Postdocs and the Research Ecosystem: Shaping Sustainable Career Paths

26-28 August 2026

Hanover

Theme Week Report 2026

Co-organised by

Volkswagen Foundation & German Postdoc Network

Grant reference number of the Volkswagen Foundation: project no. 0203200-00



Theme Week Report 2026

Organized with the Volkswagen Foundation, this theme week addressed the future of academic careers in Germany, specifically the structurally undefined postdoctoral phase. By uniting academia, politics, and funding bodies, the event developed practical solutions for more reliable and diverse career trajectories. Based on recommendations given by the the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat, WR), three symposia explored postdoc definitions, staffing models, and intersectoral mobility, complemented by a keynote, a world café, and a public panel. The resulting report provides a strategic foundation for a more transparent and inclusive academic system in Germany. This report details on the three symposia of the theme week and has been compiled by

- *GPN Coordination Office: Dr Melanie Schippling & Alexandra McCormack*
- *Symposium I: Dr Alexandra Franzke, Dr Britta Hoyer, Dr Yves Klinger, Dr Stefan Pieczonka, Dr Tina Scheibe*
- *Symposium II: Dr Vanessa Adam, Dr Roland Bloch, Dr Silvana Burke, Dr Camila Hernandez Frederick, Ellen Laurer, Dr Linda Jauch, Dr Christian Kny, Dr André Stiegler, Dr Michael Wutzler*
- *Symposium III: Dr Neele Meyer, Dr Andre Lindörfer, Dr Barbara Janssens, Dr Mariana Schulte-Sasse*

On our website, we additionally published a brief report of the overall event and elements of the joint programme: the keynote slides and a video recording of the panel discussion.

Background information on the German Postdoc Network (GPN):

The GPN is a nationwide initiative improving the postdoctoral experience across all German universities and research institutions. We foster interdisciplinary connection and collaboration to empower postdocs to shape their professional conditions and identity. Currently funded by the Volkswagen Foundation for three years, the GPN serves as a central hub for support and advocacy.

Photos by Dr.-Ing. Papon Kumar Dev

GPN German Postdoc Network

Contents

1. Symposium I Report: A Common Definition of the Postdoc Phase: Analysis, Stakeholders and Visions for Germany 5

Why a common definition of the postdoc phase matters 5

Context: The Theme Week and Symposium 1: A Common Definition of the Postdoc Phase 6

Day 1: From the data gap to initial understanding 7

Day 2: Who decides, who holds things back 9

Day 3: The definition takes shape 11

Result: The interim definition 13

Outlook 16

Acknowledgements 17

Sources and further information 17

2. Symposium II Report: 'Implementing Personnel Structure Development in Academia' 18

Legal challenges in the further development of academic career paths 18

Operational level – implementation of staff structure planning at faculty level 19

Strategic level – strategic staffing planning 20

Staffing Structures of the Future 22

Towards Sustainable Academic Personnel Structures 24

3. Symposium III Report: "Intersectoral Mobility for Researchers: Balancing Opportunities and Challenges" 25

A Timely Topic in the German and European Context 25

Learning from International Best Practice 26

Insights from Researchers with Intersectoral Experience 28

Expert Carousel & Fishbowl Discussion 29

Problem Labs: Developing Solutions 30

Key Messages and Next Steps 31

GPN German Postdoc Network

1. Symposium I Report: A Common Definition of the Postdoc Phase: Analysis, Stakeholders and Visions for Germany

Compiled by Dr Alexandra Franzke, Dr Britta Hoyer, Dr Yves Klinger, Dr Stefan Pieczonka, Dr Tina Scheibe

Why a common definition of the postdoc phase matters

Universities, non-university research institutions, funding organisations and policymakers all use the same term: 'postdoc'. But they rarely mean the same thing. This is no coincidence, but the result of a development that has taken place over a good two decades: In the course of the internationalisation of the German research system – driven by the Bologna Process, the introduction of the junior professorship and the expansion of excellence-oriented funding schemes – the term 'postdoc' has become established in job advertisements, career structures and funding programmes without ever having been consolidated into a binding category. Where definitions do exist, they are based on inconsistent criteria: sometimes on the time elapsed since obtaining a PhD, sometimes on career status, sometimes on a fixed-term contract as a supporting criterion, and sometimes on international reference frameworks such as the European Framework for Research Careers (levels R1 to R4). Postdocs are typically placed at level R2 ('Recognised Researcher': PhD graduates who do not yet conduct research entirely independently); level R3 ('Established Researcher') describes researchers who have already achieved a high degree of independence.

This lack of clarity is more than just a semantic problem. A definition is, at its core, a question of belonging: Being recognised as a postdoc should mean belonging to a clearly defined career phase with clear goals and comparable colleagues. This is precisely what forms the basis for collective organisation, advocacy, institutional support and statistical measurability. Without a common understanding of who actually counts as a postdoc, it remains difficult to establish rights, expectations and tailored structures for this career

phase. Furthermore, the definition would, for the first time, allow comparable data on this group to be collected nationwide, thereby making it possible to verify whether reforms and funding measures are actually having an effect.

The consequences extend far beyond individual careers. Because postdocs are not recorded as a separate category in most statistics, even fundamental questions remain unanswered: How many postdocs are there in Germany? How long do they remain in academia? How many move into other sectors, and under what conditions? Without reliable data, funding programmes, career development measures and policy interventions can hardly be tailored to the actual reality of this career phase. The pressure to stand out, the prevalence of fixed-term contracts, career uncertainty and the mobility requirements associated with postdoctoral life thus remain difficult to quantify and easy to overlook.

