How to Find a German PhD Supervisor or Research Partner

In order to be successful with your application for research funding/PhD studies, you will need proof of contact with a German professor. If you have not yet identified a German research partner/supervisor, you might find it difficult to get in touch. Germany has altogether more than three hundred institutions of higher education and, in addition, hundreds of research institutes. So how do you find the proverbial needle in the haystack?

This leaflet is meant to give you some guidelines. However, make sure you also study carefully the general information on doctoral studies in Germany on the DAAD website:

http://www.daad.de/deutschland/forschung/04667.en.html
1. International Postgraduate Programmes

If you are a potential PhD candidate or recent PostDoc, you may first want to find out if you can do your research within the framework of a structured International Postgraduate Programme (IPP), in which case you would not normally be required to identify an academic supervisor by yourself. These programmes are university graduate training programmes established at a centre of scientific excellence in a specific field. This ensures that your course meets the highest academic standards. The students work on their thesis within the framework of a coherent and often interdisciplinary research programme; they participate in an accompanying study programme organised by the faculty members and to some extent by the students themselves.

All participants have regular contact with the university teachers responsible for their programme and are given the opportunity to engage in collaborative intensive research. Cross-faculty courses and colloquia offer forums for interdisciplinary dialogue. German and international doctoral candidates participating in the IPP jointly attend courses from the accompanying curriculum. Teaching includes visiting lectures given by foreign academics and scientists. The doctoral thesis may be written in English and the viva may usually be held in English.

A list of structured PhD programmes can be found in DAAD’s international programmes database:

www.daad.de/idp

More information on structured doctoral programmes offered by research institutions affiliated with universities in Germany is available at:

http://www.daad.de/deutschland/forschung/ueberblick/13738.en.html

Make sure you visit these sites and study the information given thoroughly!

2. Individual Research Projects

If you do not intend to follow a structured doctoral programme but to do an independent piece of research under the supervision of a German professor, you will need to identify a suitable supervisor to take you on as his or her research student. While finding a PhD supervisor or research partner in Germany can sometimes be tricky, there are several ways of identifying a potential partner which you can explore. You will need to invest a little time, but your efforts are likely to be worthwhile. Please consider the following options:
1. Visit the PhDGermany database, which gives you direct access to PhD position offers in Germany. The institutes offering the positions are especially interested in international applicants and you can apply directly via the “apply online now” button. The database can be found here:

http://www.daad.de/deutschland/forschung/german-research-careers/14305.en.html

2. Do you know any lecturers or colleagues within your field, who are already in touch with German academics or who will attend an international conference soon? If so, ask them to help you establish contact. A brief introduction or a short letter of recommendation can often go a long way towards facilitating communication.

3. Search international refereed journals in your field for articles which lie within your research interests and which have been (co-)authored by academics and scientists affiliated with German universities or research institutes. As there are prominent German scientists and researchers in virtually any field, relevant publications can be found in all high-ranking journals and conference proceedings.

4. Visit the website http://www.daad.de/idp, which is a database of international programmes offered by German universities. Use this database to identify (Bachelor, Master) courses closely related to your area of research. Then approach the programme coordinators via email with a short research proposal and ask them whether they can suggest a potential PhD supervisor you could contact.

5. To find university departments offering PhD studies in your area of interest, go to the website: http://www.hochschulkompass.de/en.html. This is the web site of the association of rectors and presidents of all German universities and universities of applied sciences. In the section “Doctorates” you can find a search engine, where you can key in your area of research in order to get a list of the existing programmes. Through links you can then go to the web sites of the universities. Many universities and departments have bilingual web sites, but in some cases a command of German can be required. You should then look for a lecturer or a professor who does research in an area close to yours. If you have found somebody whose work looks interesting to you, feel free to contact him/her by e-mail. Most successful research cooperations began with personal contact!

6. A comprehensive search of the German research landscape can also be conducted with an online database called Research Explorer, available via our website (http://www.daad.de/deutschland/forschung/research-explorer/08308.en.html). This very useful resource allows you to identify university as well as non-university research institutes working in your area of interest.
3. Approaching German professors via email

While there are no hard and fast rules as to how to write a successful email, here are some guidelines you may find useful when first making contact with a German professor.

- Make sure your e-mail does not contain any grammatical/orthographical mistakes or typos. This includes minor issues such as capital letters or punctuation. Keep in mind that you want to convince the German professor that you are capable of producing academic work of the highest standards.

- Avoid impersonal letters (“Dear Sir/Madam”). Research has shown that you are more likely to receive a reply, if your mail is geared towards a specific receiver. You may therefore want to make reference to recent publications of the professor, indicating how your research would fit into the research portfolio of your potential supervisor (“With great interest I have read your recent article on ... “). Take on the professor’s perspective: how would s/he benefit from supervising your study? What expertise, skills, experience, contacts, cultural perspective etc. would you bring to the professor’s research team?

- Do not approach the professor for funding in your first mail. At this stage you only want to establish contact and find out whether there is general interest in your topic.

- Attach a concise description of the kind of research you would like to undertake (cf. our leaflet: “How to write a research proposal”), but also show that you are open to discuss your project and to make alterations. Take into account that professors will often have clear ideas as to what kind of research they want to have done under their supervision. You may also want to attach a brief CV so that the professor can get a more comprehensive picture of the person you are (your academic and professional background, age, skills etc.)

- Do not feel discouraged if some emails of yours remain unanswered. Please understand that many professors are extremely busy and will only get back to you if they are seriously interested in your research proposal and can offer adequate supervision.