

# Inclusive Doctoral Studies

**A Guide on Pursuing a PhD in Germany for Doctoral Students  
with Health Impairments**

## Imprint

PROMI - Promoting inclusive doctoral studies: Germany-wide practice and research project

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# Editorial

If you have a health impairment, chronic health condition, or disability, you may feel uncertain about whether pursuing a PhD or a career in academia is a viable option for you. Perhaps you have already faced barriers during your student life that have left you feeling discouraged. You may also have questions about how to finance your PhD, how to find accessible housing, and access support services as well as accommodations in Germany. Our guide is here to help. We recognize the potential for confusion and overwhelm, so we've put together a comprehensive guide to help you navigate the process of pursuing a PhD in Germany if you have a health impairment. In this guide, we answer the most common and important questions you may have and provide information about additional legal and financial resources as well as networking opportunities that can support you along the way.

Please note, this guide applies only to the German PhD system, which differs from postgraduate programs in the US or Britain.

This guide is part of the PROMI project, which was launched in 2013 to promote inclusive doctoral studies. The project, which ran until 2022, created PhD positions for graduate students with health impairments to pursue a PhD while working part-time at one of 21 German universities. Throughout the PROMI project, we identified barriers to accessibility in academia from the perspectives of PhD supervisors, graduate centers, and the PhD students themselves. The insights gained through this process have been compiled into three guides that were tailored for graduates and PhD students, doctoral supervisors, and graduate schools. To make it accessible for international students, this guide is available in both German and English.

## Reader's note

In the following, we will use the term "health impairment(s)" to best reflect the diversity of congenital and acquired disabilities as well as chronic physical and mental health conditions.

# Contents

<b>Editorial</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Contents</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Pursuing a PhD in Germany</b>	<b>6</b>
Requirements for pursuing a PhD in Germany	6
Two pathways to pursue a PhD in Germany	6
Navigating your PhD life in Germany	7
Financial considerations and residency in Germany	7
Strategies for successfully navigating your PhD	8
<b>Experiences of PhD Students with Health Impairments – Obstacles and Opportunities</b>	<b>8</b>
Balancing health impairments and work	8
Health impairment-related time expenditure at work	8
Suggestions on dealing with health impairment-related time expenditure during your PhD	9
Ableism in academia	10
Social accommodations and communication with supervisors	11
<b>The First Steps of a PhD in Germany</b>	<b>11</b>
Find your research topic	11
Contact potential supervisors	12
Learn more about funding and financial support	12
Build a support system: Finding networks, (peer-)support and mentors	15
<b>Disclosing a Health Impairment at Work</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>The Legal Recognition of a Disability in Germany</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Your Rights as a PhD Student with a Health Impairment</b>	<b>17</b>
Accommodations in examinations	17
Grants for participation in education	18
<b>The Advantages of Employment at University or a Scientific Institute</b>	<b>18</b>
The right to special arrangements at work	18
Support opportunities at work	18
<b>Managing Stress during your PhD</b>	<b>19</b>
Low motivation and frustration	19
Stress and mental health issues	20
Conflicts with your supervisor	20
<b>Additional Information and Support</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>22</b>



# Pursuing a PhD in Germany

A PhD is the highest educational qualification in Germany and entitles you to hold a doctoral degree. In Germany a doctorate is the basic requirement for a career in science, and depending on the subject, it can also improve income and career opportunities both within and outside of science. For many, a PhD begins with an interest in a particular research question or a passion for academic work. But passion and interest are not enough to successfully obtain a PhD. A doctorate is always a long-term decision and will significantly shape your next few years. Depending on the research area, the average duration of completing a PhD can differ, but overall, the average doctoral candidate in Germany works on their PhD for 5.7 years. If you have a health impairment, it's important to consider how it may impact your PhD journey. However, there are resources and support available to help you succeed. This guide is designed to provide information and resources for PhD students with health impairments and help you navigate the PhD process. So, read on and decide if doing a PhD is right for you.

Acquiring a PhD involves several steps. The first step, which is referred to as a Dissertation, involves conducting research on an innovative topic and publishing your findings. Depending on the discipline, you can publish your findings as a book (monograph), or in the form of several publications in scientific, peer-reviewed journals (cumulative). After publishing your dissertation, you will undergo an oral examination, typically in front of your supervisors and an audience. The format of the examination may vary depending on the discipline and is stipulated in the doctoral regulations of your faculty or department. The examination could take the form of a Disputation (1), which involves a scientific discussion, a Rigorosum (2), which is an examination that assesses your knowledge of your PhD topic and the wider field, or a Doctoral Kolloquium (3), which is a modified form

of a Disputation where you present a short summary of your work and discuss it with the members of the examination panel. You can find further information on the different types of examination under the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/bdhc48j2>.

## Requirements for pursuing a PhD in Germany

The requirements for doing your PhD in Germany may vary depending on the discipline, university, and faculty. Typically, a relevant university degree is the primary prerequisite for pursuing a doctorate. However, depending on the faculty and university, additional requirements may apply, such as final grades or language proficiency. You can find these specific requirements in your respective faculty or department's doctoral guidelines. Doctoral students are usually enrolled at their PhD supervisor's university or graduate school. Although it's not always necessary, it can be useful to enroll in a university, since doctoral students enjoy certain undergraduate privileges in Germany, such as a reduced-price ticket for public transport. Some programs also require students to take a certain number of courses as "doctoral studies". Furthermore, most universities in Germany have graduate centers that offer seminars, workshops, and advisory services for PhD students.

