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How to Apply as a Doctoral Student in Germany?

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**Abstract**

There are some peculiarities for applying as a doctoral student in Germany. The aim of this paper is to explain the most important ones for foreign graduates considering doctoral studies in Germany. Doctoral studies are free in Germany and one can get even a paid job at the university or a stipend while writing one's dissertation. There are some formal requirements for doctoral students but it is most important to convince a professor to accept one. For this end and in one's own interest it is decisive to look for a good match, particularly similar research interests.

JEL-Codes: A11, A29, I23, J24, J45, M51

# Wie bewirbt man sich als Doktorand in Deutschland?

## Zusammenfassung

Es gibt einige Besonderheiten beim Bewerben als Doktorand in Deutschland. Das Ziel dieses Papiers ist es, die wichtigsten dieser Besonderheiten für ausländische Absolventen zu erklären, die über ein Promotionsstudium in Deutschland nachdenken. Solch ein Studium ist kostenlos in Deutschland und man kann sogar eine bezahlte Stelle an der Universität oder ein Stipendium bekommen, während man seine Dissertation schreibt. Es gibt einige formale Voraussetzungen für Doktoranden, doch es ist am wichtigsten, einen Professor davon zu überzeugen, dass er einen als Doktorand akzeptiert. Zu diesem Zweck und im eigenen Interesse ist es entscheidend, nach einer guten Passung zu suchen, insbesondere hinsichtlich der Forschungsinteressen.

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# How to Apply as a Doctoral Student in Germany?

## 1. Introduction

In Dilger (2012), I discussed the “Peculiarities of Applications for Positions and Opportunities for Doctoral Students”<sup>1</sup> in German. Many potential doctoral students do not know what opportunities do exist and how to apply for them. This is true for postgraduates in Germany but even more so for foreigners who are or could be interested to receive a doctorate in Germany. This paper is written for them. Thus it is in English and tries to answer the title question: How to apply as a doctoral student in Germany? The focus of this paper is on the peculiarities of applications at German universities, not on the application process in general.<sup>2</sup> If you can read German and know the German university system, you should read the German paper. Moreover, universities are very diverse. There are differences between subjects, locations and even individual professors. The following is true for applications at my institute at least but the information is useful for applications somewhere else as well even if there are some differences. Nobody expects a perfect application but professors are looking for good matches.

The structure of this paper is as follows: In Chapter 2 we look at the decisive reason why you should apply as a doctoral student. If you are mainly interested in earning money, you should apply for a proper job outside academia. In Chapter 3 the main ways to get a doctorate are explained. To know their differences is important when applying for one of them. The subject of Chapter 4 are the necessary and desirable requirements for doctoral students. Chapter 5 deals with the application itself, what you need to send and how. Chapter 6 explains the further steps of the application process. Chapter 7 is about applications as a postdoc or for other opportunities in academia. Chapter 8 concludes.

## 2. The Right Reason for Doctoral Studies

The main goal of doctoral studies is to get a doctorate. If you are simply interested in getting a job and earning money, you should look for other jobs with higher pay. In Germany, the doctorate can be useful to get an even better and higher paid job outside of academia afterwards but in most other countries this is not the case. That means most foreigners considering a doc-

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<sup>1</sup> Dilger (2011), p. II, a previous version with open access of Dilger (2012).

<sup>2</sup> There are many books for general job applications, for example Leigh (2013) or Palmer (2015). For job applications (normally after a PhD from a graduate school) at American universities see for example Kelsky (2015) or Miller Vick/Furlong (2008).

torate should ask themselves whether they are interested in a career in academia. If not, doctoral studies cannot be recommended in most cases. An exception are medical students in Germany, for whom getting a doctorate is quite easy and useful. For most other students a doctorate is not really harmful but it is a long and risky detour if they do not want to stay in academia where it is a requirement.

