



# The German psychology curriculum

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*This paper is an overview of the general study and examinations guidelines of German psychology programs. Information was compiled from the guidelines of 23 universities. The German curriculum in psychology is classified as five-year generalist training, which entails general education followed by specialization in the final years. In addition to the general structure of studies, we provide information about the required subjects, examinations, and other requirements. Information about psychology students is presented in a summary fashion.*

## Introduction

This article gives an overview of the German psychology curriculum. We classify it, in accordance with Newstead (1994), as a five-year generalist program, defined as follows:

Students start out studying psychology in general and specialize only in the final years of the course or, in some cases, afterwards (Newstead & Makinen, 1997, p.6).

At the first study level, German psychology students receive training in the research areas, but not in applications. At the advanced level, students can specialize by their choice of courses in the applied fields in a few programs. However, even then students are usually required to take additional courses from other areas.

There are different types of degrees in psychology. We focus on the most common, the *Diplom*, which is comparable to a Masters of Science degree. Psychology can also be studied as a supplementary subject, or as a subject for teachers.

There are 44 *Diplom* psychology programs in Germany; seven of them are located in the former German Democratic Republic and are now under (re)construction after unification (see Bredenkamp & Funke, 1996). We surveyed 23 programs, which are listed in Table 1.

We present information taken from official study and exam regulations ('Studienordnung' and 'Diplompruefungsordnung'), which are accessible on the World Wide Web (for an overview of German universities, see [http://www.psychologie.uni-bonn.de/links/brd\\_psy.htm](http://www.psychologie.uni-bonn.de/links/brd_psy.htm)). The printed regulations might differ from information on the web, so some of the presented information may have been subject to change in the meantime.

## Structure of education

The German psychology program contains two levels. At the first level, students acquire basic research and methodological knowl-

**Table 1.** List of the surveyed *Diplom* psychology programs

|            |                                |                                  |            |
|------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|
| Bamberg    | Berlin (Humboldt Universitaet) | Berlin (Technische Universitaet) | Bielefeld  |
| Darmstadt  | Frankfurt                      | Freiburg                         | Greifswald |
| Hamburg    | Heidelberg                     | Jena                             | Kiel       |
| Konstanz   | Leipzig                        | Mainz                            | Mannheim   |
| Marburg    | Muenster                       | Oldenburg                        | Osnabrueck |
| Regensburg | Tuebingen                      | Wuppertal                        |            |

edge. After passing comprehensive exams in those areas, students continue with the advanced level. This level builds upon the first part. Application subjects (mandatory: clinical, educational, and industrial & organizational psychology) comprise the majority of the courses. Also, methodological areas (diagnostics, evaluation, and intervention) are studied with a focus on application.

After passing the final exams and writing a thesis, students receive the title *DiplompsychologIn*. The advanced level is obligatory. That is, students are professionally qualified only after they have successfully completed both levels.

Regarding the examinations, all the German *Diplom* psychology programs follow a general framework of regulations that apply countrywide (issued last in 1987 by the conference of the ministers for cultural affairs, Kultusministerkonferenz). The framework consists of guidelines which regulate the contents of the psychology curriculum and determine the minimal requirements for examinations. The regulations ensure a quite homogeneous structure of education among the 44 programs. Thus, students can, in principle, switch programs.

### Course types

Terms are on a half-year basis (two semesters). All the courses have a standard length of 90 minutes per week. German universities employ a variety of teaching methods. Lectures provide general knowledge; for detailed knowledge, there are seminars, exercise courses, case study seminars, practicals, and tutorials.

Credit is acquired in seminars and exercise courses. For credit, students are typically required to attend the course, and either give a presentation and write a term paper about a topic, or to take written exams.

### Contents of the psychology curriculum

The study regulations suggest a standard study time of nine semesters including exams and thesis. The first level should be completed within four semesters, and the advanced level within five. The ninth semester should be used to write the thesis. The actual study time is usually longer. Hoffmann and Stiksrud (1993), Suellwold and Soff (1990), and Witte and Brasch (1991), report an average duration of 12 semesters.

During the nine semesters, students have to take 160 credit hours of coursework, which corresponds to 80 courses of 90 minutes. In most programs these hours are divided equally between the two levels, so students take about 40 courses at each level.

#### *First level (semesters 1-4)*

The courses at the first level cover the core subjects developmental psychology, cognitive psychology (psychonomics), physiology, psychology of personality (individual differences), social psychology, and statistics and research methods. Students also have to enroll on a two-semester long empirical practicum. Table 2 lists additional courses that some programs offer.

At the first level students should acquire and practise general skills, such as compre-

| <b>Table 2. Additional courses required at the first study level</b>                |   |
|---|---|
| History of Psychology   | 7 |
| Theory of Science   | 5 |
| Introduction to Psychology; Introduction to Employment Areas; Observation Practical | 4 |
| Computerized Data Analysis  | 3 |
| Research Practice   | 3 |
| Applied Psychology; Philosophical Foundations; Sociological Foundations             | 1 |
| Note: the numbers indicate how many programs required students to take the course   |   |

| <b>Table 3. Continued research fields</b>  |                 |
|--|-----------------|
| <b>Research area</b>   | <b>Programs</b> |
| Cognitive Psychology   | 9               |
| Psychophysiology; Personality  | 6               |
| Sociology & Learning   | 4               |
| Communication; Developmental Psychology; Psychosomatic Studies   | 3               |
| Applied Social Psychology; Brain & Behaviour; Ecology; Engineering Psychology; Environment; Health Psychology; Intervention; Prevention; Psychology of Action; Psychotherapy Research; Rehabilitation Research | 1               |
| Note: the numbers indicate how many programs required students to take the course  |                 |

hension of publications in English, independent work, and co-operative problem solving. In most programs students are also required to participate in experiments as either subjects or, in a few programs, also as experimenters for 10-20 hours.