This is precisely where the work of the GPN's Advocacy Working Group comes in; in the run-up to the theme week, it proposed its own working definition of the postdoc phase. It is intended as a basis for discussion originating from within the community itself, rather than as a category imposed from outside and ready for administrative use. Unlike purely time-based definitions, which do little justice to the lived diversity of this career phase, the proposal is based on the framework for research careers and thus also builds a bridge to the S-categories (S1 to S4, modelled on the R1–R4 levels of the European Framework for Research Careers) proposed by the German Science Council in 2025 for the reform of academic career paths, which define the postdoc phase primarily on the basis of the independence of research output.

Context: The Theme Week and Symposium 1: A Common Definition of the Postdoc Phase

Symposium 1 was one of three parallel symposia held as part of the theme week 'Postdocs and the Research Ecosystem: Shaping Sustainable Career Paths', which the GPN organised jointly with the Volkswagen Foundation from 26 to 28 August 2026 at Herrenhausen Palace in Hanover. A total of around 90 participants from academia, research management, funding organisations and politics came together; around 130 people took part in the

public part of the programme. Twenty-eight people (including the organising team) took part in this symposium. The two partner symposia were devoted to sustainable staffing structures in academia (Symposium II) and the cross-sectoral mobility of researchers (Symposium III).

The timing of the theme week is no coincidence: in its position paper 'Staffing Structures in the German Research System' (July 2025), the German Research Council explicitly focused on the postdoctoral phase – often described as a 'black box' – and proposed a new job classification model (S1 to S4). At the same time, in the summer of 2026, the Federal Cabinet approved the amendment to the Academic Fixed-Term Contracts Act (WissZeitVG), which, amongst other things, provides for minimum contract durations following a PhD. Both developments require clarity on who is meant by the term 'postdoc'.

The remit of our symposium was to address this question of definition: How can the postdoc phase in Germany be described in such a way that networks, universities, funding organisations and policymakers can collectively support it?

The programme followed a clear structure over three days: definition on the first day, transformation – i.e. stakeholders, structures and barriers – on the second, and vision & roadmap on the third day. This structure proved effective, even though the content of the third day differed from what was originally planned.

Work took place in interactive formats: short presentations and plenary discussions, group work at pin boards, and the prioritisation of findings using sticky dots. The symposium was accompanied by graphical recording. During the World Café on the second day, our dimensions and barriers were presented in English to participants from the other symposia.

Day 1: From the data gap to initial understanding

The theme week kicked off with a keynote address for all three symposia on the current state of data regarding the postdoc phase. From an international perspective – particularly that of the US – the German system for postdocs appears exceptionally heterogeneous and virtually impossible to navigate. And it is precisely this diversity that makes any reliable data collection difficult from the outset. Two figures from the presentation stood out in particular:

According to the 'Federal Report on Early-Career Researchers (BuWiK)', fewer than ten per cent of postdocs remain in permanent academic posts, whilst more than 80 per cent leave academia in the long term. Furthermore, a Max Planck survey revealed that 25 per cent of postdocs exhibit moderate to severe depressive symptoms, compared with five per cent in the general population. In particular, the Act on Fixed-Term Contracts in Academic Employment (WissZeitVG) was identified as one of the key stress factors.



This was followed by the opening of our symposium with two short introductory talks from on the BuWiK and on the topic of 'Blindspot Postdoc'. It quickly became clear how difficult it is to draw firm boundaries: in the presentation on the BuWiK, it emerged that the BuWiK has to rely on age limits as a working framework and therefore uses the range of 25 to 48 years; in fact, 75 per cent of postdocs fall below this set age threshold. If the postdoc phase is specifically situated at the R2 level (Recognised Researcher), the distinction from R3 must also be considered, for example through taking on the role of research group leader. One idea that ran through the entire day was that a definition arises not only through positive characteristics, but also through exclusion – through the discernible progress made in moving beyond the phase. In this context, the second presentation highlighted that any definition of criteria simultaneously excludes people who have hitherto regarded themselves as postdocs but do not necessarily fulfil all the conditions of the postdoc definition – these groups must be accommodated in the ongoing debate.

Furthermore, it became clear during the symposium discussion that, whilst the European Framework for Research Careers can provide helpful guidance, it should not be interpreted as strictly as the grading system implies. Thus, postdocs may have attained different levels

of academic independence in various aspects of their work and therefore fall 'between R2 and R3'.

In the subsequent group work session on the question 'What are the key dimensions of a postdoc phase?', it was striking how closely the findings of four independently working groups resembled one another. Across all groups, six recurring dimensions emerged: duration & transitions, employment & position, roles & tasks, qualification & development goals, orientation & career development, and institutional context & support. In terms of content, there was broad agreement that neither the duration alone nor the fixed-term contract status should be the decisive criterion. Instead, several groups emphasised the function and content of the phase: growing independence, professionalisation, and deliberate preparation for the next career step, whether within or outside academia. There was, however, disagreement over how the transition out of the phase should be formally defined: One group called for a distinct name for the subsequent R3 stage; another advocated a qualification similar to a habilitation, without a fixed time limit.

Day 2: Who decides, who holds things back

The map of stakeholders

On the second day, four groups independently mapped the relevant stakeholders for a uniform definition of the postdoc phase along an influence-interest matrix. Although each group worked on a different cluster (politics, intermediaries, universities & non-university research institutions (AUF), funding organisations), the results were strikingly consistent: politicians and policy-makers wield considerable influence, but often have only moderate or low direct interest in the question of definition. Intermediary organisations such as the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), the German Science Council, professional societies or umbrella organisations, on the other hand, can act as key 'translators' and multipliers between the different levels. Universities themselves are highly interested, but fragmented and heterogeneous in their internal structures and interests. And postdocs and their networks show the highest level of interest, but have little formal power.

