

## A guest article by Dr. Eva Maria Vögtle and Giorgio Marinoni



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Digitalisation is reshaping structures and processes in higher education. It allows for a rethinking of key areas such as study organisation, teaching and student mobility – all of which influence internationalisation efforts. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the potential of digitalisation to support internationalisation activities was not fully exploited. This changed during the pandemic. Crucially, the long-term effects of the pandemic-driven digitalisation on the internationalisation strategies of public higher education institutions (HEI) in Germany remain largely unexplored. Against this background, this spotlight highlights selected findings from a recent report (Vögtle et al., 2025) comparing results from two research projects: the qualitative research project *Internationalisation in the Digital Transformation: Strategies from German Higher Education Institutions (INDISTRA)* and the quantitative *6<sup>th</sup> Global Survey on Internationalisation of Higher Education from the International Association of Universities (IAU)* (see the info box on the data). Unlike the comparative study, this spotlight focuses on selected results of the IAU survey and adds findings of the INDISTRA interviews in a condensed way; it does not go into the details of the expert interviews conducted in the INDISTRA project. By focusing on drivers, priorities and challenges of virtual internationalisation (VI)<sup>1</sup>, this spotlight presents three of the many topics covered in the comparative report.

## Key drivers of virtual internationalisation at HEIs in Germany

Regarding the most important **external drivers** of internationalisation, the IAU Global Survey shows that demographic trends are considered one of the most crucial external drivers, with 42% of the HEIs surveyed regarding it as very important (see Fig. FS1). The second most important external driver is regional policies (33% very important), followed by government policy (27% very important). Another key impetus for

## Data

### Internationalisation in the Digital Transformation: Strategies of the German Higher Education Institutions (INDISTRA project)

The INDISTRA research project was funded by the DAAD with funds from the Federal Foreign Office and conducted by the DZHW between December 2021 and January 2025. It explored how HEIs understand and manage internationalisation through digitalisation, examining associated goals, opportunities and risks. The project employed a multi-method qualitative approach, including discourse analysis of policy documents and expert interviews with management staff responsible for internationalisation strategies. Each interview covered topics related to the impact of Covid-19, digital administration and virtual internationalisation. For more details on methods and sampling, see the full report “Internationalisation in the Digital Transformation: A study on the strategies, drivers, priorities and challenges of virtual internationalisation at German higher education institutions” (Vögtle et al., 2025).

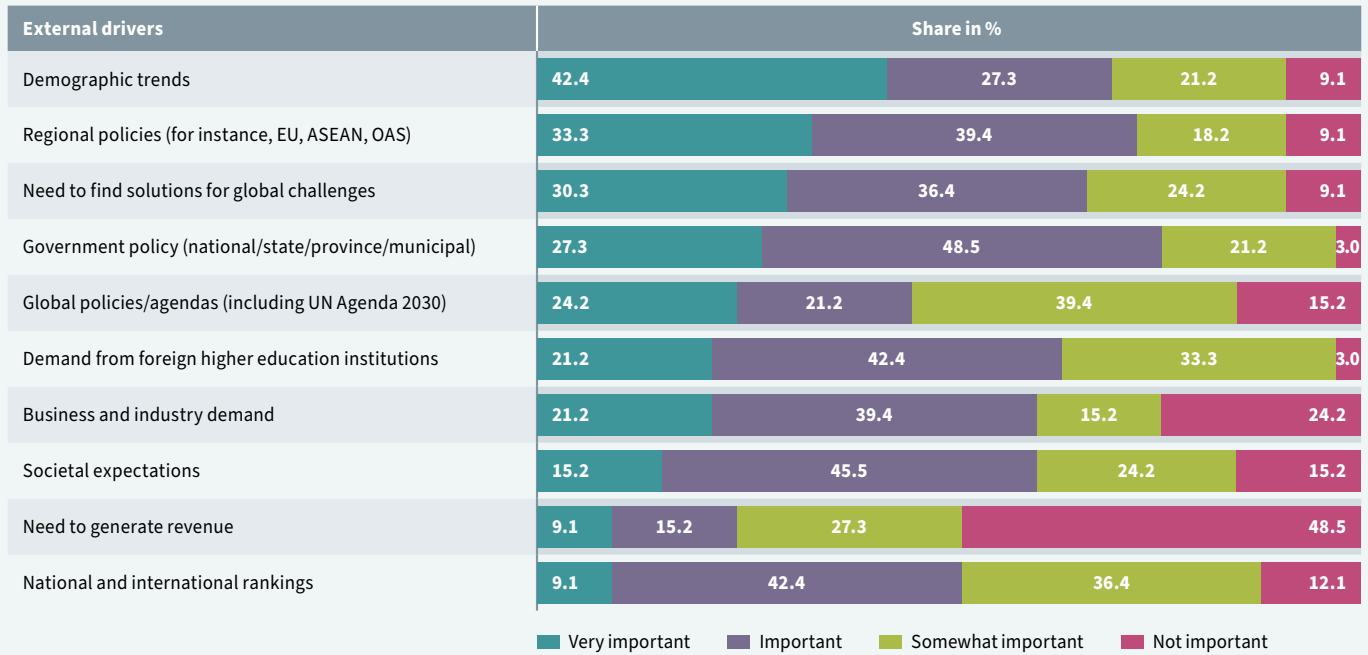
### 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey on Internationalisation