Moreover, in most countries the doctorate is the highest academic degree and therefore enough for a career in academia. In Germany, however, the habilitation is an even higher academic degree. A habilitation or an equivalent is required to become a university professor and there are not many other lifelong academic jobs at German universities. Strangely, a foreign PhD can be accepted as an equivalent for a habilitation although it is another kind of doctorate. Thus it can be better to get a foreign PhD instead of a German Dr if you want to become a professor in Germany whereas a Dr from Germany is quite good for an academic career elsewhere as most German universities are quite good and there are no tuition fees for normal and doctoral students. Nonetheless, most German university professors including me have a German Dr and habilitated afterwards. For professors at universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*), no habilitation or equivalent is required but a doctorate and some work experience (normally five years, three of them outside academia).

### **3. Ways to Get a Doctorate**

The goal of doctoral studies is the promotion, becoming a Dr, but there are several ways to this goal. When applying it is important to know and to express which way you want to go. The main question is whether one also needs a job in academia or not. The normal job for doctoral students is as research associate (*wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter*), who does research, teaching and academic self-administration. Research associates are paid like other young academics in the German public service. That means a decent salary although graduates of marketable subjects can earn a lot more in the private sector. Regrettably, many research associates are only paid part-time although the real work may be full-time or even longer. Their employment is temporary and can be extended until the promotion or for six years at the longest. Another kind of employment is as a research assistant (*wissenschaftliche Hilfskraft*), who is paid less and always part-time. For doctoral students it is important whether they have

enough time for their own research. There are large differences between institutes and professors.<sup>3</sup> You should look how successful previous doctoral students have been.

Legally, every job at a public university has to be advertised. You can apply to such job advertisements. They are published at least in German at the homepage of the respective university and sometimes on special job sites of academic societies. When applying to an advertised job you should send a full application (see Chapter 5). If you apply proactive without a job advertisement, it is important to write that you are looking for a job nevertheless. If the professor is interested in you, he or she will indicate you his or her next job offer or even open a new job, to which you but also others can apply. It is not allowed that he or she offers only you a job, especially as a research associate, without an open advertisement. Conversely, this means that there are advertisements, even if there are strong preferences for one special candidate. However, if the advertisement is distributed very widely, this is less likely.

You can be a doctoral student and become a doctor without having a paid job at a university. Then you need some other kind of financing. You can get a stipend, have another job outside academia, live from your savings or get some money from your parents. When you have your own financing, you should make this clear in your application. Some professors like external doctoral students because they cost no money. Others like them less because they will not really work for them but create work by themselves. A special case are graduate schools where you apply as a doctoral student and for a stipend at the same time. Their places are advertised and competitively awarded on merit.

Another important distinction exists in regard of the dissertation you write as a doctoral student. The classical way is a monograph. A newer alternative is the cumulative dissertation. This consists of at least three research papers. They should be published in academic journals or at least be publishable there. In some faculties (in particular in the humanities) you can only write a monograph, in others (primarily in the natural sciences) only a cumulative dissertation but in most both is possible. You do not have to decide the form of your dissertation at the beginning and can even switch it later, submitting individual chapters from a book to journals or putting together some papers as a book.

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<sup>3</sup> At my institute the employed doctoral students can and are expected to work at their dissertations in their paid time. That means that their other works require less time than they are paid for. However, they should also work at their dissertations on some of their unpaid time, especially if they are only paid part-time. External doctoral students who are not employed by the university have to write their dissertations in unpaid time anyway.

## 4. Requirements for Doctoral Students

There are different requirements for being a doctoral student and for working at a university (see Chapter 3 for this crucial distinction). The formal requirements for being a doctoral student are governed by the doctoral degree regulation (*Promotionsordnung*), which is enacted by each faculty (and written in German, at least the legally binding version). Thus there are differences between universities and between disciplines. However, there are also large similarities. Normally you need a master degree or equivalent from a good university<sup>4</sup> with a good or better grade on average in the subject or one nearby that you want to get the doctorate. There are exemptions like doctoral students with only a bachelor degree or with a completely different subject, who can get additional requirements like special courses at their doctoral studies. Sometimes these additional requirements can be prohibitive such that it is easier to make a master degree or change the subject.

