



## How to Obtain a PhD in Germany

Guideline for foreign students,  
who want to obtain a PhD at  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

The content of this brochure was taken from the Guideline for foreign students, who want to obtain a PhD at Hessian Universities – “How to Obtain a PhD in Germany”.

We adapted the original manuscript by courtesy of the colleagues of the Universität Kassel to the conditions of Humboldt-Universität.

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## Starting Point

You have completed your studies with an academic degree. You are now aspiring to continue your academic career and you want to do your doctorate in Germany. The Humboldt-Universität offers you an overview of what you have to do in order to realise your idea.

The most important thing for you is to come to understand the German system of obtaining a doctorate. For this purpose, please read the following information carefully. You can also view this information on the internet where you will find further useful addresses and links to other websites related to the subject that we recommend you to consult.

## The Outset

At the outset of the decision whether to do a doctorate and thus opening up the way for a continued academic career, you should intensely examine yourself and ask yourself if you are truly “crazy” about research and if you are also qualified for it.

Do I have my own ideas? Is there an academic problem that is worth the time, effort, and money to pursue? Is it worth to bring this problem to a positive end and to find an answer to it that is new, inventive and relevant? Do I have the patience, persistence, and the ability to identify difficulties and to overcome them? Do I have a solid command of the factual store of knowledge and the methodology of my discipline, so that I can productively apply them to the academic problem? Am I able to operationalise my ideas in such a way as to produce a workable task and time schedule?

And some other important questions are:

- How do I find a suitable supervisor/professor for my doctorate?
- How long will it take to finish the doctorate/PhD?
- How will I finance the time I spend on my doctoral project/thesis?

## The German System of Obtaining a Doctorate

The German system is essentially different from other systems as, for example, the English-speaking system. The phase of research on your doctoral project starts with having been accepted as a doctoral candidate.

You can only gain a doctorate (PhD) in Germany by attending a university or a university-status institution (“wissenschaftliche Hochschule”). A

doctorate cannot be gained from a university of applied sciences (“Fachhochschule”).

A professor, called “Doktorvater” or “Doktormutter” (“doctorate father / mother”) will act as your academic supervisor for the doctorate. This academic supervisor will formally set the topic of your doctoral thesis and will advise you on how to proceed with the studies and with your research. There are three ways to identify this topic. Your supervisor can either have a project that he will propose to you and that you may accept, you yourself may have a clear idea for a project, or you and your supervisor may discuss a possible topic for your research together.

This is why **you must first find a professor** who is willing to serve as your “Doktorvater” or “Doktormutter”. The easiest way to do so is to write to a professor whose research area(s) you are interested in. In this letter you should introduce yourself, enclose the certificates and degrees you already hold, and hope that the professor is interested in you and your project and willing to supervise you.

## **How Do I Successfully Identify a Research Team Suitable For Me?**

On no account should you send “mass e-mails” to arbitrary addresses. Instead do research first to find out who could be a suitable supervisor for you! You can find and identify interesting research groups in different ways:

- perusing academic literature

See which authors have written about your special area of interest and contact them. Especially read recent articles in the relevant journals of your discipline.

- attending conferences

Meet people from your discipline and ask them for advice on whom to contact, or talk directly to someone whose research interests you and who you would like as a supervisor.

- using the internet

On the internet, you can find information about research teams and institutions. For example, at “Forschungsportal Deutschland” (“research gateway Germany”) you can conduct a keyword search for teams of your speciality. On the websites of Hessian universities you should especially take a look into their research reports which

contain information about recent projects at the different universities. Please view our websites for these and further links.

## **How Do I Successfully Attract Attention?**

Finding a "Doktorvater" or "Doktormutter" is just like applying to an employer for a job. Professors receive lots of letters and hundreds of e-mails every day. To get his or her attention, you should arrange and formulate your application carefully. This way, you show serious interest in your possible future supervisor. The best way to come to his or her attention is to find someone whose own research is closely related to your area of interest, and to introduce yourself with an accurate letter. Present your education (school, academic education) and point out in which way you are interested in his or her research field. Lay down your state of knowledge and research you may have already done or participated in, such as the topic of your diploma thesis. It is also recommended to list other special qualifications you may have, as well as a list of your publications if you have any.

