The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) promotes the international exchange of students and academics as the world’s largest international education agency. Every year, we support more than 130,000 students and academics on study and research stays in Germany and across the world. At the same time, we support the internationalisation of German universities through a wide range of programmes aimed at strengthening our academic institutions’ welcome culture, supporting university partnerships around the globe, and establishing trans-national education. Moreover, DAAD provides knowledge to German academia and politics about higher-education organisations abroad. All of this is possible thanks to almost 70 DAAD offices and around 1,200 dedicated colleagues around the world.

I first became involved with DAAD through earlier positions at German universities, particularly as head of the International Office at the University of Bonn. Together with my colleagues, I was able to implement several DAAD-funded projects over the years. For this reason, I was already well acquainted with DAAD’s work and the many opportunities it provides when I took on my new role.

For this reason, in my role as secretary general of DAAD I am also a representative of Germany. Being familiar with German history, culture and literature – thanks to my background in German studies – is sometimes very helpful in this regard.

What challenges does the DAAD face in promoting collaborative research?

Global disorder is a challenge for us at DAAD: political dissonance, autocratic tendencies, and the hangover of previous restrictions caused by the pandemic. Combined, all of this can unsettle young people as to whether they really want to gain experience abroad, and many would, and indeed have, been put off. In this context, our academic institutions’ welcome culture, supporting university partnerships around the globe, and establishing trans-national education are crucial.

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Many borders exist that prevent free and open academic exchange networks. These can be tangible, like geometric borders that reserve access to certain countries or institutions, as well as cultural, where divisions are accelerated by differences in language, customs, and social environment. So, how can these borders be broken down and global scholarly networks formed?

This question is at the heart of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Research Outreach was privileged to talk with Kai Sicks, Secretary General of the DAAD, on the importance of international exchange networks to achieve tolerance, understanding, and responsibility in the international research landscape and beyond.

What is the DAAD and how did you become involved in the organisation?

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is a large German education agency with global perspectives aimed at spreading the value of ‘exchange’ across borders and cultures through diverse, funded research projects. Research Outreach was privileged to talk with Kai Sicks, Secretary General of the DAAD, on the objectives, achievements, and future goals of the organisation.

Kai Sicks, Secretary General

The DAAD provides thousands of students and academics with unique, life-changing support opportunities.
thought leader

We believe that we urgently need exchange, both for peace and understanding, and because the global academic community can assume joint responsibility for the future of our planet.

Our motto ‘change by exchange’ captures how international exchange, such as a year of study abroad, is a life-changing experience for most people. Students gain insights into another culture and thus a new perspective to solving global difficulties: climate change, peace, and understanding, and because the global academic community can assume joint responsibility for the future of our planet.

The DAAD supports a range of research projects from a variety of backgrounds and of different ages. How does the DAAD seek to support researchers cycling through tertiary, higher education, and doctoral study? On the one hand, we offer scholarships for graduate students, including doctoral candidates, as well as postdocs. In addition, the DAAD serves as a national agency for Erasmus+ cooperation in higher education. On the other hand, and even more than the actual scholarship, it is the exchange experience that helps students develop their academic careers. The valuable contacts and experience gained on-site at German universities or abroad then enable DAAD scholarship holders to successfully pursue doctoral studies and research careers in Germany or in their home countries. We contribute to the experience through networking events for our scholarship holders and by offering support. We consider ourselves a door-opener for academic careers.

Could you please explain what the DAAD’s ‘DIES projects’ are, their purpose, and goals in promoting education?

The ‘Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies’ (DIES) programme offers modular, practice-oriented training opportunities for management-level professionals from higher education institutions in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. We carry out this programme together with the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) with means from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

The training is based on a blended-learning approach, focused on common challenges across the organisation. DIES training courses contribute to the acquisition of knowledge and the improvement of institutional management at participating universities in the Global South. In addition, DIES dialogue events create forums for regional and supra-regional exchange on current reform topics in higher education management.

You recently set up a new programme called EPR Zukunftsfähig – Grüner Wasserstoff (ERA Future Grants - Green Hydrogen). What are the goals of this innovative programme?

Sustainable energy supply and green hydrogen are crucial for Germany and Europe. The new DAAD programme ‘ERA Fellowships - Green Hydrogen’, which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), gives its fellows the opportunity to research at German universities or abroad then enable DAAD scholarship holders to successfully pursue doctoral studies and research careers in Germany or in their home countries. We contribute to the experience through networking events for our scholarship holders and by offering support. We consider ourselves a door-opener for academic careers.

What are the future goals of the DAAD?

Our ambitions are clear: we want to continue to enable international student exchanges, even and especially in times of crisis. We believe that we urgently need exchange, both for peace and understanding, and because the global academic community can assume joint responsibility for the future of our planet.

This requires global cooperation, also with countries whose political conditions are difficult. That's exactly what 'Science Diplomacy' is all about. In these countries, however, we need to be even better acquainted with the possibilities and limitations of academic exchange and scientific cooperation and advise our own students and researchers on what they should consider during the exchange. We therefore want to further expand the DAAD as a knowledge and advisory organisation.

At the same time, we see that international students who come to Germany are often happy to stay and work here. We welcome this and strive to further strengthen the recruitment of international students as Germany’s future specialists, without losing sight of the needs of the countries of origin.

After all, we are already taking responsibility in crises today: we support refugee students in Germany, and around the world, offer shelters for threatened and endangered students and young scientists with our scholarships, and support the preservation and reconstruction of universities in war and crisis countries. Last year, we supported around 10,000 students and researchers from Ukraine in continuing to achieve their academic goals. We take this responsibility very seriously and will continue to get involved in crisis contexts in the future.