

Podcast: Junior Studies Program

Bettina: A warm welcome to our talk for a podcast about the junior studies program at the University of Potsdam. I am Bettina Hertrich, student counsellor at the central department for student counselling as well as the contact for the junior studies program. The junior studies program has been an incentive since 2012 to support gifted and intelligent students of grammar schools at the University of Potsdam. Now, if you could introduce yourself a bit more, Lars, that would be greatly appreciated.

Lars: I am Lars and I have been in the junior studies program for Psychology for two years now and have recently begun my bachelor's degree course in Psychology here.

Bettina: That's great, congratulations. Now, let us rewind a bit. How did you become aware of the junior studies program?

Lars: I just researched it myself. I was browsing the university's website for all available study courses when I accidentally came across the tab about the junior studies program. I just clicked on it and read through it by myself. It just piqued my interest, so I applied for it.

Bettina: And who or what was a driving factor behind your application?

Lars: It has actually been me. At the time, I had been engrossed in researching about Psychology as a whole, especially the neurobiological parts of it. I just read up on it more and more, and at some point, you just notice no matter how much you know about one thing, you never actually know everything because you continually broaden your horizons. And then I just thought to myself „There has to be more” and then I just applied.

Bettina: An application is annually possible until the end of May. You need a motivational letter, a consent form from your legal guardians, an assessment from your headteacher or a specialist teacher, as well as your last two report cards. If your subject of choice agrees as well, you enter the second step of the selection process. Lars, what do you remember about the selection process?

Lars: I will have to think about that for a second. Well, I had been to the university for the first time at the campus New Palace... with all these huge buildings here. That was quite an impressive view. I then walked through the hallways and was immediately greeted by an employee of the central department for student counseling. Back then it had been someone other than Bettina who managed the junior studies program. Then I walked to the end of the hallway and sat in room with two other employees, where we just talked for a bit in a very leisurely manner and a relaxing atmosphere.

Bettina: Often times, these are the introductory conversations. We also call them selection interviews, but usually the study subject has already voiced their decision and we as the central department for student counseling have also already gotten an idea at that point. It is really more so a conversation to get to know each other and talk about expectations rather than it influencing the selection process.

Freshmen start their studies in October and there are lots of introductory courses, where prior knowledge usually is not necessary. Lars, how was your start into the junior studies program 2018?

Lars: My problem was that I had still been on vacation during these introductory courses. School holidays had been exactly during that time period, meaning I missed all of these courses. Since I did the junior studies program two years in a row, I still got the chance to take part in these introductory courses, though. Even during my very first semester of junior studies I was never left to my own devices since you will be assigned a tutor to help guide you and explain everything. These tutors are from the same field of study or faculty. They usually explain everything to you, which is why I was not on my own even though I missed the introductory courses. In my third semester of the junior studies program I eventually took the introductory courses, and they were really nice. We have pretty committed student representatives, who organize these courses for the most part, especially for their own major. We had game nights, mixers, campus tours, we were shown how to build our own schedule and so forth.

Bettina: Were your expectations met that you had beforehand? Please also do tell what these expectations about university life entailed.

Lars: My expectations were that you had to learn most things by doing. Contrary to how it is in school, it does not really affect the lecturer whether or not you understand the course material. You are much more independent. Exactly that is what I experienced at the university. You have to make your own schedule work and decide, when to learn and cram for your lectures. My expectations were pretty much met.

Bettina: Now, you have already mentioned that the introductory courses took place during the school break, where you had been on vacation. Is there anything else that was hard or complicated to realize between university and school?

Lars: The most uncomplicated thing were actually the exams, since they take place right after the school break in Brandenburg. Every semester I had been able to use either the summer or winter break to study for my exams. By far the most complicated thing was having all these lecturers and professors not know what the junior studies program even is. Junior students are not actually considered students, meaning we had to talk to every lecturer individually, to be able to take part in the exams. You often had to explain to them what the junior study program actually was and what you needed from them. It was not that big of a deal actually, but it was rather tiresome.

Bettina: You did four semesters of the junior studies program, afterwards your A-Levels and then began your actual studies. What drove you to continue the program semester after semester?

Lars: The subject was just really interesting to me and even now I'm still really invested in it. In every lecture I am sat there thinking "This exactly explains so much about my everyday life and even life in general". It may very well be because Psychology just deals with human nature hence it is always interesting. I have never sat there thinking that I absolutely do not want to study right now, I have always had a great motivation to continue my studies. This motivation never ceased, which is why I took part in it every semester.

Bettina: Great. You have already mentioned junior students get a tutor assigned to guarantee them a solid start into their studies. Part of their job is to accompany you to lectures or to explain the campus to you, but also just for any and all questions. Was there ever something that helped you find a footing in your junior studies or even your full-time study course now?

Lars: What really helped me was your supervision. One was never left on their own and if one had any questions, they could just write up an email and get an answer within a day or two, which never caused any trouble. And the tutoring is a really great initiative. My tutor attended the same lecture as me so that we could always talk about that topic. She gave me the lecture slides and her notes, which I missed during my vacation and she always supported me with everything.

Bettina: That is great. Junior students are also allowed to voluntarily take part in an exam at the end of the lecture period, which they can then get recognized in their later studies. Can you remember the biggest differences between exams at the university and at school?

Lars: Well, first and foremost the workload is entirely different. I had to study so much more. At the university, every lecture is assigned certain credit and I had an exam worth 9 credits for which I had to study about 100 pages in notes. The exam, however, was only 90 minutes long and consisted mostly of multiple-choice questions. The method of examination was obviously different and those were certainly not the easiest multiple-choice questions, but the workload was so much higher. The main focus was put on learning something on your own rather than the exam itself. And there are different methods of examination at the university compared to at school. At school there are mostly tests and exams, which obviously are also done at the university, but they are usually done differently. For example, oral exams where you have to present a study or something similar to that. The content is just different, but it is nothing one cannot handle.

Bettina: Okay, that is good to know. What is something that you will always remember? Was there an event or a magic moment you will never forget?

Lars: The most interesting moment was not actually during my junior studies but when I started my full-time major. You have obviously already spent some time at the university and are familiar with the system. You are much more relaxed going into your studies that way, you know what to expect, what may be unnecessary, so you are just a lot more at ease compared to the regular freshmen. You may also be able to help answer their questions since they just started into this system.

Bettina: How did your second start feel? Was it like coming home or did it feel new and exciting?

Lars: It actually was just a very familiar atmosphere. I had always been excited to study the years prior to that because it just excited me much more than school ever did. School was fine, but during your studies you have exactly the topics that interest you the most so your motivation is also much greater. Starting my full-time major here was the best feeling for me.

Bettina: Lastly, do you have any ultimate survival tips for our listeners?

Lars: If you are ever thinking about trying out the junior studies program, I can only recommend going for it. The whole thing is not even mandatory. Meaning, if you ever feel overwhelmed or like it is not the right thing for you, you are always free to stop at any point and focus solely on your A-Levels. You are not tied to a stringent system; you are free to stop at any point. You do not even have to take the exam if you are not up for the entire workload but rather would just like to know what it is like to study at a university. Some do not

even know if studying is the right path for them or if they would rather have a vocational education. And for that exactly it is the best program.

Bettina: That is exactly my point of view, thanks. Thank you for sharing your experience with the junior studies program and for your participation in our little podcast, Lars. If anyone feels interested in our junior studies program here at the University of Potsdam because of the conversation with Lars, you are more than welcome to browse through our website to inform yourself about the application process. Thank you so much and see you soon.