Proposal Writing
How to write a successful proposal?

Tuesday, 05 June 2018 14:00 - 15:00 CEST
### General information about the webinar

#### Who hosted the webinar?

Anne Knab  
German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)  
research-in-germany@daad.de  
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www.daad.de

#### Who were the panelists?

Prof. Dr. med. Tim Meyer  
(Institute of Sports and Preventive Medicine-Saarland University)  
www.sportmedizin-saarbruecken.de  
sportmed@mx.uni-saarland.de

Prof. Dr. Alexander Gerber  
(Chair Science Communication, Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences)  
https://www.hochschule-rhein-waal.de/en/university/  

Vanesa Yepes (University Weimar)  
PhD Candidate and research assistant at the Instructional Design Chair  
www.uni-weimar.de/elab  
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### Finding the right programme/institute/topic

#### 3 Opportunities how to do a PhD in Germany:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Apply for a structured PhD programme <a href="http://www.daad.de/deutschland/studienangebote/international-programs/en/">www.daad.de/deutschland/studienangebote/international-programs/en/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Search for PhD job offers at German universities <a href="http://www.phdgermany.de">www.phdgermany.de</a></td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Send a speculative application to a professor or research institute. If you intend to apply directly to an institute then find those workgroups where research in your field of interest is carried out in the online database ‘Research Explorer’: <a href="http://www.research-explorer.de/research_explorer.en">www.research-explorer.de/research_explorer.en</a></td>
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#### How to find interesting PhD programmes?

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<tr>
<td>Search here for PhD programmes in Germany: <a href="https://www.hochschulkompass.de/en/doctoral-studies.html">https://www.hochschulkompass.de/en/doctoral-studies.html</a> <a href="http://www.phdgermany.de">www.phdgermany.de</a> <a href="http://www.research-explorer.de/research_explorer.en">http://www.research-explorer.de/research_explorer.en</a></td>
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### What are the criteria for being accepted in a PhD Programme?

Your chances for getting into a PhD programme depend on many factors. The most promising applicants have a good or very good master’s degree (or equivalent). Other important factors often include your work experience, motivation, and naturally the number and qualification of the other applicants you’re competing with.

Open PhD positions will often attract many applicants; therefore, the application process can be highly competitive.

The description of each programme usually gives you a detailed impression of what is expected of the applicants.

### What are important criteria for the professors?

- Knowledge and experience in the field (solid background)
- Ability to communicate clearly
- Ability to articulate novel ideas
- Ability to organize ideas and plan work
- Appreciation of the potential value / impact of the outcomes
- Attention to feasibility
- Attention to sustainability
- Cost effectiveness of the project
- Relation to his research interest
- Enthusiasm
## Content of a successful proposal

### What is a research proposal?

It is about what *you* want to investigate - in a structured way.

In the research proposal, you need to demonstrate that you are capable of:

- independent critical thinking and analysis
- communicating your ideas clearly
- making a valuable contribution to research

Research proposals reflect your competence to undertake future PhD or post-doctoral work successfully.

It has to convince the university or the funder that:

- the research you propose is worthwhile and relevant
- you are the ideal person to conduct the research

The proposed research should increase the knowledge of a given research field.

### When is writing of a research proposal required?

The proposal is often an integral part of the application process for a PhD position or a scholarship. It helps the university/the funder to assess whether you are a good match in an extremely competitive environment. It should show that you have a good level of knowledge about the subject and that you have already acquired some research experience and a solid background in important fields.
### Before you start writing...

- Identify for yourself what are your own ambitions
- Make a to-do list with tasks associated with the proposal
- Develop a timeline or strategy when to do the tasks
- Which funder/university/supervisor (host laboratory)?
- Which requirements are requested from the funder/university/supervisor (host laboratory)?
- Which project or idea are you proposing?
- What are the links (synergistic effects) between the host laboratory and your project?

### How does a good proposal need to be designed (Structure/Content)?

1. Title
2. Summary (Abstract)
3. Problem statement
4. Objectives of the study
5. Research questions / hypotheses
6. Literature review
7. Methodology and research design
8. Potential outcomes and their value / impact / significance
9. Limitations
10. Timeline
11. Budget
12. References

For more details have a look at:

[https://www.daad.de/medien/deutschland/stipendien/formulare/gerls-guideline_research_proposal.pdf](https://www.daad.de/medien/deutschland/stipendien/formulare/gerls-guideline_research_proposal.pdf)
| How long should a proposal be? | As long as it takes! But: A paragraph is too short, a thesis too much. Roughly: 1,000 to 2,000 words  
Follow the ‘4Cs’ rule to contain the proposal:  
• Clear (precise)  
• Concise (as short as possible)  
• Coherent (conclusive and consistent)  
• Complete |
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<tr>
<td>Is it ok to summarize my research interests?</td>
<td>Yes, if it is specific, precise and not too broad.</td>
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<td>Are research proposals in English accepted as well?</td>
<td>Yes. Research groups in Germany are increasingly working in international teams. Communicating in English is then usually taken for granted. While in most cases it is no problem to communicate in English at German research institutes, there are still plenty of good reasons for at least gaining a basic knowledge of German. Language is the key to a country’s culture and people!</td>
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<tr>
<td>How to write a winning proposal? Tips for a successful proposal</td>
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- The more precise the proposal is, the better it is!  
- It fits perfectly to the professor’s research field. (Look at his vita and at his publications!)  
- It is manageable and realistic |
| Common mistakes you should avoid |  
- The proposal is too unspecific and too broad!  
- The implementation of the research project is unrealistic (e.g., too expensive, too complicated topic for one researcher)  
- It doesn’t fit to the professor’s research field  
- It is a summary of your research interests and just a list of all things you always wanted to do – “just an idea” |
## How to get in contact