The 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey examined the current state, recent changes and future trends in higher education internationalisation from an institutional perspective. Its aim was to provide a comprehensive global overview. HEIs were advised to conduct internal consultations before submitting a single response, ensuring the reply represented institutional views rather than individual opinions. Respondents mainly held administrative roles, with heads of international offices representing about 40%. Over half of the responses came from staff in international offices, including mobility units and advisors. Heads and deputy heads of institutions accounted for nearly 25% of respondents. The survey underscored that institutional consultations primarily involved international offices and academic leadership, with limited involvement of other units. Conducted online between January and June 2023 in English, French and Spanish, it garnered responses from 722 HEIs across 110 countries. For more details on methods and sampling, see the full report “Internationalization of Higher Education: Current Trends and Future Scenarios” (Marinoni & Pina Cardona, 2024).

### \* Footnote

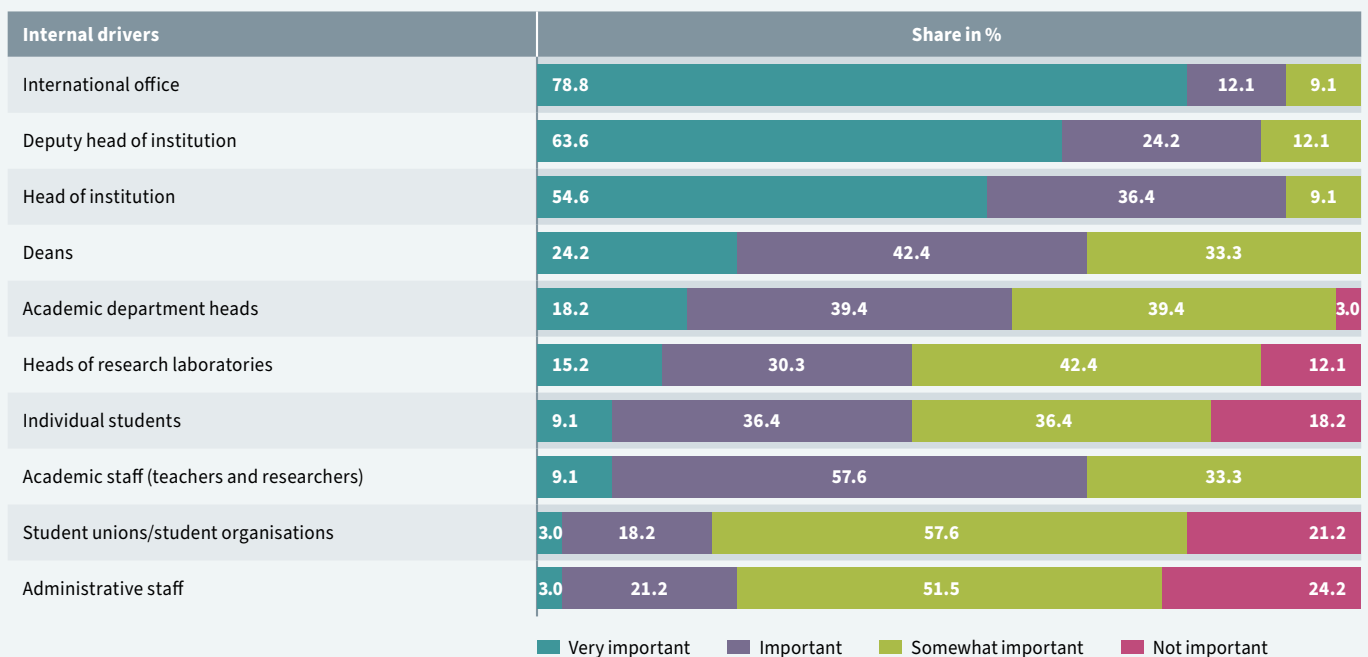
- 1 Virtual internationalisation refers to the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the higher education curriculum and learning experiences through digital platforms and tools (Bruhn, 2020).
- 2 Deviations from 100% are due to rounding.

