innsbruck. She was intrigued by the opportunity “to do the research right on your doorstep,” she says. She arrived in 2009.

The Kesselwandferner and Hintereisferner glaciers are a stone’s throw from the city’s center. This is where Nicholson’s team does the bulk of its field research. “Mountain glaciers are changing very fast and contributing to sea-level rise as a result of changes in climate,” she explains. “It’s so important to understand how the climate operates over these very complex terrains.”

Ongoing projects include measuring and modeling snow-cover dynamics on glaciers, modeling glacier length changes in the Alps, and more. The University of Innsbruck and the Tyrolean Hydrological Service sponsor the institute’s long-term glacier monitoring. — D.S.
Where do we come from? Who are we? What makes each of us unique? These are three big questions about the meaning of life. Researchers at Leipzig’s Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (MPI EVA) want to answer them in a way that reflects all regions of the world.

Studying humanity’s origins isn’t just about finding and analyzing ancient remains with molecular methods. Understanding present-day human behavior is crucial, too. So psychological studies very much belong to the institute’s tool kit.

Daniel Haun, director of comparative cultural psychology at MPI EVA, recently wrote in the magazine “Science” about the limitations of psychological research. Studies tend to be conducted in a very small number of countries, which fall under the acronym WEIRD: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. This means that over 95 percent of participants live in countries that harbor 10 percent of the world’s population. Such a biased sampling produces equally biased results. And that, in layperson’s terms, is simply not fair. So MPI EVA is committed to studying humans globally, from northern Namibia to Vanuatu in the southern Pacific. The approach could well revolutionize psychology. – C.H.
Göttingen’s connection to the Nobel Prize goes back to 1905, the year microbiologist Robert Koch received the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his trailblazing research on tuberculosis. Koch had retired from Berlin to the town of his alma mater, where as a young man he had discovered his passion for medicine.

Since then, the coveted award has been given to 44 other academics affiliated with the university town, either because they grew up, studied, or worked there. Göttingen, population 120,000, justifiably savors its reputation as the city of Nobel Prize winners. In a way, it’s no surprise. Research and academic teaching have played a major role here for centuries. Today, 30 percent of the overall population consists of students. Georg August Universität of Göttingen is one of Germany’s larger universities. And its six big research institutes employ a combined staff of 2,500.

Scientists at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry, for one, recently announced that using nanoscopy, they can optically dissect individually marked proteins in cells at higher resolutions than ever before. Physicist Stefan W. Hell, head of that research team, is Göttingen’s most recent Nobel laureate. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2014. – C.H.

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A population of just 120,000 but 45 Nobel laureates since 1905
This glue is sticky! So sticky in fact that it can reconnect broken bones. If research continues apace, it may soon replace complex, invasive procedures requiring metal rods, screws, and plates to repair everything from a skier's broken leg to a dancer's torn heel.

Not only is this super adhesive biodegradable, it's also able to withstand damp surroundings. And it's just one of several impressive research outcomes of the new Berlin University Alliance, which brings together Freie Universität Berlin (FU), Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU), Technical University of Berlin, and the medical school Charité Universitätsmedizin.

The consortium has already achieved breakthrough research like the super bone glue, which is now in a test phase. “Each of the individual institutions involved has an enormous capacity for research on its own,” says Günter Ziegler, who is both president of the FU and spokesperson for the Berlin University Alliance. “Now that we have started collaborating more closely, we have an interdisciplinary and creative power unlike almost any other,” he adds.

The numbers back him up: with a pool of 1,700 professors, 100,000 students, and a special annual budget of over 23 million euros mainly from the German state, the alliance is likely to produce even more groundbreaking scientific and scholarly developments soon.

That budget stems from the German Universities Excellence Initiative, a push to promote cutting-edge research and teaching opportunities for young scholars. When the consortium won “excellence status” in 2019, academics all over Berlin were jubilant. The money will go toward fostering cross-disciplinary research environments. – C.H.
Give the future a human touch. Yours.
Scholarships and other grants help foreign students and researchers finance their stays

Every year, Germany gives millions of euros to students in the form of *Stipendien*, an umbrella term encompassing scholarships, fellowships, and grants of all kinds.