#### *Advanced level (semesters 5-9)*

At the advanced level, students study applied psychology, methodology, and a research subject. To some extent, students can now specialize - they can choose the research subject. Some programs also offer options where students can choose one or two subjects out of the applied and methodology areas. In others, they have to enroll in all areas but can select 'in-depth' versus 'basic' areas.

#### *Application areas and methodology*

The application areas usually include clinical psychology (21/23 universities), educational/school psychology (21/23), and industrial and organizational psychology (20/23). The most prominent methodological areas are diagnostics and intervention (21/23) and research methods and evaluation (18/23).

#### *Research area*

All programs require continued training in a research area. Students can continue a subject from the first level or select a specialty subject offered by the university. Table 3 gives an overview of such courses. Similar courses have been summarized under one label.

**Table 4.** List of supplementary subjects

| Subject  | Programs |
|--|----------|
| Sociology  | 8        |
| Education; Philosophy  | 7        |
| Psychopathology  | 6        |
| Linguistics  | 5        |
| Computer Science; Business   | 4        |
| Law  | 3        |
| Criminology; Cultural Sciences; Electronic Data Processing; Mathematics; Medical Foundations | 2        |

**Minor subject**

At 18/23 universities, students at the advanced level are required to enroll in a minor subject outside of, but related to, psychology. Table 4 lists the subjects offered by at least two programs.

Practically every program permits students to enroll in an unlisted subject if they can provide reasons for their choice.

**Admission requirements**

Admission to psychological studies is limited on a nationwide basis. The selection criteria are the grade average from high school and how often applicants have applied for admission.

In general, students are required to be able to comprehend publications in English and to work and think according to scientific principles. A background in biology is advantageous but not required.

**Practical training**

At the advanced level, programs require practical training (internships) under the supervision of a *Diplom* psychologist. They must be at least 12 weeks to 6 months in length. Most of this time should be spent at an institution outside of university. The total time can be divided between two and four periods of at least 4-6 weeks in order for the

students to gain practical experience in different areas.

**Examinations**

Students have to qualify for the advanced level through the 'Vordiplom', and for the title *DiplompsychologIn* through final exams. This section describes the requirements.

**First exams: 'Vordiplom'**

The first exam phase follows the first level. Students must take comprehensive exams in Cognitive Psychology I & II, Developmental Psychology, Individual Differences, Social Psychology, Physiology, and Methods. In most programs, the exams are oral and take 20-40 minutes. In some programs, there are one or more written exams (Methods; also Cognitive I, Physiology), or written exams only. Written exams vary in length from 120 to 180 minutes.

There are variations in the general time frame. One program requires the exams to be taken within four weeks; in others, they can be taken within half a year, in two blocks within two semesters, or even distributed over two semesters. About nine programs permit the students to split the exams into two blocks. There are usually regulations about which exams can be taken earlier (typically, Physiology is among these). Methods can usually only be

taken after the 4th semester, because of course requirements that are only fulfilled by then.

#### *Final exams: 'Diplom'*

The final exam consists of comprehensive exams in the studied areas and a written thesis.

*Exams:* the final exams are a series of comprehensive exams in all the areas studied at advanced level. In most programs, students take oral exams, but in some cases one or two areas require written exams instead of or in addition to the oral exam. Typically, there are seven exams in total. In about a third of the programs, the finals can be taken in two blocks.

*Thesis ('Diplomarbeit'):* depending on the program, the thesis has to be written before or after the exams. In the thesis, students demonstrate their ability to work independently and professionally on a psychological problem.

Preferably, the thesis is empirical work that the students conduct under the supervision of two professors (the page limit varies between 40-100 pages). In general, students have a time limit of six months, but can apply for an additional three months if required. At two universities, students have four months if the thesis is not empirical. The additional time is shorter, too. In one program, students have to write a short proposal paper about their thesis topic preceding the actual thesis.

The thesis topic can be assigned or chosen by the student and can be changed once, but only within the first two months.

#### **Who studies psychology?**

Three samples of psychology students have been described by Hoffmann and Stiksrud

(1993), Suellwold and Soff (1990), Witte and Brasch (1991), which we summarize here briefly.

The mean age of beginning students was between 23 and 25 years; 65-67 per cent of the students were female; 45 per cent of the beginning students already had a different profession; 19 per cent had completed different studies. Several problems arise from the comparatively high age of psychology students. Typically, older students have jobs or families, or both, and longer study times are expected. Also, there is a general shortage of jobs, and younger applicants are often preferred. A third problem is that students who start their studies immediately after high school have a clear advantage because of their more recent training in mathematical and biological subjects.

#### **Clinical training**

The *Diplom* degree does not qualify students to work in all professions within psychology. For example, clinical students are expected to complete special complementary training programs before they can work as therapists. Some universities, like Bonn and Bochum, offer this training at the university. In most cases, however, it has to be completed outside of universities at great expense for the student.

#### **Doctoral training**

Usually, students who want to get a PhD need to apply to professors for teaching or research assistant posts. There are also a few colleges for graduate studies that are supported by fellowships. For example, there are cognitive science programs in Freiburg, Hamburg, and Saarbruecken.

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