This four-field logic gave rise to an obvious strategy for action, which was reflected in a similar form on several boards: to closely involve stakeholders with high influence and high interest – such as the Science Council or individual Members of the Bundestag from reform-friendly parties; to specifically strengthen and empower stakeholders with high interest but little influence, such as the postdoc networks themselves; and to actively persuade stakeholders with high influence but little interest, such as state governments or finance ministries. Specific organisations mentioned included BuWiK, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), the German Science Council, ministries at federal and state level, various funding organisations ranging from the German Research Foundation (DFG) to the Volkswagen Foundation, as well as trade unions.

The barriers

On the 'barriers' noticeboard, numerous individual observations coalesced into three overarching categories: (I) Definition & Identity: the distinction from the R3 phase remains unclear; the external perception of the term 'postdoc' is inconsistent; and postdocs themselves also struggle to define their own role clearly. (II) Culture & Incentives: The attitude that 'things are working fine as they are' reflects a palpable lack of urgency to act, particularly from the perspective of employers, who might feel that adopting a definition would mean giving up their considerable leeway in drafting job descriptions; added to this are a lack of decision-making structures and tangible conflicts of interest between supervisors and postdocs – the Emmy Noether Programme was cited as an example. (III) Structural barriers: The group currently grouped under the term 'postdoc' is so heterogeneous that a single solution suitable for everyone is hardly conceivable.

These barriers were countered by concrete proposed solutions: consciously refraining from standardisation and instead creating access to relevant networks; structured job advertisements with onboarding for new postdocs and offboarding for recent PhD graduates; encouraging funding organisations to integrate career development into their calls for applications, thereby generating external pressure and improving the overall

framework; and, last but not least, the proposal to simply start with small, agile pilot projects in experimental settings, rather than waiting for the perfect overall solution.

Day 3: The definition takes shape

The third day unfolded differently from what was originally planned – and in a positive sense. Instead of launching straight into a roadmap synthesis, the morning's programme was reorganised at short notice: the working definition proposed by the GPN Advocacy Working Group was discussed paragraph by paragraph in the plenary session. The original English text reads:

> *The postdoctoral researcher (postdoc) phase constitutes a transition phase following the completion of a PhD, during which researchers further develop their skills and independence, broaden their experience, and consolidate their scientific profile in preparation for future careers in academia or beyond. Postdoctoral researchers still exhibit key characteristics of R2-level, Recognised Researchers.*
>
> *Transitioning from R2-level to advanced senior roles (R3) marks the completion of the postdoc phase, and institutional support should aim to achieve this well within the ERC Starting Grant eligibility window (up to 7 years post-PhD).*

The first paragraph – both the concept and the choice of words – met with broad approval; no one in the room saw any insurmountable differences. The discussion centred primarily on nuances of wording: 'transition phase' prevailed over 'orientation phase' because it comes across as less infantilising; 'scientific profile' was to be expanded to 'academic and scientific profile' so as not to exclude disciplinary cultures such as the humanities; the word 'still' was removed as superfluous and slightly derogatory. There was consensus on R2 as the reference level, although the precise subject-specific details of R2 and R3 were to be deliberately delegated to academic departments and professional societies, rather than being prescribed centrally.

Regarding the second paragraph – the temporal framework and the transition out of the phase – there was a consensus that was as unanimous as it was illuminating: to remove the reference to the European Research Council's (ERC) funding period from the definition. A

comment from the audience summed up the crux of the criticism: the ERC is currently changing its own funding period from seven to ten years – as a reference point, this is simply too unstable. International compatibility is already ensured via R2 and R3 anyway. The timeframe was instead treated as a footnote rather than a core criterion, and the exit from the phase was defined more clearly in terms of a change of role – with the open question of whether structured annual reviews should become an integral part of the definition in future. It was also discussed whether eligibility for appointment to a tenure-track professorship should be defined as the end of the phase; there was agreement that this should be a period of time rather than a specific cut-off date. It was also emphasised that, following R2, other pathways besides an R3 post must remain open, and that, in addition to institutional support, the independence and personal responsibility of the postdocs themselves should be taken into account. This second paragraph, too, ultimately met with broad approval, provided the discussed amendments are incorporated.

A final, yet crucial, clarification concerned the question: who actually communicates this definition to the outside world? The answer in the plenary session was clear: not the GPN alone, but the symposium itself sees itself as the source – with the GPN as the cornerstone, but with the explicit legitimisation of broad consensus reached over several days.



Four very similar approaches to implementation

In the subsequent group work, four groups independently developed proposals for implementation – with an unusually high degree of consensus for workshop formats. In the order that emerged across all working groups: first, inform the postdoc networks themselves and secure their support as a foundation, as, according to one group, this was

'the toughest nut to crack'; next, specifically inform key stakeholders such as the German Science Council, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), the Conference of Science Ministers and individual university alliances; and only then reach the wider public via media such as the Wiarda blog, specialist journals and social media. Communication risk management was a consistent consideration throughout: anticipating criticism in advance, preparing appropriate responses and, above all, preventing the definition from being taken out of context or exploited for unrelated debates – such as those concerning the number of posts or the proportion of fixed-term contracts.