Besides the formal requirements there is a material one that is even more important. You need a professor who accepts you as doctoral student, acts as your adviser and is normally also the first reviewer of your dissertation. If you find one, he or she can help you with any other requirement. If you do not find an adviser, it is practically impossible to get a doctorate in Germany. Thus your application has to convince a professor to accept you as his or her doctoral student. Professors may have their individual requirements and preferences regarding doctoral students. Nevertheless, most of them want candidates who clearly fulfil all the formal requirements. Exceptions are possible but they mean additional work and perhaps problems such that I would make them only in exceptional circumstances, not for a complete stranger without overwhelming excellence.

Besides the formal requirements professors are looking for doctoral students that are good matches to themselves, their working groups and especially their research agendas.<sup>5</sup> You should look what a professor and his or her team are researching. Only if you really want to research on the same or very similar themes, you should apply and make this clear in your application. If you come from a different discipline or just sub-discipline, you should think twice and have to explain why you want to switch. For example, I cannot advise a mathematician in mathematics. I could accept a mathematician as a doctoral student if he or she wants to

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<sup>4</sup> There is the official database *anabin* at <http://anabin.kmk.org/> (last retrieved 29th September 2015) where you can look whether your university and degree are recognised in Germany. Alas, the database does only exist in German as yet but perhaps you can use it nevertheless. You will have no problem if you come from an institution rated H+ and have a degree rated A4 or higher.

<sup>5</sup> For job matching theory see Jovanovic (1979).

use his or her mathematical skills in business economics. However, you would have to convince me that you can and want to use your knowledge in my subject if you come from a different one. This is not so easy because graduates often do not know what is done in other disciplines. Interdisciplinary research is interesting and important but it is very difficult. Normally it is better to stay in your own discipline and even sub-discipline and work together with experts from other disciplines. In any case, nobody believes you that you can do everything. Even if you were willing and able to become acquainted with anything, professors are looking for doctoral students who share their special research interests and are not indifferent in what they are doing.

If you also want a job as research associate or assistant, then the formal requirements are even more important. You also need a work visa if you are not a citizen of the European Union (EU) or an associated country. Fortunately, you get it quite easily if a university and that means a professor wants to employ you. It can be much more difficult to get a general work visa if you want to work at another place while being a doctoral student or afterwards.

## **5. How a Good Application Looks Like**

A good application is one that optimises your chances of being accepted as a doctoral student and if necessary of getting a job, too. Whether you are really accepted depends on many further factors but with a poor application you can be rejected before your real qualities have been recognised at all. Conversely, if your application is too good to be true, this will be realised later and you will be rejected then or even worse you will be accepted but not be able to finish your dissertation. Thus your application should be as good as possible but not better.

There are two relevant kinds of applications as a doctoral student, a short one and an extended one. You should use the short one if you proactively apply without a job advertisement. An extended application is right if you apply for an advertised job or if you get a positive reply on a short application. In both cases you should follow precise wishes if there are any. If not, follow my advice on applications. I begin with the short ones first, which are the core of an extended one anyway.

A short application should have two to three elements. A cover letter and a curriculum vitae (CV) are necessary, a research proposal would also be fine. If you send an electronic application by e-mail, you are free to write the cover letter in the e-mail itself or in the appendix. In the second case, you should write one or two sentences in the e-mail itself, in which you ex-



plain that you are sending an application and for what. It is best to send this e-mail to the professor by whom you are applying. If you do not have his or her e-mail-address, you can send it to his or her secretary. If you send it to both, do it in one e-mail with the secretary in CC.

In the cover letter you should be very clear for what you are applying (see Chapter 3), whether you want a job, if so which one and if not how you finance your doctoral studies. Furthermore, you should explain in detail how you fulfil the formal requirements for doctoral studies (see Chapter 4). Even more important is to convince the professor that you and your research interests match with his or hers. You can explain this in more detail in your research proposal. Without one you should write one or two paragraphs of your research ideas in your cover letter. In any case you have to make clear that you have such ideas for your dissertation project but are open for suggestions or even completely different ideas by the professor. All in all, the cover letter should have one or at most two pages. You have to be informative, precise and short at the same time. It is no pleasure to read much longer letters and therefore some may not read them at all. It should be clear by now that you need to write a distinct cover letter for every application. It is not enough to change just the name of the professor. I get some electronic applications without even my name and with nothing specific. This is a kind of spam and I do not feel obliged to answer such impersonal e-mails.