Yet many aspiring university students from abroad don’t know that they can qualify, too. In 2019, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), a popular source of scholarship funding, supported 145,000 students and researchers in the country and worldwide. And 60,500 of them were foreigners. Funding is there for the taking. You just need to spend some time tracking it down …

1. **NARROW YOUR FOCUS**

Research diligently. Scholarships, fellowships, and grants vary widely in criteria and amount rewarded. In 2019, three of Germany’s large scholarship bodies alone doled out an estimated 700 million euros to fund tertiary study, research, and professional development. And there are thousands of public and private funding opportunities available. Donors range from church groups to private businesses, foundations (known as *Stiftungen* in German), think tanks, and personal estates. So narrow down options according to your interests and background.

The DAAD, the German Center for Foundations, the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research, and Euraxess offer extensive funding databases. But look at smaller organizations, too. Mira Maier, founder of Mystipendium, an online platform for research on scholarships, says supply often outstrips demand. “Small foundations may have very specific selection criteria … and difficulty finding students who match these criteria,” she says. “As a result, millions of euros in scholarships aren’t utilized.”

2. **BE CREATIVE**

With so much scholarship funding available, if you can think of an unusual scholarship category you may just find it. So
be imaginative in your research. Are you studying at university while parenting a small child? Did your parents never attend university? Are you Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, or Protestant? Are you engaged in environmental causes? Were you born in Zimbabwe? Do you love building IKEA furniture? Are you LGBT?

And don’t overlook the easy shots. Take the Deutschlandstipendium, which provides financial and other support to high academic achievers from all over the world. In 2019, more than 28,000 students each received financial assistance through the program.

Even BAföG, a state-sponsored student loan system most often awarded to lower-income students, is available to foreigners. BAföG stands for “federal training assistance act” and usually, only half of the payments a student receives during his or her studies must be repaid after graduation.

3. SOUL SEARCH

Before applying, ask yourself how a particular scholarship could help further your career path and life goals.

If the funder has a work-study requirement, how much time can you commit to over the course of your studies? And what are the funder’s guiding principles? Indeed, some well-known foundations that provide scholarships and other opportunities to students have clear political leanings. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation, for instance, is associated with the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation leans hard left, and the Heinrich Böll Foundation dubs itself the Green Political Foundation. Consider what fits best with your own political beliefs.

And like elsewhere in the world, there are differences in what is expected in return for higher-education funding. Most scholarships are no-strings-attached. Fellowships may require a token in return. You may need to publish your research findings in a newsletter, say, or present them to an academic or public audience. Some donors might expect you to stay in their geographic region or work for them for a period of time after completing your studies.

4. JUST DO IT

Don’t talk yourself out of applying. “A big challenge many applicants need to overcome is a lack of confidence,” says Britta Voß, spokesperson for the German Academic Scholarship Foundation. “Have faith in yourself. Applying is worth it in every case.”

If that’s not enough to convince you, just weigh the odds: a comprehensive 2016 study by Mystipendium and Stiftung Mercator found that 36 percent of funding applications in Germany are accepted.
BABY STEPS
After a decade-long political process, German legislation has elevated midwifery to an academic profession. Higher education is reacting with a host of new bachelor’s and master’s degree programs

BY CAROLE BRADEN
Christina Kalafa works long days and nights, often on weekends, in a German hospital delivery ward. The student midwife finds this work both intense and affirming. She has found her calling in the age-old medical profession that assists in birthing babies.

A fourth-year bachelor’s student at Fulda University of Applied Sciences, located in the state of Hesse, Kalafa will be among the first midwives in Germany to obtain a Bachelor of Science in Hebammenwissenschaft – the science of midwifery – when she graduates next year.

The child of Kenyan and German parents, 22-year-old Kalafa moved to Hesse from Uganda in search of higher education. She enrolled at the university in Fulda in 2017 just as her chosen profession was taking a historic turn in Germany. After a decade-long political process, legislation elevated the field to an academic profession in 2020.

The country’s midwives (Hebammen), nearly all of them women, had long been classified as tradespeople, receiving their training via a vocational curriculum, or Ausbildung. Throughout postwar German history, midwives had overseen the births of millions of babies, including complicated deliveries, yet their professional training was roughly equivalent to that of plumbers or seamstresses.