## **Regarding the PhD**

Once you have found a supervisor for your thesis, a committee in the department or faculty in question will decide whether the knowledge and qualifications you have already acquired will qualify you for taking a doctorate at a German university. It is possible that you may first have to attend one or two semesters of additional lectures, courses or seminars before you can start your doctorate. Each department or faculty at a university has its own doctoral regulations ("Promotionsordnung"). While one university may admit you to the doctoral studies without setting any prior conditions, others may set conditions. This is all part of the autonomy / privileges / independence which German universities enjoy.

Generally there are generally no graduate studies to be completed in order to obtain your PhD in Germany.

But Graduate Colleges or Graduate Schools ("Graduiertenkolleg") represent another opportunity for taking a doctorate in Germany and have been founded only recently. Within a "Graduiertenkolleg", several doctoral candidates ("Promovenden") work together on a major research project, with each candidate taking on responsibility for a project section. Additionally there are some graduate studies, you have to register for. For information on the "Graduiertenkollegs", which have been set up at German universities or research institutes, please visit the DFG homepage on the internet (DFG = Deutsche

Forschungsgemeinschaft - German Research Community). Perhaps you will find a research topic of interest to you in which you would like to collaborate. If this is the case, for further information and details please turn to the specified contact address on the website.

The Humboldt-Universität anticipates a four-year period for foreigners.

## **Enrolling as a Doctoral Candidate**

Once you have decided to do your doctorate at the Humboldt-Universität and have found a supervisor for your research project, you should formally enrol. Why does the registration of your doctorate make sense?

Two things are tied to the registration:

- Legal Certainty

When you have been accepted as a doctoral candidate, there are no longer any formal problems. I.e. the respective thesis committee recognises that you have the right to do a doctorate based on the quality of your prior studies. In general, this is no problem if you have completed your studies at Humboldt-Universität or the respective institution. But if you come from a different field of study or a different university (especially, from a foreign university), it is possible that the thesis committee will accept you only on certain conditions (e.g. two semesters of additional studies). This, too, normally presents no problem. But it would result in one, if these conditions are imposed on you when you have already completed your project. That is, if you register your project after having already completed most of your work on it.

- Goal Setting

The earlier you set the objective for your doctoral research project, the faster you can start working on it constructively. Together with the registration, you have to present the thesis committee with a short synopsis (abstract) of your research project. Another part of the registration is that the faculty you selected can decide if your project falls into its area of (academic) responsibility. Last but not least and for your own benefit, the abstract also serves as a means to restrict the volume of your project and to set a time-frame for it. Of course, this does not mean that you have to slavishly cling to these proposals. There are unquestionably good reasons for departing from these plans with regard to the time-frame or the content of the project. But, in general, and with the necessary corrections, the abstract should certainly serve as a guideline.

In order to register as a PhD-Student at Humboldt-Universität, contact the responsible offices of your faculty. They do the administrative work for the thesis committees. One of their tasks consists of conducting the registration and admission process for doctoral studies. For application and admission and enrolment as a doctoral student you will need a letter of acceptance of your supervisor (Doktorvater/ Doktormutter). If some formalities (see above) and definitive registration of your doctorate is not possible at the moment, you might be enrolled as a "transition student". You have to ask at the Office for International Affairs (<http://www.aia.hu-berlin.de/>) about the specific regulations.

Usually, the following documents have to be enclosed in the admission at your faculty:

- working title and written description of the academic question of your research project
- certified copies of your diploma and your transcript of records
- your curriculum vitae
- if applicable, a list of your academic publications
- if applicable, certification of your language abilities

In case of further questions concerning the application process, the "Promotionsamt, Promotionsgeschäftsstelle" ("thesis office") will be at your disposal.