FS1 Key external drivers of HEI internationalisation<sup>2</sup>



Source: 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey, special analysis

FS2 Key internal drivers of HEI internationalisation<sup>2</sup>



Source: 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey, special analysis

VI strategies and practices at HEIs in Germany is the need to address urgent societal challenges (30% very important). This aligns with results from the INDISTRA interviews, where heads of international offices (IOs) interviewed by the INDISTRA team stressed how digitalisation can be instrumental in tackling social inequalities and the climate crisis, while upholding values such as equity and inclusion, environmental sustainability, trust, collaboration, diversity, intercultural understanding, peace, democracy and academic freedom.

Concerning the key **internal drivers**, the analysis of the INDISTRA interviews and the 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey data indicate that the academic leadership as well as the IOs are perceived as pivotal in driving both internationalisation and VI processes (see Fig. FS2). The IAU Global Survey findings reveal that the three most important institutional key internal drivers of internationalisation are the IOs (79% very important), the deputy head of institution (64% very important) and the head of institution (55% very important, 36% important).

Insights from the INDISTRA interviews support that the head of institution significantly influences funding and strategic decisions related to VI; the IOs are crucial in proposing initiatives and seeking funding, while schools and faculties also participate in decision-making. Additionally, IT professionals, legal departments and peer support networks were identified as internal drivers; interviewees highlighted how their influence shapes different aspects of VI. IT professionals and legal departments increasingly contribute to VI strategies, ensuring compliance with data protection regulations and providing technical support for online teaching and communication systems. In relation to academics, the interviews revealed that while they retain autonomy over their VI practices, collaboration with administrators is vital, with the IOs playing a supportive role in digitalisation processes. In addition,

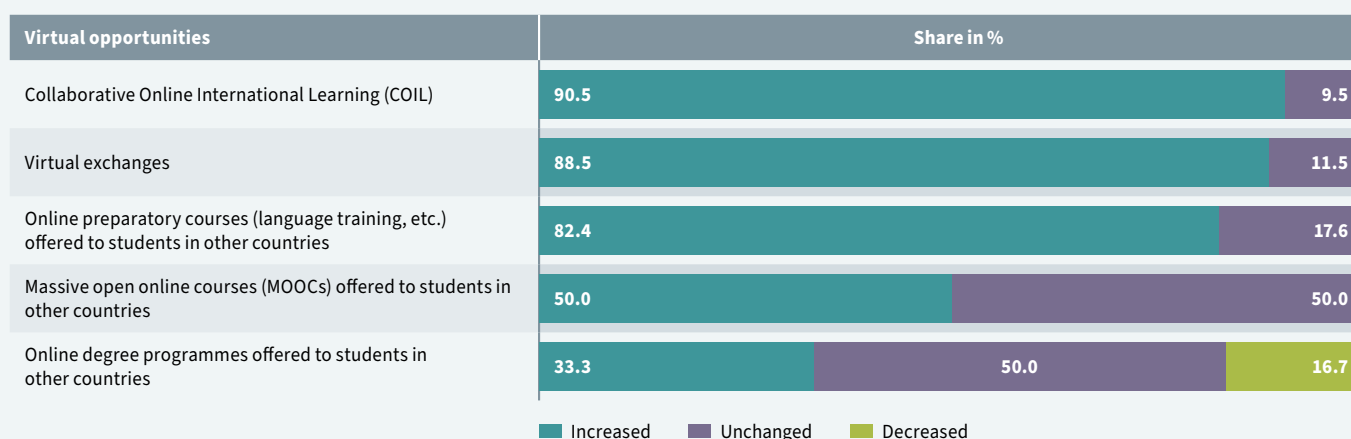
there are numerous accounts on the significance of peer support networks both within Germany and internationally. The interviewees underscore the invaluable role of collaboration through both informal channels, such as individual colleagues from IOs, and formal networks, particularly in the context of the European Universities Initiative, as key drivers of their strategies.