One particularly well-organised group explicitly structured its proposal according to a timeline: in the short term, a German translation of the definition, a press release and a guest post on the Wiarda blog; in the medium term, its inclusion as an agenda item within the HRK as well as in the committees of funding organisations and ministries; and in the long term, an evaluation and a dedicated conference to assess what impact the definition has actually had.

Milestones mentioned across several groups included: the publication of the definition, its uptake by relevant stakeholder organisations, and finally an evaluation. It was also repeatedly emphasised as a necessary measure to designate a clearly defined, neutral sponsor – for example, linked to the Volkswagen Foundation or the project itself – and to proceed in a coordinated manner rather than through uncoordinated individual actions.

Result: The interim definition

At the end of the three days, three interrelated outcomes were produced: firstly, the revised GPN working definition – based on the plenary discussion – in its detailed version; secondly, an interim version condensed into a single sentence; and thirdly, the six dimensions along which the phase can be described. All three are expressly to be understood as interim results.

1 The revised working definition

The discussions at the symposium have resulted in a revised working definition of the postdoc phase, which will be further refined at a follow-up meeting in mid-October:

> The postdoctoral researcher (postdoc) phase constitutes a **transition phase** pursued after completing a PhD[1], during which researchers further develop their skills and **independence**, broaden their experience, and **consolidate their scientific and academic profile** in preparation for future careers in academia or beyond. Postdoctoral researchers exhibit key characteristics of **R2-level Recognized Researchers**[2].
>
> The transition into a **role at the R3 Established Researcher level**, **or** into one of numerous **alternative career paths**, **marks the end** of the postdoc phase. Qualification for these career paths should be guided by an **individual development plan**, **supported by the institutions**, and **typically completed within 2 to 6 years**[3].
>
> [1] A PhD is considered complete upon the successful defence of the thesis.
> [2] A not-yet fully independent R2 Recognised Researcher, as defined in the European Framework for Research Careers.
> [3] This timeframe is influenced by structural and regulatory factors such as eligibility for DFG programmes (e.g. Emmy Noether, 2–4 years), DAAD funding (e.g. Research Grants in Germany, <4 years; PRIME, <6 years), the junior research group programmes run by non-university research institutions (~2–6 years), eligibility for appointment to W1 (junior) professorships, and the WissZeitVG (German Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act, <6 years).

German working translation:

> Die Postdoc-Phase ist eine **Übergangsphase** nach der Promotion [1], in der Forschende ihre Kompetenzen und ihre **Eigenständigkeit** weiterentwickeln, ihre Erfahrung erweitern und ihr **wissenschaftliches und akademisches Profil festigen**, um sich auf

künftige Karrieren in der Wissenschaft und darüber hinaus vorzubereiten. Postdocs weisen zentrale Merkmale von Forschenden der Karrierestufe R2 (Recognised Researcher) auf[2].

Der Übergang in eine **Rolle der Stufe R3 (Established Researcher) oder** in einen der zahlreichen **alternativen Karrierewege** markiert das **Ende** der Postdoc-Phase. Die Qualifizierung für diese Karrierewege sollte sich an einem **individuellen Entwicklungsplan** orientieren, von den **Einrichtungen unterstützt** werden und in der Regel innerhalb von **zwei bis sechs Jahren** abgeschlossen werden[3].

[1] Die Promotion gilt mit der erfolgreichen Verteidigung der Dissertation (Disputation) als abgeschlossen.
[2] Noch nicht vollständig eigenständige Forschende der Stufe R2 (Recognised Researcher) gemäß dem European Framework for Research Careers.
[3] Dieser Zeitrahmen ergibt sich aus strukturellen und rechtlichen Rahmenbedingungen wie der Antragsberechtigung für DFG-Programme (z. B. Emmy Noether, 2 bis 4 Jahre), der DAAD-Förderung (z. B. Research Grants in Germany, unter 4 Jahren; PRIME, unter 6 Jahren), den Nachwuchsgruppenprogrammen der außeruniversitären Forschungseinrichtungen (ca. 2 bis 6 Jahre), der Berufbarkeit auf W1-Professuren (Juniorprofessuren) sowie dem Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz (WissZeitVG, unter 6 Jahren).

2. The one-sentence interim conclusion

At the end of the three days, a definition emerged which, whilst retaining the discussed R2/R3 references in its detailed version, was also summarised in a condensed form as a single sentence:

> *The postdoc phase is not defined primarily by its duration or the type of contract, but by its function: a time-limited career phase following a PhD, characterised by growing independence, orientation and preparation for the next career step.*

3. The six dimensions

When analysed in detail along the six dimensions that had already emerged on the first day, the following picture emerges: the phase begins after completion of the PhD and is of limited duration, although duration alone should not be the decisive criterion – what matters are content and function. It can encompass a variety of job profiles and employment arrangements, although fixed-term employment is not in itself a defining feature. It is characterised by growing independence and responsibility, as well as the further development of one's professional role, potentially towards a professorship, but equally towards other career paths. It involves further academic development across various dimensions – research, teaching, leadership – and the development of transferable professional skills. It is intended as an orientation phase to enable an informed decision about one's own future, both within and outside academia, accompanied by structured reflection. And it requires a reliable institutional framework: clear qualification agreements, defined responsibilities, institutional support structures and international comparability.

This condensed version is explicitly to be understood as an interim outcome – the result of three days of intensive, often controversial, but consistently constructive discussion. It does not replace the GPN's more detailed, footnoted working definition, but rather demonstrates how this foundation has evolved through dialogue with a broad circle of stakeholders.

