

Forskerforbundet: Policy on postdoctoral fellows and researchers in the early career phase

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Our policy on postdoctoral fellows and researchers in the early career phase

The postdoctoral research fellowship is a recruitment position in the Norwegian education system and aims for the employee to build up a researcher profile and be able to apply for a position as an associate professor. Postdoctoral fellows and young researchers in the initial phase of their careers are the future of research Norway. They are invaluable to Norway as a knowledge-based society and must be given pay and working conditions that promote recruitment and contribute to young talents choosing research as a career path.

The research profession provides unique opportunities to pursue professional interests and develop specialist expertise in areas of significant importance to society, but for many younger researchers the research career is characterized by temporary employment and uncertain future prospects. Surveys show that short contracts, increased competition for research funds and high work pressure weaken the attractiveness of the research profession. Only one in five postdocs would recommend a research career to other young people.

Forskerforbundet believes that:

- the enterprises must be able to recruit the best suited researchers.
- the attractiveness of the research career must be strengthened.
- the postdoctoral scheme must be a genuine recruitment position.
- permanent employment as the main rule must also apply to researchers.

Competitive pay

In order to be able to recruit and retain the best candidates, the enterprises must offer competitive pay and working conditions.

Postdoctoral fellows and temporarily employed researchers must be guaranteed a better starting salary. Over time, they have had poor pay development compared both with other groups in academia and with the rest of society. The low salary level contributes to potential talents choosing other career paths. It is also a challenge that foreign employees are more often placed on the minimum starting salary and get poor salary development. In order to make postdoctoral positions more attractive, it is important to work for higher starting salaries and better salary development for researchers with a PhD.

Forskerforbundet works to ensure that:

- the pay policy at the enterprises ensures that researchers and postdocs are paid according to their competence, responsibility, and experience.
- all postdocs and temporarily employed researchers are offered a competitive starting salary, and that salary development in the position is ensured.

The postdoctoral research fellowship must be a genuine recruitment position

With the new *Act relating to universities and university colleges* and associated regulations from autumn 2024, Forskerforbundet has gained approval for a clarification of the postdoctoral position so that it becomes a genuine recruitment position.

In the Act, the postdocs are now guaranteed employment for a minimum of three years. A career plan must also be drawn up for the postdoctoral fellows, which the institutions are responsible for following up. Furthermore, the postdocs must have access to career guidance throughout the employment period.

Forskerforbundet will continue to work to ensure that the minimum requirement of three-year employment for postdoctoral fellows and the tightening of the postdoctoral scheme will apply to all sectors and all postdoctoral fellows.

The regulations do not allow multiple periods as a postdoctoral fellow at the same institution. It is still possible to be a postdoctoral researcher for more than one period at different institutions.

Forskerforbundet works to ensure that:

- there are equal rights and terms of employment for all postdocs, regardless of institution and sector.
- it should only be possible to be employed for one postdoctoral period in total.

Better job security for researchers with external funding

Permanent employment is the main rule in Norwegian working life, and this also includes externally funded researchers. It is important to strengthen the rights of employees on external funding and ensure that the employees do not bear all the risk when the external funding ends. There is a close connection between external funding and temporary employment. Many are hired temporarily for the individual project. Furthermore, those employed permanently on external funding receive constant notices of termination when the project and its funding are approaching their expiry date.

Through the Database for Statistics on Higher Education (DBH) we have a good overview of employees, job categories and temporary appointments at universities and colleges. It is important to follow developments and exert pressure on authorities and institutions. This data is missing from other sectors.

Forskerforbundet works to ensure that:

- the institutions, as a general rule, hire permanently on external funds.
- the institutions to a greater extent bear the risk of external funding by offering other tasks and/or salary funds in anticipation of new assignments.
- schemes are established for intermediate funding or bridge financing in periods without external funding, among other things by changing the regulations for state universities and colleges so that it becomes possible to also use provisions in excess of 5% to invest in the employees.
- national statistics are established on temporary employment among the research staff in state research institutes and health institutions.