## Two pathways to pursue a PhD in Germany

In Germany, there are two main pathways to obtain a PhD: through a structured PhD program at a graduate school, or through an individual doctorate. Usually, a structured program has a set duration (typically three years) and a fixed curriculum with compulsory courses alongside the student's own research. On the other hand, individual doctoral students work on their research project independently, and are responsible for conducting research according to their own schedule. In this case, students must find a supervisor who matches their research area, agrees on the topic, and provides guidance throughout the process. An individual doctorate can be written at a

university, a research institution, or in a company. Find additional information here: <https://tinyurl.com/bdfah6p4>.

## Navigating your PhD life in Germany

During a PhD program, traditional activities typically involve conducting research, learning about scientific methods, exchanging ideas with academic colleagues, attending conferences, and publishing scientific articles. In some cases, PhD students may also communicate their research to non-scientific audiences through social media or other channels. However, the daily work routine during the doctorate can vary depending on your discipline and research topic. If you are a faculty member, as well as doing your own research, you may have additional tasks such as teaching, supervising student papers and examinations, organizing and attending events or colloquia, and participating in various university committees.

## Financial considerations and residency in Germany

Before embarking on a doctoral program in Germany, it's essential to secure a reliable source of funding. There are various sources of funding and financial support available, including employment as a research assistant, external employment, and funding through a doctoral grant. How you finance your PhD does have an impact on visa and residency regulations. Additionally, regulations differ if you receive either a student grant or are employed with a work residency permit during your doctoral studies. This variation is influenced by your Country of Origin and can also affect your right to apply for a long-term residency in Germany after your PhD. Therefore, we highly recommend contacting the International Office of your university of choice. You can find additional information and contact points in the links at the bottom of this section and in the chapter "[Learn more about funding and financial support](#)".

Employment at universities and research institutes is almost always temporary. Often, these positions are

part-time jobs (between 50 and 70 percent of a full-time position) and have a set duration of a few months to three years. These fixed-term contracts are linked to pursuing a qualification, such as a doctorate, under the Fixed-Term Academic Contracts Act (Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz). Fixed-term contracts can be agreed for a maximum of six years before, and again after obtaining a doctorate. Employed doctoral candidates with health impairments may have the option of extending the six-year period according to paragraph 2.5 of the Fixed-Term Academic Contracts Act (in short WissZeitVG) by two extra years. You can find additional information under "[The Advantages of Employment at University or a Scientific Institute](#)". Employment as a research assistant often includes further tasks, such as those mentioned above. At times this extra workload can be substantial. PhD candidates must often work on their PhD project outside of their contractually regulated working hours, with this expectation implicitly set by employers and supervisors.

The workload and fixed-term contracts associated with employment as a research assistant can create time pressure and mental load for many PhD students. Despite these challenges, working as a research assistant is still a popular choice for many PhD students in Germany, as it provides a connection to scientific discourse, access to the university's infrastructure, and sometimes funding for their research project. Having an employment contract subject to social security contributions and a work residency permit may also be helpful with your residency if you plan to stay in Germany after your doctoral studies.

- DAAD Germany: <https://tinyurl.com/y3vjx4wr>
- In Cologne that would be the contact point "International Science": <https://tinyurl.com/5hbarvbm>
- Preparing for a doctoral degree – Funding and financial support: <https://tinyurl.com/39j3e2rk>

- Fixed-Term Contracts in Higher Education and Research, GEW: <https://ti-nyurl.com/2p94e9f7>

## Strategies for successfully navigating your PhD

Pursuing a PhD offers many benefits. Doctoral students gain extensive knowledge of their research field and the academic world, explore a scientific topic that excites them, and collaborate with international researchers. However, a doctorate requires a sustained level of concentration on a topic over several years, which demands stamina, organizational skills and a structured approach to work. Doctoral candidates must also navigate the autonomy and occasional loneliness associated with scientific research. Furthermore, to advance a career in research, it's crucial to establish yourself as an expert in your field. This can be achieved, for example, by presenting at conferences, networking with other scientists, and promoting your own projects. Becoming visible in your field can enhance your career prospects and provide opportunities for collaboration and advancement. Navigating the challenges and opportunities of a PhD program requires dedication, persistence, and a strategic approach to work and self-care. Therefore, carefully consider whether a PhD is the right path for you and whether you are motivated enough to devote a large part of your time to your doctorate in the coming years.

# Experiences of PhD Students with Health Impairments – Obstacles and Opportunities

How do other doctoral students with health impairments experience their doctorate? What obstacles and what opportunities have others experienced? It's important to emphasize that all PhD students with health impairments have unique experiences when pursuing their doctorate. Both the challenges and the positive experiences they encounter are highly individualized, as they are influenced by various factors. However, the experiences gathered by "PROMI – Promoting inclusive doctoral studies" have revealed some common opportunities and obstacles faced by many doctoral students with health impairments in academia in Germany.

## Balancing health impairments and work

Many graduates dream of doing a PhD. It provides an opportunity to delve deeply into an inspiring topic and develop valuable skills in project-organization, problem-solving and working strategies. In addition, PhD students can connect with an international network of fellow researchers for scientific exchange. Another advantage of academia is the frequently flexible work environment. Unlike many jobs, academic work does not typically involve fixed working hours, allowing PhD students with health impairments to attend medical appointments during the day or take necessary breaks. Additionally, the ability to work remotely has become more prevalent during the pandemic, providing even greater flexibility. Depending on the discipline and research topic, many tasks may not be tied to a specific location, enabling PhD students to work from home or from any location that suits their needs. However, this does not apply to doctoral topics that may, for example, include research in laboratories.