Outlook

What remains at the end of these three days is a broadly shared foundation and a clear common willingness: postdocs and representatives of various stakeholders from the academic landscape have worked together to develop an understanding that is robust enough to serve as a basis for deriving concrete next steps towards the nationwide introduction of a definition of 'postdoc'.

The symposium participants have agreed to continue working intensively towards this goal in the coming months.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Volkswagen Foundation, which funded and made this theme week possible, as well as all symposium participants for their openness, expertise and willingness to spend three days working on a common foundation. We would also like to thank the keynote speakers for providing the expert framework for the first day.

Sources and further information

- German Science Council (2025): Staffing structures in the German research system. Position paper (Drs. 2639-25), July 2025. https://doi.org/10.57674/j6sf-h296
- German Postdoc Network: Why defining the postdoc matters for all of us. https://germanpostdoc.net/why-defining-the-postdoc-matters-for-all-of-us/
- BMFTR: Federal Report on Early-Career Researchers (BuWiK). https://www.bmftr.bund.de/DE/Forschung/Wissenschaftssystem/WissenschaftlicheKarriere/BundesberichtWissenschaftlicherNachwuchs/bundesberichtwissenschaftlichernachwuchs_node.html
- BMFTR: Act on Fixed-Term Contracts for Researchers. https://www.bmftr.bund.de/DE/Forschung/Wissenschaftssystem/WissenschaftlicheKarriere/Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz/wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz_node.html
- European Commission / EURAXESS: European Framework for Research Careers. https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/policy_library/towards_a_european_framework_for_research_careers_final.pdf
- Max Planck Survey Report (2024): https://pure.mpg.de/pubman/faces/ViewItemOverviewPage.jsp?itemId=item_3658330

2. Symposium II Report: 'Implementing Personnel Structure Development in Academia'

Compiled by: Dr Vanessa Adam, Dr Roland Bloch, Dr Silvana Burke, Dr Camila Hernandez Frederick, Ellen Laurer, Dr Linda Jauch, Dr Christian Kny, Dr André Stiegler, Dr Michael Wutzler

The symposium aimed to discuss sustainable staff structure development at universities in order to clarify academic career paths, utilize resources efficiently, and create conditions for research and teaching that are fair to all generations. Current debates – sparked by initiatives such as #ichbinHanna, the amendment to the Academic Fixed-Term Contracts Act, and position papers from academic organizations and associations – show that the German academic system is undergoing a process of reform. Although staff development has gained importance since the introduction of the tenure-track program, there has so far been a lack of systematic approaches that also encompass the development of staffing structures. To bridge this gap, the symposium brought together experts from academia, administration, and politics.

Legal challenges in the further development of academic career paths



The first day of the symposium was devoted to the legal framework and obstacles involved in shaping academic career paths beyond the professorship. A keynote presentation introduced the reform plans of the WissZeitVG for 2026 and outlined various concepts for permanent positions from three selected German federal states, with the intention of laying the groundwork for a discussion on legal, practical and strategic challenges.

In the subsequent group discussions, it became clear that the considerable heterogeneity of legal regulations between the federal states and individual universities represents a significant barrier to efficient resource planning. To make academic positions more attractive and avoid 'career dead ends', the need for precise role profiles and a clear distinction between qualification-based and permanent duties was emphasized. In particular, it was highlighted that the real difficulties in designing academic career paths lie in the details, especially regarding funding, salary structures, and a precise definition of positions and job profiles.

Another key focus was on the permeability of the academic system. Participants discussed the implementation of tenure-track models and the creation of legally sound transitional arrangements to ensure coherent staff development. It was agreed that a sustainable structure can only be achieved if the legal framework is closely linked to strategic staff planning and secure funding. The first day thus laid the necessary legal foundations for highlighting the operational implementation at faculty level and the overarching strategic planning on the following days.

Operational level – implementation of staff structure planning at faculty level

The second day focused on the implementation of staff structure planning for permanent positions other than professorships. The topic of the first session was the operational level of this implementation within the faculties, represented by three faculty directors from various universities and academic departments.

The open, constructive exchange between the participants exemplified a key prerequisite for the success of staff structure planning, which, given its complexity, must be underpinned by good communication. This complexity does not lie solely in the fact that a large number of individuals and units are involved in the implementation of staff structure planning. Above all, it stems from the fact that staff structure planning and its implementation cannot be considered in isolation. There are interrelationships, for example, with the planning of professorships and degree programs, issues of capacity and utilization, and, more generally, with the strategic orientation of units. Without a holistic

view and the necessary dialogue between those involved, individual staffing measures are more likely to have a positive impact on their institutional context by chance.

In order to replace chance with strategy and to act professionally, staff structure planning must, firstly, be supported and implemented by qualified administrative staff. This applies at faculty level, as became clear during the discussion with the faculty directors present. However, it also applies to the central units and the tasks and processes carried out there. Secondly, professional staff structure planning and its professional implementation are only possible on the basis of a solid data foundation. Whether it concerns (old or new) job categories and associated teaching loads, the workload of a teaching obligation or the proportion of positions leading to qualification: changes to the staff structure have an impact across a wide range of relevant areas and be based on well-informed decisions. Unfortunately, this currently seems only partially feasible at many universities – data is collected by various stakeholders without coordination, is fragmented and incomplete, and technical systems lack interoperability, etc. Implementing – or even simply calling for – professional staffing structure planning is problematic as long as the framework conditions for doing so are inadequate.



