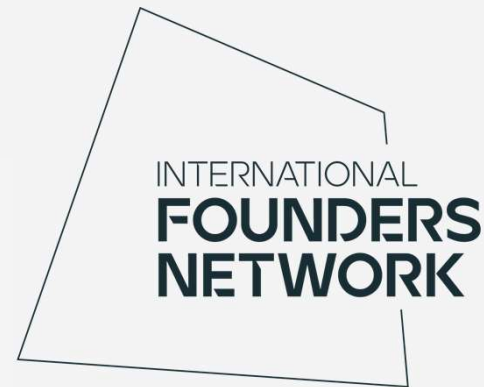


Visa and residence permit for self-employment

A handbook for international scientists aiming to start a business

by internationalFOUNDERS Network



Your Path to Starting a Business in Germany

Are you an international researcher thinking about starting your own business in Münster/Germany? Whether you've just arrived or have been here for a while, this handbook is for you. Entrepreneurship opens exciting doors, but it also comes with challenges—like figuring out how to fund your idea, understanding legal requirements, and turning your vision into reality.

This guide will walk you through the key steps and resources available to help you succeed.

The second chapter shows you the differences between freelance work, founding a start-up and setting up a small business as well as all the information you need about different business types in Germany.

**Let's lay the foundation
for your success
together!**



Index

1. Visa vs. Residence permit
2. Residence permits for students
3. Residence permits for researchers
4. Residence permits after completion of studies, research work as a scientist
5. Residence permits for EXIST scholarship holders
6. Helpful links and resources

Visa vs. Residence Permit

For international researchers planning to work in Germany, it's essential to understand the difference between a visa and a residence permit — the visa gets you *into* the country, but the residence permit allows you to *stay* and run your business legally.

	Visa	Residence Permit
Purpose	Entry permission to Germany for a specific reason (e.g., research, business, self-employment)	Legal right to stay in Germany for a specific purpose (e.g., research, self-employment, work)
Where issued	German embassy or consulate abroad	Local immigration office (<i>Ausländerbehörde</i>) in Germany
When obtained	Before entering Germany (for non-visa-exempt nationals)	After entering Germany (or directly if visa-exempt)
Validity	Short-term (usually up to 90 days for a national visa before conversion)	Medium- to long-term (months to several years, renewable)
Function	Allows you to cross the border and enter legally	Allows you to live and work legally in Germany
Types relevant for startups	National Visa for long-term stay; Schengen Visa only for short visits – not for starting a business	Residence Permit for self-employment (§ 21 Residence Act), Blue Card EU (§ 18b), Research (§ 18d)
Typical process	Apply abroad → enter Germany → convert to residence permit	Apply in Germany → receive card-format permit
Special note	Without a visa (if you are visa-exempt), you must still apply for a residence permit after arrival	Some residence permits allow switching purpose (e.g., from research to self-employment)

Students

- **Relevant residence permit:** § 16b AufenthG – *Study*
- **Purpose of residence:** Enrollment at a German university (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate).
- **Requirements:**
 - Proof of enrollment.
 - Secured financing (approx. €1,000/month via blocked account or scholarship).
- **Duration:** Minimum 1 year, maximum 2 years (or until study goal is reached); extensions possible if financing is secured.
- **Rights & Limits:**
 - Employment permitted up to 140 full days/year (not related self-employment).
 - Self-employment only with additional permit (§ 21 para. 6).
 - 18-month job search permit possible after graduation (§ 20 para. 1).
- **EXIST scholarship eligibility:** Yes, upon completion of BA.

Costs

€100 (issue), €96 (extension ≤3 months), €93 (extension >3 months)

Researchers with scholarship or employment contract

- **Relevant residence permit:** § 18d AufenthG – *Research*
- **Purpose of residence:** Conducting research at a German institution (including doctoral research in individual cases).
- **Requirements:**
 - Hosting agreement with a university or research institution.
 - Proof of financing (employment contract, scholarship, or blocked account).
- **Entitlement to social benefits:** after at least 1 year of employment contract with social contributions: unemployment benefits through employment agency
- **Duration:** Valid for the research project; extensions possible.
- **Rights & Limits:**
 - 18 months job search after research (§ 20 para. 1).
 - Self-employment only as a side activity with additional permit (§ 21 para. 6) or as main purpose with new permit (§ 21 para. 2a, if related to research or § 21 para. 1, if not related to research).
- **EXIST scholarship eligibility:** Yes.

Costs

€100 (issue), €96 (extension ≤3 months), €93 (extension >3 months)

EU Blue Card

§ 18g

- **Purpose:** Facilitates immigration for highly qualified professionals from third countries.
- **Requirements:**
 - University degree or equivalent qualification.
 - Employment contract with a minimum salary (as of 20.08.2025: € 48,800 gross annually; € 43.759,80 for shortage occupations).
 - Employment in a qualified profession.
- **Duration:** Usually 4 years; shorter if the employment contract is limited.
- **Special features:** Enables accelerated permanent residence permit (Niederlassungserlaubnis) after 27 months (or after 21 months if language skills at B1 level are demonstrated).

After completion of studies, research work as a scientist

- **Relevant residence permits:**
 - § 21 para. 2a AufenthG
- **Purpose:** Start a business related to research or scientific work.
- **Requirements:**
 - Connection between self-employment and knowledge from studies/research/scientific work.
- **Duration:** Up to 3 years.
- **Rights & Limits:**
 - No entitlement to social benefits, living expenses must be covered from own resources.
 - Possible change to other residence basis after end of employment.

Costs

€100 (issue), €96 (extension ≤3 months), €93 (extension >3 months)

§ 21 para. 1

„pure“ self-employment without a connection to the university

Requirements:

- Economic interest or regional need.
- Activity is expected to have a positive impact on the economy.
- The financing of the implementation is secured by equity capital or a loan commitment secured.

EXIST scholarship holders

- **Relevant residence permit:** § 21 para. 2b AufenthG – *Company foundation with EXIST grant*
- **Purpose:** Founding a company supported by an EXIST grant.
- **Requirements:**
 - Status as skilled worker.
 - EXIST or similar grant from German public funds.
 - Proof of financing through the grant for living expenses.
- **Duration:** For the length of the grant, max. 18 months.
- **Rights & Limits:**
 - No entitlement to social benefits.
 - Switch to other permits possible if requirements met.

Health and social insurance

If self-employment is your main occupation, you need your own health insurance.

[Free advisory](#)

Costs

€100 (issue), €96 (extension ≤3 months), €93 (extension >3 months)

Helpful links and resources

- [Visa quick-check for students and researchers in Münster](#)
- [General Visa-Navigator](#)
- [Office for Migration and Integration in Münster](#)
- [The Global Certification and Consultancy Centre for International Start-up Teams \(GCCC\)](#)

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