

2020 Summer Semester in Berlin

The Current Situation

The coronavirus pandemic is having a radical impact on Berlin's institutions of higher education and research. Germany's largest research hub with almost 200,000 students and around 60,000 researchers and staff has been reduced to only essential on-site operations since March 20. The first day of classes for the 2020 summer semester has been postponed until April 20 (the date is earlier for some universities and colleges). The Senate Chancellery – Higher Education and Research has been meeting with Berlin's universities, colleges, research institutions, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, and studierendenWERK BERLIN regularly since March 11 in order to closely coordinate their response to the coronavirus crisis and ensure a unified course of action. The 2020 summer semester is going to be exceptional. The current situation will also have consequences for the 2020/2021 winter semester and, possibly, the 2021 summer semester as well.

Our Response

Berlin, as a hub for science and research, is ready to face this extraordinary challenge with creativity, solidarity, and determination. Together we will find reliable solutions for students, teachers, researchers, and employees in face of this uncertain situation. These solutions will also take into account people's individual circumstances, the options available for their course of study, their teaching and research responsibilities, as well as other areas of work. The 2020 summer semester will not be canceled – we are making every effort to provide a wide range of courses offered via digital platforms, including opportunities to take exams remotely. However, we also have to be realistic: There are some things that we cannot translate into the digital world. But remote learning technology makes it possible for students to still take courses even if, for example, they come from abroad and cannot travel to Berlin at the moment due to travel bans. The state of Berlin is supporting the state and denominational universities, their digital teaching centers, as well as their dedicated teaching staff with a VirtualCampusBerlin instant assistance program amounting to 10 million euros. The Berlin Center for Higher Education will receive additional state funds in order to make their 2020 summer semester program available to over 1,000 university teachers across Berlin. We are all in agreement: April 20 will be the first day of the next semester (some universities and colleges are starting earlier), which will mostly take place through distance learning in digital formats. This decision by the state of Berlin is part of a coordinated effort with the other German states (*Länder*).

Reliability, Flexibility, and Consideration

We are also in agreement that students, teachers, and researchers should not face any negative consequences as a result of this summer semester if possible. We are aware that not everyone will be able to teach online or take online classes. We are aware that there are some areas where attendance in person is necessary and that any such work will have to be made up for at a later date. We are also aware that we will need to treat examinations, deadlines, and research project time lines (among other things) with the utmost flexibility

and consideration due to the current situation and within the scope of the regulations in place. It is for these reasons that we are developing a framework for the 2020 summer semester that is, on the one hand, reliable for students who are able to complete digital coursework this semester and, on the other hand, that keeps people from suffering negative consequences as much as possible during this exceptional period.

Implementation of the 2020 Summer Semester

The Senate Chancellery – Higher Education and Research together with the state universities and colleges of Berlin have agreed to hold the 2020 summer semester under the conditions listed below. It is also recommended that the private and denominational institutions in Berlin also use them to guide the implementation of coursework this semester given their specific needs. To that effect, the universities and colleges will be able to offer students many courses that are all in line with legal requirements and other official regulations.

Framework and Conditions for the Summer Semester 2020

- The summer semester will be an academic semester, in which courses are offered as best they can be. Credits completed will count toward degree requirements.
- The summer semester will not count negatively toward a student's time to degree in their program. If students are not able to take all the courses or exams they had scheduled for the summer semester, that will not count against them regarding the standard time to degree. The universities are taking precautions to ensure that regularly occurring important dates and deadlines will automatically be postponed for upcoming semesters.
- The universities will make online courses available to students to the greatest degree possible and, as soon as it is possible and, more importantly, advisable, they will also offer face-to-face instruction, which students can attend to the extent that they are able.¹
- Students will be able to complete assessments: They should be administered using digital tools as long as the content of the assessment allows for it. In-person assessments can be scheduled and held with sufficient advance notice once it is possible to do so again.
- Universities will still honor work contracts with student assistants as well as teaching assignments for instructors that were planned for the 2020 summer semester.
- If employees are not able to perform academic tasks (and in some exceptional cases non-academic tasks) planned for the summer semester, a six-month extension of their employment contract is possible for contracts scheduled to end by December 31, 2021, unless particular funding regulations or legal provisions regarding personnel do not allow that.
- Universities are currently trying to find ways to grant extensions to research projects and other initiatives funded by third parties in coordination with the respective funding bodies.

¹ If face-to-face instruction resumes in vocational degree programs or dual study programs, schools can reinstate attendance requirements.

- In order to settle disputes, the universities are counting on mechanisms within the framework of their established rules and regulations that will ensure that the rules regarding flexibility and leniency mentioned above are taken into account.

Important Dates for Upcoming Semesters

The Senate Chancellery – Higher Education and Research together with the state universities and colleges of Berlin have agreed to the following dates for the upcoming semesters:

- Summer semester: April 1, 2020, to September 30, 2020
- First day of classes for the “digital semester”: April 20, 2020 (some institutions are starting earlier)
- Winter semester: October 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021

Please note that at the moment and until further notice coursework that requires attendance in person is not permitted at the universities and colleges.

A flexible extension of the summer semester lecture period will be decided upon together with the universities as needed. A nationwide decision will be made later regarding a postponed start of classes for the winter semester (e.g., November 11, 2020) based on what happens with the *Abitur* examinations this year. Therefore, students applying to Bachelor’s degree programs (or equivalent) should keep informed of potential changes to deadlines concerning application and admission procedures and modifications regarding universities’ qualifying examinations.

Points Still in Need of Clarification

The following points still need to be clarified on the federal level:

- Various scholarships
- German Federal Training Assistance Act (BAföG)
- Health insurance
- Child benefits
- Review of further financial assistance for students in need

The state of Berlin and Berlin’s universities also advocate the establishment of a digital pact for science and research supported by the German federal and state governments and backed by 350 million euros for 2020/2021.

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We know that this summer semester is going to be extraordinary. We would like to thank all the students, instructors, university employees, and everyone else committed to making the semester a success.