## Health impairment-related time expenditure at work

Many PhD students with health impairments often experience additional demands on their time. A number of things contribute to these additional demands including environmental barriers, routine medical



appointments, and bureaucratic issues.

- **Environmental barriers:** Environmental barriers can mean non-accessible buildings and campuses as well as (digital) literature that cannot be read by screen readers for blind PhD students and therefore has to be made accessible by a reading assistant. All these environmental barriers make student life and PhD work more time-consuming.
- **Organizing your health impairment:** Often, the health impairment and its organization require additional time, because of medical appointments or the need for more breaks during the day to manage one's energy levels.
- **Bureaucratic issues:** Most of you are probably already familiar with the bureaucracy involved in applying for disability benefits. Although assistance and other benefits are intended to support inclusion in the workplace, the application process poses an additional burden for several reasons. First, the bureaucratic processes are not always easy to understand and the university's service offices for disabled (undergraduate) students are often not familiar with the PhD context. Second, the responsible authorities require extensive documentation and evidence of study-related needs such as personal assistance services, sign language interpreters and workplace accommodations. At many German universities, the disability departments mainly cater to undergraduate students. Often times they lack advisors who are equipped to guide PhD students with health impairments and understand the unique challenges of pursuing a doctorate while living with a health impairment. Due to the bureaucratic requirements and lengthy application processes, approval for accommodations may be delayed. This delay can also push back the start of your PhD. Therefore, we recommend that you contact

your university's service center for disabled students as early as possible.

PhD students and early-career researchers already face time constraints in academia, and the added burden of health impairment-related time expenses can exacerbate these challenges. This may lead to a reduction in the time spent on actual work tasks or the time needed to complete a given task may be extended. Therefore, we have gathered the following advice for managing time expenditures related to health impairments.

## Suggestions on dealing with health impairment-related time expenditure during your PhD

- Communicate with your supervisor about time budgets and deadlines for work tasks to ensure effective planning for major tasks and to better manage your overall well-being.
- Communicate with your supervisor and colleagues about what kind of work environment is best for you and if you need specific workplace accommodations or a daily routine. If possible, explain how your health impairment affects your work and discuss ways to address any challenges that may arise.
- Learn about your rights: As a PhD student with a health impairment in Germany, it's important to educate yourself about your rights. If you are employed as a research assistant at the university or in a research institute, you are subject to social security contributions, but that does not apply to all PhD pathways. As an employee, you usually have more benefit-and accommodation-options available. Chapters such as "[Your Rights as a PhD Student with a Health Impairment](#)" and "[The Advantages of Employment at the University or in a Scientific Institute](#)" can provide additional information and resources.

- Employed doctoral candidates with a health impairment may have the option of extending the six-year period before completing the doctorate by two additional years under the Fixed-Term Academic Contracts Act (WissZeitVG, paragraph 2.5). In principle, periods of sick pay can also be added to the end of the contract upon request, and scholarship providers may allow the scholarship to be extended. However, the extension of employment or scholarship is an option and not a legal claim. Find additional information in the chapter "[Financial information and residency in Germany](#)".
- If you work for a German establishment or organization with five or more employees who have a legally recognized severe disability, the company is required to have a representation of employees with severe disabilities, known as Schwerbehindertenvertretung. As an employee of a university or research institute, you can benefit from the advice and support for bureaucratic matters and more of this representative.
- If you're enrolled at university as a doctoral student, you can get support and advice from the university's service office for students with disabilities (Beauftragte für Studierende mit Behinderungen).

For additional resources and support, please refer to the "[Information and Support](#)" chapter.

## Ableism in academia

Implicit norms and perceptions of the ideal academic often prevail in academia, where scientists are expected to be flexible, dedicated, and willing to endure long hours of work. However, this ideal can pose a challenge to researchers who do not conform, or are perceived as such by others. This is where the term "ableism" comes into play. Similar to sexism and racism, ableism is a social phenomenon associated with discrimination against people with health impairments. A feature of ableism is the

(unconscious) belief that people with health impairments cannot perform at the same level as non-disabled people. For instance, in the case of PhD students with health impairments, they may be unfairly perceived as unable to cope with the pressure of academia. Moreover, further barriers may unintentionally be placed in the way of researchers with health impairments. For example, when you are required to give seminars for undergraduate students but face opposition from the department administration for an accessible room. In particular, students with invisible health impairments report that their needs are sometimes not taken seriously.

You can find additional information on the topic of disclosure in chapter "[Disclosing a health impairment at Work](#)".

The idea of the ideal academic can also influence graduates and PhD students with health impairments, leading them to underestimate their abilities and question their potential to pursue a doctoral degree and work in academia. Previous experiences, such as lack of accessibility during undergraduate studies, may make college graduates with health impairments hesitant to consider a doctoral degree. Moreover, there are few scientists with visible or disclosed health impairments who could serve as positive role models and examples. For PhD students with impairments, confronting their own beliefs and those of others can consume significant time and energy, which can be detrimental to doctoral work. Connecting with other PhD students with health impairments can be beneficial in this situation. You can connect with others in similar circumstances through the representation of employees with severe disabilities (Schwerbehindertenvertretung) or the university's office for students with disabilities. Additionally, at the virtual meetups of the "PROMI – promoting inclusive doctoral studies" project, you can share experiences and exchange ideas with other doctoral students with impairments and chronic health conditions.

If you would like to take part, please contact the coordinators  
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([juliane.elmenhorst@uni-bremen.de](mailto:juliane.elmenhorst@uni-bremen.de)) or Markus Unger ([markus.unger@email.de](mailto:markus.unger@email.de)).