The CV should begin with some personal information. In Germany it is allowed and even advisable to include a professional photo. You should also make clear whether you are male or female if this is not totally clear from your first name or photo. Then you have to list the educational and occupational stations of your career. It is now usual to start with the present and go back in time. You should enumerate your degrees and average grades. You can also write the titles of your bachelor and master theses and the grades for them because they are nearest to your dissertation. If you already have any publications, courses taught or other academic achievements, you should list them separately. Finally, you should specify your language skills and other kinds of relevant knowledge.

A research proposal is optional as long as it is not explicitly required. If you have one or two very good research ideas, write it or them down on one to three pages. You do not need a detailed research plan at the beginning of the application process, just a sketch of your ideas is enough. The research proposal should be suitable for a dissertation project. If it is impossible or very improbable that you could write such a dissertation in a few years, then slim it down. It is also important to double-check whether the research proposal is a good match to the research of the professor and his or her team where you are applying. If this is not the case, you

should not send this proposal with your application but think about writing another proposal or applying somewhere else.

An extended application is like a short application with a longer appendix including all relevant academic certificates and job references. For all important points on your CV you should have some evidence, especially about your academic degrees and detailed grades as well as from all former jobs. From a current employer you may include an interim report. If some evidence is missing, this is a bad signal because it could mean that you got a negative reference and want to hide it or that you are simply messy.

Such an extended application can be quite long. For a paper version, this is no problem and you should use some kind of binder. Best are those with a clear front page, which allows to see your photo on the first page of the CV, and the possibility to take the untacked pages out. You must not send original documents but only copies. The cover letter comes before the binder into the envelope. You have to sign the cover letter and the CV. These documents go to your personnel file if you get a job. If you lied in your CV, you can later be fired.

In an electronic application you do not have to sign anything or to scan your signature, which is legally irrelevant anyway. However, the size can be a problem in extended electronic applications. A normal e-mail should not be longer than two or three megabytes. At universities themselves, larger e-mails would be okay, but you do not know whether the professor is at home or abroad with a bad or expensive internet connection. There are some ways to compress electronic files. However, you should not send zip-files or anything that is prone to viruses. Best are pdf-files that are quite secure and mostly stable between different computers. If your extended application is too large, you can put the additional appendixes somewhere on the internet and just send the link(s). However, you should always attach the short application with the cover letter and CV to the e-mail. They are small enough as long as your photo has a reasonable size.

You can and should write your application in English as long as your German is not quite good. Nearly all professors in Germany can enough English to read it. Nevertheless, some will not accept you without sufficient German language skills, especially when you apply for a position with teaching responsibilities as most courses in Germany are taught in German. If your English as well as German are poor, you will have a problem. Please check before whether a professor can read your application and later work with you in any other language. Furthermore, I recommend that you write your application by yourself. It is okay and advisa-

ble that someone else, preferably an English native speaker, proof-reads your application. However, if someone else writes a perfect application for you that you could have not written by yourself, then your first impression is good but the disappointment later will be greater.

## **6. Further Steps of the Application Process**

When you send out your application, you often need patience and sometimes even a thick skin. I try to answer to any application if it is not clearly a mass mail or even spam. However, I know that not all my colleagues do that and they are not obliged to do so. Thus it is quite possible that you never get an answer to your application. This is quite unsatisfactory but in a way no answer is also an answer, namely a negative one. However, you may be anxious whether your application reached its recipient at all or an answer for you was lost. I think one follow-up e-mail is okay with your application for a second time and the polite question whether the first e-mail has been received. However, you should wait with this two to three weeks and should not send a lot of e-mails or even rude ones when you do not get any answer. An alternative is to change the kind of application if you got no answer, meaning an application by post after an e-mail or an e-mail after a postal one. If you have been invited to apply, personally or by an advertisement, then you have the legal right to get your postal application back without the application letter (if this has not been explicitly ruled out in advance). However, even then you may not get any answer.

