

Personnel structures
in the German
academic system

Position paper

Abstract

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Abstract

The German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat, WR) advocates a far-reaching **transformation of academic personnel structures**. The aim is to create attractive, transparent and functionally differentiated job profiles and prospects that promote both individual development and institutional performance, thereby contributing to the overall strengthening of the German academic system, including in an international context. The proposed change in personnel structures serves an urgently needed modernisation in order to **meet the increased and ever-growing complexity and differentiation of tasks in the academic system as well as the demands placed on science and humanities and to ensure that Germany does not fall behind in international comparison**. The current personnel structures are no longer adequate for this purpose and, moreover, are not sustainable in the long term due to their lack of transparency and attractiveness. The already tense employment situation in German academia due to high rates of fixed-term contracts and low predictability is further exacerbated by the shortage of skilled labour, social and technological changes, and competition from attractive non-academic labour markets.

In recent years, the pressure for change has already been met with incremental developments and selective modifications. Non-university research institutions in particular, but also numerous universities, have already restructured their personnel and organisational structures, their employment conditions and personnel development concepts as far as possible. Individual federal states have initiated reform processes, and relevant stakeholders have formulated the need for change in positions and statements. There therefore seems to be broad consensus at present that a transformation of academic personnel structures is imperative. What is needed is a **coherent, guideline-based overall concept** to provide guidance throughout Germany and across institutions and to promote the necessary reform on a broad scale.

The WR proposes a generic **personnel structure model** that can be used to develop (internationally) compatible academic and science-related job profiles for the future, transparently identify diversified development options and target positions (also complementary to professorships), and adapt them to the profile of an institution. The personnel structure model has **four job categories** (S1 to S4, based on the European Reference Framework), each of which differs in terms of

4 specific degrees of independence, qualification and competence requirements, management tasks, personnel and budget responsibility, type of employment and remuneration. Each of the four job categories can be adapted to all academic performance dimensions (teaching, research, transfer including science communication, infrastructure and science management); both mixed profiles and focus profiles can be created.

The generic personnel structure model must be adapted to each institution and discipline: research and higher education institutions in Germany, which are highly differentiated in terms of function, can and should use the clearly defined job categories to develop **personnel structure concepts** that are appropriate for them in accordance with their main tasks and (statutory) mandates. These can also be designed to span multiple institutions in order to strengthen science areas. The starting point for the target concept is the institutions' **strategy and profile development processes**: strategy and personnel must be considered together; personnel structures are essential strategic design tools.

The WR is committed to making employment conditions in academia more attractive and, not least, to making science and humanities and the academic system resilient in times of multiple internal and external crises and uncertainties. Plannable and secure employment options for academic personnel guarantee essential academic freedom and, with it, innovation and creativity beyond the academic system. In this way, academia and the academic system can continue to guarantee the pursuit of new ideas and the systematic search for knowledge from a position of individual and institutional freedom, security and stability, thereby contributing to the further development of our society and shaping a future worth living. The WR is aware that the personnel structure model proposed here represents a far-reaching change in the academic profession, requiring a profound transformation process and cultural change. The change should be supported by a series of overarching **guidelines** that shape the WR's considerations for its personnel structure model. Specifically, these include:

- _ Personnel structures are subject to a **functional logic**. The specific tasks of the various institutions are decisive for the qualitative and quantitative composition of their academic staff, who should be employed on a permanent basis to a large extent in order to perform the tasks of an institution. Personnel structures must be aligned with the profiles of the institutions and go hand in hand with their strategic and organisational development.
- _ When (re)designing institution-specific personnel structures, the **attractiveness of employment conditions** must be given high priority. Attractive employment conditions are the key factor in attracting and retaining the most talented scientists and researchers – including those from abroad – for the German academic system in the future and in competition with non-academic employment sectors.

- _ **Transparent personnel structures** provide clarity about the professions available in academia, the tasks and requirements associated with a position, and the prospects it offers. A comprehensible differentiation of job profiles and prospects is particularly urgent for the postdoctoral phase.
- _ This demand for transparency is accompanied by **professional recruitment and personnel development measures**, which are regularly used throughout the system.
- _ In a more functionally differentiated personnel structure, the **promotion of equality and diversity aspects** serves to attract, retain and further develop the best-qualified academic personnel. Promoting these aspects opens up broader access to the academic system. Higher education and research institutions benefit from the resulting diversity.
- _ Transparency and comparability of personnel structures are in turn necessary to ensure **permeability** for academic staff and their **mobility**. Cooperation and the exchange of personnel between institutions, the three types of higher education and research institutions considered here, the federal states (including internationally) and between science, industry and society generate impetus and innovation; the individual flexibility of academic staff to operate within a clearly defined framework forms the decisive basis for this.
- _ Personnel structures must be adaptable to the **specific characteristics of each discipline** with its distinctive (and dynamically changing) scientific practices; this also serves the purpose of differentiating personnel structures in a way that is specific to the institution, i.e. in line with its functions and needs.

