

Success through engagement -a guide for international students

"Act, Connect & Reflect –
Integration through engagement in studies, society and work"

A cooperation project of the International Office and the Study Service Center,
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1. What is voluntary engagement?

Voluntary social or civic engagement - what is it? All of these terms pursue a similar goal. Voluntary and civic work is very diverse in Germany and share one thing in common: both describe engagement which is **voluntarily performed** and **not aimed at material gain, benefits society and takes place publicly** (German Bundestag 2002, 32).

As a result, engagement helps to strengthen society and fosters relationships between citizens, because volunteering rarely takes place alone, but mostly in initiatives and groups in which people come together and pursue a common goal. These goals vary depending on the interest group: there are associations and clubs for environmental protection, animal protection, sport or other leisure activities, childcare, cultural promotion, neighborhood assistance or social projects; the range is wide.

Engagement usually begins with active participation in community events such as sports. In the long term, such activities in clubs and groups often lead to the takeover of regular tasks. This includes, for example, working as a trainer or board member in an amateur football club. Voluntary workers help players train and compete by performing many organizational tasks of the club in their free time **without getting paid**. At the **university**, engaged students organize themselves in many groups, e.g. in student councils which stand up for the needs of the students of their faculty in terms of university policy and can even influence personnel decisions.

These are just a few examples of social and university engagement. But, what are the other special features of the engagement culture in Frankfurt and Germany? What challenges do international students have in this area and how can they benefit from their engagement? **How can you find a voluntary work that suits your interests and your current life situation?** Our guide is devoted to these questions and should encourage you to get involved in studies and society.



Figure 1

2. The meaning of engagement in Frankfurt and Germany

Engagement in Germany is an important pillar of Democracy and an evidence of practiced social participation. In Germany, 30.9 million people are engaged in voluntary work (BMFSFJ 2016, 3; as of 2014). The number of volunteers has grown steadily in recent years.

The biggest engagement areas are sports & exercise, school & kindergarten and culture & music. The proportion of people who engage themselves is the greatest between the age 14 and 49. School students, university students and graduates are especially active in voluntary work.

Engagement plays also an increasingly important political role in Germany. Since 2002, the subcommittee "Civic Engagement" has been regularly advising in the Bundestag what successful engagement promotion can look like. Since the referendum on 28 October 2018, the importance of volunteering has also been mentioned in the Hessian constitution: "Volunteering for the common good receives the protection and support from the state, municipalities and associations of municipalities." (Article 26f, Hessian Constitution).

Although in large cities, unlike in rural regions and small cities, a smaller proportion of people is engaged in voluntary work, this trend cannot be found in Frankfurt (BMFSFJ 2016, 16). In Frankfurt, charitable foundations and clubs with engaged citizens are closely linked to the city's history: 61.1 percent of the adult citizens were or are engaged in voluntary work (Hauptamt und Stadtmarketing, 5). The city of Frankfurt itself also contributes to an atmosphere in which people like to get involved through holding regular events (e.g. the annual volunteer fair) and a great culture of recognition (volunteer card & certificate of competence).



Photo 1

3. Engagement of international students

Engagements exist in different forms and contexts worldwide. What is relatively unique in Germany is the widespread incorporated association system. As a result, people who were born in Germany or who have German citizenship are automatically more often involved in clubs or associations than people who come to Germany in the course of their lives (BMFSFJ 2016, 17). These differences are due to different formative experiences with engagement in youth and childhood.

According to surveys, the motivation for future volunteer engagement is very high among foreign residents. The high willingness to future engagement is also detected among international students. Yet, international students are currently not as active as their German fellow students in volunteer engagement. There are several reasons for this:

Above all, limited time or a high workload is referred to the main barrier to volunteering among international students. On the one hand, they have pressure on high (examination) requirements in their studies, and on the other hand, many international students work part-time to finance their studies and afford the cost of living (Backhaus-Maul et al. 2018, 22). Other hurdles for engagement are a lack of language skills, but also a lack of information about engagement opportunities (ibid.)

With this guide, we would like to give you a quick introduction to the topic and an overview of the advantages of volunteering. Finally, we will present our "five steps to engagement"-plan.



Photo 2



Photo 3

4. The benefits of your engagement

Many social institutions in Germany rely heavily on volunteers and would hardly be able to exist without them. Therefore, you can make a **positive contribution to a good society** through your engagement. Furthermore, people who are socially engaged have a higher level of life satisfaction and the chance to shape the society in their way.

Practicing your language skills

Medium- and long-term engagement gives you the opportunity to **improve your own language skills**. Many clubs and initiatives strive for having a greater diversity and are ready to help with language difficulties, for example, through the support from mentors. At Goethe University and in Frankfurt, you can also participate in international initiatives in which English or other languages are spoken.

Some international students give up their plans of volunteering due to a lack of knowledge in German language. It is true that, in many clubs, it can be difficult to take on voluntary work at the beginning, since general and board meetings in some associations are quite formal. Nevertheless, diversification in German associations is highly needed!