## Social accommodations and communication with supervisors

The demands of temporary part-time contracts, teaching responsibilities, faculty work, the pressure to publish research, and the need to establish networks can be stressful for many people. PhD students with health impairments often encounter additional difficulties because of the barriers mentioned above. Supervisors are often unaware of this situation, which can lead to misunderstandings between them and their PhD students. Research indicates that doctoral students and undergraduates with health impairments often rely on their own resources or over-extend themselves to meet expectations. Therefore, it's important to realize that as a doctoral student with an impairment in Germany, you are eligible for support, certain accommodations, and benefits. Given the diversity of impairments and health limitations, each doctoral student has their own unique approach to dealing with their situation and managing obstacles. Being transparent with supervisors about work budgets and deadlines, as well as sharing difficulties, resources, and solutions with other doctoral students with health impairments may be helpful.

# The First Steps of a PhD in Germany

Having gained an initial overview of doing a PhD in Germany while living with a health impairment, it's now time to start preparing. Your primary focus should be on selecting a research topic, securing financial resources, and finding a suitable PhD supervisor. On enrolling, or at an earlier stage, we also

recommend you get in contact with the representative for students with disabilities at your (future) university. If you will be employed during your PhD, then you can also contact the representation of employees with severe disabilities for support.

We also recommend you to contact others who are also navigating their PhD life with a health impairment, for example the peer-support of the PROMI-project. If you would like to connect with peers please contact us through the PROMI-mailing address ([promi-projekt@uni-koeln.de](mailto:promi-projekt@uni-koeln.de)).

As there is already plenty of information available on the initial steps of pursuing a doctorate (some of which can be found in the section "[Pursuing a PhD in Germany](#)") that caters for all PhD students, here we focus on information that is important for doctoral students with health impairments.

## Find your research topic

Most people interested in doing a PhD have a rough idea of the direction in which their research project should go. Perhaps they are fascinated by a new discovery in their field or they want to explore their original thesis research question. If you are interested in pursuing a PhD but are uncertain about which topic to focus on, job advertisements for scientific staff or graduate schools can be helpful. Based on the advertised subject areas, you can develop your own question or specify your own topic. For doctoral students with health impairments, it can also make sense to consider whether the topic and the structural framework of the doctorate fits your needs when choosing a topic. For example, some topics can only be researched through travel or longer research stays abroad. Some jobs, such as working shifts at a planetary research telescope, may not be compatible with personal energy resources. Therefore, it can be helpful to discuss with (possible) supervisors at the beginning what is expected in a doctorate on a specific research topic.

Choosing a doctoral supervisor is not only based on their expertise in your study area but is also a

practical and interpersonal decision. Which professor is well connected to your research topic and has interesting projects? What experiences have other doctoral students had with them as their supervisor? If you have limited mobility, it might also be important to consider the frequency and duration of meetings with them, as well as the available transportation options. It's important to bear in mind that a PhD is a long-term relationship between you and your supervisor. Moreover, studies show that they play a crucial role in the success or failure of doctorates and scientific careers. Supervisors also introduce their doctoral candidates to the scientific field, network, and if necessary, can set the course for their later career.

When searching for a supervisor, keep in mind that there are differences between individual PhD and structured programs in Germany. In an individual doctorate, you speak to potential supervisors at the beginning of your PhD journey and present your topic to them. However, in a structured program, you have to adapt your research project to the overarching topic of the graduate school and decide on the supervisor during the course of the program.

## Contact potential supervisors

- Do your research on professors that work on your topic. In the case of structured doctoral programs, you'll usually receive an overview of the scientists involved who you can contact.
- If you already have potential supervisors in mind, you can send an initial e-mail that includes your CV and research proposal, introducing yourself and briefly describing your project. It's important to clearly articulate why you and your research project are a good fit for the professor's area of expertise. If you have not received a response to your first e-mail after four to six weeks, you may send a follow-up reminder.
- If you have received feedback and an interview offer, prepare yourself by reading your research proposal again and note potential

questions. Additionally, if the feedback you receive is positive, you may ask about further actions and specific next steps.

- Employers and responsible authorities often apply or approve accommodations and benefits for participation in working life. Therefore, to receive these benefits, at least partial disclosure of your health impairment is necessary. For further information and support on the subject of disclosure, please refer to the "[Disclosing a Health Impairment at Work](#)" section.
- Rights and claims are fundamentally dependent on the financial model of your doctorate. Additionally, professors are often unaware about possible (workplace) accommodations available to PhD students with health impairments at the university, or whether students are eligible to receive them. So, after an initial positive conversation, you may reach out to the university's office for students with disabilities and the representative of employees with severe disabilities. This can give you a better understanding of the university's commitment to inclusion and accessibility, as well as help you to explore potential support services that may be available to you.
- If you do get a doctoral position and apply for workplace accommodations, it often takes a long time before benefits are approved. That's why it makes sense to start as early as possible.

## Learn more about funding and financial support

The way doctoral funding is structured in Germany differs from other countries, which has significant implications for day-to-day work during your PhD. For doctoral students with health impairments in particular, the funding model is crucial as it determines access to support services, such as workplace equipment or assistants. The costs of living in

Germany varies depending on the city and region. If you want to know more about estimated living costs you can check the link below. Please note that the estimates given here are for a "student life style". This lifestyle typically involves low-cost living for a single person, often in shared flats (in German: Wohngemeinschaft) where the rent for the apartment is shared, and everyone has their own room and shares kitchen, bathroom and other facilities. Find further information here: <https://tinyurl.com/3d644uw7>.