### Priorities of virtual internationalisation activities

The importance of three VI opportunities, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), virtual exchanges and online preparatory courses (language training, etc.) offered to students in other countries has increased between 2018 and 2023 at least more than 80% for all three abovementioned activities at those HEIs in Germany replying to the IAU Global Survey (see Fig. FS3). Regarding massive open online courses (MOOCs), 50% of surveyed HEIs perceive offering them to students in other countries than Germany as of increasing importance. Online degree programmes offered by institutions to students in other countries remained stable in perceived importance at half of the surveyed HEIs and increased in importance at 33% of surveyed HEIs. It is the only VI opportunity where 17% of HEIs state a decrease in importance over the last five years at the time the 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey was conducted.

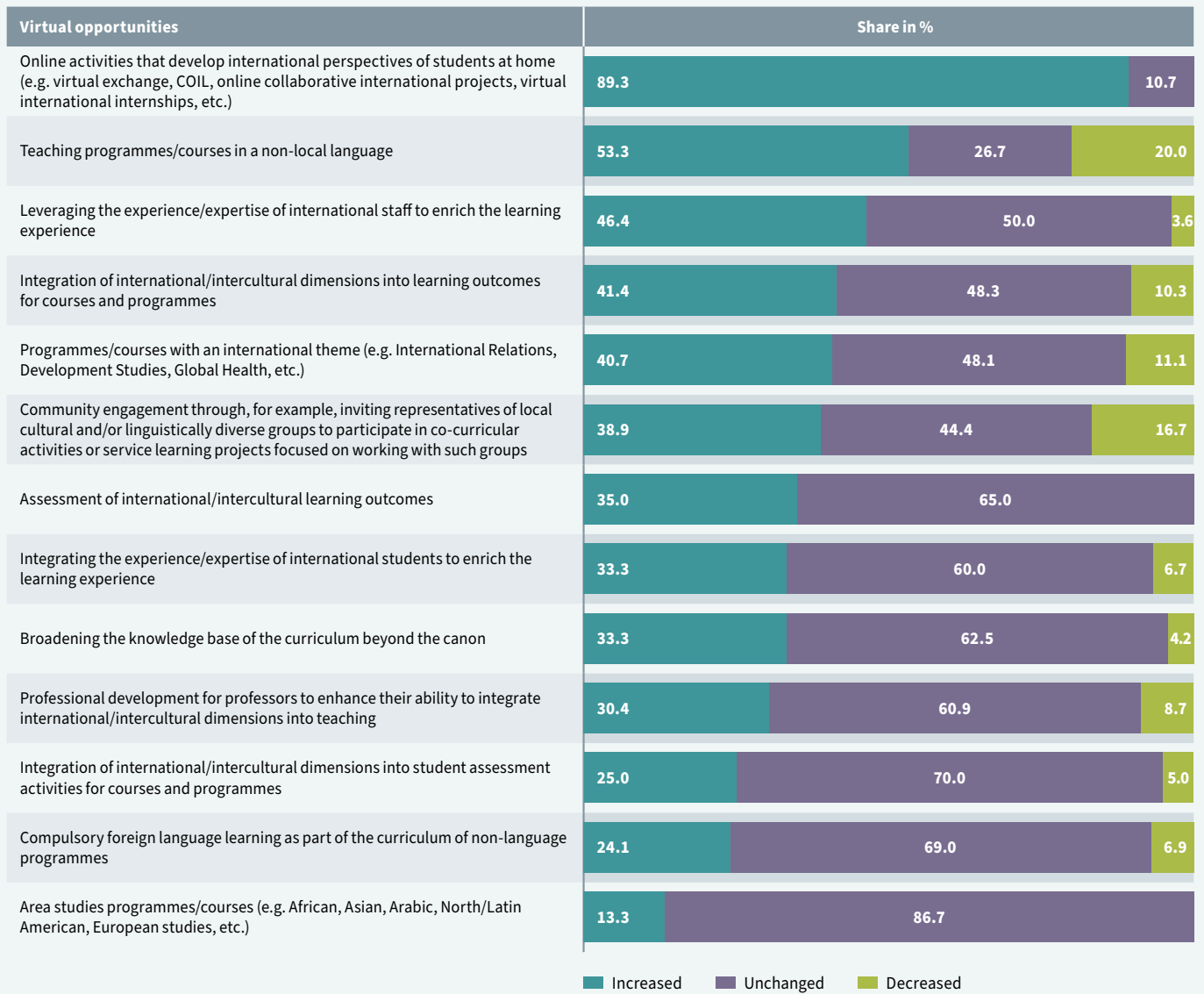
The IAU Global Survey findings on the importance of COIL activities are echoed in the INDISTRA interviews, which highlight the creation of e-learning and COIL centres to support academics in digital teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the involvement of academics in COIL activities remains largely an extracurricular activity, often hindered by the increased workload it entails, along with a lack of incentives and framework conditions.