The recent academization of the field has required higher-education institutions to expand programs of study, building in scientific, theoretical, and research components to create a standardized bachelor’s degree. Requirements may still vary slightly from state to state, but the dual course of study generally takes four years, as it does in Kalafa’s program in Fulda. The legislative change is likely to make once-rare master’s and doctoral degrees in the field more prevalent as well.

“It seemed like the perfect fit,” says Kalafa of her decision to study midwifery. As an 11th grader back in her hometown of Mukono, near Uganda’s capital Kampala, she knew she wanted to work in the field of medicine one day. She considered training as a paramedic and attending veterinary school.

But then Kalafa started to explore the role of the Hebamme, which includes caring for women throughout their pregnancies, assisting them in the labor process, and providing new mothers with postpartum support, including help with breastfeeding and infant health.

Now, about a year shy of graduation, Kalafa is working hands-on with mothers in the Fulda-based hospital as she completes the 3,000 hours of practical experience her program requires. She loves it.
German-speaking midwives have been skillfully catching babies since at least the 17th century. Today’s most experienced midwives have been performing their jobs well, without academic degrees, for decades. Perhaps this is why, at least in part, the country was the last European Union member state to require academic training for the profession.

The change will certify midwives to work in other countries and thus increase their field of opportunity far beyond the country’s borders. “For us, it’s a revolution,” says Babette Müller-Rockstroh, a professor of midwifery science at Fulda University.

Germany’s birthrate has gone up over the last decade, from 677,947 in 2009 to 778,100 in 2019, according to the Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), the country’s statistics bureau. So demand is high. “We don’t have enough midwives,” says Yvonne Bovermann, board member and an education advisor at the Deutscher Hebammenverband, a professional association based in Berlin. Many jobs are vacant, especially in hospitals. Bovermann attributes this in part to a historically tense relationship between midwives and doctors, round-the-clock on-call hours, and less-than-stellar pay rates.

Bovermann is nonetheless optimistic. Birthing, like other health-related services, is a business, and increasing demand for out-of-hospital options such as home deliveries gives midwives more opportunities for work. Furthermore, as Germany’s demographics become more diverse, job prospects will improve for foreign-born midwives. And it’s possible that changing attitudes toward gender in the country will soon be reflected in the profession as well, as more German men as well as transgender and non-binary people are drawn to it.

Indeed, the numbers of students are on the rise throughout Germany. According to Destatis, enrollment in programs connected to midwifery increased 44 percent in the 2018–2019 academic year compared with a decade ago. At the University of Lübeck in Schleswig-Holstein, the first class in midwifery, will graduate in 2023. Ostbayerische Technische Hochschule Regensburg, Landshut University of Applied Sciences, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, and others have rolled out degree programs as well.

All over Germany, women of childbearing age say midwives are in short supply. Services vary. Vor- sorgehebammen provide prenatal care; Beleghebammen deliver babies in hospitals or birthing centers; those who provide postnatal care and coaching are called Nachsorgehebammen. Midwives may oversee just one part of this journey or cover all of the above. Some midwives have freelance status, which offers appealing freedom but also requires business acumen and a big insurance budget. These freelancers sometimes pay house calls or work in one of Germany’s roughly 130 birthing centers, and they may deliver infants on contract in a hospital.

Those who offer special services, such as a water-based birth or foreign-language assistance, are particularly in demand. “The English speakers are fully booked,” says Candice Deidre Bender, a South African living in Frankfurt who gave birth to a girl in January 2020. Bender says she called some 300 Hebammen but never found an available provider of at-home prenatal services.

Applicants to degree programs in Hebammenwissenschaft need a Hochschulzugangsberechtigung, the standard university entrance qualification. This generally consists of (but is not limited to) the equivalent of an Abitur (a high school diploma) and a C1-level language certificate. Müller-Rockstroh, the university professor, stresses that a strong command of German is also key.