More often than not, the answer you will get is a rejection. This can be very short without any explanation. If you get an explanation, you may feel that it is wrong. Nevertheless, resist the urge to argue with the professor. A few days later you should consider the information you got. I often write that I do not see a good match. Think about it if you get such an answer. Perhaps you just have to explain your research interests better, but perhaps it is really no good idea to apply to professors from totally different subjects for example. In other cases I have to ask about missing information like what someone is applying for or whether the formal requirements are fulfilled. You should make this clear in your application itself such that other things can be discussed.

A successful discussion will be followed by an invitation. Such an invitation is really a success for an applicant. However, depending on your location it can be quite expensive to go to Germany just for one interview. It is in your own interest to discuss all critical points before. These can be points by which the professor may lose his or her interest in you or points because of them you might change your mind. However, it is better to find this out as soon as

possible than to make an expensive interview in vain or even to start as a doctoral student but never finish. In case of a job interview, the potential employer has to pay the costs of the applicant if this is not ruled out explicitly what most universities do. Sometimes it is possible to make a first interview by telephone or Skype. In a few happy cases you can even make an appointment at an international conference or somewhere else nearer to you. However, the normal case is an interview in Germany at your expense. In the interview you should make a good impression, discuss your planned dissertation project and how it can be realised.

Ideally, you are accepted as a doctoral student a few days after the interview. Often it takes longer, especially if you applied for a job and there are several candidates. Perhaps they have their interviews later than you or the first choice of the professor needs some time to think about an offer. There are some common characteristics that most professors are looking for such that some candidates will get several offers while others will be happy to get one. If you are one of the lucky applicants with several offers, you should not take the first one but make a wise choice. Sometimes one offer is clearly better than the other(s), more often one has to decide between very different advantages. One job may pay more money, another is nearer at home, yet another offer comes without money but at a more prestigious university and so on. You should always think from the end and your final goal (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, it is a decision under uncertainty and the next few years are also important, not only the doctoral degree that you hopefully get in a few years. Thus it can even be reasonable to decline an inappropriate offer even if it is the only one that you got. There are other ways to be smart and happy even without a doctorate.

Hopefully, you are accepted as a doctoral student. Then you have to fill out a lot of forms. Please ask other doctoral students to help you. The German bureaucracy can be difficult even for Germans but it is very important. Afterwards you start as a doctoral student. There are very large differences in the supervisions. Some professors want to see you every day, there are others you will never see if you do not urge them to make appointments with you. Finally, it is your task to research well and write your dissertation. Other people can help you but only so far.

## **7. Applications as a Postdoc or for Other Opportunities**

You cannot only apply as a doctoral student at a university but for several other opportunities, too. This makes it even more important to make it clear what you are applying for. Do you

want a job, a degree, doing research together or all three things at the same time? I got and get many applications in which this is not clear. You should do better.

If you already have a doctorate, you could try to get a second one in another subject. However, in most cases this is not worthwhile. If you want to stay in academia, you should consider a postdoctoral degree, the habilitation (see Chapter 2). If you just want to visit for a while for some research, together or alone, then write it with your expectations: Do you need money, an office, an official invitation or something else? The more you offer and the less you need, the likelier is a positive answer.

## **8. Conclusion**

One reason for writing this paper was to make more potential applicants aware of the importance to write transparent applications. Particularly at universities, the application process is less about style and more about substance. You should not hide your weaknesses but show your strengths. Applicant and professor should say what they want and then balance their expectations. I for my part am not looking for the absolutely best doctoral students (or postdocs) as they will probably look somewhere else but I am looking for good matches who write quite great theses in a reasonable time. When I accept someone, I want him or her to succeed and help accordingly. Correspondingly, I have to be strict before accepting someone as a doctoral student. If you cannot convince someone with your application although it is quite short and you have all the time you want to write it, how will you later convince this person with much longer and more difficult academic texts?

I hope you are successful first in applying as a doctoral student and later in getting your doctorate. You can write me ([alexander.dilger@uni-muenster.de](mailto:alexander.dilger@uni-muenster.de)) about your experiences, ask me any related questions and send me your feedback for improving this paper for a second version.

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