Strategic level – strategic staffing planning

The discrepancy between the growing demand for strategic management and the often precarious framework conditions were also reflected in the second session, which focused on strategic staffing structure planning. A retrospective analysis of current practice reveals that staffing planning at many institutions is still heavily influenced by historically established structures and a certain degree of institutional inertia. As a result, staff planning is frequently viewed primarily as a sub-aspect of faculty planning, with the allocation of

professorial positions continuing to serve as the central distinguishing feature of institutional resource management. Consequently, the allocation of permanent positions is often guided by ad hoc agreements reached in small committees, rather than following a long-term strategic plan.

At the same time, however, approaches have also been identified which show that professionalization has already begun. For instance, there are best-practice examples in which academic departments determine their requirements independently and on the basis of data, and even strategically forgo certain positions in order to pool resources for forward-looking personnel categories. Such approaches demonstrate that a cultural shift has already begun in certain areas. Nevertheless, significant hurdles remain: The implementation of new job categories often takes place only on an ad hoc basis or is undermined by a lack of oversight. Furthermore, a lack of comparability between the federal states and the imprecise definition of qualification levels makes it difficult to create reliable career paths and genuine development opportunities.

To overcome these shortcomings and complete the transition from reactive to proactive personnel structure planning, a consensus-based future scenario emerged from the discussion. Sustainable strategic workforce planning must be based on a foundation of transparency, clearly defined responsibilities, and a binding framework for action. Crucial to this is the establishment of a cyclical quality cycle based on valid data, whilst allowing sufficient flexibility for short-term adjustments.

At the end of the second session, the picture at the strategic level was similar to that at the operational level: the process of staff structure planning requires a holistic perspective that incorporates all staff categories – including those providing academic support – into the planning. This requires intensive collaboration between the faculties and the administration, as well as an explicit commitment from university management. Only if staff structure planning is also integrated into overarching strategic cycles and receives professional support – both at individual university sites and at national level – can the permeability and cross-sectoral mobility called for by the Science Council

(Wissenschaftsrat) be realized. Ultimately, the aim is to establish staff structure planning no longer as a purely administrative task, but as a strategic management tool for the university.

Staffing Structures of the Future

On the third day, participants were invited to reflect on possible solutions based on the problem descriptions developed and largely agreed upon during the first two days. Working in groups, they used a 'staffing structure designer' to draft and visualize an ideal staffing structure, one that is guided not merely by what is feasible but, above all, by what is objectively appropriate, and which provides answers to questions such as: What are 'permanent positions'? What should the ratio be between qualified positions and 'permanent positions'? How are the doctoral and postdoctoral phases integrated into the staffing structure? Who teaches and how much? What status does the professorship have and what role will it play in the future organizational structure? What significance do higher-level organizational units, such as faculties, hold? How can staffing and organizational structures be systematically linked, for example within departments? Finally: how can the answers to these questions be brought together within a holistic approach to staffing structure development and planning?

Based on the visualizations and the discussion surrounding them, the participants formulated a set of demands, no-go's and implementation steps for the redesign of staffing and career structures at universities in Germany.

Four key demands:

- *Introduction of permanent positions alongside professorships, in which academics teach and conduct research independently. There should be standardized definitions nationwide for these permanent positions (e.g. Lecturer, Researcher, Science Manager).*
- *Elimination of the staffing allocations for professorships, which are negotiated on a case-by-case basis at the time of appointment. Instead, academic and academic support staff should be assigned to larger units (e.g. departments).*

- *With reference to the European framework for academic career stages, fixed-term employment should be the norm in the first (R1 First Stage Researcher) and second (R2 Recognized Researcher) stages, whilst permanent employment should be the norm in the third (R3 Established Researcher) and fourth (R4 Leading Researcher) stages.*
- *Regarding higher education funding, the share of base funding should be increased in order to create a stable financial foundation for the necessary increase in the proportion of permanent positions.*

Three structural no-go's:

- *Teaching staff iwith special duties (Lehrkräfte für besondere Aufgaben) do not constitute a category in the staff structure of the future, as they are assigned such a heavy teaching load that research cannot be carried out in these positions, thereby turning them into 'career dead ends'.*
- *The chair to which a professor is appointed – and whose staffing levels are determined during appointment negotiations – cannot be the central organizational unit of the staffing structure of the future, as it stands in the way of strategic staffing planning that necessarily spans multiple chairs.*
- *Simply holding universities responsible for implementation on the grounds of their autonomy will not lead to a transformation of staffing and career structures, given the internal decision-making structures (a majority of professors on academic self-governing bodies) and external funding (the threat of funding cuts).*

Three concrete implementation steps:

- *Universities address the balance between permanent and fixed-term employment as part of transparent staff structure planning.*
- *For staff selection, universities introduce transparent selection procedures to ensure that positions can no longer be filled on an individual basis.*

- *For academic qualification, particularly at the doctoral stage, universities shall separate the roles of supervision and assessment in order to avoid relationships of dependency.*

Towards Sustainable Academic Personnel Structures

A Step Forward in Dialogue and Reform:

The symposium facilitated a structured exchange between stakeholders who rarely have the opportunity to collaborate or exchange perspectives in their day-to-day work. Issues relating to the development of academic staff structures have so far been addressed only in isolated cases and frequently within individual institutions and areas of responsibility. At the same time, there is a lack of established best-practice examples and suitable formats for a discourse that transcends institutional and status group boundaries.

The symposium addressed this gap by creating a shared space for reflection and discussion. It brought together diverse disciplinary, institutional, and experience-based perspectives and facilitated exchange across fields of work, career stages, and levels of higher education. This made it possible to identify key challenges, highlight existing approaches, and formulate recommendations for the further development of sustainable academic staff structures.