For all that work, there are rewards, not least the free tuition. Kalafa, the bachelor’s student from Uganda, describes the appeal of obtaining an academic degree without exorbitant tuition fees. She was fortunate that she had learned German from her mother and in school, she adds. “For any international student who can master the language,” she says, “the opportunity is there.”

Kalafa’s professor agrees. Now is the perfect time to bring new cultures and contexts to German midwifery, Müller-Rockstroh says. “Most of us would appreciate a higher number of applicants from other countries. They can enrich our understanding of the women we care for.”
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If you have a cold and visit two German doctors, one might give you antibiotics while the other sends you home with well wishes and some herbal tea.

Indeed, the spectrum of medicine is wide in Germany, but you can rest assured that you’ll get excellent care. The country was one of the first to develop universal healthcare. With just a few exceptions, patients can seek both preventive and curative healthcare whenever they wish for it.

Nonetheless, the system has its idiosyncracies, and it’s good to familiarize yourself with the local quirks. “Every health system is embedded in a different culture and is a little bit different, of course,” says Evert Jan van Lente, director of EU affairs for AOK, a large public health insurer.

What may be less obvious to expats eager for some TLC: you’ll need to be patient. “Once you find your way, it’s a good system,” says a 36-year-old gallery assistant from New Zealand who has lived in Berlin for the past 12 years. “But you do have to go through a few missteps before you figure things out, and that can be frustrating.”

For one thing, even if you call a local doctor for an appointment, you may find that there are no slots available for several weeks. This is partly because doctors divide their time between scheduled appointments and what are known as Sprechstunden, or open consultation hours, where patients just turn up and sit in the waiting room until the doctor can see them.

It generally takes time before your name is called, so set aside two to three hours for this kind of visit. Protocol around this is tricky. Some practices require patients to register by phone before attending Sprechstunden. Others are drop-in only. It’s always best
to check an individual practice's homepage. After so much time in the waiting room, don’t expect the average general practitioner to spend more than 10 to 15 minutes with you. This simply reflects Germany’s universal healthcare system. Regardless of how long the visit lasts, doctors only earn a certain amount per patient – patients with public insurance, that is. If you have private insurance, that doctor you visit may spend a bit more time on the consultation.

Health insurance (Krankenversicherung) is generally compulsory in Germany for everyone, including foreigners. Expats have three main options: private health insurance, public health insurance, and travel insurance. This can become complicated because what you sign up for depends on various factors: whether or not you come from an EU member state, what type of visa or residency permit you have, how long you’re planning to stay, and whether you have a job or a spot at a university.

Compared with other countries, German health insurance pays for almost everything, AOK’s van Lente says. “Because Germans are very technology oriented, they do a lot of diagnostics and operations. There’s no other country that does more MRIs, and sometimes maybe a few too many,” he says.

“You have to remember that in Germany, every doctor’s clinic is a small business, so they are profit oriented,” van Lente adds. These financial concerns affect a number of things. How you pay, for example, makes a difference. If you’re willing to pay for a visit in cash, you may find yourself at the front of the line for an appointment. Cash comes in handy if you plan to be reimbursed via travel or private insurance; doctors often can claim higher fees in such cases.

In general, most agree that the German healthcare system is efficient and honest and will do all it can to get you well again. But sometimes there is a sense that patients are supposed to take responsibility for themselves. (In that respect, it’s a little bit like being a student at a German university.)

The autonomy isn’t all bad, though. You can pick your own specialist (without, for example, being bound by “in-network” requirements as is the case in some other countries). That isn’t possible in many other countries. This also means you can seek a second opinion without worrying about referrals or costs.

As for referrals, you don’t need one unless you’re going to see certain types of doctors, such as radiologists. There are long waiting times for some specialists, however. For example, psychotherapists on average have 20-week waiting lists throughout the country, according to Germany’s Federal Chamber

DON’T EXPECT A DOCTOR TO SPEND MORE THAN 10 TO 15 MINUTES WITH YOU
of Psychotherapists. German insurers also love it if you are proactive about staying in shape. Some health insurers even cover a percentage of the fees for so-called preventive classes such as Pilates, yoga, water aerobics, or Nordic walking.

