

FREIBURG INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY:

Language is the Key to Integration

February 23, 2024

„His parents and five sisters cried when Nabeel Farhan boarded a plane from Mecca to Frankfurt in December 1996. Farhan was 17 years old and looking forward to experiencing snow in Germany for the first time. However, his arrival at Frankfurt Airport was disappointing – a culture shock, as he described in a meeting in January. Originally, he planned to stay in Germany only for his medical studies and then return to his home country of Saudi Arabia. But things turned out differently – he stayed. Today, Nabeel Farhan is a Professor of Physician Assistance, a specialist in neurosurgery, a Master of Medical Education, and the founder and owner of the Freiburg International Academy (FIA). In this role, he has helped around 7000 doctors from 140 countries, including Burkina Faso, Ghana, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia, to establish themselves professionally in Germany since 2013. He is currently launching a project that gives 20 Afghan female doctors the opportunity to travel to Germany. Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, women's rights are virtually non-existent.

“We accompany doctors, including those from crisis and war zones, in their professional start in Germany,” Farhan explained the focus of FIA. When asked about his motivation, the 44-year-old replied, “I like to help people, that's why I became a doctor.” And he emphasized that this principle is not limited to the Hippocratic Oath. “During my specialist training in neurosurgery at the University Hospital Freiburg, many foreign guest doctors asked me for support.” They had difficulties adapting to the new environment, cultural customs, hospital routines, and language. Farhan knew these problems from his own experience and felt it was his duty to lend a hand to his colleagues. In addition to specialized language skills and daily tips, he taught them non-verbal communication forms. “Many focused exclusively on verbal communication due to insufficient German language skills and paid little attention to body language, facial expressions, and gestures.”



Nabeel Farhan developed a special training concept with actor patients



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What began as a collegial volunteer effort evolved in collaboration with the clinic and the University of Freiburg's founding office in 2013 to first become an association and ultimately a nonprofit GmbH. The Academy organizes approximately 150 courses annually at locations in Freiburg, Essen, Frankfurt, Hanover, Heidelberg, and Mainz. Content-wise, it focuses on general language as well as specialized language and knowledge and is aimed at male and female international doctors, dentists, and pharmacists. Training for nurses will also be established soon. Currently, 250 employees and lecturers are employed at the FIA.

Accelerating Procedures

In 2013, a patient communication test designed by FIA was made mandatory by the state examination office of Baden-Württemberg. Other states followed suit. Nowadays, the test is not only offered by FIA but also by the respective state medical chambers. Farhan's developed training concept includes, for example, simulated anamnesis discussions with actor patients. “Thanks to our targeted preparation of foreign doctors for the competency exams, the failure rate has improved tremendously,” says the neurosurgeon. In 2011, only about 30 percent passed this test; now it's over 90 percent nationwide. With the passed tests, the doctors receive unrestricted professional approval (Approbation). The entire process of professional recognition takes between 12 and 18 months. That's too long, Farhan judges. Processes should be less bureaucratic and faster.

To offset the shortage of skilled workers, migration is just one component. “Because it cannot be a solution for doctors to leave their home countries when they are needed there.” More study places and digitization are necessary. Along with the Faculty of Life Sciences at the University of Siegen, Farhan accompanies as a study doctor the projects of the “Digital Model Region for Health in the Three-Country Corner”. The three-country corner consists of the neighboring states of Rhineland-Palatinate, Hesse, and North Rhine-Westphalia. The idea is that patients measure their vital signs themselves and transmit them digitally to reduce home and practice visits, especially in rural areas with a shortage of doctors.

More Welcoming Culture

Farhan observes with concern right-wing extremist xenophobic tendencies in Germany. “The world has become a village thanks to the internet and social media. What is said here is heard everywhere.” Germany is losing its international reputation due to the right-wing shift, especially among qualified professionals and academics. “The welcoming culture needs improvement, especially in the eastern German states,” says Farhan, explaining that he has closed FIA locations in Jena and Dresden. The willingness to integrate foreign skilled workers there is more difficult than in places like Freiburg. “We are countering the negative image with the positive success stories of our graduates.” The statements are available on Instagram, YouTube, and the website.

Farhan recounts how painful it was for him when a patient refused to be examined by him as an “outsider”. At that time, he had lived in Germany longer than in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, he wasn't discouraged and stayed. His family in Mecca still hopes he'll come back someday to stay.

Original text: [netzwerk südbaden](#), translation + photos: FIA