

“Welcome - Students Helping Refugees”



Providing orientation, overcoming barriers, offering assistance: Hundreds of students throughout Germany are working to provide refugees a foothold at German universities. As part of an extensive set of measures for refugees, the DAAD issued a call for applications for its new programme “Welcome - Student Helping Refugees”, financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Currently the DAAD is funding 151 “Welcome” projects.

Marcus Willand from the University of Stuttgart decided to establish a student organisation for refugees while he was in India. “I was over there while thousands of refugees were trying to gain asylum in Germany in summer 2015 – and I was watching it all from a distance,” recalls Willand, a research assistant at the Modern German Studies Department. Shortly after returning to Germany, he founded a language mentoring programme as an integrative learning concept, in which students could assist academically trained refugees with learning German and thereby create a place for intercultural exchange.

More than one hundred students showed up at the information meeting in autumn 2015 – too many for the 20 or so language mentors, whom Willand had originally planned to train at the Language Centre. Ever since then, for about 90 minutes per week, these students have been working together with “their” small groups, while Willand and his colleagues Yvonne Zimmermann and Fabian Dirscherl have managed the organisational aspects. In that one semester, he spent 200 to 250 hours on the project, says Willand, writing e-mails and designing flyers. “The refugees have an incredible desire to come in contact with students,” the German Studies post-doc explains. “Every day after they arrive, they sit in the libraries for hours on end studying so that they can make contact as quickly as possible.”

Additional capacities

In the future, this project will be receiving support from the DAAD. With funding from the new programme “Welcome - Students Helping Refugees”, universities will be able to employ a staff member to manage the language mentoring project for eight to ten hours a week. The programme is financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Funding can be used to pay staff in self-organised student projects, as well as those involved in university integration programmes. They can offer tutorials, provide mentoring, produce info materials and help with translations and language courses. Material expenses are also fundable. “With this programme, we wish to support the fantastic volunteer commitment that we’re seeing at most universities in the long term,” says DAAD President Prof. Margret Wintermantel.

The University of Stuttgart can finance six staff members in total: for the project “Discussions about Democracy”, for the documentation of a construction project, in which students and staff of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning designed a “Place of Encounter”, and for the “Friends of Refugees” in the international mentoring programme. By way of info events, excursions, recreational activities and discussions, the programme helps refugees get situated at university more quickly. “We’re happy about the funding,” says Nina Jürgens of the University of Stuttgart, who oversees all the “Welcome Campus” projects and activities. “It brings new momentum to our projects – there’s always the desire to do more, but we usually don’t have enough capacity.”

Multifaceted projects

According to Katharina Riehle, head of the department “University Programmes for Refugees” at the DAAD, 78 universities of applied sciences, 66 universities, six art and music academies and two teacher training colleges submitted funding applications for a broad range of “Welcome” project proposals. “Every state in Germany is participating, all the major universities and numerous universities of applied sciences are represented – the result is a very diverse spectrum of projects, which we’re delighted about.” While some institutions applied with very concrete projects in mind and had already started implementing them, other projects were only just getting off the ground. “It’s impressive to see how intensively the institutions are looking at how they can contribute to the refugee issue,” says Riehle. The substantial interest in the “Welcome Programme” demonstrates how strong the demand is.

The selected projects receiving funding are extremely multifaceted. The University of Applied Sciences in Bremerhaven, for example, is offering a student-run buddy and tandem programme which includes campus tours, excursions and a student café. The team “TUtor International” at the TU Darmstadt, which has provided assistance to foreign students for many years, is now taking prospective student refugees on guided tours of the campus and the University and State Library. Because many tutors can speak the refugees’ native languages, explaining the degree programmes and departments is much easier. At the University of Cologne, law students offer free legal counselling to refugees at the “Refugee Law Clinic Cologne” and accompany them to the municipal authorities. Moreover, the university offers language courses which are specially tailored to the needs of academically qualified refugees. The Department of Oriental Studies at the university is providing translation support and intercultural training courses.

Orientation at the universities

The Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin was one of the first universities in Berlin to offer free guest-student status to refugees in the winter semester 2015/2016. Currently more than 100 student refugees are attending courses in this way. The university began by evaluating which departments were attracting the most interest and then networked student projects active in those departments, which the DAAD is supporting with a total of twelve staff members. The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration offers tutorials and a mentoring programme, while the Faculty of Life Sciences assigns “buddies” to student refugees. “We have found that, aside from the language difficulties, the biggest challenge facing refugees is gaining orientation at the university, understanding the German university system and finding the right contact partner,” explains Inse Böhmgig, advisor at the Department for University Internationalisation. The university wants to help them.

Some 80 students and staff of the Geography Department organise events called “Spaces of Encounter” at locations near three refugee shelters and offer academic advising in Farsi and Arabic to academically qualified refugees. With funding from the DAAD, the Refugee Law Clinic, which had previously offered refugee- and asylum-related legal counselling at the shelters, can now provide a one-hour advising session at the university on laws pertaining to foreigners and refugees.

Atmosphere and tolerance

The projects at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin (HTW) aim help prospective student refugees become better acquainted with the atmosphere of the university. That’s why – along with advising, information, language training and skill acquisition – the “Mitlaufen” (Come Along) project is so important. Originally intended for prospective students from non-academic families, the project now offers academically qualified refugees the opportunity to become familiar with university life – by going to lectures, the dining hall, the library and the university sports programme. Angela Weißköppel, research assistant at the HTW, stresses that “the university has a social responsibility in the integration process and promoting a culture of tolerance. The students are the multipliers in this process.”

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MORE INFORMATION

[Refugees at universities - Programmes and measures](https://www.daad.de/der-daad/fluechtlinge/en/)
[<https://www.daad.de/der-daad/fluechtlinge/en/>]

[Ensuring that integration succeeds: The DAAD’s measures for refugees](https://www.daad.de/der-daad/daad-aktuell/en/39750-ensuring-that-integration-succeeds-the-daad-s-measures-for-refugees/)
[<https://www.daad.de/der-daad/daad-aktuell/en/39750-ensuring-that-integration-succeeds-the-daad-s-measures-for-refugees/>]

[Information for Refugees in German, English, Arabic, Dari, Pashto and Urdu](https://www.study-in.de/information-for-refugees/)
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