There are many different ways to finance your PhD in Germany, the most important of which are:

- **Employment at a university/research institute:** Most doctoral students in Germany work as research assistants at a university or research institute. Usually, these positions are temporary part-time positions lasting three years. As employed PhD students, they are required to carry out administrative tasks, give seminars, and participate in the work of the faculty, chair, professorship, or institute. Therefore, their working hours are not exclusively dedicated to their doctoral research, even though the positions are advertised as qualification positions. Consequently, doctoral students often work on their doctorate outside of their working hours. Many doctoral students with this financing approach report being under lots of time pressure and experiencing stress. It is important to note that doctoral positions in Germany are governed by the German Act on Fixed-Term Employment Contracts in Academia (WissZeitVG), which limits the duration of these positions to a maximum of six years. However, doctoral students with health impairments are subject to a special rule. In the case of medically and legally recognized severe disabilities, health impairments as well as chronic illnesses, it's possible to extend the maximum time limit by two years according to paragraph 2.5 of the German Act on Fixed-Term Employment

Contracts in Academia (WissZeitVG). However, there is no legal entitlement to this extension. For doctoral students with impairments, this funding model offers significant advantages over other financing models. As employees, students with disabilities and health impairments are subject to social security contributions and have a right to receive occupational participation assistance benefits for their contracted working hours. These benefits are intended to reduce or compensate for barriers that make it difficult to perform one's job due to impairments and environmental obstacles. More information on this topic can be found in the chapter "[The Advantages of Employment at a University or a Scientific Institute](#)".

- **Scholarship:** Many scholarship programs in Germany offer scholarships for PhD students. As a rule, scholarship holders receive a monthly amount of between 800 and 1,500 euros for up to three years. Some programs allow scholarship holders to extend their scholarship beyond the regular funding period in the event of illness or health impairment. However, this must be well justified and documented. Unlike a doctoral position, scholarships do not imply an employment relationship subject to social insurance contributions, meaning that among other things you may be responsible for paying for your health insurance yourself. Some scholarship providers may offer a subsidy for this, but this varies by program. The German Academic Exchange Service website offers further information on their scholarship for international students: <https://www.daad.de/en/study-and-research-in-germany/scholarships/daad-scholarships/>

A major advantage of a scholarship is not having any additional faculty tasks so you can concentrate solely on your PhD. A major disadvantage, however, is that scholarships

do not finance any occupational participation assistance.

- **Financing through third-party funds (Drittmittel):** Some positions in universities or research institutes are financed by funds from sponsors or federal agencies. The German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft or DFG), the largest public German funding provider for research, and some other bodies, may consider the situation of scientists with health impairments regarding benefits and additional needs in project funding. If you have any questions about project applications and standards of the DFG, you can contact the DFG-contact person for equal opportunities. You can find their contact information at <https://tinyurl.com/promiDFG>.
- **Graduate colleges/schools:** Graduate colleges or schools are study and research programs at German universities that focus on a shared, larger research topic, in which several doctoral students conduct individual PhD projects. Sometimes PhD students in graduate colleges are employed as research assistants or receive a scholarship, but the term graduate school in Germany is occasionally also used for programs that do not have any financial resources available. A doctorate at a graduate college or school allows you to focus solely on the doctoral project, as there is typically no teaching or administrative work involved. The doctoral phase is structured by a teaching plan (curriculum). In addition, participants are expected to contribute to the supporting program by organizing conferences, workshops and lectures. Since this type of program is typically funded by a scholarship or a temporary part-time position, it shares the same advantages and disadvantages as those types of funding models, including employment subject to social security contributions.

- **Part-time doctorate:** Some doctoral students finance their livelihood by working outside of academia and scientific institutions. This approach has the advantage of clearly separating PhD and professional life. However, one of the drawbacks is that many doctoral students in this model lack the connection to scientific exchange and infrastructure available in a research institution. Anyone who is also planning a career in science should network with other scientists as early as possible, gain teaching experience through seminars and publish research. Many graduate schools offer associated scientists with external funding the opportunity to benefit from the structures of the college. For doctoral candidates with health impairments, however, this financing model does not offer any occupational participation assistance for the doctorate itself.

Each of the financing models mentioned has advantages and disadvantages. Ultimately, it is up to you to decide which model fits your needs best. Before deciding, take some time to reflect on your situation and your experiences during your studies. Ask yourself: What conditions do I need to be able to work well?

#### **Some important points to consider:**

1. If you have a health impairment that affects your ability to study, and you require support such as personal or technical assistance or a customized workplace, it is important to note that the costs for workplace adjustments or personal assistance services during the doctorate are typically only covered if you are employed at a university or scientific institute and subject to social security contributions. If you receive a scholarship or do part-time doctorate, occupational participation assistance will not be available for you.
2. If you need more time for some PhD tasks, such as taking longer to work on texts, or if



you have an additional time burden due to medical appointments, it's worth considering the potential tradeoffs of being employed by a university or a scientific institution. While this funding model may provide financial stability, it may also require a significant time and energy commitment for work assignments that could otherwise be used for your PhD. As a result, you may need to balance a lot of different tasks and responsibilities.

3. Do you have the time and energy to balance two jobs simultaneously, such as pursuing a PhD and working a part-time job? As mentioned previously, both a part-time doctorate and a doctoral position at a university will require additional work beyond your PhD course work.