As a doctoral student, you do not have to pay tuition fees, but an administrative fee ("Semesterbeitrag"), which is paid by all regular students and covers costs for services such as student government, public transport, and student services ("Studentenwerk"). The contribution is about 250 € per Semester, but the amount can vary at each university and each Semester.

An important issue which you should inform yourself about before registering, is whether the degrees you hold are comparable to the German degrees that are a prerequisite for a PhD. For further information, please contact the study service for foreign students (Admission for Foreigners, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Tel. +49 (0)30 2093-2627, E-Mail: [elke.nuerck.2@uv.hu-berlin.de](mailto:elke.nuerck.2@uv.hu-berlin.de))

The doctoral regulations also state in which language you are allowed to write your thesis. In the natural sciences and in engineering, it is usually possible to hand in your dissertation in English. In all other cases, you should check early with your supervisor or the doctoral office for the respective regulations. In general, you are expected to master the German language on an academic level. This is not only necessary for the daily communication with your supervisor and other academic staff, but also often for writing your doctoral thesis. In any case, it is to

your advantage to know enough German to communicate with the people you meet. This will not only make your daily life in Germany easier, but also help you to make friends and feel comfortable and at home in this country during your doctorate.

## **How Do I Finance My Research and My Life while Doing the Doctorate?**

Another factor for a productive (research) environment (in addition to the professional skills of the "Doktorvater"/"Doktormutter" that are not to be underrated) is a sensible approach to the question of financing.

If you have the chance to obtain a job as a research assistant/teaching assistant for a professor, you will receive a salary according to the German Public Servants Rate. This position allows you to be paid for doing your doctorate and also involves 2 to 4 hours of teaching a week as well as other services for your professor's CHAIR. Often you are referred to graduate-scholarship programmes that you can apply for. But, of course, you do not only have to take into account your personal costs that are covered by your salary or your scholarship. You will also need an appropriate infrastructure, for example, new equipment or consumable materials. Who will pay for travel expenses to archives, conventions, and symposia? Therefore, it is important to arrange for appropriate financing in your chosen environment.

As already mentioned, there are many possibilities to finance your work. Principally, there are three options:

1. Humboldt-Universität and other research institutions advertises positions with different research fields/for different projects that you may be interested in and that offer the possibility of additionally obtaining a PhD. Sometimes/Often these positions are part-time. This means that you will earn only half the money, but you have also less duties and more time to spend on your project.
2. Apply for a scholarship. You can find addresses from institutions providing scholarships on the internet.

At the moment, these scholarships consist of approximately 1000 € of monthly assistance. The money also has to pay for your health insurance and does not include any social insurance (such as unemployment insurance, pension insurance). But, most importantly, you will not receive money for additional expenses (equipment, consumable material, travel expenses).

Please note that in Germany, most grants and scholarships are meant for “junior scientists” and they are age-restricted. If you are older than 30 years, it will be difficult to obtain such funding.

The scholarships can be individual scholarships which can be given to an individual PhD project if you have found a supervisor. Or you can apply for a scholarship which is provided at Graduate Schools (<http://www.kisswin.de/en/funding.html>).

3. Institutions funding research, such as the German Research Community (DFG) or Volkswagen-Stiftung give money to finance research projects on application. In order to apply, you basically have to meet two conditions: You have to be qualified (i.e. you have to hold a PhD) and you as a person have to be financially covered by an institution like our university. Therefore, you cannot apply for funding yourself, but only your supervisor can apply at one of these institutions for a research grant that will finance you. This application should be based on your doctoral research project. Such a scholarship (in the positive case of an acceptance) usually pays for a half-time position as a research assistant, additional equipment and consumables as well as, if needed, travel expenses. Officially, your supervisor has to write the application, but of course, you can do an important part of the work yourself by writing a draft of the application so that your supervisor “only” has to go over it.

