Change by Exchange: An Academic Diplomacy Model for the International Student Mobility Programme

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Introduction

Imagine a magical key that not only opens doors to the world of education but also lets you discover a wealth of cultural exchange and soft power. This unique key, in my case, is represented by the international academic mobility program DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst). International scholarships have been shaping the minds of foreign students for decades by fostering interactions with the host country's citizens.[1] It leads to soft power transition through cultures, values and policies that are essential for the relationship with the strategically important partner countries.[2] This type of public diplomacy helps to 'build and manage relationships' that can influence long-term decisions and opinions.[2,3]

DAAD is one of the largest funding agencies in the world, with an estimated 775 million Euros annual budget in 2022. It has supported approximately three million academics through the student mobility programme globally since its inception in 1950.[4,5] The organisation, born in 1925 and reestablished in 1950, aims to internationalise higher education by strengthening a worldwide network of scholars and institutions with 57 DAAD offices comprising 19 regional offices and 38 information centres.[4,5] Its roots in India date back to 1960, operating officially since 1969.6 The regional office in Delhi is responsible for India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka and operates through seven information points.[6]

According to the DAAD annual report (2022), the agency funded over 140,000 academics in 2022 in various subjects, including engineering, natural sciences, language, economics and music.[5] In 2022, 1998 Indian nationals studied in Germany with DAAD's support, while 335 German citizens received DAAD fellowship to study in the Indian higher education system.[5]

What's particularly noteworthy is the rapid growth of the Indian student community in Germany. In 2022, this community became the largest foreign student group, with approximately 43000 individuals. This 25% increase from the previous year and a doubling of numbers over the past five years demonstrates the increasing appeal of Germany as an educational destination for Indian students.[7] Dr Philipp Ackermann, the German Ambassador to India, acknowledged this trend, stating, "German universities are very keen on having Indian students. They have a very good reputation in Germany."[8] This sentiment reflects the strong bonds between Indian students and German institutions, further emphasising the significance of international academic mobility programs like DAAD for endorsing global education partnerships.

Germany: A Popular Destination for International Students

'Zero-tuition fees' for higher education in maximum German universities, 'innovative teaching formats and

concepts', experienced open-minded researcher communities, and world-class research infrastructure make Germany one of the most desirable destinations for foreign students.[9,10] Germany now stands as the third most popular destination for international students globally and first as a non-English speaking country.[11] Over the past decade, there has been a remarkable 75% increase in international students' enrollment in Germany.[11] International PhD students comprise one-fourth of the total doctoral students in Germany.[11] Besides, the residents of Germany have welcoming behaviour towards the immigrants and their cultures, making Germany a safe country for foreigners.



Figure 1. Organisation and funding of DAAD at a glance (Source: DAAD Annual Report 2022)

DAAD Scholarship for the Professional Development

International scholarship, like DAAD, aims to secure trustworthy global partners for future collaborations.[12] A survey by the DAAD revealed that international Master's students funded by the DAAD scholarship show a positive attitude towards future relations with Germany or German institutions, such as 95% of the respondents desired close communication with German nationals, 96% agreed for future cooperation with German organisations, and 83% would like to work in German institutions in their home countries.[12,13]

This scholarship has a transformative effect on the careers of its recipients. Many DAAD scholarship holders reported significant improvements in their professional positions due to their exposure to the German education system.[12-14] This improvement is also reflected in those who studied management at the postgraduate level; for instance, 70% of DAAD alums holding management responsibilities compared to 59% self-funded peers.[12,13] Additionally, more than 75% of former DAAD fellows found similarities between their current professions and the courses they availed, contrasting with 63% of the self-supported individuals.[12,13] This implies that the DAAD's neutral selection system helps students find the right career path and secure a job.

The DAAD extends support to universities in developing countries to internationalise the higher education system and reform academic institutions. For example, 50% of the College of Basic Sciences, University of

Nairobi, staff passed through the DAAD qualification system, which results in collaborative work among the alums for a productive cause.[12,13]

My Journey with the DAAD Scholarship

I received a DAAD scholarship, 'Research Grants – Doctoral Programmes in Germany'[15], in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic and started my doctoral studies in 2021 at the Friedrich Schiller University (FSU) Jena, a university city often hailed as a 'science city'. A student-friendly atmosphere, high-tech research facilities and an affordable lifestyle make Jena a 'student paradise'. For these reasons, almost 25% of residents of Jena belong to the student community.