Many insurers cover as much as 80 percent of the course fees, and some may even reduce insurance premiums if you can document taking part in such activities. And if you have a chronic illness or are recovering from one, they may pay for you to go to a sanitorium or rehabilitation facility for a period of recovery called a Kur.

Lastly, learning the language goes a long way. Even as a student, for one thing, you’ll do well to learn the word for a sick note: Arbeitsunfähigkeitsbescheinigung. If you’re too sick to work for more than three days, German law requires you to give this to your employer as proof of your disability or illness. Doctors are usually happy to oblige.

Need your prescription filled? Ask for Medikamente, also known as Arzneimittel. Medication names can be very different in German from your own native language, so if you have a regular prescription, take the packaging along with you for identification purposes.

Don’t expect to buy anything even remotely medicinal from a supermarket or drugstore. You’ll need to go to a pharmacy, or Apotheke, where you can consult highly trained experts about all kinds of over-the-counter treatments, which is why pharmacists are sometimes seen as ad hoc nurse practitioners.

Some pharmacists as well as many doctors in the country know a lot about homeopathy, an alternative form of medicine that is popular among many Germans. It was invented in Germany, and don’t be perplexed if your pharmacist or doctor recommends herbal tea or pressure points. Indeed, some forms of Komplementärmedizin, or complementary medicine, are partially covered by health insurance. But don’t bank on it. Always check the fine print of your health insurance policy. Some insurers don’t cover pregnancy terminations, for instance, while others will even cover an extended stay at a rehab facility.

If a health problem arises suddenly, international visitors often head straight to a hospital emergency room because they’re unsure of where else to go. Unless it’s really an urgent medical matter, however, industry observers recommend instead visiting a doctor’s regular Sprechstunde.

Last but not least, many physicians in Germany still like to see everything on paper. If you have non-digital medical records, bring them along to your first appointment.
DAY 1
THE ARRIVAL
We made it! I am so excited to film dating culture in Berlin, Germany. Our consultants say Berliners are not into that whole mansion glitz and glamour, so the contestants (they’ve insisted on gender parity) will sleep in tents. The set for our show will be a bar along the Spree River made entirely from driftwood and old beer crates. Who are these people?

DAY 2
THE OPENING PARTY
I met these people. Out of the ten, nine have tattoos of geometric shapes, four have doctorates, two say they are something called “jazz comedians,” and one works for a local start-up that sells shoe laces by monthly subscription. At the party, everyone just wound up sitting around nodding their heads to deep house, discussing the theory of the subconscious by Sigmund Freud, and attempting to out-vegan each other. Almost no usable footage today.

DAY 3
ON-CAMERA INTERVIEWS
Disaster! All contestants said, on camera, that they’re not looking for love or anything serious right now. They just want to hang out and see what happens, no pressure. No pressure? It’s a freaking dating show!

DAY 4
THE ROSE CEREMONY
Total failure! First the men, then the women refused to hand out roses, all totally agreeing that monogamy, making the first move, reality TV, and roses are sad vestiges of the patriarchy (which, without a doubt, must be smashed). As if that weren’t enough, then Alice, a “social entrepreneur in the pet bereavement industry,” informed the production team that all the contestants had agreed to form a Betriebsrat (some sort of labor union, I think). And their very first petition, believe it or not, was to rename the show “Let’s Just Hang Out and See What Happens, No Pressure.”
DAY 5
THE FIRST DATES
Contestants were randomly assigned for one-on-one dates. And Alice got Gregor, a self-described anarchist angel investor. “It’s not a date,” he said. “Yeah, German doesn’t even have a word for dating,” she replied. He agreed. “Just pretend it’s a date,” I said, lighting the table’s candle.

“Pretending is so fake,” he said, blowing it out.

“We can hang out if you want,” said Alice. “No pressure. I already invited my crew to drop by later. We’re going to this new club that opens every seventh Tuesday of the month at 7 a.m., in the back room of a shop that sells bins.”

“Osama’s Bin Laden? Cool,” said Gregor. “I was going to meet some people to play Kicker and drop some Ketamine. Shall we combine?” “Sounds good,” Alice said. “But no pressure.”