The WR strongly recommends that all higher education and research institutions adapt and implement the generic personnel structure model presented here: it enables **decisions** about career prospects in the professional field of science to be made much **earlier** than is currently the case, and offers a **clear job structure, various career options with clear requirements** and significantly earlier (gradually increasing) **independence**. The model also explicitly provides for other permanent positions in addition to professorships, which are awarded in criteria-based and transparent recruitment procedures under joint (rather than individual) responsibility.

The WR's key recommendation is that higher education and research institutions, federal states and the federal government **adopt and implement the proposed personnel structure model with its overarching guidelines**. It is recommended that institutions

- _ develop **institution-specific personnel structure concepts** that emerge from the strategy and profile development processes and take into account closer cooperation between different higher education and research institutions and also with industry and society;






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- _ design **suitable organisational structures**, for example by introducing and further developing departmental structures with flat hierarchies and shared responsibility, which provide the necessary foundation for the new personnel structures with more independent job profiles, even below management level;
 - _ clearly **distinguish between permanent institutional tasks and tasks related to academic qualification** in the personnel structure of an institution in order to enable better development conditions during the qualification phase;
 - _ **assign permanent institutional tasks to academic staff in permanent positions** in order to promote expertise and professionalisation in attractive positions other than professorships;
 - _ based on the implementation of the two previous recommendations, change the quantitative ratio of fixed-term and permanent employment contracts in such a way that expertise and professionalism are increased and dynamism is promoted at the same time by **expanding permanent positions**, since a system stabilised by more permanent positions with more attractive options supports and promotes individual mobility;
 - _ recruit staff **in a quality-assured manner, based on criteria-driven, competitive selection procedures**, in order to promote quality, fairness, transparency, acceptance and dynamism;
 - _ implement **systematic and professionalised personnel development** in order to provide sustainable support for individual and institutional development. This should be the overall responsibility of the institution's management and linked to the actors responsible for personnel and organisational development.

To the extent that higher education and research institutions are required to restructure their personnel structures, they are dependent on the support and promotion of the federal states and the federal government. These provide **impetus and incentives**; they create the **legal and financial framework conditions** to promote reform and innovation within the academic profession and to support the complex transformation process. Legal provisions must be designed in such a way that they facilitate cross-state comparability and transparency as well as mobility between institutions, between universities, universities of applied sciences and non-university research institutions, and also between sectors (i.e. between science, industry and society). Institutions must be given incentives and (financial) leeway to enable them to design their personnel structures in a strategic, attractive and functionally logical manner and to provide professional support to their staff. Mutual trust between the funding bodies and the higher education and research institutions is the currency for driving forward the urgently needed further development of academic personnel structures. The transformation steps developed in this position paper do not necessarily aim to expand the academic system. The personnel structure model serves primarily to

remedy dysfunctions and, through a novel personnel organisation that is largely financially neutral, to make the academic system competitive for current and future challenges.

Demographic change, the high number of imminent retirements and the increasingly noticeable shortage of skilled workers in the scientific sector are creating an opportunity for change, but also necessitate the immediate initiation of the transformation process. The WR is aware that the redesign of personnel structures in line with the proposed personnel structure model and the associated transition to a system based more strongly on reliable employment options cannot be implemented overnight, but will have to be implemented gradually over the next few years. This phase of redesign and restructuring, which must be initiated immediately, must ensure that personnel structures become more flexible and are designed to be generationally equitable. **Establishing a consistent system of objectives for attractive and functional academic personnel structures requires both the political will to remove existing legal and financial barriers and the willingness of higher education and research institutions and academic personnel themselves to use the scope for creativity and, overall, to initiate a cultural change towards a new professional cooperation in science and humanities and a new understanding of the academic profession.**

Table 1 Generic personnel structure model of the German Science and Humanities Council for the future categorisation of job profiles in higher education and research institutions

Characteristics of academic job profiles							
	Degree of independence	Competence or qualification requirements	Personnel and budget responsibility	Management tasks	Type of employment	Job type	Salary levels
S1	restricted	university degree qualifying for a doctorate	no	no	usually fixed-term	doctoral position	E13
S2	low to medium (for own scientific orientation and development)	doctorate	limited	supervised	depending on type of position fixed-term or permanent	project-based, development or functional position	E13/E14
S3	extensive (in defined service areas and for specific tasks)	doctorate and several years of professional experience	predominantly	largely independent	depending on type of position fixed-term or permanent	development, functional or project position	E14/E15, AT, W1/W2 if applicable
S4	complete	proof of eligibility for appointment, achievements and management experience	yes	independent	usually permanent	professorship or management position	W2/W3 or AT
Characteristics of science-related job profiles							
S1	restricted	university degree	no	no	permanent	functional position	E13
S2	medium	university degree, in some cases doctorate	no	supervised	permanent	functional position	E13/E14
S3	extensive (in defined service areas and for specific tasks)	university degree, in some cases doctorate and other achievements	partly	largely independent	permanent	functional position	E14/E15, AT
S4	complete	in some cases doctorate, management experience and other achievements	yes	independent	permanent	management position	E15, AT
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  Research </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  Teaching </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  Transfer & Science Communication </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  Science Management </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  Infra-structures </div> </div>							
Performance dimensions of the German academic system (S1 – S4)							

Source: Own representation.

The list of contributors can be found in the detailed version (in German):
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