## Build a support system: Finding networks, (peer-)support and mentors

Although doctoral work often requires long hours of solitary thinking, research, and analysis, it's important to recognize that scientific work also benefits from sharing perspectives, exchanging research questions, and engaging in critical reflection. Furthermore, building connections with other PhD students can be incredibly valuable, not only for networking and finding allies, but also for sharing personal experiences and learning from one another's strategies for overcoming challenges. So, while much of the work involved in a PhD is independent, don't underestimate the importance of finding opportunities to connect and collaborate with others in your field.

The first point of contact for an exchange with other doctoral students are graduate institutions and contact points in respective professional societies (the scientific association of a specific subject). These societies offer doctoral students' advice, forums for exchange, working groups and workshops. In addition, doctoral students can also attend meetings and conferences to engage in scientific discourse.

### Accessibility and networking:

- If your graduate center offers an interesting event but has no information on accessibility, it's worth contacting the organizers to inquire about accessibility and accommodations. Graduate institutions may offer the opportunity to move a workshop or seminar to a barrier-free room or offer sign language interpretation and speech-to-text translation. The University of Cologne, for example, has set up the "Sign Language and Speech Interpreting" fund for this purpose. Since graduate institutions are part of the universities, doctoral students have a fundamental right to participation, but the effort involved in adjusting for accessibility must also be reasonable.
- The same applies to conferences or summer school registrations. If information about accessibility isn't provided, it's worth asking.
- If you're interested in exchanging ideas with other doctoral students with health impairments, "PROMI – promoting inclusive doctoral studies" offers a virtual meetup for doctoral students with health impairments and a peer counseling service. If you are interested in attending the virtual meetup, please contact the coordinators Juliane Elmenhorst ([juliane.elmenhorst@uni-bremen.de](mailto:juliane.elmenhorst@uni-bremen.de)) or Markus Unger ([markus.unger@email.de](mailto:markus.unger@email.de)). If you are interested in a peer counseling please contact ([PROMI-Projekt@uni-koeln.de](mailto:PROMI-Projekt@uni-koeln.de)).

Remember to take care of yourself. Sometimes the daily academic routine and your own sense of duty can overwhelm you. When this happens, it helps to prioritize events and only attend those that are really important to you personally.

# Disclosing a Health Impairment at Work

A study conducted in Germany in 2018 (best2)<sup>1</sup> revealed that the majority of health impairments are not readily apparent. The study analyzed data on students with disabilities and chronic health conditions and found that 96 percent of the students surveyed reported that their health impairment was not immediately noticeable to others.

Individuals with invisible impairments may sometimes find that their needs are not fully accommodated because their condition is not immediately obvious to others. A fundamental difference, for example, is that you can decide whether, when, and how to disclose an invisible health impairment to employers or doctoral supervisors. It is important to note that, in general, doctoral students with health impairments are not required to disclose their situation. Exceptions to this might include situations in which an individual poses a risk to themselves or others (such as through a contagious disease), or if they are no longer able to fulfill the contractual obligations of their program.

Disclosure can have advantages and disadvantages. Some support services, such as deadline extensions or compensation for disadvantages in examinations require, for example, disclosure of the impairment to employers, supervisors and/or the university's representative for severely disabled people. In some cases, it can also be an advantage to inform employers and doctoral supervisors about whether and how the health impairment affects your working routine. Disclosing a health impairment is an important way to communicate what accommodations and support may be needed to work effectively. However, it's also understandable that some may worry about the potential for stigma or discrimination if they disclose

their condition. Ultimately, the decision whether to disclose a health impairment is a personal one, and there is no universally correct approach. It's important for individuals to weigh the potential risks and benefits of disclosure, and to make the decision that feels most appropriate for their situation. The online tool JDAPT is designed to help you identify the demands of your job and with decisions around disclosure, workplace tools and resources. It was designed by the Institute for Work & Health, a not-for-profit research organization based in Toronto, Canada and is anonymous: <https://tinyurl.com/promiJDAPT>.

Please keep in mind that it was created with the Canadian context in mind. So it might not always apply to your situation in Germany.

## The Legal Recognition of a Disability in Germany

The legal verification of a (severe) disability makes it easier to claim rights and obtain compensations for disadvantages that people with health impairments might experience. This includes, in accordance with Book Nine of the Social Code (SGB XI), benefits for participation in working life such as personal and technical assistance or workplace equipment, for example. Therefore, seeking an official recognition may be a helpful option. In Germany, many health impairments are recognized and assessed as disabilities under the law. These include:

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<sup>1</sup> Poskowsky, Jonas/Heißenberg, Sonja/Zaussinger, Sarah/Brenner, Julia (2018) beeinträchtigt studieren – best 2. Datenerhebung zur

Situation Studierender mit Behinderung und chronischer Krankheit 2016/17, Berlin.



- Long-term mental illnesses, for example depression
- Partial performance impairments/neurodiversity such as Dyslexia, Autism, or ADHD
- Chronic and long-term diseases such as rheumatism or Crohn's disease
- Impairments in the area of the sensory organs, for example visual or hearing impairments
- Speech and mobility impairments

An impairment can be officially recognized as a disability if people with health impairments experience barriers in their social and physical environment and are therefore unable to participate in society or are prevented from partaking on an equal footing, for example in professional life, for a period of more than six months.

**How to get your disability legally determined:** You can apply for an official recognition of your health impairment as a disability at the social affairs office regardless of your residency status. Depending on the severity of the impairment, a degree of disability (GdB) is assigned.