DAY 6
EVICTION CEREMONY
After a round of unsuccessful dates involving at least ten people that no one accepted as dates, we made it to the first eviction ceremony. There, Gregor, on behalf of the Betriebsrat, cancelled the eviction. They’re illegal under Germany’s very strict rental protection laws, which also cover tents. What’s more, the contestants now required profit sharing and mandated equal screen time as well as an end to the show’s excessive use of roses, which they consider “flowerist.”

DAY 7
CANCEL CULTURE?
We got a call from the US: the show’s cancelled. I guess I should be sad, but I respect the Berlin way of non-dating dating. Gregor and I have been hanging out a lot. It’s, err, refreshingly simple. I stayed in his tent last night …

DAY 8
THE END
I quit my job! I’m staying in Berlin! Are Gregor and I dating? Ugh. Let’s just hang out and see what happens, no pressure …
PLAN IN ADVANCE

No matter what university you’re attending, your adventure will begin with paperwork and some very long German words. Depending on your nationality, you might not be allowed to travel to Germany if you don’t have a visa (Visum). Apply for a student visa at the nearest German consulate in your home country. Take care of this as soon as you receive an acceptance letter from your chosen university.

If you’re not an EU citizen, obtaining a visa for Germany often requires proof that you’ve set up a blocked account (Sperrkonto) with a domestic bank, and that this account has a consistent, minimum amount of money in it. (In 2020, that sum was 10,236 euros.) This proves that you can afford to live in Germany. The account is “blocked” in the sense that withdrawals are not to exceed a certain amount – up to 853 euros – per month.

In many countries, this precondition applies to student visas, too, so be sure to look into requirements well in advance.

Fintiba, a service provider based in Frankfurt, offers help: for 89 euros they’ll open a Sperrkonto for you in 10 minutes.

FIND SOME DIGS

Once you’ve landed in Germany, you’ll need a base for your adventure. Most universities offer affordable student housing via the Studentenwerk, also called Studierendenwerk, a state-run organization for student affairs.

Far more popular than dorms, however, are shared apartments (Wohngemeinschaften, known to all as WGs). Literally translated, these are “living communities.” Here, you rent your own room but share a bathroom, a kitchen, and usually a living room with other renters. WG living sometimes comes with persnickety rules (proper division of fridge shelf space, for one), so inquire before you take the plunge.

If you’re only spending a few months in Germany, a sublet (Zwischenmiete) might be easier. It’s already furnished, whereas in regular apartments, renters often have to install their own kitchens, including refrigerators and sinks.

Landlords may ask for as much as three months’ rent as a security deposit (Kaution). If nothing’s damaged, the deposit will be returned when you move out. Get a signed list of pre-existing damages before you move in.

Looking for lodging can be frustrating no matter where. Explore all your options. Browse the local newspaper and Kleinanzeigen (classifieds) on and offline, including eBay’s German-language offerings. Consider other options such as Wohnen für Hilfe initiatives, which pair students with senior citizens in a barter arrangement; students get free housing in exchange for assisting their elderly roommates with day-to-day life. Or try one of the platforms for shared housing: housinganywhere.com/de and WG-gesucht.de.

REGISTER IN YOUR CITY

Registering your new address (Anmeldung) with the authorities should be at the very top of your to-do list. You’ll need proof of registration (Meldebestätigung) to do everything from opening a bank account to applying for health insurance. Try to make an appointment with your local registration authority (Einwohnermeldeamt) before you arrive, as these authorities tend to book up weeks in advance. Covid-19 has added a whole new layer of complexity. Check official websites for
Shared apartments are far more popular than dorms
coronavirus-related office closures and other restrictions.

Be sure to bring along your passport, the signed and completed registration form (*Anmeldeformular*), and confirmation from your landlord that you are allowed to live at your new address (*Wohnungsgeberbescheinigung*). If you’ve found a spot in a shared flat, the main tenant can provide this form.

Usually, you’ll receive the *Meldebestätigung* right away. This document can help open many doors for you while settling in.

A few weeks after you register, you will automatically receive your tax ID (*Steuer-ID*) in the mail. Even for part-time work, which many university students seek, you’ll need this tax identification number to get paid.