My research project, titled 'Impacts of land use and cover changes on the demography and behaviour of Indian desert gerbil *Meriones hurrianae* in Thar desert, India', aligns with three United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, viz. 'Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production', 'Goal 15: Life on land' and 'Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals'. The project aims to understand the impacts of unsustainable agriculture[16] and unrestrained grazing[16] on the ecologically important prey species, the Indian desert gerbil (*Meriones hurrianae*), in the Great Indian desert.

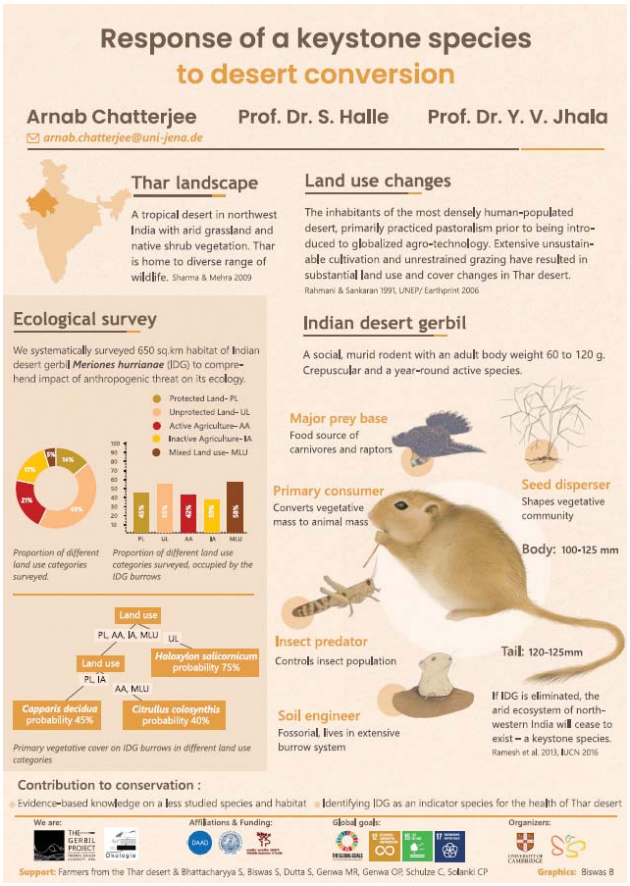


Figure 2. Research Poster at the Student Conference on Conservation Science Cambridge 2023

My project involves collaboration between the FSU and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun. FSU is responsible for providing the necessary funds for the project while WII is hosting the doctoral candidate (me) and applying for the required permission to conduct the fieldwork at the State Forest Department of Rajasthan, India. The DAAD scholarship has been instrumental in supporting me throughout my journey, providing a monthly stipend, insurance, and airfare for my fieldwork in India.

Besides, we have collaborated with the Institute for Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine (inStem), Bangalore and the Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, Kolkata (IISERK), to complete the



Figure 3. Training facility of 'Small mammal ecology group' at Jena

project objectives within the proposed schedule. The local people of Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, worked in this project as drivers, interpreters of the local languages, field assistants and student trainees, which helped to gather essential data for the project. On the other hand, those people received temporary employment, which improved their livelihood. This project bridges the 'land of diversity' (India) and the 'land of ideas' (Germany), fulfilling the conditions for 'Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals'.



Figure 4. Conducting field ecological studies in the Thar desert, India

Moreover, FSU supports me by providing theoretical and practical knowledge. For example, I have received training on capturing small mammals and collecting biological samples from them in the facility situated in Jena. I am applying those advanced techniques to the Indian desert gerbil in the Thar desert. The University of Jena also provided me with training on lab animal experiments, which ensures ethical animal handling with less stress and the least injury to the experimental subject. The certificate courses on 'Good Scientific Practices'[17] and 'Research Data Management'[18] helped me understand that following scientific studies rules and regulations is as necessary as a seatbelt in a moving car. Besides, the courses on behavioural ecology and ecological modelling helped me design and collect data during the fieldwork.

Designing and conducting studies in the Thar desert, managing the funds for the project, collaborating and communicating with scientists and working with people from rural India are offering me partial autonomy and early-stage independence for my scientific career, which will help me in future to conduct studies in India with greater responsibilities.



Figure 5. Communication with the local people of Jaisalmer, Rajasthan

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