THEMENWOCHE 2026 – SYMPOSIUM 3

3. Symposium III Report: "Intersectoral Mobility for Researchers: Balancing Opportunities and Challenges"

Compiled by Dr Neele Meyer, Dr Andre Lindörfer, Dr Barbara Janssens and Dr Mariana Schulte-Sasse

The symposium "Intersectoral Mobility (ISM) for Researchers – Balancing Opportunities and Challenges", organized within the German Postdoc Network (GPN) Theme Week "Postdocs and the Research Ecosystem: Shaping Sustainable Career Paths", brought together around 30 stakeholders from academia, industry, policy, funding organizations, universities of applied sciences, non-university research institutions and research support structures to discuss how ISM can become a normal, recognized, and valuable component of postdoctoral research careers.

A Timely Topic in the German and European Context

The symposium took place at an important moment for research careers in Germany and across Europe. Recommendations from the German Science and Humanities Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*), European research policy initiatives, and the emerging emphasis on "Talent Circulation" planned for the BuWiK 2028 reflect a growing recognition of ISM as a key driver of innovation, knowledge exchange, and talent development. Moving between academia, industry, government, civil society, and other sectors is increasingly seen as an integral part of a dynamic and interconnected research ecosystem.

Yet a gap remains between policy ambitions and reality. Although most doctoral and postdoctoral researchers eventually pursue careers outside academia, academic career structures still primarily reward traditional research outputs, offer limited support for exploring other sectors, and rarely recognize experience gained outside academia. Consequently, ISM opportunities remain limited, and mobility is often a one-way transition

out of academia rather than an opportunity for continuous exchange, professional development, and knowledge transfer.

The symposium focused on five overarching goals: 1) map existing ISM initiatives in Germany and Europe, 2) learn from researchers´ and employers´ firsthand experiences, 3) foster dialogue between different stakeholders, 4) identify opportunities and barriers, and 5) develop practical recommendations to make ISM a more accessible and valued component of research careers.

Learning from International Best Practice

One of the symposium's major strengths was the presentation of international best-practise examples that illustrated different approaches to promoting ISM, ranging from short-term career exploration to structured internships and institutional strategies.

An overview of **intersectoral mobility (ISM) across Europe** focused on the EU policy framework and ongoing discussions. Key policy instruments include the 2023 Council Recommendation on Research Careers and the 2025 second thematic report of the Mutual Learning Exercise on Research Careers, focusing on skills and intersectoral, interdisciplinary and interoperable careers. Drawing on examples from EU Member States, these reports provide recommendations for strengthening ISM, including dedicated funding programmes to foster intersectoral, interdisciplinary and international researcher mobility, alongside skills development aligned with ResearchComp. Further recommendations address the recognition of research talent in R&I investment, transparent recruitment, more stable employment conditions and career prospects, and researcher assessment reforms in line with CoARA.



Karolinska Institutet (Sweden) presented an established internship programme offering placements of one to three months. Since 2012, the programme has grown from five to around 80 placements annually, involving more than 250 host organizations across industry, healthcare, consulting, public administration, and civil society. Its success builds on networking events, carefully selected projects and career preparation activities. Participants reported significantly improved career clarity, 31% were recruited directly by their host organization, and 18% reported collaboration proposals or ongoing projects. The programme has supported 592 researchers to date, is managed by a full-time coordinator and contributes to retaining talent in Sweden.

The **Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft** (Austria) presented its Expert Internship Programme, offering two-month placements supported by € 5,000 scholarships. Researchers select their host organizations, while the Career Center facilitates contacts and coordinates the placements. Since 2005, the programme has helped researchers recognize transferable skills and make informed career decisions. Sustainable funding remains a challenge, and administrative barriers complicate direct employment by host organisations.

KU Leuven/Flemish universities (Belgium) showcased a government-supported collaborative approach involving all Flemish universities, promoting equally valued career paths. Through initiatives such as the PhD Talent Advisory Board and the PhD Talent Pool, universities, employers, policy actors, and researchers continuously exchange perspectives with the aim of helping researchers make informed career decisions rather than encourage them to leave academia. The Job Shadowing Programme offers one- to two-day experiences in non-academic organisations. In 2026, approx. 470 researchers applied for 150 placements in 70 organisations.

Nord University (Norway) emphasized that ISM requires an institutional ecosystem rather than isolated programmes. Nord University's strategy combines business mentoring, collaborative projects with external organizations, short-term secondments, and European mobility schemes – e.g. via the European University of the Seas Alliance. A central

challenge is enabling researchers to return to academia after gaining experience elsewhere.

Together, these examples illustrated that successful ISM depends not only on individual programmes but also on sustained institutional commitment, appropriate funding and closer collaboration between academia and other sectors.

Insights from Researchers with Intersectoral Experience

A particularly valuable aspect of the symposium was hearing directly from researchers with firsthand experience of ISM. Their perspectives highlighted both the opportunities and the challenges associated with moving between sectors e.g. through internship programs or tandem programmes.

They reported **acquiring competencies** that are often difficult to develop within traditional academic environments, including people and project management, stakeholder communication, entrepreneurship, strategic thinking and the ability to translate scientific knowledge for different audiences. Several speakers emphasized that this mobility helped them understand the broader societal relevance of research and improved their ability to work in interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral environments.