**OPEN A BANK ACCOUNT**

Proof of a local bank account is indispensable to life in Germany. For example, you’ll usually need to provide your bank information to register for services like internet, telephone, and health insurance.

Public savings banks, which you’ll find under the German monikers of Sparkasse or Volksbank, have a good network of automated teller machines throughout the country. Student accounts at these types of savings banks tend to cost between 3 and 8 euros per month.

Online banks such as ING or Comdirect are also popular options for foreign students, although you might have fewer options for withdrawing cash automatically. You can open such an account at home or underway using optical character recognition (OCR) technology. To do so, however, you will need a camera-equipped laptop as well as your passport for official verification.

**INSURE YOURSELF**

Health insurance (*Krankenversicherung*) is obligatory in Germany, but once you have it, you’re entitled to visit any doctor or hospital.

A student policy will likely cost you in the realm of 85 euros per month, depending on how much money you earn on the side. You can find and compare health insurers at *krankenkassen.de*.

Not surprisingly, you might need some personal insurance, too. After all, what if you drop a friend’s smartphone?

Consider purchasing personal liability insurance (*Haftpflichtversicherung*), which starts at about 30 euros per year for individuals. Compare policy prices on *check24.de*.

**GET RESIDENCY**

You’re almost done! The last step to becoming a legal resident of the Federal Republic of Germany is the important residence permit (*Aufenthaltstitel*). Students from the European Union can skip this procedure, since they already enjoy freedom of movement within the EU. But all non-EU students need one. Make an appointment at the immigration office (*Ausländerbehörde*).

The exact documents you need will differ slightly depending on the type of student visa you have, but the following are always required: a valid passport; a biometric photo; a completed application form (the *Antrag auf Erteilung eines Aufenthaltstitels*); your lease; the *Meldebestätigung*; proof of health insurance; as well as about 110 euros to cover the fee. Keep in mind that at many offices, you may still need to pay this fee in cash.

**PAY YOUR BILLS**

A few weeks after you move in, just when you think you’ve cut through all the red tape, an envelope will arrive in your mailbox from an organization called the ARD ZDF Deutschlandradio Beitragservice, still referred to by its former abbreviation, GEZ. It’s a bill for obligatory contributions to German public television and radio. Everyone living in the country has to pay these contributions, which amount to about 210 euros per year, paid quarterly.

Got a pet? You’ll have to register your dog – but not your cat – with the tax office within four weeks of entering Germany. The “dog tax” (*Hundesteuer*) varies from city to city but ranges from 90 to 160 euros per year.

**OUTSOURCE RED TAPE**

If settling in seems daunting and you can afford it, hire an agency to help you jump the hurdles. Services range from 10 euros for registration assistance up to about 100 euros for the whole shebang (registration, health insurance, and bank-account assistance).

SympatMe, a Berlin startup that caters to expats, offers a free welcome package with an e-book, application forms, and access to an online community.

You can also buy additional services. For 14.90 euros, for example, the company helps with the application form for your registration at the local *Einwohnermeldeamt*. If you don’t speak the language at all, or are just getting used to it, this may be well worth the extra cost.

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**Consider getting some personal liability insurance – just in case**

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**Photo: Zara Pfeifer**
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Academic terms can be baffling in a foreign language. Try your hand at this bilingual crossword puzzle before your first day at university.

BY DEBORAH STEINBORN ILLUSTRATION ALINA GÜNTER

ACROSS
4. ORAL PRESENTATION
7. PREPARATORY COLLEGE
11. LECTURE HALL, AUDITORIUM
12. STUDENT SERVICES ASSOCIATION
13. LECTURE
14. COURSE SCHEDULE
15. LIBRARY
16. SHARED APARTMENT

DOWN
1. PROFESSORIAL CHAIR
2. STUDENT ID
3. MANDATORY ATTENDANCE
5. HEAD OF FACULTY, DEAN
6. WRITTEN EXAM
8. INTERNSHIP
9. ACCEPTANCE LETTER
10. ON-CAMPUS CAFETERIA
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- Bersal (Zimbabwe/Portugal), class of 2019, PhD student in Cambridge

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**THE WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2019</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Private University in Germany</td>
<td>#10 Small University Worldwide</td>
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