FS3 Change in the importance of opportunities for virtual internationalisation, 2018–2023



Source: 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey, special analysis

FS4 Change in the importance of opportunities for internationalising the curriculum, 2018–2023<sup>2</sup>



Source: 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey, special analysis

The general importance of the internationalisation of the curriculum had increased at about three quarters of HEIs in Germany over the last five years at the time the 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey was conducted (thus between 2018 and 2023). However, a closer look at the different measures that can be used to internationalise the curriculum shows that only two ways of internationalising the curriculum had gained importance at the majority of the HEIs surveyed (see Fig. FS4): Online activities that support international perspectives of students at home (e.g. virtual exchanges, COILs, online collaborative international

projects, virtual international internships, etc.) and teaching programmes or courses in a non-local language. Online activities that develop international perspectives of students at home had increased in importance at 89% of HEIs, which clearly demonstrates that HEIs in Germany see VI as an important tool to internationalise the curriculum.

In line with this finding, interviewees in the INDISTRA project agreed on the growing importance of internationalising the curriculum, highlighting the need to make education more international,

intercultural and accessible to a diverse student and staff population. According to the interviews conducted within the INDISTRA project, as digitalisation strategies evolve, integrating digital with traditional exchange formats can help create international experiences for a larger share of students – particularly in regions with strong local ties. Digital programmes can lower barriers for students unable to study abroad while providing introductory international experiences that may encourage future physical mobility. Heads of IOs emphasise the goal of streamlining VI options to enhance the meaningfulness, efficiency and sustainability of mobilities and collaborations. They highlight that Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) under Erasmus+ have become a key focus, offering international experiences with fewer time and financial commitments compared to traditional study abroad periods. Although well-received by students, BIPs face challenges such as limited funding and strict requirements regarding the number of participating students and partner institutions, which can create imbalances and complexities in managing student influx and engaging in follow-up projects like research collaborations. While the INDISTRA interviewees maintain that virtual exchange should not replace physical mobility, they agree that it can complement traditional learning or precede it. Some interviewees also pointed out that, for many students, VI offers invaluable opportunities to develop intercultural and language competences while connecting with peers from different countries. Moreover, virtual interactions can arguably enhance employability prospects, as graduates increasingly enter jobs that require online

