

Studying Law in Germany: Description of Course of Studies and Grading

Grading and Honors System:

In Germany a special grading system for law students is in use which is considerably different from the regular system used in secondary schools and other academic disciplines.

Generally speaking, it is theoretically possible to achieve grades between 0 points (which would be “failed”) and 18 points (which would be “especially outstanding”). Practically, two-digit-grades (10 points and above) are very rare. For a student, the 10-points-threshold is not only the beginning of the section “vollbefriedigend” (“fully satisfactory”), it is also considered a very good result and therefore the start of the „with honors“ section. In exams this threshold is even lowered to 9 points and it also marks the entry to the “with honors“ section. Only approximately 10-15% of all degree candidates achieve a result of 9 or more points, even though 9 points are only 50% of the highest possible score of 18 points.

As can be encountered from these few remarks, the grading system for law students and especially for degree candidates is extremely strict and the grading cannot literally be translated into another language without facing the risk of fundamentally distorting the standards applied resulting in a misinterpretation of the grading.

A publication by the DAJV (Deutsch-Amerikanische Juristen Vereinigung; German-American Lawyer’s Association, GALA, Bonn and New York), a guide for German applicants who want to do graduate studies in the USA, contains a USIS (U.S. Information Service) statement, cited below, concerning the proper translation of German grades into the English language. The publication is titled: „Rechtsstudium in den U.S.A., Informationen zur Vorbereitung und Organisation“. DAJV (ed.), Bonn 1991, pages 23-25.

As the grading system for students differs slightly from the grading system for degree candidates, thus they are set out separately:

a) The grading system for law students:

The grading system for students is shown below, including the gap between regular grades and the „with honors“ section of 10 points and above. (Cited from p. 25 of the above mentioned publication.)

The wide range of 10-18 points, the “with honors“ section, is not often used. Only 10-15% of all students achieve a grade “with honors“, while 85-90% of the students stay below.

Since 7-9 points are still considered above average, the majority of students lie even below 7 points in the 0-6 area.

Grading chart for law students:

Points	Grade (German)	Literal Translation	Translation in regard to grading practice
16-18	Sehr gut	Very good	Especially outstanding (seldomly achieved)
13-15	Gut	Good	Very good (rarely achieved)
10-12	Vollbefriedigend	Fully satisfactory	Good (not often rewarded)
7-9	Befriedigend	Satisfactory	Above average
4-6	Ausreichend	Sufficient	Average
1-3	Mangelhaft	Deficient	Failed
0	Ungenügend	Insufficient	Failed

b) The grading system for degree candidates:

On first glance the grading system for the degree candidates is less strict than the system for students. The intervals between grades is only 2.5 points, compared to 3 points for students.

Grading chart for degree candidates:

Points	Grade (German)	Literal Translation	Translation in regard to grading practice
14.00-18.00	Sehr gut	Very good	Especially outstanding (seldomly achieved)
11.50-13.99	Gut	Good	Very good (rarely given)
9.00-11.49	Vollbefriedigend	Fully satisfactory	Good (not often awarded)
6.50-8.99	Befriedigend	Satisfactory	Above average
4.00-6.49	Ausreichend	Sufficient	Average
0.00-3.99	Ungenügend	Insufficient	Failed

This means while 4.00 points is still the lowest grade needed to pass (“ausreichend“), the grade “befriedigend“ starts already at 6.5 points, etc. The grade “sehr gut“ starts at 14 points for degree candidates while a student has to achieve at least 16 points for a “sehr gut“.

Nevertheless it is extremely difficult to reach these outstanding results. Although at first glance the standards seem to be lowered for degree candidates, it is very difficult to cross the 9-points border. Candidates with an exam of 9 or more points are called “Prädikatsjuristen“ which means „lawyers with distinction“.



(Jule Türke, Global Office)



Issued by:
Global Office
Goethe-Universität
Frankfurt, Germany
Feb. 2024