At the same time, they identified substantial barriers. The strongest concern was the continued dominance of **publication-based evaluation systems**. Researchers who leave academia often reduce their publication output and therefore face significant disadvantages when attempting to return. Several speakers argued that academic evaluation systems still fail to recognize professional experience, leadership, science

communication, innovation activities, or industry achievements as valuable indicators of excellence. They also highlighted **administrative and cultural barriers**, like the persistent perception that leaving academia represents failure rather than a legitimate career choice. Interestingly, these narratives also come from the researchers themselves, and many argued that changing these perceptions is just as important as reforming the system.

For institutions and policymakers, it is particularly important to design low-threshold measures to ensure that ISM can be a meaningful and enriching career opportunity rather than yet another requirement in the postdoctoral phase, which is already characterised by multiple forms of insecurity.

Expert Carousel & Fishbowl Discussion

The Expert Carousel explored ISM programmes in Germany, including whether there is a point of no return when transitioning out of academia. The dynamic Fishbowl format enabled an open exchange between diverse stakeholders, allowing participants to contribute both questions and perspectives. A key takeaway was that sectoral differences are often reinforced by misconceptions and a lack of mutual understanding. Participants highlighted the importance of making transferable skills visible, improving career guidance and providing opportunities for early exposure to non-academic environments. They also emphasised that challenges such as hierarchical dependencies, leadership quality and job insecurity are not exclusive to academia. Overall, the discussion highlighted the role of institutions and policymakers in challenging established mindsets, raising awareness of transferable skills, and strengthening exchange and collaboration between academia and other sectors. The Fishbowl format was particularly valuable in bringing together perspectives from diverse stakeholders, enabling participants to actively



ask questions, challenge assumptions and respond to one another, thereby fostering mutual understanding and collective learning.

Problem Labs: Developing Solutions

As part of four Problem Labs focusing on specific scenarios, participants translated their discussions into practical recommendations for institutions and policymakers, drawing on the diversity of perspectives within the group.

Implementing Industry Secondments: The group explored how research institutions can establish structured opportunities for researchers to gain industry experience while addressing organisational, administrative and legal barriers.

Key takeaways:

- Involve all stakeholders (researchers, PIs, HR, legal departments and industry partners) from the start
- Establish clear frameworks for employment conditions and intellectual property
- Secure faculty support, particularly from deans, was identified as the biggest challenge

Recruiting Postdoctoral Talent Beyond Academia: The group discussed how employers can improve their outreach and recruitment of postdoctoral researchers by strengthening connections and communication channels between academia and other sectors.

Key takeaways:

- Strengthen university-employer networks through dedicated contact points, career services and alumni relations
- Maintain reliable contact lists with named representatives and permanent email addresses
- Increase visibility through career fairs, conferences, campus events and social media platforms

Building Sustainable University-Industry Partnerships: The group examined how universities and companies can move beyond individual collaborations to develop long-term partnerships that create mutual benefits.

Key takeaways:

- Develop partnerships around shared interests and mutual benefits beyond recruitment
- Invest in dedicated transfer managers, clear contact points for each partner and long-term relationship management supported by institutional leadership

Recognizing and Recruiting Researchers with Cross-Sector Experience: The group addressed the challenges researchers face when returning to academia after working in other sectors, particularly the limited recognition of non-academic experience and achievements in academic recruitment processes.

Key takeaways:

- Revise academic selection criteria to explicitly recognise industry experience, management, entrepreneurship and professional networks
- Diversify recruitment committees and train committee members to ensure these criteria are consistently applied.

By moving beyond existing programmes and focusing on real-world cases, programme design and concrete next steps, the Problem Labs demonstrated exactly the kind of collaborative, practice-oriented approach needed to foster ISM, bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise.

Key Messages and Next Steps

Overall, participants agreed that ISM must become easier, more visible, and more strongly embedded within institutional structures. Mobility should begin earlier in researchers' careers, ideally already during the doctoral phase. Structured internships, secondments, job-shadowing opportunities, dual appointments, and mentoring schemes should become more widely available. Academic reward systems also need to evolve to acknowledge diverse forms of excellence beyond publications alone. The main barriers are not only

individual awareness and skills but also academic culture and structural disincentives such as insufficient recognition of intersectoral experience.

To strengthen ISM, organisations should:

- *make role models and career pathways visible,*
- *provide concrete opportunities for intersectoral experience and*
- *establish supportive institutional frameworks.*

The symposium concluded with a clear sense that considerable momentum currently exists around this topic. However, participants also emphasized that more evidence, collaboration, and policy action are needed to translate promising examples into system-wide change. To build on the outcomes of the symposium, participants agreed on several follow-up activities to recognise, scale and sustainably implement successful ISM initiatives.

These include:

- *continued mapping of ISM programmes across Germany and Europe,*
- *increased dissemination of best practices and role models,*
- *the development of a policy paper addressing systemic barriers, and*
- *the publication of key insights and materials.*

Particular attention will be given to increasing the visibility of successful intersectoral career paths and collecting testimonials from researchers, supervisors, employers, and institutions that have benefited from mobility initiatives.

Ultimately, the symposium reinforced a simple but powerful conclusion: ISM should no longer be viewed as a departure from academic careers but as a **fundamental component of the research ecosystem**. The challenge for the coming years is to transform growing political interest and successful local initiatives into lasting structural change that enables genuine circulation of talent, knowledge, and innovation across sectors.

A recurring theme throughout the three days was the importance of moving **from one-way transitions to circular mobility**, enabling **mobility in all directions**, rather than viewing

it solely as a transition from academia to other sectors. Circular mobility was highlighted as an opportunity for continuous knowledge exchange and professional development throughout researchers' careers. Achieving this requires career structures that recognise experience gained across sectors and allow researchers to move between them without compromising their future career opportunities.