Engagement and contacts at the university, in Frankfurt and in the region

Many international students realize that they mostly maintain **friendships** with other foreign students during their studies. Especially, in English-language courses, many encounter the problem with having contact with German students.

In this regard, voluntary work in university policy or in student initiatives can lead to personal growth, as you have the opportunity to work with other students from different disciplines in an interdisciplinary manner. In the student council, you also have the opportunity to work with German students from your own department and degree program.

Such engagement enables you to develop new skills, such as dealing with different people, convincing or mobilizing people. Additionally, knowledge of public relations and budget management you earned in student initiatives will be an advantage when looking for a job.

Making **acquaintance** with people outside the university is the greatest challenge for many international students. However, volunteer engagement in Frankfurt is an excellent opportunity to get to know other people since in clubs and initiatives people from different phases of life meet each other and become active together.

Acquiring and training key competencies

Clubs and student initiatives face many challenges in their work that need to be solved: How should be different activities financed? How can be new members recruited and how can the target group of the project be addressed?

In your voluntary work, you will confront many challenges with new learning processes and thereby develop methodical skills. At the same time, it offers you the opportunity to use your strengths and further develop important **key competencies** that significantly influence your professional success and the expansion of your networks. When choosing your voluntary work, you should pay attention to which competencies you can contribute in a meaningful way and in which fields you would like to develop yourself further. It would be ideal if you could put the knowledge you gained during your study into practice through volunteering.

Preparation for the job market

It may sound like a distant future to some international students, but it is important in the first semesters of a bachelor's or master's degree, to orient yourself on the job market and continuously prepare for it.

The first important advantage of engagement in connection with the career is the **establishment of a diverse network** of acquaintances, friends and potential employers, which will later have a positive effect when looking for a job in Germany.

Engagement increases - as studies show - competencies to applications, as well as one's own knowledge of German and orientation on the job market (Lokande 2016, 17).

In addition, the engagement itself can be an important component for a **successful career**, because volunteering is a very relevant factor for many HR managers and serves as a valuable addition to the final grade of your academic certificate. Engagement is more than a part of your CV; it also provides information about the qualifications of applicants, such as problem-solving skills and the ability to successfully interact with different people.

Participate actively in society

There is no question that volunteering strengthens social ties. This increases the **feeling of belonging** of international students and the desire to stay in Germany after graduation also increases significantly. The more intensive social contact helps to reduce prejudices and to approach each other. That means that engagement plays a key role in the social integration of international students during and after their studies.

5. Five steps to your commitment

After talking about the advantages of engagement, we are now going to show **possible ways to find** the right volunteer position for you. The options mentioned here are only an assistance, which should give you an orientation during your initial search.

5.1 What am I interested in?

The engagement that you choose should be interesting to you and include activities that motivate you to engage. Your voluntary work should not be an additional burden to your study. It is, therefore, particularly important that you are sure in advance about the field in which you want to get involved. In any case, it may make sense to orientate yourself towards your hobbies and interests. For example, as an enthusiastic volleyball player, you will surely enjoy supporting youth teams in the sports club or, if you like to write short stories, you could contribute to a student literature magazine. Your personal interest is a good starting point to look for initiatives and clubs.



Photo 4

5.2 What do I want to learn?

Volunteering can also help you learning something completely new. Therefore, before your engagement starts, it is good to consider the skills that can be developed through your voluntary activities. Here are some examples:

- You can develop pedagogical methods particularly well in child and youth work
 - As a referee, you can demonstrate your decisiveness and assertiveness
 - In the voluntary fire brigade, you can experience working in a team and learn how to deal with stressful situations.
- ...and so on.

You can also apply your existing knowledge into practice. To put it in a nutshell, every voluntary activity can help you develop yourself and advance your abilities. Keep this in mind and get advantage of it!

5.3 How much time do I have?

Besides studying, possibly a part-time job and hobbies, often too little free time is left. Therefore, you should think about how much time you want to put into your voluntary commitment and how long you want to commit yourself. Do you have a certain number of hours per week for regular volunteering or would you rather get involved irregularly?

There is a possibility for everyone, for example:

- In clubs and associations, there are often weekly or monthly meetings and regular activities.
- Other organisations, such as animal shelters, are happy to receive any spontaneous help and they do not expect a firm commitment over several months.
- At (sport) events or festivals, your help is often needed only for a few days, so that you can help with such events during the semester break or on weekends.

As you can see, there are medium or long-term as well as one-off engagement opportunities that are open to you. Therefore, you can choose your voluntary engagement according to your own time resources.

5.4 How do I find my engagement?

After thinking about your time budget and interests, the question arises how to find your voluntary engagement. We have here listed a variety of ways to find voluntary work.

- If friends and acquaintances are already involved in clubs, you can ask them what they are exactly doing and for what reasons they are working. If you have similar interests to your friends, you can pay a visit to the club and see what exactly is going on there.

- The city of Frankfurt and the AStA organize the **volunteer fair** (Ehrenamtsmesse) and a **market of opportunities** (Markt der Möglichkeit). At such events, you can get to know many clubs and initiatives in a short time and get into conversation with people who are already integrated into these voluntary works.