You can apply for a scholarship, ask your supervisor to apply for a grant to the DFG and respond to job advertisements at the same time. You should only be aware of one thing: If you have worked as a research assistant for three or more years and then decide to apply for a scholarship because your thesis is not yet finished, you will run into problems. In general, scholarships are awarded immediately after obtaining the university diploma which gives you the right to take a doctorate. Three or more years later simply do not qualify as “immediately”. Besides, you are also three or more years away from the category “junior scientist”. As a general rule, you should, therefore, apply for and accept a scholarship before any employment contract!

Financing a doctorate has become more difficult in times of tight budgets. That is why it is no longer sufficient just to go to your supervisor and ask him to apply to the DFG for you. It takes work and labour (for your supervisor, too). Not every applicant will be granted the money. Only the projects deemed worthiest will receive funding. But an exciting idea and an excellent application still have a good chance of being sponsored.

## How to Compose a Good Application

In order to register your doctoral studies and to apply for a scholarship or for funding for your project, you need to have an exposition of the topic you want to work on.

The most important advice is: **Make it short!** Of course, there are no generally accepted rules on how to do this. The “Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft” (DFG), for example, states in its guidelines for material grants that an application should not consist of more than 20 pages and the task schedule should make up at least half of the application. A rule of thumb for applications for doctoral/graduate scholarships is that two pages are usually just a bit short in order to convince reviewers to give you money for two years. But someone who does not manage to convey in ten pages what he or she plans on doing will probably not achieve this on twenty pages! In this case, too, the following is true: the exciting things are not only the ideas that you have developed from the current state of research, but also your ability to come up with realisable and temporally restricted work steps. Therefore, please especially heed the above suggestion that the work schedule should take up half of the application!

If you take into account that reviewers have only limited time, it is imperative to make it **short** and also **concise**. This begins with the title and does not stop at the summary. With the latter, concision is of special importance, because with it you open the eyes, minds, and emotions of the people you want to convince of your project. The title “Short treatise on doctoral studies in general and in special cases with particular regard to the environment of their genesis, their financing, and the time frame resulting from the former” would probably motivate neither you nor the reviewers to carry on reading. The title is the first ‘eye-catcher’ of your abstract; the second one is the summary. Here, you have to make clear in a few catch phrases what exactly is new, original, and exciting about your project.

In general, your abstract should have the following structure:

- Current State of Research

This does not have to be laid out in depth; instead there should be a pointed and tight presentation that makes clear why the question of your project resulted from it. This is particularly true for bibliographical references. They should be restricted to the most important and relevant works, since you are not expected to prove your erudition but rather your ability to differentiate between what is more and what is less important.

- Objective of Your Project

You are working on obtaining a doctorate. This is a temporally limited phase of qualification. But afterwards, you still want to have something to do. Therefore, limit your project consistently to the most interesting and most necessary. Make clear what the particular problem is that will bring new conclusions and lead you to your goal. Later, as a professor or a researcher at an institute, you may carry on your research and deepen or broaden your doctoral project.

- Means and Methods to Reach Your Goal

You have laid out your ideas in describing your objective. Now you have to show that you are able to realise your ideas. How do you want to proceed? Which methods do you want to use? Which problems do you want to work on in which time intervals? You should not only describe **what you want to do**, but also **how you want to do it** and **why you want to do it that way**.

- Work Schedule, Time Schedule, Financial Plans

Are work schedule, time schedule, and financial plans consistent with your ideas? Is your time schedule maybe just a trick to fulfil the conditions of a sponsor (e.g. the graduate funding commission) who will provide money only for two years? You can assume that, in general, commissions consist not only of specialised but also methodically trained scientists who are certainly capable of estimating the consistency of your objectives, the necessary means and necessary time.