Good supervision and follow-up of researchers in the early career phase

Building a research career is demanding, and for most people access to supervision and follow-up is important. In the last ten years, the number of postdoctoral positions has increased by over 50 per cent in the university and college sector. There has been no corresponding growth in ordinary, permanent scientific positions. This increases both the competition and the requirements for competence when hiring.

The time use survey shows that the work pressure is high, and many people experience psychological strain as a result of great uncertainty and high pressure of expectations.

Half of the postdocs are dissatisfied with the scientific career prospects and a clear majority of temporary researchers and postdocs believe that it is unrealistic to get a permanent job in academia.

Forskerforbundet works to ensure that:

- employers follow up on the regulatory requirements for career guidance for postdoctoral fellows.
- all research-performing enterprises establish systems for career planning and guidance for researchers in early career phases.
- employers have concrete action plans to look after young researchers and counteract poor mental health.

Flexibility in scientific career paths

In the Norwegian HE sector, there are three scientific career paths: the professor path, the teaching professor (*dosent*) path and the researcher path. Although both the institution's and the employee's needs may change along the way, the academic employee has little or no opportunity to change career path. Forskerforbundet has (with the new employment regulations) gained approval for employees to apply for a transfer between job categories at the same level. However, this has not been introduced as a national scheme. The institutions themselves can decide whether they want to use it.

The researcher positions must be recognized as an independent career path alongside the professor and teaching professor paths. It has proved difficult to integrate the researcher positions into the breadth of tasks at the universities and colleges. The consequence is that the institution's overall expertise is not utilized. It is also difficult for employees in researcher positions to qualify for a position in the professor or teaching professor path.

An increasing proportion of those employed in technical-administrative positions have a PhD and work closely with research. In 2018, a government-appointed committee in its report *Jobs structure at universities and colleges* proposed a separate career ladder for academic support positions. This has not been followed up in later work. Recent surveys show that many technical-administrative employees miss better opportunities for professional development and clearer career paths.

The trial scheme with tenure track positions for Norwegian HE institutions is little used outside economics. The tenure track position has challenges when it comes to equality and clear guidelines for implementation.

Forskerforbundet works to ensure that:

- the option for transfer between job categories at the same level is being used by the institutions.
- the researcher positions are used in the full range of tasks at the universities and colleges, including teaching-related tasks.
- a career ladder is established for academic support positions with research competence.
- the trial scheme with tenure track positions is discontinued, and replaced with a scheme where permanent employment on given terms can be agreed for postdoctoral positions.

Researcher mobility and international collaboration

Researcher mobility and international collaboration are important for promoting knowledge development. Surveys show that researchers particularly benefit from exchanges early in their careers. Both international research collaboration and researcher mobility require funding and facilitation from the Norwegian authorities. In addition, Norwegian institutions must conduct active exchange collaboration with institutions abroad and assist in planning academically relevant stays outside their own institution.

For incoming researchers, both the employers and the professional communities have a responsibility to contribute to good integration in the Norwegian research community. Many incoming and outgoing researchers face challenges related to salary, tax, social security, and other benefits, because the regulations are complicated, and it is difficult to get good enough advice. In addition, there are linguistic and cultural barriers. Employers should take care of incoming researchers' and postdocs' needs for information and advice on duties, rights, and further research careers.

Forskerforbundet works to ensure that:

- all postdoctoral fellows, regardless of funding source, have access to funds and mobility grants that enable stays abroad.
- there are good schemes to facilitate and finance stays abroad for families with children.
- the institutions ensure that young researchers and postdocs are offered advice on relevant stays abroad and make resources available
- all institutions have routines for how they receive and integrate visiting researchers and postdocs in the academic and social environment.
- international postdocs and researchers are offered Norwegian language training.

FORSKER FORBUNDET

- Forskerforbundet er landets største og ledende fag- og interesseorganisasjon for ansatte i forskning, høyere utdanning og kunnskapsformidling.
- Forskerforbundet er tilsluttet Unio – hovedorganisasjonen for universitets- og høyskoleutdannede.
- Forskerforbundet arbeider for høyere lønn og bedre arbeidsvilkår for medlemmene.
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