Photo 5

o Frankfurt Volunteer Fair (Ehrenamtsmesse Frankfurt): At this fair, about 50 projects are presented and information about their work and the need for voluntary support will be provided; Information on the next volunteer fair will be published on the city's website in due course. In recent years, the Frankfurt Volunteer Fair took place from August to September.

o Market for critical initiatives: The AStA (General Student Committee) at Goethe University organizes a market with selected initiatives once a semester; Information will be announced via Facebook (@astafrankfurt).

- You can also use databases and online platforms to get an overview of clubs and organisations, which are looking for volunteer workers in certain areas. There you can find the contact details of the organisation you are interested in and contact them personally.

- Online Platform Engagement:

The online platform Engagement, which is currently under construction, shows the students of Goethe University the opportunities to get involved in university groups and student initiatives. If you know any initiatives and groups at the university which should not be missing on the platform, please send us an email to engagement@uni-frankfurt.de. Link: [Platform engagement](#)

- <https://www.ehrenamtssuche-hessen.de/> (search engine for volunteering in Hessen)

- <https://www.betterplace.org/> (Germany-wide donation platform, which shows various current projects)
- <https://www.caritas-frankfurt.de> (Catholic charity with voluntary projects)
- <https://www.diakonie-frankfurt-offenbach.de> (establishment of the Evangelical Church with voluntary projects)

• There are also volunteer agencies in Frankfurt, which not only offer you an overview of existing engagement opportunities, but can also advise you personally and help you with any questions:

- <https://www.freizeit-helden.de> (volunteer platform for Frankfurt and Rhein-Main)
- <http://www.freiwillig-agentur.de> (volunteer agency of the workers welfare AWO Frankfurt)

If you have any questions about engagement and would like to have more information, you can mail or visit us during our office hours:

- Consultation hours of the team „Engagement“:

Tuesday, 10 a.m. - 11 a.m. in the LBIH container or by appointment at engagement@uni-frankfurt.de / 069-798-17293

5.5 Am I satisfied with my engagement?

If you have found an opportunity to engage yourself, you should regularly reflect on your activity, for example, after the first three to six months:

- Am I satisfied with my voluntary work?
- What competencies have I already achieved or which knowledge do I want to deepen in my future?
- Can I achieve my goals through the engagement?
- Do I have enough time for my studies and personal hobbies besides my voluntary work?
- Do I want to invest more or less time in my engagement?
- Could I contribute and learn more in another initiative?
- Did I get to know new people through the engagement?



Photo 6

- Have I obtained my career aspiration or learned about the German job market through the engagement?

It often helps to discuss these questions in a conversation with a friend or acquaintance. Also, during the office hours of the team „Engagement“ of the International office, we can talk about these questions and draw some conclusions.

6. What you might be also interested in

The International Office offers a broad range of options in the field of engagement, competence development and professional networking. It is, therefore, worth knowing about the possibilities that are specifically directed to international students.

Consultation hours:

Through consultation during office hours, you can find the right engagement for you, get to know more about the advantages of voluntary engagement and reflect on volunteer activities.

Tuesday, 10 a.m. - 11 a.m. in the LBIH container or by appointment at engagement@uni-frankfurt.de / 069-798-17293

Student projects:

If you would like to volunteer but do not yet know exactly where to start, then you have the opportunity to get involved in a study-related student project.

Link: [Student projects](#)

Training center:

In the training center, you can talk about your engagement plans in a personal consultation. You can also get support from the qualification trainings in your selection. The training courses are divided into different areas and help you acquire key competencies.

Link: [Training center](#)

Mentoring Programme:

With the mentoring programme CONNECT, the International Office and the Study Service Center support and promote international students in their transition from studying to working life in Germany. Through the direct meeting with professionals from the Rhine-Main region, you have the opportunity to simulate job interviews, to be advised about possible career paths, to build a network, to hear personal experience from your desired career fields and perhaps even to visit the workplace of your mentor! The mentoring phases begin when the semester starts.

Link: [Mentoring Programme](#)



Photo 7

Buddy Programme:

Finding a flat, registering a residence, transferring rent, holding presentations and dealing with administrative matters etc. can in the beginning be quite complicated for international students without support. This is exactly why the International Office offers the so-called buddy programme, in which newly arriving international students can find a "buddy", an experienced student from a higher semester at Goethe University, who will make your start at the university and in Frankfurt easier. This exchange not only facilitates your start in the student life but also offers all participants the opportunity to meet interesting people from different countries and to build friendships with them.

Link: [Buddy program](#)

Kompass³:

The International Office offers the Kompass³ certificate programme for international students. In the programme, international students have the opportunity to attend a variety of workshops and seminars to develop various skills to proceed their study without problems and ultimately to begin a career successfully.

Through the key competence workshops, seminars and training sessions, you will get information about what your study and the job market require. At the same time, you will receive practical tips on part-time jobs, internships, scholarships and professional application training. The main goal of Kompass³ is to support international students in various ways from the start of their studies to their entry into the job market.

Link: [Kompass³](#)

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