## The Academic Environment

As mentioned above, in Germany the decisive question is: Is there someone who is able, willing and qualified to supervise the academic work on your selected topic? This person will usually be the PhD supervisor or "Doktorvater"/"Doktormutter". As the term suggests, the personal factor is very significant. Nevertheless, this personal aspect should not mislead you to conduct your own research in a kind of slavish dependence on the work of the concerned person or to choose somebody based only on his or her personal qualities.

You yourself can also contribute to creating your own productive environment for your research. Generally, you are not alone with the joys and woes of a doctoral project. Therefore, you should seek contact with others that are in the same situation as you are. With them, you can discuss any problems that may arise and find out, for example, if your specific problems and perspectives are related to particular people or are rather situation-related. Seminars for doctoral candidates (such as

you) in the different faculties are good institutions where the current state of each research project is presented and discussed or where problems of the phase of qualification are talked about on a regular basis. You should also engage in this actively!

Before enrolling as a doctoral candidate, you should take the time to make use of the helpful suggestions given above in order to be well prepared and to be able to make good use of your time during the doctorate.

## **Time Frame**

Unfortunately it is very common that doctoral candidates take on too much work and are not able to finish their thesis. Therefore, it is imperative to work out a good time and work schedule and to limit the objective of your research. It is impressive when a thesis for a diploma or a Master of Arts comprises at least 200 pages (without appendices, of course). Many people conclude from this that the doctoral thesis should be at least 500 pages long. The only problem is that all this takes time. Often one forgets that a doctorate is just a phase of qualification, and not the work of a lifetime. Ironically and with much exaggeration, one could say: First the doctorate, then the Nobel Prize!

That is why a sensible time and work schedule should not be forgotten when beginning your doctorate (see: Application), but it should serve again and again as a point of reflection of what you have already accomplished and what is left to do. On the outset of a doctorate, 3 or 5 years seems an "infinite" stretch of time. But time moves all the more quickly as the end approaches. The time frame should always "admonish" you to take your work seriously and to identify existing problems on time in order to be able solve them rapidly.

Surely, it is no divine law that a doctorate has to last more than three years. But completing your PhD in the course of three years exhorts good time management.

## **Additional Qualifications**

The activities that will qualify you for a PhD do not only consist in the work on your project. It also comprises (independently-done) teaching or continuing education in academic methodology or the amplification of computer skills and possibly the attainment of multimedia knowledge.

Above all, the acquisition and the nurturing of key qualifications are important. For example:

- reading academic texts
- academic writing
- academic lectures
- project development and project management

The participation in the German academic self-administration is certainly not unimportant for future professional prospects, if you have not already attained these abilities during your prior studies.

**But, to concentrate on your doctorate is imperative!**

In order to be able to do this, you need good time management! This you can learn. The most important ability that you can also learn is to say no sometimes. Do not let the work that your supervisor might impose on you or your teaching duties get in the way of completing your thesis. If you do not learn to say no sometimes, you might end up with empty hands! If you reflect on what you have done (or have not done yet) and what you want to accomplish with what material and which methods at regular intervals, then, success is organisable and obtainable.

## Useful Addresses at the Internet

Information of the Humboldt-Universität for Young Scientists

[http://www.hu-berlin.de/englisch/for\\_e.htm](http://www.hu-berlin.de/englisch/for_e.htm)

Information about Doing your PhD in Germany

[http://research.hu-berlin.de/young\\_scientists/DAAD\\_Promeng.pdf](http://research.hu-berlin.de/young_scientists/DAAD_Promeng.pdf)

The Researcher's Mobility Portal Germany

<http://www.eracareers-germany.de/en/index.htm>

Higher-education-compass Germany

<http://www.hochschulkompass.de/en/doctorates.html>

Research gateway Germany

<http://forschungportal.net/index-en.html>

Research training groups by DFG

[http://www.dfg.de/en/research\\_funding/programmes/list/index.jsp?id=GSC](http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/list/index.jsp?id=GSC)

[http://www.dfg.de/en/research\\_funding/programmes/list/index.jsp?id=GRK](http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/list/index.jsp?id=GRK)