- In Germany, a "degree of disability" (Grad der Behinderung or GdB) of 50 or higher is typically considered to indicate a severe disability. Individuals with a GdB of 50 or higher are eligible to receive a severe disability pass from the responsible social affairs office (Versorgungsamt), which can provide additional benefits and support.
- People with a level of disability between 30 and 50 who are unable to find or retain suitable employment due to their disability may be eligible to apply for equivalent status to that afforded to people with severe disabilities. Individuals with a legally recognized severe disability, or equivalent status, have a legal right to receive financial benefits and compensation for any disadvantages they may face in the workplace, as outlined in

paragraph 2.2 of the Social Code Book IX (SGB IX).

Handbook Germany, an online platform for newcomers in Germany, offers further information on living with a health impairment in Germany: <https://handbookgermany.de/en/special-needs>.

## Your Rights as a PhD Student with a Health Impairment

Doctoral students with health impairments may have the opportunity to apply for various support services and accommodations. However, depending on how you finance your PhD, different legal options and contact points are available for you. Doctoral students who are employed as research assistants at a university or research institute are subject to social security contributions and usually have more resources at their disposal. So, they and their employers can apply for occupational participation assistance. Employed doctoral students who have a legally verified (severe) disability not only have a right to compensation for disadvantages in examinations, but also to compensation for disadvantages at work. Doctoral students who are not employed mostly do not have these resources. In this section we provide information about resources that are available to all doctoral students, regardless of their employment status and official, legal confirmation of their disability.

### Accommodations in examinations

Doctoral students with health impairments may have the opportunity to apply for accommodations in exams (Nachteilsausgleich). Possible accommodations include:

- Changes in exam time, for example extensions, more or longer breaks
- Adaptation of the examination form, for example a virtual Disputation instead of an on-site Disputation
- Sign language and/or speech-to-text interpreters in the exam
- Technical aids, such as visual or hearing aids
- A personal assistant in the examination

Although exam accommodations are typically specified in doctoral regulations at many universities, not all institutions or faculties have explicitly addressed the concerns of doctoral students with disabilities, health impairments, or chronic illnesses in their guidelines. However, even if your university or department does not provide explicit accommodations for your needs, you still have rights under the state higher education law, university statutes, and the principle of non-discrimination. To access support or assistance with requesting accommodations, you can consult with the doctoral office or the university's office for students with disabilities.

## Grants for participation in education

In certain circumstances, doctoral students who are not employed in positions subject to social security contributions may be eligible to receive educational participation assistance (Leistungen zur Teilhabe an Bildung). However, to qualify, individuals must demonstrate that pursuing a PhD is essential for achieving their desired career objectives. Historically, applications for educational participation benefits have sometimes been denied when the doctorate was not perceived as necessary to attain the intended career goal. If it's granted, the educational participation assistance can take the form of aids, interpreters (e.g., for sign language) and the like. The nature of the assistance provided may be both monetary and in-kind and can be applied for through the responsible rehabilitation provider. The social services system in Germany has various rehabilitation providers that have specific responsibilities regarding rehabilitation and participation of individuals

with a health impairment. The German social accident insurance and the public youth welfare agencies are responsible for benefits for participation in education, for example.

# The Advantages of Employment at University or a Scientific Institute

Being employed as a research assistant at a university or a research institute means you are subject to social security contributions. As such, you have a number of rights and benefits that are usually not available to doctoral candidates with a scholarship or part-time employment outside of academia.

## The right to special arrangements at work

Employees who are subject to social security contributions and have a legally recognized severe disability or an equivalent status have the right to various compensations for disadvantages. These compensations may depend on the degree of disability or certain letters on the severe disability pass (e.g., G for significant walking and standing impairments). Among other things, the following accommodations in the job may be possible:

- Severely disabled employees are entitled to additional leave
- There is special protection against dismissal for severely disabled employees

## Support opportunities at work

Employees with a legally recognized severe

disability or equivalent status and their employers can apply for occupational participation assistance (paragraph 45 SGB IX) as well as other support services. In the case of temporary employment in accordance with the Fixed-Term Academic Contracts Act, it is also possible to extend the maximum fixed-term period according to paragraph 2.5 of the Fixed-Term Academic Contracts Act (WissZeitVG) by two extra years.

- **Occupational participation assistance:** As employers, the universities and research institutions are obliged to make workplaces and their equipment accessible and to take sufficient account of the needs of employees with health impairments. Financial support for these measures can be provided by rehabilitation providers through occupational participation assistance. In the case of a doctorate, this will usually be the locally responsible employment agency. This includes, for example, the (proportional) assumption of costs for technical work aids, a work assistant (e.g., readers for visually impaired doctoral students) or financial motor vehicle assistance, which supports financing a car. The benefits can either be paid to the employer, or as a personal budget directly to the employed doctoral student. With a personal budget, doctoral students can, for example, hire an assistant to support them with their doctoral work. On the one hand, a personal budget enables more autonomy, on the other hand, it also costs energy and time to manage the budget yourself. The representation of employees with severe disabilities can provide information on this and support the identification and application process. However, some benefits for participation in working life, in particular a personal assistant, are only available for activities within the contractually regulated working hours, i.e., not for work on your PhD outside of working hours.

- **Integration subsidy:** In some circumstances, an employer can apply for an integration subsidy for employees who are impaired and have a legally verified severe disability. The integration subsidy is financial support for the salary of someone with a legally recognized severe disability and is one of the benefits of the Federal Employment Agency (Arbeitsagentur). The subsidy is intended to support the professional integration of people for whom finding a job is difficult because of their health impairment. For example, on-the-job training that goes beyond the usual framework can be funded.
- **Extension of a fixed-term contract at a university or a research institute:** According to the German Act on Fixed-Term Employment Contracts in Academia (paragraph 2.2 WissZeitVG), doctoral candidates with an impairment or a serious physical and/or mental health condition can extend the maximum fixed-term contract by two years from six to eight years.

