

18 August 2020**HRK: The international character of German universities must be maintained during the COVID-19 crisis**

The German Rectors' Conference (HRK) welcomes the fact that there is still undiminished interest among international students in studying at German universities in spite of the COVID-19 crisis. In the HRK's view, to ensure that international students can actually enter Germany for the winter 2020/21 semester, it is crucial that the necessary visas can be applied for and approved promptly.

There has been recent discussion of the new regulation that international students will only be able to obtain a German entry visa (a Schengen visa) if they can prove that they need to attend in-person classes at a German university. In accordance with the Residence Act, a residence permit can be issued for the purpose of full-time or part-time study. However, in spring 2020 temporary entry restrictions were introduced in response to the coronavirus pandemic, which also affected international students. The visa rules introduced on 2 July 2020, which are now being discussed, apply EU law and, from the universities' perspective, ultimately represent an easing of the restrictions imposed in the spring by creating a specific exemption for students that allows them to enter Germany during the COVID-19 crisis. The rules are also not comparable with the new visa rules in the USA, criticised by the HRK on 14 July 2020, which were subsequently revoked. In no case, for example, would international students currently residing in Germany be required to leave if their studies were moved to an online-only basis.

Prof Dr Peter-André Alt, President of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), said in Berlin today: "International students domiciled in third countries will be allowed to enter Germany for study purposes in the upcoming winter semester so long as their course involves in-person teaching. This is likely to apply in the vast majority of cases. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, following a largely digital summer semester, German universities are aiming to offer a blend of in-person and digital teaching for the winter semester, which is designed to balance the essential need to keep everyone safe with the requirements of university teaching."

Together with the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and in coordination with the relevant ministries, the HRK has produced certificate templates that universities can use to certify the necessity for international students and research staff to be resident in Germany. These templates are already being used. In this way, universities are enabling their international students to obtain a visa and commence regular studies in Germany.

Alt also explained: "If necessary, it would be possible to attend purely virtual courses from a student's home country. But of course, one of the main benefits of studying abroad is the personal contacts and experiences acquired outside the seminar room. So whenever in-person

work is possible within the framework of the necessary protective measures, we must ensure that international students are granted unrestricted access and the appropriate visa.

At the moment, the challenge for international students entering Germany has less to do with proving the need to attend university courses in person but more with another issue, Alt continued. "The HRK is concerned that the limited operation or even closure of German consulates in many countries will give rise to serious problems in visa applications and approvals. In the HRK's opinion, it is therefore very important to ensure that the necessary resources are available. During these difficult times, the international character of German universities must be maintained."