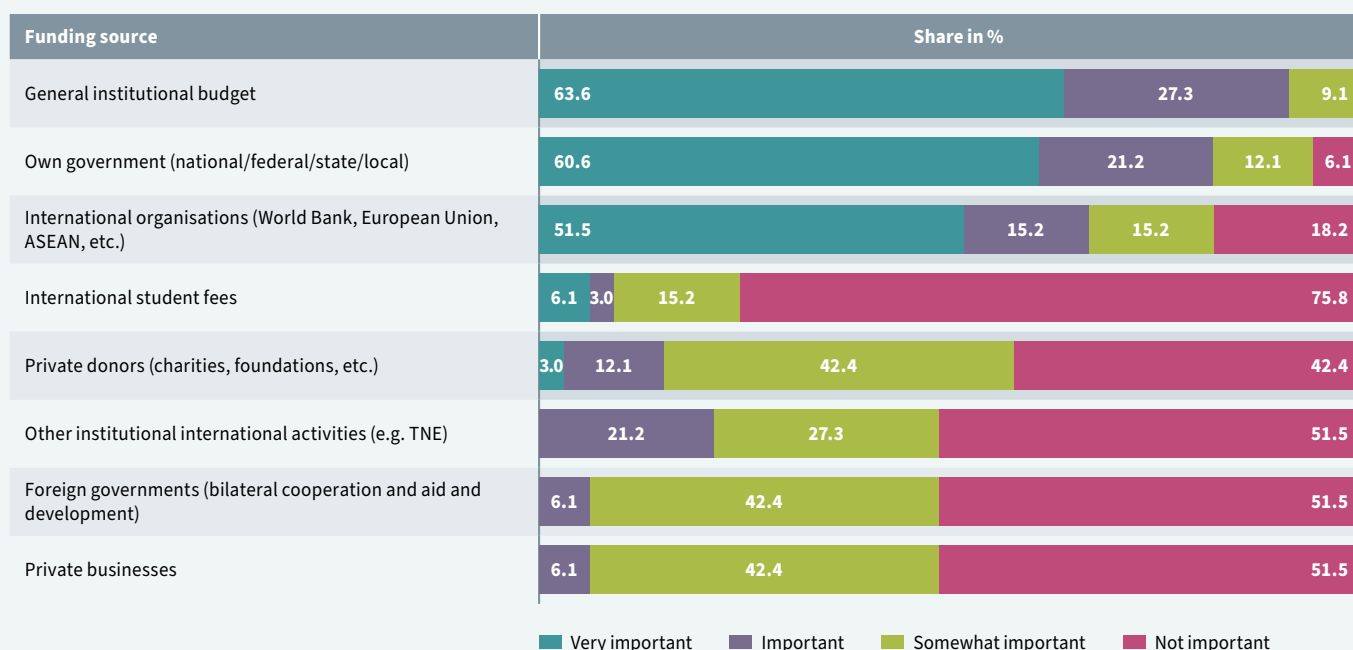
collaboration, communication and other work-related skills essential to thriving in international, multicultural and interconnected work environments.

### Challenges to advancing virtual internationalisation

As institutions increasingly recognise the importance of VI in higher education, it is essential to examine the challenges they face in its implementation. According to the IAU Global Survey results, the general institutional budget is the most important funding source for the internationalisation activities of HEIs in Germany (64% very important), followed by government funding (61% very important) and international organisations like the European Union (52% very important, see Fig. FS5).

The INDISTRA interview results support the IAU Global Survey findings that governmental agencies and supranational bodies are crucial in funding digitalisation and internationalisation initiatives, with the DAAD and the European Commission’s Erasmus programmes being frequently cited by the interviewees. While many HEIs in Germany are well-equipped digitally, they face fierce competition for financial resources. Moreover, the reliance on project-based, third-party funding represents a major challenge to the long-term sustainability of VI strategies as internal funds are limited and typically cover only project initiation rather than long-term funding and permanent staff.

FS5 Key funding sources for internationalisation activities at HEIs in Germany<sup>2</sup>



Source: 6<sup>th</sup> IAU Global Survey, special analysis

According to interviews conducted within the INDISTRA project, adhering to regulatory requirements – especially regarding data protection and recognition processes – poses significant challenges, particularly in international collaborations where partner HEIs may be subject to different regulations. Concerns also emerged about the lack of clear framework conditions for online teaching under the German Capacity Law (*Kapazitätsrecht*), which could hinder academic participation in digital teaching. While political goals for integration are generally considered clear, their practical implementation is often impeded by complex administrative, bureaucratic and legal hurdles, especially in the context of digital integration. A common issue shared by interviewees is that regulations have not been updated to meet the demands emerging from changes in VI processes. Interviewees voiced the concern that this has directly affected the status of international or exchange students attending courses virtually from their home countries or coming to Germany for very short stays (e.g. participation in BIPs). For example, students participating in virtual exchanges or short-term physical exchange programmes who are enrolled at HEIs in Germany are required to pay the semester fees and obligatory health insurance, even if they are rarely or never physically present at the German institution in which they are enrolled.

## Central findings and outlook on emerging challenges for virtual internationalisation

The findings of both the INDISTRA project and the comparative study this article draws on (Vögtle et al., 2025) indicate that digitalisation has considerable potential to enhance the internationalisation of teaching, learning, collaboration, administrative processes and decision-making at HEIs in Germany. Despite a noticeable shift back to traditional practices after the pandemic, the flexibility of digital formats continued to intertwine digitalisation with internationalisation. While traditional physical mobility experiences hold intrinsic value, BIPs are gaining

traction as an effective alternative that combines the potential advantages of both virtual and physical mobility. However, barriers to participation remain, and simplified claims of inclusion merit critical examination. In addition, heads of IOs interviewed in the INDISTRA project voiced concerns over the reduction of funding for digitalised internationalisation options, fearing that established structures and programmes might vanish once programme-based funding ends. High expectations and a strong faith in the perceived potential of digital technologies in the upper levels of HEI administration tend to underestimate the resource-intensive nature of digitalisation, neglecting financial and personnel needs at the lower levels of HEI administration.