## Managing Stress during your PhD

The vast majority of doctoral students experience crises during their doctoral thesis. Scientists learn early on that challenges and setbacks are part of any good research work. However, mental strain is not necessarily directly related to the doctorate, but to greater structural issues such as barriers in everyday university life, obligations to care for family members or even relationship conflicts with colleagues or supervisors.

### Low motivation and frustration

Many doctoral students experience periods of low motivation and frustration during the course of their

research. These feelings can arise when faced with new research challenges or when a project feels stagnant or unproductive. While there are resources and support available to address these professional challenges, there may be other reasons for frustration that lie outside the scope of the research project itself.

For example, the process of applying for occupational participation assistance or other accommodations, such as personal assistance services, sign language interpretation, or technical adjustments, can be time-consuming and frustrating. To mitigate these challenges, it's important to seek out support early on in the process. This may include contacting the representation of employees with severe disabilities, as well as other advice service centers or support resources at your university.

In addition to seeking out professional support, it may also be helpful to connect with other doctoral students who have had similar experiences. Virtual meetups or support groups, such as the PROMI meetup, can provide a valuable opportunity to exchange ideas and support one another through the challenges of the doctoral process. If you would like to take part please contact the coordinators Juliane Elmenhorst ([juliane.elmenhorst@uni-bremen.de](mailto:juliane.elmenhorst@uni-bremen.de)) or Markus Unger ([markus.unger@email.de](mailto:markus.unger@email.de))

## Stress and mental health issues

It is not uncommon for doctoral students to experience mental health issues during their studies, and some may even develop serious mental health problems. While this issue has only recently gained greater attention and research, it is clear that the uncertainty and stress inherent in the doctoral process can be a significant cause or amplifier of mental health issues. Personal issues, such as conflicts with family or friends, experiences of discrimination, or ongoing challenges related to accessibility, can also contribute to a sense of mental load and stress. If you find that you are struggling with mental health concerns, it's important to seek out support and counseling. Most universities have a counseling service

center that can provide confidential support to students in times of crisis, and there are also many help-lines available that offer support and resources for individuals struggling with mental health issues.

Besides the mental health care provided by professionals and local doctors, German higher education institutions typically offer many forms of mental health support to their students, also in english, for example student counselling or student health management (studentisches Gesundheitsmanagement or SGM).

## Conflicts with your supervisor

Due to the pressure to perform in academia, it is not uncommon for professors or supervisors to have high expectations of their PhD students and employees. This can sometimes lead to conflicts over working hours, availability, or other factors that can impact a student's ability to work effectively. When faced with these types of conflicts, it can be helpful to encourage an open conversation with your supervisor or superior, and to communicate clearly about your needs and limitations. This might include discussing what you need in order to work effectively, what improvements could be made to your working arrangements, and what daily schedule or routine suits you best. While supervisors may not be able to accommodate every request or need, it's important to have an open dialogue so that they can respond to your needs in a way that is feasible and effective. In some cases, however, conflicts may become entrenched or difficult to resolve.

Then doctoral students can, for example, seek advice from graduate institutions, and perhaps have a moderated (arbitration) discussion with the supervisor. Some graduate institutions also have persons of trust and ombudspersons or counseling services that doctoral students can turn to.

# Additional Information and Support

We hope our guide has provided you with an initial insight into pursuing a PhD in Germany as a student with a health impairment. However, we understand that not all questions may have been answered. It is not uncommon for PhD students, supervisors, and administrative staff to be unaware of support services, accommodations, and means of compensation that may be available. To assist you further, we have compiled a list of additional information and service centers that you can contact for advice and support.

Independent Counselling Centers on Participation (EUTB): <https://tinyurl.com/9jxf9ew>

International Offices: <https://tinyurl.com/promi-Hochschulkompass>

Information on equal opportunities to students with disabilities on <https://inclusivemobility.eu/>

Information on Living with a disability in Germany <https://handbookgermany.de/en/special-needs>

# Glossary

Ableism .....	9	Integration subsidy (Eingliederungszuschuss) .....	19
Accommodations in exams (Nachteilsausgleich) ..	17	Kolloquium .....	5
Accommodations in working life ....	8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 18	Legally recognized severe disability (anerkannte Schwerbehinderung) .....	9, 17, 19
Benefits .....	8, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 19	Occupational participation assistance (Leistungen zur Teilhabe am Arbeitsleben, LTA) .....	12, 13, 14, 17, 19
Compensation for disadvantages .....	16, 17, 18	Part-time doctorate .....	13
Degree of disability (Grad der Schwerbehinderung, GdB) .....	17, 18	Personal assistance .....	13
Disclosure .....	16	Rehabilitation providers (Rehabilitationsträger) .	18, 19
Disputation .....	5, 18	Representation of employees with severe disabilities (Schwerbehindertenvertretung) 9, 10, 19	
Dissertation, .....	5	Research assistant .....	6, 12, 17
Educational participation assistance .....	18	Residency .....	6
Employment .....	6, 9, 12, 18, 19	Rigorosum .....	5
Federal Employment Agency (Arbeitsagentur) .....	19	Scholarship .....	9, 12, 14
Fixed-Term Academic Contracts Act (Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz) .....	6, 9, 19	Social affairs office (Versorgungsamt) .....	17
Graduate school .....	5, 13	Social security contributions .....	6, 8, 18
Health impairment-related time expenditure at work .....	7		
Individual doctorate .....	5, 11		