### How to find a supervisor

When you are looking for a supervisor you can also search for a good university with the right fit for your research focus. Here are some useful links and database:

- **The CHE University Ranking** enables you to search for universities by subject or by city: [https://www.daad.de/deutschland/studienangebote/ranking/en/46337-che-university-ranking-01-1/](https://www.daad.de/deutschland/studienangebote/ranking/en/46337-che-university-ranking-01-1/)

- The “Research Map” offered by the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) allows you to search for German universities where your field of interest is available: [https://www.hrk.de/activities/research-map-key-research-priorities](https://www.hrk.de/activities/research-map-key-research-priorities)

### What is the best way of contacting a professor?

Once you’ve identified a potential supervisor you need to apply directly to the professor in question. When applying, you should provide details about your previous academic achievements, the topic of your thesis and the subject area in which you wish to specialise. Your application can include a well-considered proposal for your dissertation.
Some Tips for contacting the professor via e-mail

- Do gather information about the professor’s research work
- Do make sure that your interests match to the professor’s interest
- Do send only individualised emails-no mass e-mails!
- Do think about the subject of your mail
- Do proof read your email
- Don’t use coloured letters, coloured backgrounds, unusual fonts
- Don’t add pictures or animations
- Don’t use sms-language or slang
- Don’t frequently start sentences with ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’
- Don’t flatter the recipient
- Don’t pressurise the recipient

What do I do when the professor does not reply?

- If you have followed all the tips, but you didn’t get an answer after two weeks it is wise to send in a reminder e-mail. Do not call the professor at this early state of contact!

Other issues

How can I attract the researcher by my proposal if it is not closely associated to its speciality but still in the same field?

Referring to the professor’s comments on selection criteria, it is especially difficult in nature sciences to accept proposals from researchers, who don’t match the current research goal of the professor and his institute, because there is always a high impact on cost for material and similar, which has to be taken into account.
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td>What are normally the differences between a proposal for a Master’s Program and a PhD Program?</td>
<td>For master studies, there is no such requirement in Germany. What you have probably have been asked to provide is a motivation letter for the master studies. This also refers to applications for funding for master programmes.</td>
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<td>How important is it to have a high number of publications before submitting a proposal for a PhD?</td>
<td>Usually a PhD application does not require publications at all, as it is in most cases sent during the master studies or right after the master studies. No one expects publications at this early stage.</td>
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<td>Do we need to write different proposals for every different supervisor?</td>
<td>As already mentioned it is important to do research on the particular research area of the supervisor you want to address and refer to it in your proposal. So, in conclusion the answer might be – you don’t have to write a whole different proposal as the topic, you want to do research on stays the same, but you should adjust it and make it personal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do professors actually contact the reference people mentioned in the email?</td>
<td>Yes, they do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there some AGE limit for PhDs candidates?</td>
<td>No.</td>
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<td>I have admission to a structured PhD programme in Germany and I have a supervisor for my PhD Proposal. My question is: must I work on the proposal to suit DAAD format before applying for DAAD funds?</td>
<td>No. But you should in any case send the admission letter or confirmation, that you have been offered a position. PS: There is no “DAAD format” for research proposals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>During the first stage of the application (getting in contact with potential supervisors), Do should I write a research exposé or a complete research proposal?</td>
<td>Alexander Gerber wrote: I would only read any proposal if a shorter version has convinced me to read it in the first place, e.g. abstract / short exposé. This implies of course, that you must have a proposal already written to send it afterwards!!</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Can you approach a potential supervisor about interest in their research group and if they have any funding for a postdoc without an advertised post?</td>
<td>Yes, of course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a good PhD proposal the most important part of application for funding PhD studies in Germany or there are some more important qualification such as language, good CV, previous publications etc?</td>
<td>Yes, it is. The selection committee will focus on the research proposal. The other criteria are also important and should be met accordingly, except the publications. (This has been already answered above.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a DAAD Format for PhD proposal? Can I use my proposal accepted by my supervisor? or I have to adapt it to DAAD format?</td>
<td>There is no such „DAAD format“ for a proposal. What you can find on the DAAD website are tipps and recommendations how to write a research proposal, if you don’t have a clue how it works. But you don’t necessarily have to follow these recommendations. You can just send in a copy of the proposal you have prepared to send to a potential host professor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it good idea to mention the professor name, under whom I worked in the past?</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
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Federal Ministry of Education and Research

Research in Germany

Land of Ideas

www.researchin-germany.org
Useful links:

Research funding
www.researchingermany.org/funding
www.funding-guide.de
www.euraxess.de/en/inFoerderdatenbank

Useful contacts
www.diplo.de (German missions abroad)
www.daad.de/local (Offices abroad)
www.euraxess.de/en/uebersicht_servicezentren
www.germaninnovation.info (German Houses of Research and Innovation, DWIH)

Preparing for a successful research stay
www.researchingermany.org/researchstay
www.diplo.de (Visa regulations)
www.recognitioninGermany.de
www.makeittinglemania.com
www.goethe.de/learngerman

Doing a doctorate
www.researchingermany.org/phd
www.phdgermany.de
www.daad.de/internationalprogrammes

The German research landscape
www.researchingermany.org/researchorganisations
www.researchthorpler.de
www.highereducationcompass.de
www.researchmap.de
www.studyin.de

Jobs
www.researchingermany.org/jobs
www.makeittinglemania.com
www.euraxess.de/en/jobs

Research in industry
www.gte.de (Germany Trade and Invest)
www.ixpos.de (German Business Portal)
www.researchingermany.org/researchareas
www.hightechstrategie.de (German only)

Discover Germany
www.deutschland.de
www.dw.de/discovergermany
www.factsabout-germany.de

Publications