



Study

Internationally Mobile

Motivations, Determining Factors and Impacts of the Emigration and Return Migration of German Citizens

Summary

For several years now, Germany has been experiencing an immigration boom. The influx, particularly of EU citizens taking advantage of the freedom of movement, has increased and net migration has been positive since 2010. In contrast, the balance between emigration and immigration among individuals with German citizenship has been negative for many years. Between 2009 and 2013, around 710,000 departures and roughly 580,000 arrivals were reported. This represents a moderate outflow of around 25,000 people annually. If mainly well-educated young people move abroad on a permanent basis, this can have a negative impact on the social security systems and international competitiveness in a demographically aging industrial nation like Germany. However, not much is known about the social structure of the emigrants and returnees, the reasons they migrate and the consequences of their cross-border mobility. This mobility certainly also offers opportunities: emigration and return migration can lead to a productive exchange of ideas and innovations and help strengthen international networks, which is of growing importance in an increasingly globalised world.

This study takes a differentiated look at the causes and consequences of the international mobility of Germans based on empirical findings. The Internationally Mobile survey is a kind of pilot project because an innovative methodological approach was used to access potential respondents: a systematic sample of 3,000 emigrants and 4,500 returnees was drawn with the help of twelve municipal registration offices in large German cities. These individuals were then asked to participate in an online survey. The analysis includes responses from almost 800 emigrants and around 900 returnees. The results are not representative for all German emigrants and returnees; but they do supply meaningful and reliable information about the sociostructural characteristics of German emigrants and returnees, their motivations for migration, the individual consequences of international mobility and the current migration trends and patterns. They thus provide unique insight into the transnational mobility of citizens of a highly developed country which are highly relevant to both national and international migration research as well as to society's decision-makers.

The main findings of the study are as follows:

- (1) **The study does not find evidence that there is a massive 'drain' of highly qualified individuals who go to live abroad permanently.** Even though the number of academics emigrating is disproportionately high compared to the resident population in Germany, the same



can be said of returnees: around 80 per cent of each group are highly qualified or in training; this percentage is only around 30 per cent in the non-mobile reference population. And, only a minority of these highly qualified emigrants assume that they will stay abroad permanently.

- (2) **Most emigrants are not motivated solely by an increase in income;** more than 70 per cent go abroad to have new experiences. **Returnees are also not primarily motivated to move back to Germany as a result of economic failure in their destination country;** reasons related to family and partnership are decisive for roughly two-thirds. People usually have a whole range of motivations. The spectrum of reasons for migration is especially diverse when it comes to career and employment: in addition to higher income, emigrants often hope to find a more interesting job, better opportunities for further development or improved working conditions.
- (3) **Mobility experiences have a long-term impact on people's personal living situation: In most cases, emigration substantially increases income.** This positive upward mobility is largely independent of education level and professional qualifications. **At the same time, however, emigrants experience a significant deterioration in their social ties, particularly in terms of friends and acquaintances.** Returnees often suffer financial losses when they return to Germany but, on the other hand, they perceive significant improvements in their social lives. The consequences of return also differ depending on the social group: return migration on average has a much more negative impact on the economic situation of individuals with low professional qualifications while highly qualified individuals in particular are economically rewarded for experience abroad.
- (4) **Among German emigrants who live abroad, there is a disproportionately high number of people with a migration background; their motivations, however, are different from those of other internationally mobile individuals.** Among this group, emigration is more likely to be motivated by reasons related to partnership and family or due to dissatisfaction with life in Germany. However, only a smaller proportion of Germans with a migration background migrates to their own country of origin or to that of their parents' generation. This finding is an indication that a person's migration background generally results in a higher tendency to migrate for this group.
- (5) **Internationally mobile individuals are highly likely to migrate multiple times:** around six out of ten emigrants have already lived at least once in a country other than Germany prior to their current residence abroad.

The results of the Internationally Mobile survey establish an important empirical reference point for a core insight: emigration must not be viewed as a one-sided 'loss' for society, but also as an opportunity. Mobility should therefore be managed proactively. Political, economic and civil society actors should develop strategies designed to capitalise as much as possible on the opportunities presented by



international mobility – both for the migrants themselves as well as for the countries of destination and origin – and minimise the risks:

- (1) **Because migration is the result of complex individual motivations, the general living conditions in a country play an important role.** Here, the considerations of government actors and employers overlap: how can researchers, highly qualified professionals and skilled workers, regardless of whether they are German citizens or foreign immigrants, be motivated to stay in or return to Germany. Attractive public goods and services as well as Germany's openness to international mobility hold considerable potential for companies, society and culture. There are many ways to exert influence in a number of policy areas including economic, labour market, social, family, education or research policy. Working and employment conditions in particular have proven to be important factors that encourage or limit migration. In this regard, issues related to wages, working hours, equal opportunity and, last but not least, the compatibility of family and work should be seen more from the perspective of international emigration and immigration.
- (2) **Emigration and return migration should be taken into account in policy making processes of the German federal government such as the Skilled Worker Concept (*Fachkräftekonzept*) or the further development of the demographic strategy.** In the future, monitoring of emigration and immigration could also include the migration patterns of German citizens as well as their qualification and education level. Demographic policy measures should be reviewed to determine whether and to what extent they, on the one hand, prevent or limit particularly well-qualified people of working age from emigrating permanently and, on the other hand, how they could be combined with targeted measures to help retain skilled workers in Germany in the medium and long term. At the same time, they should take into account the opportunities presented by international mobility which, e.g. offer limited residence abroad or in the country of origin.
- (3) **Political, economic and civil society actors in Germany should assess their current measures for promoting mobility and return and explore new approaches for transnational networks in light of international experiences with 'diaspora engagement policy'.** No targeted programmes of this kind have ever existed at federal level in Germany. Individual *Laender* or organisations that promote scientific research, however, have launched initiatives to encourage return migration; advisory centres and the International Placement Services of the German Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit) provide selected services for those interested in moving abroad or returning. In light of the foreseeable demographic development and increasing international competition for skilled workers, it could be useful to establish these kinds of programmes in certain industries in the future. To this end, existing approaches in Germany and abroad should be systematically evaluated and examples of successful practices identified.



- (4) **Policymakers should work to ensure that all social groups and classes have as equal access as possible to the opportunities of international mobility.** Particularly for people who are not from well-educated or well-off families, early experiences abroad can improve the prospects for upward social mobility. Recommended as concrete measures: low-threshold funding programmes that support the international mobility of young people or offer scholarships for pupils to live abroad that take into account social criteria in order to reduce existing mobility barriers.
- (5) **More scientific research should be conducted on issues related to international mobility.** The Internationally Mobile survey has broken new ground in terms of content and methodology and provided various findings on the migration patterns of Germans and their motivations. Methodologically speaking, it represents a point of departure for regular monitoring of the mobility of the population in Germany which could improve existing data on international migration over the long term. In-depth data collected on an ongoing basis on the factors that influence migration decisions would also make it possible to link population, migration and social policy measures to scientifically based findings on emigration and return processes. Political and civil society actors could thus live up to their structural responsibility of supporting international mobility, taking into account aspects of the individual and collective benefits from the point of view of the migrants themselves, the destination countries and countries of origin.

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