The strategic positioning of digitalisation as a comprehensive institutional initiative has yielded positive outcomes by enhancing administration, science communication and teaching practices at various HEIs. This shift is evident in improved resource allocation, fostering internal collaboration and establishing a cohesive framework for the use of tools and platforms. Taken together, the findings of the INDISTRA project and the comparative study support the notion that comprehensive digitalisation is a sustainable avenue for advancing both higher education and VI. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise that digitalisation should neither be viewed as a standalone objective, nor as a “one size fits all”; rather, it must add value by addressing specific institutional needs and enhancing human experiences within the educational landscape.

### Suggested citation

Vögtle, E. M., & Marinoni, G. (2026). The state of virtual internationalisation at higher education institutions in Germany. In N. Netz, J. Kercher, N. Knüttgen & I. Fuge (eds.), *Wissenschaft weltoffen 2025. Facts and Figures on the Internationalisation of Studies and Research in Germany and Worldwide* (pp. 112–117). wbv. <https://doi.org/10.3278/7004002xew003>

## Wissenschaft weltoffen

Facts and Figures on the Internationalisation of  
Studies and Research in Germany and Worldwide



This spotlight was published as part of the main report of the project  
**Wissenschaft weltoffen 2025**

*This spotlight summarises the key findings of a study on the impact of digitalisation on the internationalisation of German universities, thereby focussing on virtual internationalisation (VI). The results are based on the findings of the INDISTRA project and the 6th IAU Global Survey Report. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation. External drivers were demographic trends and regional policies, while internal momentum came primarily from international offices and university administration. Universities are increasingly relying on various forms of VI such as COIL and virtual exchanges. However, they face challenges such as a lack of long-term funding, dependence on project financing, data protection issues and recognition obstacles. The resource-intensive nature of digitalisation is often underestimated, ultimately hampering its implementation. The study shows that digitalisation facilitates long-term development when it is usefully combined with physical mobility, adapted to institutional needs and supported by stable funding and appropriate legal frameworks.*

### IMPRINT

#### Published by

German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)  
Kennedyallee 50  
D-53175 Bonn



The DAAD is an association of German universities and their student bodies. It is institutionally funded by the Federal Foreign Office.

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#### Overall production

wbv Media GmbH & Co. KG  
Auf dem Esch 4, 33619 Bielefeld  
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**Article number (eBook): 7004002xew**

**ISBN (eBook): 9783763979554**

**DOI: 10.3278/7004002xew003**

#### Project partners

DAAD  
German Academic Exchange Service  
S15 – Research and Studies  
www.daad.de

#### DZHW

German Centre for Higher Education Research  
and Science Studies  
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Kai Sicks: DAAD/Saenger (p. 3), Marcus Beiner: Petra Nölle (p. 3), Isabelle Schiffer-Fiedler, Marie Lena Muschik: Petra Nölle (p. 76), Eva Maria Vögtle: Sven Brauers (p. 112), Giorgio Marinoni: Fennell Photography (p. 112)

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#### Suggested citation

Vögtle, E. M., & Marinoni, G. (2026). The state of virtual internationalisation at higher education institutions in Germany. In N. Netz, J. Kercher, N. Knüttgen & I. Fuge (eds.), *Wissenschaft weltoffen 2025. Facts and Figures on the Internationalisation of Studies and Research in Germany and Worldwide* (pp. 112–117). wbv. <https://doi.org/10.3278/7004002xew003>

#### Bibliographical information of the German National Library

The German National Library catalogues this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographical data are available online at [https://www.dnb.de/EN/Home/home\\_node.html](https://www.dnb.de/EN/Home/home_node.html).

SPONSORED BY



Federal Ministry  
of Research, Technology  
and Space



Federal Foreign Office

The project on which this report is based and the publication thereof were funded by the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space and the Federal Foreign Office.